

# Translated COVID-19 Fake News

## Human Input and Localization As Benchmarks of Disinformation Intent

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### 1. Introduction

**I**N THE introduction to “How to Communicate in a Postmodern Pandemic,” reporter Michael J. Coren makes an astute observation: “In pandemics, as in war, truth is often the first casualty.”<sup>1</sup> Today, as in the past with syphilis and influenza, the SARS-CoV-2 has been referred to as the “Wuhan virus” or, more famously, the “Chinese virus” and “kung flu.” One media outlet proposed calling it the Chinese Communist Party virus.<sup>2</sup> This practice, although partly understandable in the early days of a new virus,<sup>3</sup> has nonetheless fueled an increase in anti-Asian sentiments worldwide.<sup>4</sup> This is, among others, due to the unprecedented spread of (dis)information we experience today, which is rivaled only by the virus.

What is yet to be understood is how much translation factors in the circulation of misinformation. The role it plays in combating the “infodemic” has been emphasized time and again.<sup>5</sup> Nonprofits such as Translators Without Borders took it upon themselves to translate key content related to COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> However, the irony is that, in many a case, the translators involved in such projects try to undo the harm caused by their peers, amateur translators, who render fake news either out of conviction that it represents the truth or for financial purposes, or both. In what follows, this article will explore the ways in which translation has impacted the COVID-19-related fake news phenomenon in Romania(n), from how the term is rendered and popularized to the alterations such reports are commonly subjected to in translation.

## 2. Fake News vs. False News

THE COVID-19 pandemic brought fake news into the limelight and with it, the debate on whether the Romanian language can accommodate the terminology with which the English-speaking academia and journalists operate. On 14 June 2020, the Romanian Public Service Television 1 broadcasted the first episode of *Breaking Fake News*, “the first TV program in the Romanian audiovisual landscape to be devoted to the right of being correctly informed.” In a press release regarding the program, the host, journalist Marian Voicu, who had released a documentary film and a book-length study on fake news, notes that

*The distinctions between “false news” and “fake news,” between “misinformation” and “disinformation” cannot be reproduced in Romanian—they are all translated ambiguously into Romanian as “știri false.” “False news” is the information that does not correlate with facts and is generated intentionally or unintentionally to increase sales or engagement. “Fake news” implies a strategy, a budget, and an ideology, promotes an agenda, has its own vocabulary, and is part of a campaign against an individual or a community.<sup>7</sup>*

A similar view and a possible translation solution are proposed in a 2020 article that the author of the present article co-wrote with Simina-Maria Terian:

*In English, the difference in nuance between “false” and “falsified” is aptly highlighted by the false news vs. fake news binary opposition. In Romanian, however, due to the absence of said adjectival doublet, a more adequate rendition of “fake news” would be, perhaps, “știri contrafăcute” [counterfeit news].<sup>8</sup>*

In practice, however, Romanian media outlets and, most notably, fact-checking websites,<sup>9</sup> all but favor the Anglo-Saxon “fake news.” Classifications tend to vary as well, with some websites identifying as many as eight different types of deceptive reports, from “la mișto” (in jest) to “propaganda.”<sup>10</sup> Others have opted for a much simpler taxonomy, distinguishing between “fake news” and “disinformation” only.<sup>11</sup> A similar preference can be noted in the case of news flagged as “fake.” Specifically, of FAKEROM project’s corpus of 452 COVID-19 fake news reports,<sup>12</sup> the number of articles featuring “fake news” is double the total of reports containing all the possible inflections of “false news.”<sup>13</sup> This is, I believe, indicative not only of the lack of terminological consistency currently pervading domestic media but also of the influence the English language exerts on the Romanian discourse on fake news.<sup>14</sup>

## 3. The Romanian Government’s Response to the Infodemic

IN RESPONSE to the spread of SARS-CoV-2 on its territory, Romania entered a 30-day state of emergency on 16 March 2020. The Decree whereby the lockdown was instituted stipulates, in Article 54(3), that

