

“THEY WANT TO IMPLANT CHIPS TO OUR BODIES”: COVID 19 CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON CZECH SOCIETY

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Together with the dissatisfaction of citizens in connection with the Covid 19 pandemic (aiming primarily against the restrictions and measures imposed by the government), a whole series of fake news, disinformation, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories began to spread through (not only) Czech society, which further undermined social attitudes, moods, but also shared values of the society. The rise of various conspiracy theories (especially in the social media environment) was then noted in the context of restrictions associated with vaccination against Covid 19. The chapter therefore aims, from the perspective of communication studies, to map these various misinformation and hoaxes that have spread in the communication space in recent years in Czech society (specifically on the social platform Facebook), and which resonate in selected groups to this day, with has an impact on political views and behaviour of the citizens. The goal will be to point out not only the stereotypical tendencies and argumentative strategies used in the given communication, but also the refutation, or clarification / explanation of the information on which the newly created misinformation is based.

Key words: Czechia; conspiracy theories; disinformation; fake news; hoaxes; Covid 19; Facebook; social media.

1 INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories, hoaxes and / or disinformation have influenced public life for centuries, however, their spread has long been influenced by the limited reach of the means of transfer of such information. Technological progress and mainly

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wide access to social media, such as Facebook or Twitter (just to name the most used ones), made the spread of disinformation much easier, both technologically and financially. It is therefore no surprise that the modern era built primarily on the transfer of many public activities to online space, brings not only benefits, but also great challenges regarding the spread of false information. Moreover, it puts governments and state administrations into a dilemma, how to combat the negative aspects of it. This is especially challenging for the governments in the region of post-Communist Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where any attempts to regulate public debate immediately bring comparison to the censorship imposed by Communist regimes.

This chapter deals with the disinformation spread on Facebook in connection with Covid 19 pandemics in Czechia. Besides the generally accessible environment for spreading hoaxes, that exists today due to free access to several mean of communication with high reach and impact, the crisis as was the Covid 19 pandemics always bring the opportunity to create and spread falsified information. The governments' and states' roles increase in the times of crisis, as besides the roles they play in general (under normal circumstances) they serve as crisis managers. They are endowed with special powers to impose all necessary means to face the crisis, which sometimes includes restricting certain activities or imposing some measures, under the threat of punishment. Specifically in the times of Covid 19 pandemic, such powers included imposing mask mandates, social distancing, closures of stores selling non-essential products or providing non-essential services, ban of public assemblies or regulating number of people that can meet together and under what conditions, closures of borders, both between the countries as well as within the country, e.g. between the districts or regions (just to mention few). Despite majority of the population complied with the government-imposed measures, this policy also mobilized the anti-governmental forces which depicted governments' actions as limiting and violating basic human rights and freedoms. Online environment became an ideal space for spreading these narratives as it became the space where most of the people spent time due to the social distancing and transferring many of the previous offline activities to online form.

It needs to be said at the beginning, that the Czech authorities have long underestimated the role of disinformation being spread online in general. The crisis situation, as was the Covid 19 pandemics, showed the unpreparedness and thus the inability of the government, other state institutions as well as law enforcement bodies to combat the disinformation in full scale. The chapter opens with introducing the Czech disinformation scene in general, identifying the key actors (individual and institutional) as well as topics that were targeted by their activities. It is followed by the three case studies of the most common conspiracy theories related to Covid 19 pandemics that were spread via Facebook.

The chapter is based on the two main research questions: What conspiracy theories, hoaxes and / or disinformation has been the most frequently circulating in connection with the Covid 19 pandemics on Facebook? What was their dominant narrative?

2 CONTEXT: CZECH ONLINE SPACE AND THE DISINFORMATION SCENE

Facebook has long been one of the most used social media platforms in Czechia. Despite its failing popularity in recent years, especially among the younger generations, it still belongs among the most influential environments from which people draw information (Datareportal 2023). At the same time, it is one of the most effective tools for spreading fake news, disinformation, conspiracies and other false, misleading and / or lying information. It is also an environment where extremist content is spread, with the (mis-)use of the emotionally tinged communication² that is typical for many social media, not only Facebook. The above-mentioned description is supported by the existence of quasi-communities of Facebook groups, often counting tens of thousands of users, who share the content among themselves, thus supporting the creation of identical collective view and shared positions, emotions as well as values of the community. Moreover, they repost the content to other groups, resend it to other users and intend to spread it as effectively as possible.

