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COVID-19 and the Post-Truth Age: The Role of Facts in Public Policy
Summary of an Online International Conference

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The COVID-19 pandemic erupted in what is commonly known as the “post-truth age,” when facts seemingly bear less importance than beliefs, emotions, and opinions. The occurrence of the pandemic in the post-truth age raises many questions regarding the role of facts in dealing with the crisis and the pandemic’s potential long term implications for the post-truth age. On May 27, 2020, the Lipkin-Shahak program at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), “National Security and Democracy in an Era of Post-Truth and Fake News,” held an o-line international conference to address these questions. The speakers were experts in medicine, academia, research institutes, the traditional media, and the social media. Discussions questioned the whether the COVID-19 pandemic was a product of the post-truth age, and, if so, in what way. In the course of the crisis, what were the functions of the scientific community, the traditional media, and the social media, which currently constitute the entities for clarifying and mediating the truth? Another question considered the public’s confidence in these institutions during the pandemic, and the ways this confidence will presumably evolve in the future.

Conference Participants: INSS Deputy Director for Research and Analysis Brig. Gen. (ret.) Itai Brun, who moderated the conference; Dr. Jennifer Kavanaugh of the Rand Corporation; Prof. Steve Fuller of the University of Warwick; Dr. Ofer Fridman of Kings College London; Prof. Jacob Moran-Gilad of Ben-Gurion University; Prof. Ayelet Baram-Tsabari of the Technion; Dr. Tomer Shadmi of the Hebrew University’s Cyber Center and INSS; Attila Somfalvi of Ynet and INSS; and Prof. Sir Lawrence Freedman of Kings College London.

The COVID-19 Phenomenon in the Post-Truth Age

It is widely agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic period has been characterized by confusion and a lack of understanding among the public and decision makers. What caused this?

One possibility is that uncertainty stemmed from a lack of knowledge: COVID-19 is a virus whose attributes were (and, to a great extent, still are) unknown. The lack of knowledge makes it difficult to answer questions concerning the spread of the virus, the duration of the crisis, and ways to cope with it. It is no surprise that periods characterized by a lack of knowledge are accompanied by charlatanism, misinformation, and errors, all of which are phenomena stemming not from the post-truth age but rather as a result from the need to fill the vacuum left by the only partial information available during the crisis.

A second possibility is that the COVID-19 pandemic is actually a unique phenomenon constituting the most blatant expression of dangers of the post-truth age: the period of the pandemic has been characterized by less confidence in institutions, a lack of agreement on facts, and a blurring of the line between opinion and fact. The pandemic intensified the need of citizens to find certainty, but they have tended to find it in comfortable “facts” from institutions and entities they regard as trustworthy, and that are consistent with opinions they already espouse. The sense of confusion and uncertainty stem from contradictions between different facts and sources. Charlatanism, misinformation, and errors are the outcome of the desires and interests of different people, and the degree of correspondence between them and comfortable facts that do not cause cognitive dissonance.

A third possibility is that COVID-19 is a standard phenomenon of the post-truth age – an outcome of inevitable processes. Democratization and education have created a situation in which every individual regards himself or herself as capable of deciding what is true. Therefore, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the public hears different arguments in the political realm and the scientific community and feels qualified to decide what the facts are, with no need for experts to develop theories and refute them on their behalf. The confusion and uncertainty stem from a disparity between people’s sense of being qualified to determine what is correct, and the difficulty in doing so, particularly in a period replete with uncertainty and a plethora of often contradictory arguments. From this point of view, charlatanism, misinformation, and errors constitute arguments like all other arguments, which the public may accept or reject.

Truth-Clarifying Institutions

The pandemic has resulted in changes not only throughout the general population but also in institutions whose role it is to “clarify the truth” and make information accessible to the public: the scientific community, the media, and the social media.

The scientific community encountered a twofold difficulty during the pandemic. First, medical research itself was negatively affected: the accumulation of accurate scientific information by experts is an extended process impossible during a rapid spread of a virus.