*Hosting and content service providers have the obligation, upon the motivated decision of National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communication [ANCOM], to immediately interrupt the transmission through an electronic communication network or the storage of the content, by removal the content at source in the eventuality that the content promotes fake-news as to the evolution of COVID-19 and to the protection and preventive measures.<sup>15</sup>*

Based on appraisals made by the Strategic Communication Group (GCS), which reports to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, ANCOM issued, on 20 March 2020, the first Decision pursuant to which a website was blocked for access on the grounds of disseminating COVID-19 fake news. Between 20 March and 6 May 2020, thirteen other domains would be temporarily denied access.<sup>16</sup> On 15 May 2020, the state of emergency was lifted, as was the ban on the websites blocked by ANCOM.<sup>17</sup> According to external inquiries, the campaign was not as efficient as predicted: a SINOPSIS report shows how several domains “were ‘resurrected’ under different web addresses and, in one case, a website, which was blocked in theory, continued to be accessible.”<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, according to sociologist Nicolae Țibrigan, the number of visitors to all these domains grew five or sixfold after the ban was lifted, and fake news circulated still on various social media.<sup>19</sup> These shortcomings, coupled with the low level of public trust in the state authorities, which Romanian fake news researcher Alina Bârgăoanu likens to Liberia, the least developed country in Africa,<sup>20</sup> has contributed to increased vulnerability to COVID-19 deceptive reports: “More than 57 [percent] of people [Romanians] feel that media exaggerates the pandemic, as opposed to . . . 26 [percent] in Germany,”<sup>21</sup> while “one poll shows 41 percent of Romanians believe COVID-19 is a US-made bioweapon.”<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. The Influence of the English Language on COVID-19 Fake News in Romania(n)

**T**HE RELATIONSHIP between COVID-19 fake news and translation is, if not always implied, hardly ever expressed directly. An EU report on fake news regarding the pandemic, which argues that Russian and Chinese media have made systematic “efforts to sow division within the EU,” features no occurrence of the words “translation” or “translate.”<sup>23</sup> This lack of emphasis on translation as the process whereby deceptive discourses are transferred from one language and culture to another is also visible in the decisions issued by ANCOM with respect to fake news websites. All of them mention the articles GCS found to qualify as “fake news” and the results of the inquiries based on which the GCS reported the hosting domains to ANCOM. However, neither one of these decisions states if these articles were original reports authored by the websites’ contributors or translations from other languages.

Upon consulting said articles—where still available—, I have found that six explicitly reference English-language written sources.<sup>24</sup> Of these articles, three do not mention the

identity of the translator(s),<sup>25</sup> while the other three attribute the renditions to the owner of the website wherefrom the translations originate.<sup>26</sup> In most cases (5 out of 6), the original articles are fully rendered into Romanian. As for the English-language sources, they are controversial “pro-Russia” platforms,<sup>27</sup> unreliable websites and credible online publications,<sup>28</sup> or trustworthy platforms whose news are decontextualized.<sup>29</sup> In all the six cases, the articles are published in Romanian by self-professed religious and/or Christian Orthodox websites.

In terms of translation quality and spelling accuracy, these articles rank above average, especially when compared to automatic translations of the original English-language reports. For exemplification, take, for instance, an excerpt from a *Russia Insider* (RI) article whose rendition was flagged by GCS, its anonymous Romanian translation published on the *Vremuri Tulburi* (Troubled times) (VT) website, and an automatically generated rendition by Google Translate (GT):