One of the key tools in creating and spreading the dangerous content on Facebook are false or fake profiles, which artificially increase the popularity of posted or shared content, and optically increase the fan base of the specific Facebook group and / or page.³ Their impact can be seen in strengthening of the search algorithms, but it also has psychological effect and aspect.⁴ The essence of the existence of such fake or false profiles is simple. First of all, some individuals feel safer if they can act anonymously or under aliases while posting or sharing aggressive, hateful, incendiary, conspiracy and / or disinformation content. These users are very often connected to pro-Russian disinformation networks and circles which main goal is to undermine the citizens' trust in democratic political institutions, actors, procedures and processes and / or undermine the trust in pro-Western geopolitical orientation. They artfully use any events to their advantage to undermine this often already fragile trust of selected segments of society. Unfortunately, these fake or false profiles are often also connected by supporting the ANO 2011 movement (full name "Akce nespokojených občanů 2011", in English "Action of Dissatisfied Citizens 2011"), political movement founded by and led by billionaire entrepreneur and now also politician Andrej Babiš. Both Babiš and many of the ANO 2011's political representatives use content created and / or spread by these fake or false profiles in their political communication and rhetoric, often even re-posting it on their own profiles on social media networks such as Facebook or X (formerly Twitter). One of the most prominent examples of such activities are the two profiles on X network

² In 2021, Facebook's internal documents revealed that Facebook was directly responsible for the company's divisiveness, as well as conflicts among its users. It may even have had a vested interest in knowingly encouraging them in their anger with sophisticated tactics. This was most evident in the issues that strongly divided not only American society - namely the political situation and the coronavirus pandemic. The documents show, among other things, that it was well known in the early days of the pandemic that once a post went viral, it was most often false information. There was research on this that suggested setting up algorithms to control the spread of such misleading posts. Workers even tested them and found that they were able to reduce the spread of misinformation about coronavirus by 38 percent (Dwoskin, Newmyer and Mahtani 2021).

³ In that case, there is a lot of fake accounts without active involvement in discussions. At first glance, the accounts look like they were created by a computer, they do not have personal information, posts, photos, videos, or a network of user friends. In some cases, even dozens of such profiles can be acquired per day within groups (Jezberová 2023).

⁴ A higher number of Facebook group members leads to greater confidence of such groups among the users.

(formerly Twitter): @JZdesena (which stands in Czech for the term “Jsem zděšena”, in English “I am horrified”) and @PeulnaMarkvart1 (which stands for Czech female name “Peťulína Markvartová”), behind whom Petr Markvart (male name) stands.⁵ The activities of two mentioned exemplary profiles fit perfectly into previous description of the motives as well as forms of the communication hidden behind aliases, fake names or false names.

If we return to the individual Facebook groups, in the Czech environment we can meet a whole series of very numerous, pro-Russian oriented groups. As Jezberová states (2023), the most numerous groups include “LID PROTI PAVLOVI A FIALOVI...” (“THE PEOPLE AGAINST PAVEL AND FIALA...”, referring to the President Petr Pavel and the Prime Minister Petr Fiala) with more than 32.8 thousand members, “Češi, táhněme za jeden provaz” (“Czechs, let's pull together”) with around 34.2 thousand members, “Přátelé, kterým se líbí Andrej Babiš” (“Friends who like Andrej Babiš”) with around 18.9 thousand members, “Svobodné Česko” (“Free Czechia”) with 21.9 thousand members or “Přátelé Ruska v České republice ...” (“Friends of Russia in the Czech Republic ...”) with 19.5 thousand members, the last one characterized by a high frequency of new contributions (even several dozen posts per hour). For the purposes of our study, we also focused on private groups “Covidu se nebojíme, bojíme se „opatření“ – Nechte nás na pokoji!” (“We are not afraid of Covid, we are afraid of “measures” - Leave us alone!”) with approximately one thousand members and “#nenechameseockovat#” (“#wedontgetvaccinated#”) with 16 thousand members.

Some of the established groups, existing until now, were originally linked to an anti-epidemiological topic, specifically the group “Czechs, let's pull together”, which until now has the following description in its introductory information: “(...) Covid is here and will be here. Even we experienced that. In the end we will all be infected anyway, so why destroy the economy, why don't they allow us to go to work, I understand some of the measures: face masks in hospitals, public transport, but why did they close my wife's gym where you could eat from the floor [“eat from the floor” is Czech metaphoric expression meaning that the place described like this is so clean and sterile that you could even eat from the floor], why do they close a restaurant that is cleaner than an operating room. (...) Why did they ban children from going to schools. (...) I will fight against that. And that's what this group is for. Together we can do it” (Svoboda 2023).

Other groups focused on Covid 19 abandoned the original topic after the outbreak of the Russia's invasion to Ukraine and moved from attacking anti-Covid 19 measures to spreading the anti-Ukrainian sentiments. For example, Facebook group “Neočkování CZ SK” (“Non-vaccinated CZ SK”) changed its name to “Pro mír. Ne válce.” (“For the peace. Against the war” (elfwebmaster 2022), with their interpretation that the peace can be reached only by Ukraine giving up and surrendering to Russia. According to an analysis by the Czech Elves [internet community combating the disinformation and pro-Russian propaganda], up to 90 % of fake news related to Covid 19 came from around 30 long-term pro-Russian websites, such as pravdive.eu, cz24.news, Pravyprostor.cz, ac24.cz, Sputnik, Aeronet, etc. (mvr 2021). Political parties also participated in the spread of disinformation. In 2021, the SPD movement (full name “Svoboda a přímá demokracie”, in English “Freedom and Direct Democracy”) Volný blok (“Free Bloc”) were significant spreaders of disinformation content in the online

⁵ Markvart does not run only these two profiles. He administers also other fake profiles, however, these two are the most prominent and active ones.

environment. Representatives of these political parties and movements used disinformation websites extensively, e.g. in September 2021, as an important platform for their election campaign before the October 2021 elections to the Chamber of Deputies (elfwebmaster 2021).

