EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF MISINFORMATION AND PUBLIC AGENDA: A CLOSER LOOK TO A LOOMING POLITICAL SCANDAL

EXPLORAREA INTERSECȚIEI DEZINFORMĂRII ȘI AGENDEI PUBLICE: O PRIVIRE MAI APROAPE LA UN SCANDAL POLITIC ÎN CARE

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Theofilos MAROUSIS,
e-mail: theofilos.ma@outlook.com
Grecia

Summary. *When a problem receives massive dimensions in society or affects the common good, then it is considered as a public problem. The value and usefulness of information to citizens sometimes comes to be degraded by misinformation in order to serve some purposes, as an influence tool. The efforts of powerful actors to push their agenda in the public discussion combined with information falseness emerges a possible problematic situation of agenda setting mixed with misinformation. In the article we discuss the case of Pizzagate as a conspiracy theory according to certain sources, which occupied the public debate, near the US presidential elections. We underline the risks of information falseness for public security and the need of state measures to limit the phenomenon.*

Keywords*: misinformation, agenda setting, scandal, media*

INTRODUCTION

According to the literature, when a problem receives massive dimensions in society or affects the common good, then it is considered as a public problem. Neveu [1, p. 43] states that a public problem is nothing more than the conversion of any social event to public confrontation and / or state intervention. Princen [2] attributes to the concept of conflict, thus describing its conflict character. This, therefore, the conflict nature of the public problem is the feature that makes it News, as supporters and opponents of opinions are opposed to a common public arena, which in modern societies make up Mass Media as mentioned by Dearing and Rogers [3]. Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten [4] add that the basic Media contribution to political themes lies more at the stage of emergence and the stage of definition of public problems.

The value and usefulness of information to citizens sometimes comes to be degraded by misinformation in order to serve some purposes. European Commission Communication [5, p. 3] defines misinformation as the verifiable false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic benefit, or to deliberately deceive the public or in general for public damage. It also adds that misinformation is a powerful, cheap and often economically beneficial influence tool. We could say that someone in-

vesting in misinformation is intentionally made to make political or economic and business profits. According to Castells [6] the media on their own do not possess the power to change things, but they are largely the stadium, where it is determined who has the power to push his agenda. For Miliband [7] the media are the tools through which a system of sovereignty is expressed, but also the means of reinforcing this sovereignty. Many times show views in an appropriate way, from a specific perspective and contribute to promoting a climate of compliance in public opinion. Adorno [8] writes that commercial media constitute a tool for economic elites to divide, disorient and weaken citizens.

MISINFORMATION AS A PUBLIC PROBLEM

False information is largely the result of the strategic service of strong business, political and geopolitical interests. They make use of natural persons (professional politicians, opinion leaders, journalists, etc.), media, communications companies and other techniques to make and spread easily crafted news that ensures their hegemony or neutralizing their opponents. So at the same time, the democratic function of the public sphere is undermined. Based on these approaches, the term of misinformation comes very close to term propaganda. Propaganda according to Pratkanis & Aronson [9] is a form of communication, aiming to influence the public through the diffusion of information from the media. As a key component of all modern Western democratic societies, it is a means of shaping social reality, as well as the maintenance and reproduction of the power structures of modern political mechanisms. There is, of course, a significant difference. The misinformation contains and promotes fraudulent, incorrect or false information, while propaganda contains true information, which it promotes strongly to public opinion and tries to make it well known.

This is done in a deliberate effort to persuade people to think in the desired way, as mentioned by Taylor [10]. Both of course are fed by servicing some interest. But there is still another distinction we encounter, this of black propaganda. According to Jowett & O ‘Donell [11] the black propaganda is the big lie, the source of information is transferred or credited to a false authority and spreads lies and manufactured information and aims to mislead. A similar definition is also given for Gray Propaganda by Gelders & Ihlen [12], in which the source is unclear and the correctness of information is uncertain. At the same wavelength Bernays [13] had wrote that propaganda becomes bad when the producers of consciously and with feasibility disseminate something they know that it’s a lie or when they aim at results that they know that they are harmful to the common good.

We are observing that these propaganda versions are essentially identified in the general concept of misinformation. In both cases, we have alteration of information or fully false information, while at the same time this is done intentionally to make a benefit. In addition, this benefit (political, economic, etc.) does not result from an interpersonal relationship, but it requires massivity, as it includes the general public. So, as tools for the implementation of disinformation and propaganda, the Media are used (in many cases),

so as to spread the information The media is the tools for disseminating information to the general public. It is precisely in this context that „the perception of the media as an equivocal mirror" [14, p. 237] is justified.