| VT (1)   | RI   | GT (2)  |
|--|--|---|
| Pana aici e ok, dar in rest totul a mers prost în acest haos disperat. Un virologul de top a confirmat că maedicamentul chorochin a fost folosit de chinezi cu rezultate spectaculoase pentru a vindeca pacienții, apoi și-a îmbunătățit poțiunea magică adăugând un antibacterian pneumonic numit azitromicină și din 1,000 de cazuri, doar la unul singur nu a dat rezultate. <sup>a</sup> | So far, so good, but everything else went wrong in this desperate and ultimate banzai. The top virologist on the planet confirmed that chloroquine was being used by the Chinese with spectacular results to cure patients, then he improved his magic potion by adding a pneumonic antibacterial called azythromicin, and saved every one of his first 1,000 cases, but one. <sup>b</sup> | Până acum, atât de bine, dar orice altceva a mers prost în acest banzai disperat și suprem. Virologul de top de pe planetă a confirmat că clorochina era folosită de chinezi cu rezultate spectaculoase pentru a vindeca pacienții, apoi și-a îmbunătățit poțiunea magică adăugând un antibacterian pneumonic numit azitromicină și a salvat fiecare dintre primele sale 1,000 de cazuri, dar unul. |

a. “Au dat mâna Putin și Trump.”

b. Sylvain Laforest, “Putin & Trump Forced into Populist Alliance vs. Globalists—The End of Jewish Power?,” 6 April 2020, [https://russia-insider.com/en/putin-trump-forced-populist-alliance-vs-globalists-end-jewish-power/ri28611?fbclid=IwAR3PriSfR0F0TyCYMwR8v0dfy\\_VqASGvwiY26-Po9OJcIJN1LrIHLdSXEI4](https://russia-insider.com/en/putin-trump-forced-populist-alliance-vs-globalists-end-jewish-power/ri28611?fbclid=IwAR3PriSfR0F0TyCYMwR8v0dfy_VqASGvwiY26-Po9OJcIJN1LrIHLdSXEI4).

Looking at the two translations into Romanian, there are reasons to believe that (1) is a human-edited version of (2). Firstly, note how (1) switches between not using diacritics—“pana aici” and “in rest” instead of the standard Romanian “până aici” and “în rest”—to deploying them exactly where the automatic rendition does. This may be an indication that whoever corrected the GT translation forgot to change the keyboard language. The rendition of the first sentence, although devoid of diacritics and failing to capitalize “OK,” makes more sense than the automatic translation. This is because machine translation services still struggle with rendering idioms such as “so far, so good” accurately. Culture-specific instances of language are another issue GT has of late failed to properly address. “Banzai,” the word used in (2) to render the English-language coun-

terpart “banzai,” exists in Romanian, yet it has not acquired the meaning in the source text, i.e., “battle cry.”<sup>30</sup> The term with which the translator(s) of (1) replace it—“haos” (chaos)—does not have a similar sense, yet it effectively conveys the idea expressed in the source report.<sup>31</sup> Other alterations which, I believe, point to human emendations of (1) are “un virologul de top” [sic] (a top virologist) instead of GT’s unnatural literal translation and VT’s reworking of the latter part of the paragraph—“saved every one of his first 1,000 cases, but one”—, whose syntax proved too difficult for GT to render into Romanian comprehensibly. This is not to say the human editor(s) are infallible: they not only omit to use diacritics but also insert a typo in ‘medicamental’ (the drug), a word of their own addition in (1).

In a context where content travels, as previously seen, across languages and cultures, chances are the same article will emerge on different websites under different translations. In a corpus of 452 Romanian COVID-19 fake news articles, three such cases were identified<sup>32</sup> based on the sources they reference, of which the most interesting is that of an article published by a domain formerly blocked by ANCOM and a mainstream news website.<sup>33</sup> On 18 November 2020, *Summit News* (SN) published an article titled “Top Pathologist Claims Coronavirus is ‘The Greatest Hoax Ever Perpetrated on an Unsuspecting Public.’”<sup>34</sup> A day later, *Ortodox Info* (OI), one of the temporarily banned domains, posted it in a Romanian translation. On 20 November 2020, the same day when *Evenimentul Zilei* (EVZ) published the second rendition of the article,<sup>35</sup> Canada’s Royal College of Physicians released a statement, clarifying that Dr. Hodgkinson, the medical professional cited in the article, who was certified by the Royal College in 1976, “is not nor has ever held the position of chairman” and that they “believe COVID-19 presents a serious threat to the health of Canadians.”<sup>36</sup> The fact-check report on this piece of news was published ten days later.<sup>37</sup> For reasons of space, what follows is a selection of passages from the source report and the two Romanian translations, which are illustrative of the various processes of rendering fake news:

| IV (1)   | SN   | OI (2)   |
|--|--|--|
| Title: Un medic zguduie lumea științei: “COVID-19 este o farsă! Masca, distanțarea și testele sunt inutile! Totul e o afacere” | Title: Top Pathologist Claims Coronavirus is “The Greatest Hoax Ever Perpetrated on an Unsuspecting Public”  | Title: Doctor Patolog canadian de top, declară Coronavirusul “cea mai mare farsă din istorie”  |
| Patologul de top susține că noul coronavirus este “cea mai mare farsă perpetuată vreodată unui public.”                        | Top pathologist Dr. Roger Hodgkinson told government officials in Alberta during a zoom conference call that the current coronavirus crisis is “the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on an unsuspecting public.” | Roger Hodgkinson, un Doctor Patolog foarte cunoscut, a declarat oficialilor guvernamentali din provincial Alberta, Canada, în timpul unei conferințe online pe Zoom, că actuala criză a coronavirusului este “cea mai mare farsă aplicată vreodată unui public neștiutor.” |

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Tabel – *continuare*

Comentariile lui Hodkinson au fost făcute în timpul unei discuții care a implicat Comitetul pentru Servicii Publice și Comunitate, iar clipul a fost ulterior încărcat pe YouTube.

Hodkinson’s comments were made during a discussion involving the Community and Public Services Committee and the clip was subsequently uploaded to YouTube.

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Noting that he was also an expert in virology, Hodkinson pointed out that his role as CEO of a biotech company that manufactures COVID tests means, “I might know a little bit about all this.”

A menționat totodată că este și un expert în virologie, și a subliniat rolul său de CEO al unei companii de biotehnologie care produce teste COVID afirmând: “Știu câteva lucruri despre toate acestea.”

“Există o isterie publică complet nefondată condusă de mass-media și politicieni, este revoltător, aceasta este cea mai mare farsă perpetuată vreodată unui public neștiutor,” a spus Hodkinson și continuă: “Nu este altceva decât un sezon rău de gripă. Acesta nu este Ebola. Nu este SARS.”<sup>a</sup>

“There is utterly unfounded public hysteria driven by the media and politicians, it’s outrageous, this is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on an unsuspecting public,” said Hodkinson.<sup>b</sup>

“Există o isterie publică complet nefondată, condusă de mass-media și politicieni, este revoltător, aceasta este cea mai mare farsă perpetuată vreodată unui public nebănuitor,” a spus Hodkinson.<sup>c</sup>

- a. “Lumea științei zguduită.”
- b. “Top Pathologist.”
- c. “Doctor patolog.”

As is evident from above, both (1) and (2) stay relatively close to the source report, yet they also exhibit marked differences. Take, for instance, the headlines: *OT*’s is a near-faithful rendition of *SN*’s, with the amendment that, for emphasis, “on an [u]nsuspecting [public]” is replaced with “din istorie” (in history). Conversely, *EVZ*’s title—which back-translates to “A doctor shakes up the science world: ‘COVID-19 is a hoax! Masks, social distancing, and tests are useless! Everything is just a setup’”—is a compilation of partial quotations from Dr. Hodkinson—“this [coronavirus crisis] is the greatest hoax,” “social distancing is useless,” “masks are utterly useless,” false positive RT-PCR test results are “driving public hysteria,” and the whole situation is “politics playing medicine, and that’s a very dangerous game.”<sup>38</sup>