In addition to the social media networks, which have been clearly playing key role in sharing and distributing various conspiracy theories, disinformation and / or fake news, there is also one specific medium in Czechia – so called chain e-mails. This type of communication, targeted primarily at older generation and seniors, has been considerably strengthening in recent years. And they also played an important role during the Covid 19 era.

3 DISINFORMATION, MISINFORMATION, HOAXES AND SO ON – HOW TO UNDERSTAND THEM

For the purposes of these study, it is useful to clarify at this point what we mean by the various terms we are working with. The most basic concept is the term disinformation, which probably originates from the Russian word *dezinformacija* (дезинформация), which was first registered in 1949, in connection with Russian propaganda (cf. Ministry of Interior 2024; Ellul 2006, 23–24). According to Fallis (2015), disinformation consists of misleading people in the form of lies or propaganda, or in the form of conspiracy theories and false alarm messages, and can be socially very dangerous, especially when people are deliberately misled about essential matters such as investment opportunities, medical treatment, or political actors. The Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic then characterises the term disinformation as *“the dissemination of deliberately false information, especially by state actors or their offshoots vis-à-vis a foreign state or the media, with the aim of influencing the decision-making or opinions of those who receive it”* (Ministry of Interior 2024).

Misinformation can be distinguished from disinformation. Such communication is based on an error or mistake, i.e. it is inaccurate or misleading information that may be spread unintentionally due to mistakes or misinterpretation. However, if misinformation is widely disseminated, it may lead to the same result as disinformation, i.e. the adoption of opinions or decisions based on false information. The Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic defines misinformation as *“incorrect or misleading information which is neither systematically nor deliberately disseminated with the aim of influencing the decisions or opinions of those who receive it”* (Ministry of Interior 2024). Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) further distinguish malinformation, which works with true information, but the source spreads it with the intention of harming someone.

This brings us to a term that is very closely related and overlapping with disinformation and misinformation, which is fake news. Fake news can be defined as fabricated, deliberately misleading information that copies the content of the news media to appear credible, but which is verifiable and therefore can be considered deliberately deceptive and untrue to mislead the recipient (cf. Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Vosoughi, Roy and Aral 2018). We can also talk about fake news as political weapons (Lazer et al. 2018) or to achieve financial profits. Controversial content is often used to gain more user clicks and subsequent sharing of these messages, especially in social media environments (Vargo, Guo and Amazeen 2018). This is a rather popular current trend.

This is closely related to the concept of hoax, which we have discussed extensively below. Hoax or swindle generally refers to false and misleading messages that appear in media content and are also shared by social media users. These relatively large-scale and deliberately created lies often aim to make someone believe false information or especially something unpleasant. Hoaxes include fake news, hoaxes, journalistic ducks, pranks, chain messages (email or the increasingly popular form of texts shared via WhatsApp) calling for further mass forwarding and sharing to deceive recipients (Nutil 2018, 137).

Last but not least, the key term conspiracy theory can be understood as “coordinated hidden acts of at least two actors to affect society or its parts negatively” (Matuszewski, Rams-Ługowski and Pawłowski 2024, 88). Although the conspiracy theories and other forms of manipulation with information have been around for centuries, it is obvious that their contemporary rise is closely connected with the emergence and wide spread of social media (Šteger 2024, 69; Wardawy-Dudziak 2024, 59).

4 METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of the research, the social network Facebook was chosen, especially for the following reasons. Facebook was used by 4.8 million users (45.8 % of the population) in the Czech Republic in 2023, according to data from advertising software, and it was clearly the most popular social communication platform in the Czech Republic (Datareportal 2023). At the same time, Facebook provides its users with a much more intensive connection, and in addition, many people use Facebook as a source of information about politics and current events.

The method of qualitative content analysis of selected posts that appeared in Facebook groups in the years 2020-2021, when Covid 19 resonated the most, was chosen to obtain data. The above-mentioned Facebook groups thus became the primary source, however, misinformation from other, smaller groups or websites was often shared within them as well. Here we then resorted to examining the primary sources from which the given disinformation or hoaxes reached the groups.

The aim of the presented chapter is to analyse the most prominent misinformation and conspiracy theories about the Covid 19, which were spread not only in the above-mentioned groups and gained many supporters and shares, but also those that subsequently spread in the Czech internet environment. The goal is also to clarify the argumentation strategies used in the given communication, but also to clarify and / or explain the information on which the communication created by disinformation is based, or what the sources of the disinformation and hoaxes are. We will also focus on images that were often intended to serve as evidence for the claims themselves and with their misleading, inaccurate and manipulative nature only fuelled anti-vaccination sentiments.

