How to use the Reflexive Control Theory in order to Identify Online Propaganda in the context of Covid-19 Infodemic

Viorel TUTUI

In this article I will begin by addressing the very difficult problem of defining and identifying propaganda in the new context of public communication dominated by the Social Media. This task is notoriously challenging because propaganda became a pejorative word which refers to an activity that remains at least partially concealed and hard to distinguish from other types of persuasive communication and became imbedded in the self-legitimating narratives that define the social identity of human communities. However, the development of Social Media made this task even harder since it relativized even further the distinction between the public and the private sphere and between political and non-political communication. I will argue that we are witnessing a new propaganda wave which goes along with the development of Social Media, and gains its force by using all the major crises that have the potential to intensify the existing political and social conflicts. My investigation will focus on the current crisis generated by the global Covid-19 pandemic, which is, unfortunately, accompanied by a „Covid-19 infodemic": a very complex and confuse mixture of misinformation and disinformation with traces of accurate information, with fake and junk news, with propaganda, conspiracy theories and so on. Therefore, it is very hard to identify online propaganda that is disseminated on the Social Media and to differentiate it from the other types of misinformation and disinformation that are contained in this mixture. However, I believe that some clear criteria which can be used in the attempt to single out propaganda narratives can be provided by the theory of Reflexive Control formulated by Vladimir Lefebvre (1984) and developed by Corneliu Bjola (2019) in the form of the 4E Funnel Model. The main objective of my paper will be to present this set of criteria and to apply them to some prominent narratives that were disseminated in Romania on Social Media in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.