*EVZ* brought substantial changes to the body of the article as well. While (2) gives once again a near-exact rendition of the first paragraph, (1) omits to mention the context in which Dr. Hodkinson’s comments were made (i.e., conference call with Alberta state officials). The third passage, which references the medical doctor’s professional background, also disappears from (1)’s translation. It does, however, feature content which does not exist in the source report. *SN* ends the fourth paragraph with “‘this is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on an unsuspecting public,’ said Hodkinson,” while *EVZ* adds:

“și continuă: ‘Nu este altceva decât un sezon rău de gripă. Acesta nu este Ebola. Nu este SARS’” (and continues: “It is nothing more than a bad flu season. This is not Ebola. It is not SARS”). The insert is not new textual material on the part of the translator: the video that accompanies the *SN* article records Dr. Hodgkinson stating just that. This alone indicates that, in the case of (1), we are not dealing with an instance of what could be called “fast translation” or the rapid rendition of news via *GT* or other machine translation service, published with or without prior minimal human emendations.

In the context of fake news, textual additions are not an isolated phenomenon, yet in most cases, they represent information which does not feature anywhere in the source report and whose role is that of making the content more locally relevant and, therefore, attractive to the target-report audience. Take, for instance, one of the articles which prompted *ANCOM* to block *OI* and the source report from *Zero Hedge* (*ZH*):

| <i>ZH</i>  | <i>OI</i>   |
|--|---|
| Title: “Immunity Certificates” Are Coming—COVID-Survivors To Get ‘Special Passports’ Enabling Return To ‘Normalcy’   | Title: AZI, „declarațiile pe propria răspundere.” MĂINE “Certificatele imunitare,” fără de care nu vom putea ieși din casă nevaccinați  |
| —  | Aceste așa numite DECLARAȚII PE PROPRIA RĂSPUNDERE sunt, după cum v-ați convins cu toții, foarte absurde și inutile. Însă ele pregătesc mentalul oamenilor încât să-i facă să accepte următorul pas despre care se vorbește în diferite părți ale globului, de către persoane cheie ale Sistemului: |
| Update: Even more prophetically, billionaire hedge fund manager Bill Ackman tweeted about his “optimism” and the need for Hydroxychloroquine and antibiotics appear to help. There is increasing evidence that the asymptomatic infection rate could be as much as 50× higher than expected. | Miliardarul Bill Ackman:  |
| “One could imagine a world in the next few months where everyone is tested and all but the immune-compromised go back to a socially distanced but more normal life.” <sup>a</sup>  | “S-ar putea imagina o lume în următoarele luni, în care toată lumea este testată și, cu excepția celor compromiși imunitar, toți se întorc la o viață mai normală, dar mai distanțată social.” <sup>b</sup>   |

a. Tyler Durden, “‘Immunity Certificates’ Are Coming—COVID-Survivors to Get ‘Special Passports’ Enabling Return to ‘Normalcy,’” 6 April 2020, <https://www.zerohedge.com/health/immunity-certificates-are-coming-covid-survivors-get-special-passports-enabling-return>.

b. “Azi, ‘declarațiile pe propria răspundere.’”

The intent to localize the source report is evident from the very title of the target report, which preserves *ZH*'s reference to immunity certificates only. Instead, the *OI* translation, which originates from a different website, alludes to a possible future transition from a

country-specific measure of preventing the spread of SARS-CoV-2—“declarații pe propria răspundere” (statements filled out by Romanian residents during the state of emergency which granted them the permission to leave the premises of their homes)—to “immunity certificates,” which, the title of the target report suggests, is a means of confining non-vaccinated people. To reinforce this narrative, several alterations were brought to the body of the source report. Most notably, the target report changes ZH’s statement on the reason why the article was updated and puts forward, in explicit terms, the theory foreshadowed in the target-report title. And since in the context thereby created the first part of Bill Ackman’s tweet serves no purpose, *OI* shortens it to substantiate the claims introduced by the title and the opening statement.<sup>39</sup>