We deliberately omit from the study one of the first pieces of disinformation that appeared in the public space about Covid 19 and gradually became an effective communication tool of far-right parties in the Central Europe, namely the claim

that Covid 19 is an artificially created disease and a tool of global control.⁶ The given claim was widely used by the far right to undermine trust in the European Union and the West in general. In the Czech environment, we are talking mainly about criticism coming from the supporters of the SPD movement.

The opinion that Covid 19 is an artificially created disease was supported by an argumentative strategy of shielding oneself with authority. A well-known Czech microbiologist Soňa Peková served this purpose after she became one of the first advocates of this disinformation in Czech public space shortly after the outbreak of the pandemics. Her statements were often quoted by the Czech media, not only the alternative ones, as it was completely new topic and there were only few authorities able to provide their expertise in this unprecedented situation. As an example, supporting and proving our previous argument, we can quote one of her responses from an interview in the Czech Radio, a public service medium, aired in April 2020: *"I believe it is a man-made virus. The virus behaves strangely, does not develop good immunity, cases of reinfection are known. It has many characteristics that we have not seen in nature before,"* she said in the radio interview (Výborná 2020).

5 CONSPIRACY THEORY 1: "IMPLANTING MICROCHIPS TO THE BODY DURING TESTING OR VACCINATION"

One of the most widespread hoaxes related to the Covid 19 was the topic of microchips. The hoaxes claimed that the Covid 19 testing is just a way to implant a microchip into the body, thus allowing the governments to manipulate the people with it. Microchip related hoaxes appeared across many of the Facebook groups and in various modifications and forms of communication. We could come across both recorded videos, where important people expressed their opinions on the issue and addressed them directly to the viewers through the front camera of a mobile phone⁷, as well as shared photos that were supposed to support the claims mentioned in the text and often included links to some other disinformation websites. The topic of microchips also appeared in a lot in chain e-mails.

The main idea of the mentioned conspiracy theory is the fact that, either by inoculation or with the help of a swab, a microchip is inserted into the body of people during testing for Covid 19. According to the conspiracy theory, such microchip or nanochip would subsequently enable the monitoring of such persons, and eventually (after the wide implementation) lead to absolute control of the population. According to disinformation websites, Bill Gates was the dominant figure who was supposed to have an enormous interest in chipping people. The monitoring tool should be 5G networks.⁸ The proof that the microchip is part of the swab kit should have been the depth of the control swab, which depends on the necessity to plant the chip so deep in the cavity that it cannot be removed. A warning and all-clarifying picture was circulated in the

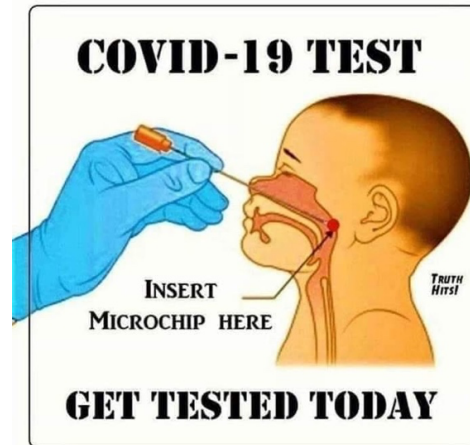
⁶ The goal was supposed to be the absolute control of humanity and obedience / submission of the population, under the control of people such as Bill Gates, George Soros, or Donald Trump, or even institutions such as Communist Party of China or the Government of the United States of America (Máca 2020).

⁷ It has become a very popular way for spreading the content in recent years, as it does not require creating long written texts. It has also become popular to shoot these videos while driving a car.

⁸ It should be noted here that the smallest 5G chip that has ever been developed is the size of a penny coin.

groups (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: HOW THE CHIP IS SUPPOSEDLY INSERTED INTO THE BODY, ACCORDING TO THE DISINFORMATION SOURCES.



Source: @Bestincovid2020.

We found three dominant hoaxes in the Facebook groups that were supposed to support the truth of the given conspiracy theory. The first hoax that we will present comes from the video of Petra Rádová Fajmonová, a Czech manipulator, anti-vaxxer and unsuccessful candidate in the 2022 Senate election in the Brno district. During Covid 19 in 2021, she pretended to be the head nurse of the intensive care unit at the Brno University Hospital. Subsequently, she shared a video on Facebook⁹ in which, to appear erudite, she spoke to the audience from the position of health authority and explained them why it is a mistake to get vaccinated¹⁰ and to support the government's Covid 19 restrictions.

