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**THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH OF THE  
PHENOMENON OF DISINFORMATION. CASE  
STUDIES: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE  
WAR IN UKRAINE. COMPARATIVE STUDY**

**SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS**

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# TABEL OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>1.1. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>1.1.1. ONSET OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ROMANIA.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>1.1.2. MEASURES TAKEN TO PREVENT THE SPREAD AND CONTROL         THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ROMANIA.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>1.1.3. THE PROCESS OF VACCINATION AGAINST COVID-19.....</b>	<b>30</b>
1.1.3.1. BRIEF HISTORY OF VACCINATION.....	30
1.1.3.2. VACCINATION AGAINST COVID-19.....	31
<b>1.1.4. FREEDOM ISSUES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.....</b>	<b>32</b>
1.1.4.1. THE NOTION OF FREEDOM.....	32
1.1.4.2. MEASURES IMPOSED BY THE AUTHORITIES AND THE FREEDOM OF CITIZENS.....	34
<b>1.1.5. ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF IMPOSED MEASURES AND         VACCINATION.....</b>	<b>39</b>
1.1.5.1. UTILITARIANISM.....	39
1.1.5.2. ETHICS OF CARE AND ETHICS OF JUSTICE.....	40
1.1.5.3. COMMUNITARIANISM.....	42
1.1.5.4. VACCINATION FROM AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE.....	43
<b>1.2. THE WAR IN UKRAINE.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>1.2.1. BACKGROUND, ONSET AND EVOLUTION OF THE WAR IN         UKRAINE.....</b>	<b>45</b>
1.2.1.1. BACKGROUND TO THE INVASION OF UKRAINE.....	45
1.2.1.2. THE INVASION OF UKRAINE.....	45
1.2.1.3. EVOLUTION OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE.....	46
<b>1.2.2. CONSEQUENCES OF THE INVASION OF UKRAINE.....</b>	<b>48</b>
1.2.2.1. CONSEQUENCES OF THE INVASION OF UKRAINE.....	48
1.2.2.2. THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CRISIS.....	49
1.2.2.3. SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA AND THEIR EFFECTS WORLDWIDE.....	49
<b>1.2.3. FREEDOM ISSUES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN         UKRAINE.....</b>	<b>52</b>
1.2.3.1. MARTIAL LAW IN UKRAINE AND FREEDOM OF CITIZENS.....	52
1.2.3.2. SANCTIONS AND FREEDOM OF CITIZENS OUTSIDE UKRAINE.....	54
<b>1.2.4. THE WAR IN UKRAINE FROM AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE.....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2. INFODEMICS ASSOCIATED WITH CONTEMPORARY DISASTER SITUATIONS FROM A MEDIA PERSPECTIVE.....</b>	<b>62</b>

<b>2.1. MEDIA ETHICS.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>2.1.1. ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF THE MEDIA.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>2.1.2. CITIZEN JOURNALISM.....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>2.2. TRUTH, POST-TRUTH AND MISINFORMATION.....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>2.2.1. THE NOTION OF TRUTH.....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>2.2.2. THE NOTION OF TRUTHFULNESS.....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>2.2.3. THE PHENOMENON OF DISINFORMATION.....</b>	<b>67</b>
2.2.3.1. MISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS.....	67
2.2.3.2. CONSPIRACY THEORIES.....	69
<b>2.3. MEDIA AND MASS COMMUNICATION IN CONTEMPORARY CATASTROPHIC SITUATIONS.....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>2.3.1. INFODEMICS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID PANDEMIC-19..</b>	<b>72</b>
2.3.1.1. INFODEMICS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC WORLDWIDE.....	72
2.3.1.2. INFODEMICS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ROMANIA.....	74
<b>2.3.2. INFODEMICS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE.....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>2.4. CONTEMPORARY CATASTROPHIC SITUATIONS FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE.....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>2.4.1. ANGUISH FROM A PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE.....</b>	<b>82</b>
2.4.1.1. PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOANALYSIS.....	82
2.4.1.2. ANXIETY.....	83
<b>2.4.2. ANXIETY FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE.....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>2.4.3. ANXIETY AND MISINFORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY CATASTROPHIC SITUATIONS.....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3. APPLIED RESEARCH.....</b>	<b>94</b>
3.1. RESULTS OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH.....	94
3.2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES.....	95
3.3. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES.....	95
3.4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	97
3.5. RESEARCH SAMPLE.....	98
3.5.1. SAMPLE OF TEACHERS.....	99
3.5.2. SAMPLE OF HEALTH PERSONNEL.....	102
3.5.3. SAMPLE OF IT STAFF.....	107
3.6. RESEARCH RESULTS.....	111
3.6.1. ANXIETY, NEWS AND FREEDOM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.....	111
3.6.1.1. TEACHERS.....	111
3.6.1.2. HEALTH PERSONNEL.....	116
3.6.1.3. IT STAFF.....	120