Beyond the fact that we have a public speech that sows misinformation and lie to society, there is something more also. It changes what in the Media theory we call Agenda Setting. As Agenda Setting in political communication, we consider the effort to establish in the public debate of a particular theme, which at the same time marks the conditions of genesis of Public Action as mentioned by Muller & Surel [15]. It is also the ability of Media to influence citizens' priorities as to which problems are more important in public life. Agenda Setting is defined, in general, by the themes/agenda of Media, which affects public themes and finally, affects political themes. They also report that the Media themes/agenda are very strong in its effects, managing a problem on the public agenda, which can lead to a change in public policies. Media have the ability to pose, under certain conditions, issues and frameworks, to be converted to Agenda-Setters and Framers in political agenda. When the agenda setting is made on the base of fake news and rumors, that do not actually reflect the reality, then we have a problem in public debate. Van Aelst et al. [16] write that fake news potentially leads to misperceptions and contributes to growing inequalities in political knowledge, one of the most pressing challenges for democracy today. A false news is used by various actors to undermine the faith of the society in democratic processes and to distract its attention from important issues. Based on these, we can say that misinformation is considered a public problem, so public actions and policies are needed to deal with this as far as possible.

THE PARADIGM OF PIZZAGATE THEORY AT THE PUBLIC AGENDA

With the term "priming" we are trying to describe the phenomenon in which the media excessively promotes a topic, to the extent that citizens automatically associate it with a person/persons, even if subconsciously. For example, many people when they see George W. Bush may think of 9/11 or the war in Afghanistan, events that occurred during his time in office. By making some issues more salient in people's mind (agenda setting), mass media can also shape the considerations that people take into account when making judgments about political candidates or issues (priming).

Priming refers to that information processing involves the development of the "activation tags" that are the basis for connection between concepts. The primary questions pursued by social psychologists studying priming have involved the activation of social representations (e.g., traits, stereotypes, or goals) by exposure to different types of information, and the application of these activated representations in social judgments and behaviors. Moreover, Van Duyn & Collier [17] say that as media emphasize certain issues more frequently, these issues are primed in the minds of the public and are more accessible when forming judgments about policies or candidates. Of course, the more the media deal with a specific issue and the more vividly they represent it, the more strongly they imprint it on the viewer's mind. There are elements that help this process

and strengthen priming. Some important such elements are news a) frequency, b) duration and c) vividness. The viewer then identifies the news with the persons involved in it. That highly vivid portrayals resulting in stronger priming effects. Therefore, the more impressively an event is presented, the greater effect it has on the cognitive process of citizens. The people judge whether a news story is true by three factors: base rates, emotional feelings, consistency. Base rates mean that people believe that the news they see for the first time is likely to be true. Emotional feelings mean that people interpret their own subjective experiences as evidence of truth. Consistency has to do with the repetition of a news story by the media, as with the frequency we saw earlier, the more times someone sees a news story, the more likely they are to consider it true. So far we have observed the phenomenon of priming, but the main problem arises when it meets misinformation. What happens when priming is done with a fake news? A typical example is the “Pizzagate” scandal. In 2016 shortly before the US presidential election, John Podesta’s emails were found on Wikileaks. Podesta was Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman in her presidential campaign and a prominent member of the Democratic Party, serving as a political adviser during the presidency of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. One of the emails was between Podesta and the owner of the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington and they were discussing the restaurant as a possible host for a Clinton campaign fundraiser. Some internet users overanalyzed these emails and came to a more different conclusion, that there was a deeper connection between Comet Ping Pong and politicians from the Democratic Party. According to BBC, people trawled Alefantis’ Instagram feed (owner of the pizzeria) for pictures of children and the modern art which lines his restaurant’s walls, and dreamt up a pedophile sex ring involving prominent politicians and political donors of the Democrats. Continuing, it is reported that thousands of people were convinced that a pedophilia ring involving people at the highest levels of the Democratic Party is operating out of a Washington pizza restaurant. The influence of the news on public opinion was so intense that in some cases some citizens took extreme measures, wanting to take the law into their own hands. Alefantis and his staff have received hundreds of death threats on social media and also a direct message telling him his pizzeria should be “burned to the ground”. A man even reached the point of visiting the pizzeria carrying an assault rifle, fired one or more shots and later he told the police that he had come to the restaurant to “self-investigate” the rumors about the scandal.

The case of Pizzagate was widely covered by the media and especially by social media. Major TV channels such as Fox News, CNN, CBS, NBC, made reportage and covered the issue. D. Trump, being a competitor for the position of president in the American elections, made an indirect reference to the issue and used it as an argument against H. Clinton in the final presidential Debate that was broadcast live across the country. Large newspapers and sites also picked up on the issue of Podesta’s emails, such as Washington Post,Guardian, Politico, USA Today. Radio was another medium that raised the issue high on the agenda, to the extent that Alex Jones, who is a radio producer and owner of the website Infowars, after the episodes in the Washington pizzeria, made

statements of repentance for promoting pizzagate scandal. A. Jones broadcast his radio show on over 160 stations and had over 1.8 million followers on Youtube. Notification of the scandal was also made by Donald Trump's party camp as Michael Flynn Jr posted on Twitter that "until pizzagate proven to be false, it will remain a story", according to BBC. Michael Flynn Jr is the son of Michael Flynn, who was Trump's National Security Advisor. The sharing of the scandal on social media was also important. In Twitter, the hashtag of "pizzagate" was shared almost 1.4 million times by more than a quarter of a million accounts in its first five weeks of life and among these were dozens of users who tweet so frequently (up to 900 times a day) that experts believe they were likely highly automated. In another example, there was a twitter account that clearly stated that there was a pedophilia ring with Hillary Clinton being at the center and the rumor was retweeted more than 6,000 times.