As evidence for her position, she presented the conclusions of her own amateur blood structure change tests, according to which the blood of vaccinated people is different from the blood of non-vaccinated people. The amateur testing was supposed to confirm the experts' conclusions. According to her research, the blood of the vaccinated people also reacts to magnetism. Moreover, now when Rádová's friend was supposed to start making a phone call, the blood of the vaccinated should have started to react to the transmitted magnetic waves, because of which something hidden until then appeared in the blood, which looked like a chip (mvr 2021).¹¹

The Brno University Hospital immediately commented on the video, and strictly denied any connection of the hospital with Rádová. The hospital's Facebook statement literally stated: "This lady IS NOT and NEVER WAS in an employment-legal relationship with our hospital, she does not represent any opinion or testimony, attitudes or opinions of our hospital. As a medical facility, we distance ourselves from the statements and information in such a video" (Fakultní nemocnice Brno 2021). Unfortunately, the hospital made a small mistake, as it

⁹ The original full video has already been deleted and cannot be recovered anymore. However, partial shots are still available online on some of the social media accounts or other channels, e.g. here: <https://gloria.tv/share/BskFb878stoR4FzfAYCfshoyU#320>.

¹⁰ The arguments that are heard here try to undermine the credibility of vaccines, for example, by saying that they do not protect against the severe course of Covid 19.

¹¹ The details of the video were broadcasted on the Czech Television program called "Czech TV Reporters". The given passage of the original Rádová's video cannot be currently found.

was discovered later that Rádová used to work there. Few days later after releasing the original statement, the hospital corrected it with an apology, stating that Mrs. Rádová, who appears in the video as a nurse at the Brno University Hospital, did indeed work here, but only between 1996-1998 and under a different name (Fakultní nemocnice Brno 2021). Unfortunately, this was enough to bring down a new wave of mistrust and the belief that the truth is being suppressed.

As this hoax began to spread relatively quickly in groups on social networks, Vaxinátor¹² responded to it with a video in which he directly contradicts some of Rádová's nonsensical claims. In a short video on the Facebook profile of the project, it vividly demonstrated what a drop of distilled water will do to, for example, cotton wool fibre, dust or just a dirty laboratory slide. If one uses a little imagination, one can really see something here that looks like a nanochip, but also like a parasite.¹³ Here, not only the research conditions (including incorrect handling of the sample), but also the equipment is essential. Children's microscopes show more distortion than others (Vaxinátor 2021).

The second hoax that was strongly present in the public space were manipulative videos, which, as proof of the presence of a chip in the body, showed people holding a magnet to their skin at the site where vaccination was applied. The videos used the principle of comparison, when, for example, a man applied a magnet to the place after vaccination, then used an unvaccinated child as a second figure, whose arm the magnet did not hold. In the videos, phrases such as: we are infected, we are poisoned, etc. are heard.

These videos were spread in hundreds of groups, not only in the ones we analysed. One of the reported disinformation posts came from the "Otevři svou mysl" ("Open Your Mind") profile. In this case, it's an edited 15-minute video of various actors demonstrating how a magnet holds onto their arm.¹⁴ It is not clear on the video whether these are vaccinated individuals or whether the site where they place the magnet is actual vaccination site. The fact that the magnet sticks to the skin is not due to the magnetization of the chip, but it is caused by the oiliness of the skin. For example, if a person rubs his skin with oil, metal objects such as a magnet, but also a coin, which certainly cannot be claimed to be magnetic, will stick to him. Vaccines do not contain anything that the magnet could possibly react to.¹⁵

However, users in the comments appeal with the usual disinformation mantra that everyone must quickly share the post so that the message reaches as many people as possible, because it is immediately deleted for individual users of the post (exceptionally, Facebook's algorithms probably worked). Some of the videos using the given hoax did not even come from the domestic (Czech) environment, they were mostly videos from English-speaking countries, such as the United States and Canada. AFP Fact check USA, a department within the AFP news agency, called them fraudulent, saying that it is not possible for vaccination to magnetize people and that the goal is only to create fear and mistrust of

¹² It is a Slovak Facebook page that was created in response to anti-vaxxer sentiments in society.

¹³ Some of the hoaxes included claims that vaccines contain the parasite called *Trypanosoma cruzi*, which causes the deadly Chagas disease, and which can allegedly cause AIDS. Here, however, it subsequently turned out that the circulating photo of the parasite comes from a parasitological atlas. Among other things, the already mentioned Rádová or the disinformation website Aeronet flooded the public space with a similar claim.

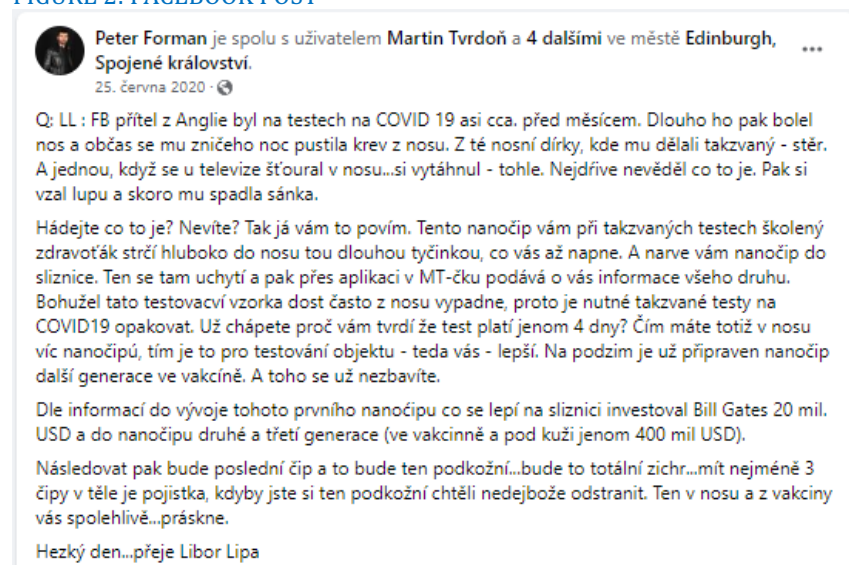
¹⁴ The sample can be seen at <https://perma.cc/6NE7-G5P3?type=image>.