3.6.2. ANXIETY, NEWS AND FREEDOM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE.....	124
3.6.2.1. TEACHERS.....	124
3.6.2.2. HEALTH PERSONNEL.....	129
3.6.2.3. IT STAFF.....	133
3.6.3. INFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID PANDEMIC-19.....	138
3.6.3.1. ESTABLISHING THE TRUTH VALUE OF THE MOST COMMON NEWS STORIES IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT BY TEACHERS.....	138
3.6.3.2. ESTABLISHING THE TRUTH VALUE OF THE MOST COMMON NEWS ITEMS IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT BY HEALTH PERSONNEL.....	146
3.6.3.3. ESTABLISHING THE TRUTH VALUE OF THE MOST COMMON NEWS STORIES IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT BY IT STAFF.....	155
3.6.4. INFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC .....	163
3.6.4.1. ESTABLISHING THE TRUTH VALUE OF THE MOST COMMON NEWS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE BY TEACHERS..	163
3.6.4.2. ESTABLISHING THE TRUTH VALUE OF THE MOST COMMON NEWS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE BY HEALTH PERSONNEL.....	172
3.6.4.3. ESTABLISHING THE TRUTH VALUE OF THE MOST COMMON NEWS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE BY IT STAFF.....	180
3.7. INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS.....	189
3.7.1. QUANTITATIVE INTERPRETATION.....	189
3.7.1. QUALITATIVE INTERPRETATION.....	197
DISCUSSIONS.....	200
<b>CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>202</b>
<b>CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>204</b>
OBJECTIVES PURSUED BY THE PAPER AND RESEARCH RESULTS.....	204
FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH.....	206
<b>ANNEXES.....</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>ANNEX NR. 1.....</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>ANNEX NR. 2.....</b>	<b>219</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>220</b>

**Key words:** COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, freedom, applied ethics, disinformation, infodemics, ethical theories, angst, truth, fake news.

**Summary:**

This paper aims at a philosophical approach to the phenomenon of disinformation from the perspective of media ethics. Media ethics is a subdivision of applied ethics that refers to the ethical principles and standards of the media, including television, cinema, film, print media, internet. The best known part of media ethics is the ethics of journalists, which is taught in training programmes for journalists.

Codes of ethics for journalists are contained both in professional self-regulations (imposed by various societies, professional associations) and in normative regulations (in the form of laws, ministerial orders, other normative acts). The most important issues covered in these are truth, objectivity, protection of sources, multi-source verification and public interest. These codes should be respected by all journalists, but this is harder to follow in the case of citizen journalism. In this case the person writing the article is expressing his or her own ideas and opinions and is not a qualified person, not trained in journalism. Thus, the ethical codes of journalists end up being disregarded, unknowingly exposing information obtained from unreliable, unverified sources, which is presented with certainty, misleading the reader.

The number of citizen journalists increases in various catastrophic crisis situations. Such catastrophic situations were the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in Romania on 26. February. 2020 (identification of the first case of the disease in Romania), i.e. the war in Ukraine, its onset dates from 24. February. 2022 (Russia's invasion of Ukraine). Therefore, during this period the practice of citizen journalism intensified, leading to the dissemination of unreliable information on social media platforms, resulting in mass misinformation.

In the context of philosophical research, the philosophical approach to the phenomenon of disinformation, is a scientific research with philosophical relevance and interdisciplinary character.

Given that the phenomenon of disinformation is a subject studied by philosophy, psychology, sociology and communication specialists, it is an interdisciplinary problem. Thus, the research encompasses certain psychological and sociological aspects that address this issue.

At the same time, we analyzed the situation from the perspective of media ethics, focusing on the analysis of the two catastrophic events, presenting the most common misinformation, analyzing the attitude of the participants in the applied part of the work.