Due to the pressures of time, many articles were published after only limited peer review, and in some cases without any peer review at all. The result was the publication of contradictory findings of disputed value. Most academic conferences were canceled and replaced by conferences conducted via Zoom, which, though more accessible than professional conferences, have also been characterized by questionable professionalism and effectiveness. The challenge lies in mediating the information to the general public. During the pandemic, scientists received extensive exposure, although many did not excel in presenting their research to the general public. As a result, much research of dubious quality reached the public and decision makers, who frequently viewed it as pure truth, as opposed to theories and assessments requiring validation and proof. Once revealed as erroneous, such research resulted in uncertainty.

During the pandemic, the media found itself trapped: on the one hand, the crisis resulted in high ratings for the traditional media, in part due to the lockdown, which allowed increased consumption, and perhaps also the attribution of higher reliability to the traditional compared with the social media. On the other hand, the media's ability to transmit accurate information was negatively affected by the difficulty of clarifying facts and identifying the relevant experts. The media were therefore forced to shift quickly to intensive coverage of a subject marked decidedly by a lack of previous knowledge. In addition, the attempt to present the two sides of every story sometimes resulted in the presentation of fraudulent views and the positions of experts side by side, as if equal in value, whereas minority views were silenced. Ultimately, the conception that media bodies have an agenda also resulted in scientific facts sometimes perceived as part of a political agenda.

The crisis also had an impact on the social media. Although in the past the social media tended not to take responsibility for the content it circulated, with the exception of extreme cases, during the pandemic social media platforms adopted relatively aggressive policies of information distribution from official sources on the one hand, and – in a precedent setting fashion – the identification and deletion of misleading content, including that of political leaders on the other hand.

Public Confidence

There is no consensus regarding the change in the relationship between the public and the decision makers and truth-clarifying institutions. On the one hand, the far-reaching policies adopted by many countries and the obedience by civilians to the limitations imposed upon them were indicative of public confidence in the knowledge relied upon by decision makers. The high media ratings were indicative of an element of public confidence in the media and the experts interviewed. On the other hand, there is no concrete information regarding public confidence during the pandemic period, and there

may have been a decline in the faith in decision makers and truth-clarifying institutions, including the medical community, due to the multiple opinions and the frequent changes that revealed their lapses and weaknesses to the public. It is also possible that these two trends are occurring in parallel: increasing public confidence among certain populations and decreasing confidence among others, depending on whether the populations in question were directly injured by the virus and therefore intent upon clarifying the truth about it, as opposed to populations that suffered greater injury from the restrictions that were imposed by the government.

One of the insights emphasized at the conference is that public confidence is of great importance in times of crisis. First, public confidence may constitute a decisive factor in public compliance with imposed restrictions that may present ongoing challenges and be renewed in the event of a second wave of the pandemic. Second, lack of public confidence can be a weak point serving foreign elements with an interest in undermining popular confidence in institutions in democratic countries by highlighting the ostensibly preferable performance of totalitarian states during the crisis.

The Long Term influence of the Pandemic

The conference questioned whether the unique attributes of the crisis would result in deeper change in the approach of the general public, media bodies, and decision makers to the role of facts, professional analysis, and experts. In this context, the following policy proposals were raised:

With regard to the medical community, the COVID-19 pandemic may result in harm to popular confidence in experts due to the public exposure of lack of agreement within this community; this lent the sense that scientific arguments are similar to political arguments and are tools of the political game. At the same time, COVID-19 sparked public interest in the pandemic and familiarized the public with relevant healthcare terms that may make it easier for the professional community to explain its positions in preparation for a new outbreak. To increase the confidence in healthcare experts, it was suggested to ensure an inclusive discourse concerning scientific research, as opposed to contrarian discourse that divides the public into “right and wrong.” It was also suggested to separate the scientific community from the political arena in order to avoid giving the impression that public officials are responsible for producing the information, thereby imbuing it with political meaning.

The traditional media will need to consider how its popularity can be leveraged in order to build the image of a quality truth-clarifying body. Inter alia, the media will require enhanced ability to convey information to the public in a precise manner and to screen

the experts who are invited to be interviewed in order to make certain that they are the most relevant experts around.

Finally, on the level of state and society, it is necessary to consider ways of restoring public confidence in the establishment – including the media, information, and the state institutions – in order to enable better coping with crises in general and future pandemics in particular. The restoration of public confidence should also aim to prevent the possible influence of foreign actors such as Russia and China that may exploit the crisis to present a model that is an alternative to Western democracy and that suppresses individual liberties in exchange for contending more effectively with collective challenges, such as pandemics.