¹⁵ Vaccines contain water, salts, lipids, proteins, and chemicals to maintain pH.

vaccination (Wade 2021).

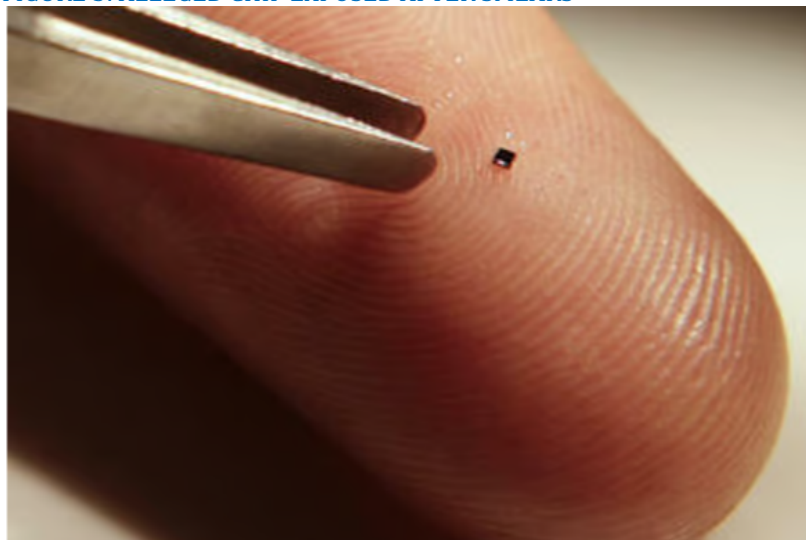
The last hoax that we will analyse in connection with the microchips or nanochips is a post from social networks that refers to a personal experience (see Figure 2). Hoax in the form of Facebook post works with the introductory information presented at the beginning of this chapter, that the microchips, resp. nanochips are implanted in the body during smears and that Bill Gates has an eminent interest in chipping the people, and that he invests millions of dollars in the production of such microchips, resp. nanochips. The main protagonist of this content is a friend of Libor Lipa living in England, who allegedly had a nose pain for several weeks and later the installed microchip allegedly popped out when he started bleeding out of the nose. As evidence he posted the photo of the microchip as part of his post (see Figure 3).¹⁶

FIGURE 2: FACEBOOK POST



Source: Forman (2020).

FIGURE 3: ALLEGED CHIP EXPOSED AFTER SMEARS



Source: Löwer (2009).

¹⁶ Here, Facebook's algorithms worked again, and the image was evaluated as displaying false information and currently cannot be displayed together with the post.

With this hoax, we encounter several false information and manipulative levels. If we leave aside the lie associated with poking the nose and the above-mentioned, repeatedly appearing hoaxes linked here, the message is primarily persuasively supplemented with an image that has nothing to do with the information provided in the post, except for the fact that there is indeed a chip in the photo. When using any fact checking application focused on identification of photos, we immediately find out that the photo shows a chip with the smallest Bible in the world. The photo dates to 2009 and was presented by the German magazine *Handelsblatt* (Löwer 2009). However, the purpose of this post is to serve as evidence and add credibility to the false message. The last two hoaxes introduced above also dominated the chain e-mails that were about microchips in the vaccines. The one about blowing the microchip out of the nose was at the top of the charts of the most intensively spread messages regarding the alleged harmfulness of vaccines for several months and, unfortunately, found several fans and supporters.

6 CONSPIRACY THEORY 2: “VACCINATION CAUSES CHANGES OF THE DNA AND INFERTILITY”

The second presented category of conspiracy theories shows us how much disinformation has become a powerful and dangerous tool in influencing society. The hoax works with the information that the Covid 19 vaccine causes a change in DNA. There are several versions that have been circulating in Facebook groups. Sometimes we encounter the fact that only selected types of vaccines cause a change, for others the rule applies broadly for all vaccines in general.

However, the origin of the hoax itself can be traced in the preprint of the later revised and published article “Reverse-transcribed SARS-CoV-2 RNA can integrate into the genome of cultured human cells and can be expressed in patient-derived tissues” (Zhang 2021). Disinformers chose a certain suitable part of the mentioned article for manipulation, reformulated it and published on social media. The original article itself states that under certain circumstances, some genetic remnants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus can integrate into our DNA and remain for a very long time after the infection.¹⁷ And it was exactly this information that became a tool for the opponents of vaccination to spread the fear and the threat of vaccines, even though it was a laboratory experiment and it is not clear that this effect also occurs in a living human organism.