The phenomenon of misinformation is becoming an increasing problem in contemporary society due to the existence of multiple social media platforms and the practice of citizen

journalism. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine, the phenomenon of disinformation has intensified.

So this is a current problem of contemporary society that we are facing now and will face in the future.

The main problems in the period 2020-2021 are related to the COVID-19 pandemic: measures taken in Romania by the authorities, restriction of freedom, vaccination. In 2022, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a new wave of problems and concerns emerged, due to the large volume of information (more or less verified), related to the possibility of the outbreak of a world war, the effects of sanctions against Russia (political, economic, social effects). Thus, from 2020 to the present day, there have been various reasons for concern, more or less backed up by reliable information, so anxiety has increased, and the practice of citizen journalism has also intensified.

Having worked in pre-university education as a teacher, but also in my own psychology practice, I have witnessed and continue to witness the changes caused by the pandemic, the effects of the pandemic, but also the various anxieties caused by the pandemic and the outbreak of war in the neighbouring country, both among minors and among the adult population.

Thus, this is a topical issue that we are facing and identifying how to understand, select and process information is key to reducing the impact of misinformation.

A possible limitation of the research is the small number of participants in the application part, so it cannot be generalised to the whole population. At the same time, by identifying the above, the phenomenon of misinformation cannot be stopped, but only diminished.

In the research of Anna Ichino (specialist and professor in the field of philosophical psychology) we can see that misinformation leads to conspiracy theories, which, however, at the level of a person, is the most suggestive explanation for a situation. These theories arise in response to catastrophic, crisis situations.

In Romania, Oana Lup and Elena Cristina Mitrea conducted a study among Romanian students to determine the main factors that favour a person's adherence to certain conspiracy theories. The main factors favouring belief in conspiracy theories were: parents' level of schooling, analytical skills and news-watching habits.

In 2021 I completed an undergraduate dissertation in Philosophy entitled "The COVID-19 Challenge in Pre-University Education. Ethical and Psychological Aspects", and in 2022 I continued the original topic in my dissertation in the same field, the paper being entitled "The COVID-19 challenge in pre-university education. Ethical and psychological aspects. Comparative study 2020-2021". Also in 2022 I completed an undergraduate thesis in the field

of Psychology, entitled "Challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic in pre-university education". Thus, I analysed the issues of the COVID-19 pandemic from both a psychological and a philosophical point of view. We have analysed the measures taken during the years 2020-2021, concluding that each of these measures can be framed within at least one of the ethical theories. The majority of participants (pre-university teachers) considered the introduction of the measures to be necessary and ethically acceptable. In terms of psychological aspects, anxiety visibly increased after the onset of the pandemic, after which it remained at a medium level, and in 2021 it decreased to a pre-academic level. There are three explanations for this decrease: the advent of the COVID-19 vaccine in early 2021, the decrease in time spent following the news, and the fact that we got used to the pandemic, so it became the new normal. Time spent following the news followed the same pattern as participants' anxiety levels, with a significant increase at the onset of the pandemic, then a maintenance at medium level, and a sharp decrease in 2021. The mode of following the news in most cases remained unchanged, with most following the news on TV and via social media sites. Thus, the source of information did not influence the vaccination decision of participants. The way the information was processed and post-communist prejudices were those aspects, which I believe influenced these decisions.

The present paper follows a development of previous research. In the previous research we analysed the COVID-19 pandemic as an issue of bioethics, i.e. from the point of view of pre-university teachers, focusing on the acceptance of the measures, the teachers' opinion about them, their habits in following the news and their mental state. The present research deals with both this bioethical issue and the issue of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as two catastrophic events, presenting and analysing the two events and the various conspiracy theories that have emerged in their context, thus making an interdisciplinary presentation of them, and finally, a brief analysis from the perspective of media ethics.

The present research can be defined as both interdisciplinary and applied research. The interdisciplinarity of the research emerges from the analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine from several aspects, carrying out a complex analysis at the philosophical, sociological, psychological, media and communication levels. The applied nature of the research will be highlighted in the last chapter, which will include the presentation and analysis of an applied research using active-participatory methods, involving participants, using questionnaires and interviews.