As it turns out, the reality is different. The accusations were categorized as false and the "pizzagate" scandal was based on fake news. As reported on Yahoo, the FBI intelligence bulletin from the bureau's Phoenix field office, among others, mentions Pizzagate and talks about "conspiracy theory-driven domestic extremists", "motivated by fringe beliefs" and adds that "these conspiracy theories very likely will emerge, spread, and evolve in the modern information marketplace". A fact-checking and fake news investigation website, cited some examples of pizzagate being a conspiracy theory. One of these examples was that the pictures of children who were supposed to be the victims, came from Facebook or other random sites and were the children of the pizzeria workers or family and friends. Another example is that photos were released with underground facilities of the pizzeria, but the truth is that the photos were not from the pizzeria but taken from other random buildings. In addition, many journalistic organizations such as the BBC, the New York Times, the CNN, dealt with the issue and after research debunked it, classifying it as fake news.

European Parliament states that conspiracy theories can be used as a tool for spreading disinformation and propaganda with destabilizing effects, as they have the potential to incite hatred and violence against a perceived enemy. The pizzagate scandal, although it turned out to be fake, as it seems, nevertheless left its mark on public life and influenced public opinion to some extent. Following a Public Policy Polling survey, the results 14% of Trump supporters think Hillary Clinton is connected to a child sex ring run out of a Washington DC pizzeria. Another 32% aren't sure one way or another, much as the North Carolinian who went to Washington to check it out said was the case for him. Only 54% of Trump voters expressly say they don't think Pizzagate is real. In short, 46% of Trump's supporters do not think that pizzagate is a conspiracy theory, but they believe it is true, or it is not sure exactly what is true. In another poll by YouGov America and the Economist states that 17% of Clinton voters and 46% of Trump voters believe that leaked emails from the Clinton campaign talking about pedophilia and human trafficking were true. In other words, in addition to Trump's supporters, the conspiracy theory was also believed by Hillary Clinton's supporters, albeit in a smaller percentage. Based

on the evidence, we observe that even after the debunking of Pizzagate scandal by local officer of Federal Bureau of Investigation and by major journalistic organizations, a group of voters still think that the scandal is real. The storm of fake news poisoned public opinion and "stained" the pre-election campaign of the Democratic party and the political profile of Hillary Clinton. The rest is history. According to Federal Election Commission, the Democrats lost the elections receiving 48.18% and Donald Trump was elected president with 46.09%. Although Trump collected fewer votes (62,984,828) than Clinton (65,853,514), he was the winner of the elections because he won in key states and gathered more Electors. Certainly no one can say that Clinton's election loss was due to the Pizzagate scandal. But we can see based on the evidence that fake news and the Priming, done by the Media and social media create a jumble of misinformation and stigmatize the morals or beliefs of a political person or even an entire Party. Everything matters and plays a role in public life, especially when we are talking about serious issues, not lifestyle, but issues concerning the political life of a country, which in turn determines the daily life of its citizens. One could say that a conspiracy theory has been the subject of political exploitation to hurt the opponent. Withal, an interesting fact is that the scandal returned to the news in 2020 coincidentally once more, again in the year there were presidential elections in the United States. Thus, the video was misunderstood and interpreted by many as a hidden message, rekindling rumors of the scandal. As mentioned in the same article in the New York Times, during that period the shares, likes and comments that mentioned Pizzagate or had its hashtag, reached 800,000 on Facebook, 600,000 on Instagram and over 82 million views on Tik Tok. Even D. Trump himself was not missing from a cloud of disinformation, who, either without intention or intentionally, published on social media posts that had to do with conspiracy theories.

CONCLUSION

Based on what we examine, we see that disinformation has become part of the political game and the agenda of public life. Thus, we talk about an issue that impacts broad social masses and it's considered a public problem. The situation involves risks not only for the smooth conduct of a public confrontation but also for public security, since as we have seen there is a possibility of appearance of extremists, due to opinion polarization. Some actors use all available means to achieve their goal and may sometimes succeed and sometimes not. The media initially deal with a topic (even if it is fake news and they still don't know about it), project it and make it known to the public. This is precisely where dangers and problems arise: „on the one hand, the mass media creates a new and true public space. On the other hand, they can create, at the same time, a false public space, which actually diminishes the potential of the mass media as a constitutive and comforting element of the public space" [18, pp. 10-11]. This is why the regulatory acts adopted by the European Union „seek to implement the imperative of ensuring media pluralism, while further promoting transparency, freedom and diversity in the European media landscape" [19, p. 238].

The Priming phenomenon is amplified even more in the Internet age, through social media, and acquires whirlwind characteristics, as individuals participate in the process, rebroadcast the news, and all this creates a proliferation of misinformation. As a result, the need of state policies to limit misinformation, for the cause of public debate and public security protection, grows intense.

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