Although vaccines and their effects were not even part of the presented research, the article served to create several rumours and hoaxes. Whether it is in the form of the fact that people who have experienced Covid 19 are infectious forever, or the just-mentioned fact that vaccines change human DNA. The hoax resonated so much in society that even on the website of the Government of the Czech Republic, videos were published that refuted the said inaccuracies.

If we give an example of a specific form of this disinformation about the change in the DNA of vaccinated people, we can watch the widely shared and liked video that was spread across the mentioned Facebook groups. It was created by the well-known disinformant, conspirator and healer Michal Shark Hašek. The author

¹⁷ The study has received strong criticism from expert circles, especially for the lack of data and the threat of causing unwarranted panic. However, a similar phenomenon has already been observed in other viruses.

has been sharing several false claims regarding the Covid 19 for a long time and has built a strong community of like-minded supporters. In this particular video,¹⁸ he focused on Astra Zeneca's vaccine, specifically on the package of this vaccine and the term "ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 recombinant," which is on the package and which we don't seem to understand and are too lazy to decipher. With the help of Wikipedia, in the video he defines the meaning of the word recombinant and explains that recombinant DNA molecules (rDNA) are DNA molecules created by laboratory methods of genetic recombination such as molecular cloning. From this, he deduces that extraneous DNA molecules are part of the vaccine, while here he creates conspiracy theories, when he concludes that extraneously cloned molecules can be not only human or animal, but also of some extra-terrestrial species (Mojevideo 2020).¹⁹

A similar message was spread as fake news both on the Internet and in chain e-mails that dominated at the end of 2020. The headline of these messages read *"The Swiss hurried and banned the COVID vaccine. What about the other nations of Europe, will they allow to get vaccinated in the biggest socio-biological experiment of all time? The Swiss want to completely bypass general practitioners, vaccinations will be given in other places. It is not talked about much in the mainstream, but the reason for nervousness here is that m-RNAs are the first vaccines that interfere directly with the genetic material and change it."* (Čeští elfové 2021). Here, the disinformation scene operated with twisted information from the Swiss environment. The report originally only stated that the Swiss had not yet approved the AstraZeneca vaccine, but at that time they had already vaccinated with the other two vaccines and 75 % of the Swiss population had already been vaccinated. Subsequently, the already known report on DNA change was used.

The mentioned chain e-mails continued to spread another false message, namely that there are many as-yet-undetermined risks associated with the m-RNA vaccines. *"There is speculation about both local and new systemic inflammatory reactions that can trigger autoimmune disease, cancer, chronic organ damage, and other problems. Another cause for concern is the misuse of m-RNA vaccines to TARGETEDLY DAMAGE SOME FUNCTIONS OF THE BODY, SUCH AS CELL RENEWAL, FERTILITY AND FUNCTIONING OF THE NERVOUS SYSTEM."* (Čeští elfové 2021).

And that brings us to the last part of the analysed hoax, which also appeared in a separate version. It is a claim that vaccines cause infertility or, in the words of some of the fake news, even sterilization. A disinformation article from the cz24.news website was shared many times in several Facebook groups, which literally read: *"There is a serious suspicion that vaccines against Covid 19 will cause sterilization of women, and at the same time possibly significantly worsen the course of the Covid infection."* (cz24.news 2020). The report is based on the assertion of the head of research at Pfizer that the protein contained in the Covid 19 vaccines destroys the protein needed for the formation of the placenta (cz24.news 2020).

¹⁸ Source: https://www.mojevideo.sk/video/3391c/michal_shark_a_je_to_tu.html?fbclid=IwAR21VGrCz4nh4Esc-FEr_XZx3yyK-gw_AF0C5WfAysu36ZnfAqzFmA-DAkI.

¹⁹ The vaccine does not carry any DNA molecules, the word recombinant only refers to the fact that it is a recombinant RNA virus vaccine.

7 CONSPIRACY THEORY 3: “FAKE COVID 19 TEST RESULTS”

Throughout the most intensive part of the Covid 19 period (circa 2020–2022) we have witnessed attempts to spread the false results of Covid tests. This issue represents very specific case in our chapter, as it originally started as a hoax, however, later turned out to be true. Well, the fact that fake messages were spread, turned out to be true, not the content of the fake messages. These messages with fake Covid 19 test results have been sent to the people's cell phones allegedly by the testing centres themselves. At least they appeared so. However, the senders were none of the approved medical or administrative staff members, but hackers that compromised the information system of some of the testing centres, incl. the ones located at the major medical institutions in the country (e.g. General University Hospital in Prague). Messages reporting the results of Covid 19 tests were sent both to the people who were tested and awaited the results, as well as to the people who were not tested at all (Všeobecná fakultní nemocnice 2020). The information that people were receiving messages with fake test results had been for some time considered a hoax that was spread to undermine confidence in the health care system, and in Covid 19 testing. Facebook and other widely accessible social media with high potential for fast spread of the information had been used for posting messages reading “my friend went for testing, but did not want to wait in line, so left the testing centre without getting tested, despite that he received message that he had been positive” (Žabka 2020a). However, when posting such messages, nobody presented any proof that such a situation happened. Only later was it reported by several medical centres that their patients are receiving “results” of testing, even if they have not been tested at all. It can be understood that what was originally a hoax about non-existing issue became ground for creating “reality”, i.e. the hackers interfering with the information services of testing centres and send the alleged results to the people's phones (Žabka 2020b).