In the first chapter, entitled *The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine as issues of applied ethics*, I presented the COVID-19 pandemic on the one hand, and the war in Ukraine

on the other, analysing the two catastrophic situations from a philosophical perspective. In the first sub-chapter we presented the COVID-19 pandemic, the first case of illness in the world being identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, its onset dating back to 26 February 2020 in Romania. Thus, a state of emergency was established from 16 March 2020, followed by a state of alert until 8 March 2022. During these two years in Romania, but also in other countries of the world, there have been a series of measures imposed by the authorities, based on the recommendations of the World Health Organization. Thus, these measures have targeted the way we live our lives, introducing a series of barriers to carrying out various activities. These measures include the closure of schools, restaurants, suspension of non-essential services during quarantine, bans on leaving home without good reason, prioritisation in the health system, keeping social distance, wearing surgical masks, the need for green certificates. After a period of one year after the emergence of the virus, at the end of December 2020, the first vaccine aimed at minimising the chance of contracting the virus, i.e. favouring the appearance of mild forms in the event of illness, appeared, which is the product of Pfizer- Biontech. The vaccine used relatively new technology and contained messenger RNA molecules. A short time ago, in early 2021, Moderna's vaccine appeared, using the same technology. In the spring of this year AstraZeneca's vaccine appeared, then in the summer of this year Johnson & Johnson's, these being non-replicating viral vector vaccines. The Pfizer- Biontech and Moderna vaccines consisted of two doses, 21 and 28 days apart respectively, with the third dose administered at least 6 months after the previous dose. Astra Zeneca's vaccine also had two doses, administered 56 days apart, while Johnson & Johnson's vaccine had a single dose. In this sub-chapter, we have looked at the situation from both an ethical and a freedom and rights perspective. Following the analysis, we concluded that the measures imposed by the authorities fall under at least one of the ethical theories. Utilitarianism, not being an absolutist moral theory, aims at the principle of greatest happiness, i.e. maximising efficiency and goodness. In this sense, the digitisation of education, the closure of non-essential activities, quarantines and the measures introduced in the health system fall into this. The ethic of care is about caring, compassion for oneself and others, and the ethic of justice is about the principle of equality. In this sense, we can say that wearing masks, disinfecting hands, quarantine, social distancing and the attitude of medical professionals can be categorised under this moral theory. Finally, I presented communitarianism as a moral theory based on cooperation, on the good of the community. In this theory we can include both imposed measures and the responsible attitude of citizens to comply with these measures, for the good of all, the common goal being to fight the pandemic and return to normality.



In the remainder of this sub-chapter, we have examined the notion of citizens' freedom in the context of this pandemic. The notion of freedom refers to the absence of all constraints, while Mill makes it clear that any constraint on freedom can only be justified in certain situations, i.e. if it prevents the freedom and rights of others from being infringed. Thus, we have come to the conclusion that most of these imposed measures, although they did restrict certain individual freedoms, were justified restrictions. However, we can also discuss specific situations, such as the closure of private medical practices, the lack of medical care for common illnesses, online education, especially in inclusive schools, where the right of certain individuals to medical care, the right to health, the right to education has been violated.

In the last sub-point of this sub-chapter was the ethical analysis of vaccination. The appearance of vaccines on the market was legal and ethical, respecting the necessary steps for endorsements and approvals. Therefore, its administration was either done out of duty or according to duty, at least at the beginning of its administration. Thus, those who opted for the vaccine out of duty took a decision in line with ethical ethics, primarily respecting their obligations at work (health professionals). The majority of vaccinated people, however, took this decision out of duty, thus vaccinating for subjective reasons, for their own good. We can also distinguish a third category of people, who got vaccinated in order to be able to travel more easily and cheaply, not needing to be tested for every trip.

In the second sub-chapter, we made the presentation of the war in Ukraine, the invasion of which took place on 24 February 2022, Ukraine was subsequently attacked by air, sea and land from the north, north-east, east, south and south-east. The purpose of this invasion is not very clear, and there are various suppositions to this effect. Initially Putin discussed a denazification of Ukraine, but in later stages his apparent aim was to occupy territories that were previously under Russian authority. To Russia's and the world's surprise, Ukraine has shown patriotism, continuing to fight for their country, their defence more intense than the world expected.

This war has had countless consequences for both Ukrainians and the whole world. We can talk about its psychological effects worldwide, initially triggering panic, with the anxiety that arose during the pandemic becoming more pronounced in many cases. On the other hand, we can discuss a series of measures and sanctions against Russia, its aggression being condemned by most countries, measures and sanctions which have an effect not only on Russia, but affecting the world economy. At the same time, we are also talking about a humanitarian crisis as a result of the large number of refugees.