## 5. Possible Ways of Identifying Disinformation Intent in Translated Fake News

**W**HAT I hope to have achieved with this study is to emphasize, on the one hand, that translation as a vehicle for disseminating deceptive reports is severely underrepresented in fake news research. Moreover, translated fake news appear to fall in a gray area, halfway between misinformation—“the inadvertent sharing of false information” (indeed, in a different language)—and disinformation—“the deliberate creation and sharing of information known to be false.”<sup>40</sup> These two factors seem to be the reason why this type of fake news had not been legally defined in the presidential Decree, which raised valid concerns regarding GCS’s inquiries and ANCOM’s decision to ban certain websites during the state of emergency. In Țibrigan’s words,

*The intent to disinform is difficult to prove, as many [articles deemed fake news] are reproductions or translations, and the provisions of the Decree whereby the state of emergency was declared does not offer any clear criteria [of identifying this intention].<sup>41</sup>*

In such contexts, consensus between state authorities and academic research is—or should be—essential for effectively regulating an otherwise fuzzy phenomenon, and to this end, it is highly important to devise criteria whereby a distinction can be made between translated fake news that verges on misinformation and rendered fake news that touches on disinformation. The case studies above point not only to some noteworthy convergences but also to two parameters which may be of use when assessing the extent to which a translated fake news report qualifies as disinformation:

- the degree of human input: Is the name of the translator(s) featured? If there are reasons to suspect the rendered fake news article is an automatic translation, are there any signs of human intervention (amendments to how *GT* renders the source-report title or idioms, additions or omissions relative to the original report)?
- the degree of localization: Does the new textual material make any reference to target-culture events, socio-political peculiarities, public persons widely known across the



receiving culture? Is the source content instrumentalized to push a different and/or localized counterdiscourse?

It is only logical that the higher the level of human input and localization, the higher the chances that the translation was intended not only to garner engagement and, therefore, revenue, but also to disinform. However, as seen in the case studies above, it is only on rare occasions that a rendered fake news report ticks all the boxes. As a result, some grey areas remain. The question then arises: why bother to distinguish between various degrees of agreement between a source report and the corresponding target reports? The answer is simple: because otherwise, claims of neutrality on the part of the websites distributing them cannot be refuted.<sup>42</sup>



## Notes

1. Michael J. Coren, “How to Communicate in a Postmodern Pandemic,” 7 May 2020, last updated 12 April 2021, <https://qz.com/1852552/past-pandemics-show-the-danger-of-misinformation-during-covid-19/>.
2. Andrea Bellemare, Jason Ho, and Katie Nicholson, “Some Canadians who Received Unsolicited Copy of Epoch Times Upset by Claim That China was Behind Virus,” 29 April 2020, last updated 2 May 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/epoch-times-coronavirus-bioweapon-1.5548217>.
3. Reuters Staff, “Japan Confirms Third Case of Wuhan Virus,” 25 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-japan-idUSKBN1ZO08O>; “China Virus: What’s Life Like in Quarantined Wuhan?,” *BBC News*, 24 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-china-51232613>.
4. “COVID-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide,” *Human Rights Watch*, 12 March 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>.
5. World Health Organization “Infodemic,” accessed 20 May 2021, [https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1).
6. Gretchen McCulloch, “COVID-19 Is History’s Biggest Translation Challenge,” 31 May 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/covid-language-translation-problem/>.
7. “‘Breaking Fake News’ sau pledoaria pentru adevăr, cu Marian Voicu, la TVR 1,” *Agerpres*, accessed 20 May 2021, <https://www.agerpres.ro/comunicate/2020/06/11/comunicat-de-presa-tvr--520907>.
8. Anca-Simina Martin and Simina-Maria Terian, “Știrile false: Limite și perspective ale analizei lingvistice,” *Transilvania* 10 (2020): 72.
9. See, for instance, *Press One*, *Anti-fake*, *Rise Moldova*, *Veridica*, and *Factual*. A notable exception is *Stop Fals*.
10. “Buletin de fake news,” *Factual*, accessed 21 May 2021, <https://www.factual.ro/fake/>.
11. *Veridica*.
12. FAKEROM’s corpus was compiled based on Busioc, Ruseti, and Dascalu’s research. See Costin Busioc, Stefan Ruseti, and Mihai Dascalu, “A Literature Review of NLP Ap-