8 CONCLUSION

It was not possible to cover and analyse all the disinformation that appeared in the mentioned groups on Facebook during Covid 19 pandemics. In some cases, it was difficult, if not impossible to trace back the shared conspiracies, hoaxes, disinformation and fake news to their original source(s) and / or original author(s). It was mainly due to Facebook's algorithms to fight disinformation, because of which certain posts, incl. images and / or videos, as well as certain users were blocked.

Nevertheless, even the few recovered and traced examples of some of the most frequent Covid 19 conspiracy theories spread in the Czech online space during pandemic, provided evidence we can use to find and make generalizing conclusions. Conspiracy theories, hoaxes and / or disinformation about Covid 19 that circulated across Facebook groups were often of a dangerous nature and had a strong influence on the formation of public opinion beyond the scope of selected groups. Their artful use by disinformers often harmed rational social discussion and, unfortunately, the reaction of government officials and other public authorities often came late.

We believe that society needs to be aware of the dangerousness of conspiracy theories and disinformation before they take root in social consciousness, therefore timely and preventive information is necessary. It is important to

identify risks in the digital media environment early on and to gain an understanding of how information circulates among different audiences and how it is misused for disinformation. Similarly, it is essential to clarify which groups have an interest in sharing such misinformation. Once misinformation reaches the subconscious of individual segments of society, it is already very difficult to reverse the given thinking. Whereas if there was an early refutation and clarification of the given conspiracies and disinformation, even in the form of widespread government marketing campaigns or well-placed strategic communications, the degree of influence would be smaller, at least in terms of the number of affected individuals.

However, it must be stated objectively that the space for the creation and sharing of conspiracy theories, hoaxes and / or disinformation was often caused by politicians or representatives of the state administration themselves. The government's response to such unprecedented crisis as was Covid 19 pandemics had not always been systemic – both in terms of imposed measures and restrictions, as well as in the way and form of how these were communicated to the general public. Sometimes the information provided by different governmental and public service institutions, agencies or even the Cabinet ministers themselves contradicted each other, thus bringing even more confusion into the issue. The level of trust and confidence in government and its bodies decreased and in such an environment the conspiracy theories, hoaxes and / or disinformation found suitable grounds to be rooted in and grow from. As a result of it, even the people who do not identify themselves as hardliners belonging to the core of disinformation circles but can be rather described as soft or mild supporters of fake news, lost confidence in the system represented by the governmental agencies as well as by the mainstream media (Pika 2023).

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²⁰ "One lady was talking" (in original "Jedna paní povídala") is a Czech metaphorical expression referring to the spread of unverified information. The term "gossip" would probably be the closest simple (one word) synonymous expression. Example of the use of such expression in Czech language: "Je to pravda nebo je to informace typu jedna paní povídala?" (in English: "Is it true or is it one-lady-was-talking type of information?")



»V NAŠA TELESA ŽELIJO VGRADITI ČIPE«: TEORIJE ZAROT O COVID 19 IN NJIHOV VPLIV NA ČEŠKO DRUŽBO

Skupaj z nezadovoljstvom državljanov v povezavi s pandemijo covida-19, usmerjenim predvsem proti omejitvam in ukrepom, ki so jih uvedle oblasti, se je po (ne zgolj) češki družbi začela širiti cela vrsta lažnih novic, dezinformacij, potegavščin in teorij zarot, kar je še dodatno spodkopalo družbene odnose, razpoloženja, pa tudi skupne vrednote družbe. Vzpon različnih teorij zarot (zlasti v okolju spletnih družbenih omrežij) je bil takrat opažen v kontekstu omejitev, povezanih s cepljenjem proti covidu-19. Cilj prispevka je z vidika komunikacijskih študij prikazati te različne napačne informacije in potegavščine, ki so se v zadnjih letih razširile v komunikacijskem prostoru češke družbe, natančneje na družbeni platformi Facebook, in ki v izbranih skupinah odmevajo še danes, ter s tem vplivajo na politična stališča in obnašanje državljanov. Cilj prispevka je ne samo opozoriti na stereotipne težnje in argumentativne strategije, uporabljene v dani komunikaciji, temveč tudi pojasniti in razložiti informacije, na katerih temeljijo novonastale dezinformacije.

Ključne besede: Češka Republika; teorije zarot; dezinformacije; lažne novice; prevare; covid-19; Facebook; spletna družbena omrežja.