Next, we looked at the war from the perspective of morality and freedom. Therefore, analysing the situation with regard to freedom and respect for the rights of Ukrainians, we came to the conclusion that the declaration of martial law, which led to a travel ban on men between the ages of 18 and 60, infringed the freedom of citizens, disrespecting their negative rights, such as the right to life, free speech, freedom, property. Although this coercion is apparently justified, in practice these people have had no special training in such situations, thus risking their lives by simply being forced to remain on the spot. In my view, the obligation to stay does not necessarily imply a defence of the country; someone who does not want to fight will not do so simply because they are in the area because of prohibitions.

As for the sanctions imposed against Russia, they also affect the freedom of all citizens and entities living in European Union or G7 countries, thus forfeiting their right to decide individually and deliberately. Apparently, these decisions represent a curtailment of citizens' freedom. This restriction, however, is justified, in accordance with the ideology represented by Mill, as these restrictions on freedom are intended to infringe the freedom of citizens by Russia. Thus, in this situation, I believe that we cannot talk about an infringement of freedom, i.e. the denial of the rights of civilians and affected entities.

On the other hand, we can talk about the infringement of the freedom of Russian citizens, who, due to disinformation, not having access to external news sources, are affected by these sanctions and who most probably do not know the real reason for these sanctions. However, we can say with certainty that their freedom is restricted. If we look at the situation from their point of view, we can conclude that their freedom is being infringed by the countries that have imposed these sanctions. If we look at the situation from the point of view of the countries that imposed the sanctions, these sanctions are aimed at the Russian state, so its citizens are implicitly targeted, the sanctions are of a purely political nature. Thus, it is the Russian authorities who are restricting the freedom of Russian citizens by not renouncing the act of aggression against Ukraine.

In the last sub-point of this sub-chapter we have analysed the war in Ukraine from an ethical perspective. By analysing the situation, we came to the conclusion that this war is considered to be an act of aggression, and there are countless war crimes, one of the most visible of which is the unnecessary bloodshed. Russia did not respect humanitarian corridors, but neither did it respect areas where civilians were, as they were not a target for their army. Russia's attitude is therefore immoral.

Next we looked at the situation of civilian volunteers, who decided to stay voluntarily and participate in the defence of their country, thus showing their patriotism. This decision of

theirs, namely the decision of the Ukrainian people to fight and defend themselves until the last moment, is a utilitarian one, and at the same time it can also be framed in the theory of communitarianism, this decision being beneficial not only to the Ukrainians in terms of self-respect, sovereignty and democracy of the country, but also to the whole world, as Russia sees that it is not giving in, thus minimising the chance of Russia adopting a similar attitude to other neighbouring countries.

With regard to the situation of the refugees, the support given to them, as well as the support given to the civilians remaining in the country, we can say that these decisions are moral, they fall under the theory of the ethics of care and justice, bearing the care of these people, and at the same time providing them with rights such as healthcare, education, work and residence.

Finally, I briefly outlined the position of the United States of America, which is a controversial one. This state, which today condemns Russia's attitude, had a similar attitude, beginning in 2003 towards Iraq, an act of aggression that lasted until 2011, the consequences of which were a very large number of civilian deaths (approximately 100,000). Thus, in the present situation, we can state that, although the support given by the US is apparently a moral decision and attitude, on closer examination, the attitude of this state is an immoral one, not adopting these decisions on the basis of morality, but on the basis of politics, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of the current situation.

In the second chapter, entitled *Infodemics associated with contemporary disaster situations from a media perspective*, we presented the infodemics associated with these catastrophic events, starting from the presentation of media ethics, the phenomenon of fake news, conspiracy theories, exemplifying and analysing their evolution.

Thus, we first analysed media ethics, presenting its ethical principles. Media ethics is part of the broad field of applied ethics, representing the totality of codes of ethics in the process of mass communication. Truth, credibility, protection of sources and public interest are the guiding principles of media ethics. Thus, specialists in this field are obliged to present strictly the truth, the facts in an objective manner, checking the sources, ensuring the full credibility of the information.

These codes of ethics must be followed by all media professionals, irrespective of their nature and medium. With the advent of the internet and the popularisation of social media platforms, however, citizen journalism has emerged. Thanks to the freedom of any adult to create an account on these platforms, as well as the freedom to express their thoughts, these platforms are also becoming the means by which a large number of people can express their

opinions, ideas and knowledge in an informal and unspecialised way. Thus, the deontological codes of media ethics are not respected by these people, as they are not trained specialists.