- proaches to Fake News Detection and Their Applicability to Romanian-Language News Analysis,” *Transilvania* 10 (2020): 65–71.
13. Seven articles feature the term ‘fake news’ exclusively, two use the inflectionary forms ‘știre falsă’ and ‘fake news’ interchangeably, and three deploy inflections of ‘știre falsă’ only.
  14. For the sake of simplicity, I will hereinafter refer to this phenomenon as ‘fake news.’
  15. Decree on the Establishment of the State of Emergency in the Territory of Romania, *Monitorul Oficial al României*, pt. 1, no. 212, 16 March 2020, accessed 21 May 2021, <https://rm.coe.int/16809e375d>.
  16. Octavian Coman, “Operațiunea site-uri blocate: Limitele luptei cu dezinformarea,” *Sinopsis*, 7 May 2020, <https://sinopsis.info.ro/2020/05/07/operatiunea-site-uri-blocate-limitele-luptei-cu-dezinformarea/>.
  17. Europa Liberă România, “ANCOM: Au fost deblocate toate site-urile închise pentru fake-news,” 15 May 2020, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/siteuri-blocate-fake-news-/30613952.html>.
  18. Coman.
  19. Europa Liberă, “ANCOM.”
  20. Andreea Ruxanda, “De ce înflorește în România fake-news-ul legat de vaccinul anti-COVID: ‘Suntem la cote de încredere în semeni la nivelul Liberiei, cea mai săracă țară din Africa,’” 9 January 2021, <https://ziare.com/stiri/coronavirus/romania-are-cote-de-incredere-la-nivelul-liberiei-1655377>.
  21. Vicente, “Navigating the Romanian ‘Infodemic,’” 17 September 2020, <https://project-youcheck.com/navigating-the-romanian-infodemic/>.
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  42. In a 2017 interview with *VICE*, one of the owners of a Romanian fake news website declares: “As far as I am concerned, I want to mention that many news reports are reposted [from other domains] and do not reflect the style of the website I manage. If a news report is classified as ‘fake,’ one must first go to its source. We launched the site in 2008 and our objective, unlike mainstream media, is to inform readers correctly and without censorship.” See Andreea Pocotilă, “Am vorbit cu oamenii din spatele unor site-uri din România acuzate că răspândesc știri false,” 1 March 2017, <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/ypkz4g/am-vorbit-cu-oamenii-din-spatele-unor-site-uri-din-romania-acuzate-ca-raspandesc-stiri-false>.

### Abstract

#### Translated COVID-19 Fake News: Human Input and Localization As Benchmarks of Disinformation Intent

This article sets out to chart various aspects of the relationship between COVID-19 fake news and the process of translation by analyzing how several English-language deceptive reports were rendered into Romanian. In Romania, the emergence of the novel coronavirus coincided with a surge of interest in the fake news phenomenon among experts, the wider public, and most notably, the country’s authorities, which blocked fake news websites temporarily in an effort to combat the

infodemic. However, neither the Decree which instituted this measure nor the existing research into the phenomenon distinguishes between original and translated reports, which led to criticism regarding the extent to which the intent to disinform is provable in the case of such articles. In the present essay, the author argues, through case studies, that the higher the level of human input and localization, the higher the chances that a translated fake news report can successfully be proven to be part of a disinformation agenda.

### **Keywords**

COVID-19, English, fake news, Romanian, translation