In the remainder of the chapter we have introduced the notions of truth, post-truth and disinformation. The notion of truth is one that has been researched and analysed from different aspects, thus giving rise to several theories about it. The utilitarian or pragmatist theory of truth, which considers that a thing can be true if it is useful, if it has a practical purpose, and that truth does not represent the appropriation of the statement, but represents an event, from which the above statements follow. The correspondence theory of truth considers that truth is a fact in itself, correlating with reality, while coherence truth refers to the fact that a true statement should be consistent with other true statements at the same time and in the same relation, without being in contradiction or contradiction with one or more statements considered true.

The notion of posit truth went viral in 2016, as it was considered the word of the year, being the most commonly used and encountered. The notion of post-truth refers to the passing over of truth, in other words our tendency to focus on emotions, feelings, effects around us, not actually noticing the truth itself. Thus, this phenomenon shows us the fragile boundary between facts and opinions, a boundary that is crossed time and time again, due to the huge flow of information, i.e. the emotional influence that is more intense than the communication process itself.

This phenomenon, i.e. the emergence of citizen journalism, has given rise to disinformation and fake news. While fake news gives us unreliable information of a certain nature, misinformation gives us information that is assumed or deliberately created to manipulate a group of people. At the same time, we must distinguish between rumours and fake news, the latter always being in the public domain, while rumours are in the private domain of each individual.

With the emergence of infodemics in the context of contemporary catastrophic situations, the number of citizen journalists has increased, and the practice of infodemics has encouraged the emergence of fake news, intentional or unintentional misinformation due to ignorance, and conspiracy theories.

The groups of people who spread fake news can be divided into two groups: those who distributed news that exaggerated the situation and those who spread news that amplified the gravity of the situation. In Romania, initially the denial of the seriousness of the situation appeared, then after the quarantine was established, amplifying opinions appeared. In the meantime, the stigmatisation of those of Chinese origin, but also of medical professionals or people who have been through the disease, has appeared, with various aggressive behaviours

towards them. Later, the pandemic came to be known sarcastically as plandemic, the latter being the name given to the situation by those who denied the existence of the disease or its seriousness. Many people considered the pandemic to be the invention of politicians in order to save money by closing schools, while at the same time seeing this closure as an intentional barrier to educating people. Vaccination has created another wave of stigma and intense misinformation about its effects.

As for the fake news and misinformation in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, it was on the one hand intentional, in the context of Russian propaganda, through which Russia offered information and explanations for its actions, presenting the situation as one of protection and not one of war and invasion. In Romania, the news of greatest intensity was that men would be enlisted, requesting lists from family doctors of clinically healthy men of enlistment age. Another intense wave of misinformation was about a nuclear power plant explosion, with many people trying to buy iodine tablets.

The emergence of such fake news has not only led to exchanges of ideas or spur-of-the-moment behaviours such as those described above, but has also intensified psychological problems.

In the remainder of the chapter we have conducted an analysis of anxiety and anguish from a contemporary psychoanalytic and psychological perspective. Thus, anxiety would correspond to everyday anxiety, which is a shadow of every person, being with us in all possible circumstances. It can have both negative and positive effects. Anxiety itself, or everyday anxiety, has positive, motivational effects, being a response of our body and psyche to different situations.

However, misinformation and infodemics in the context of contemporary catastrophic situations encourage the intensification of this healthy anxiety, making it a harmful one, which is why we are already discussing the existence of pathological anxiety. It has three main components: subjective symptoms (feelings), cognitive symptoms (thoughts) and behavioural symptoms (rituals, avoidance), often accompanied by somatic, physiological symptoms such as a lump in the throat, shortness of breath, palpitations, headaches, muscle rigidity. These occur when anxiety increases and exceeds tolerable levels, thus already having negative effects on daily life.

In the context of contemporary catastrophic situations we can talk about cases of generalised anxiety disorder, but also the development of specific phobias such as social phobia, excessive fear of getting sick or dying, panic disorder.

Thus, in this chapter we have analysed infodemics in the context of the pandemic followed by infodemics in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, from the perspective of media ethics, analysing the notions of truth, falsehood and disinformation. At the same time, we conducted an analysis of the situation from a psychological perspective, presenting anxiety from a psychoanalytic perspective, anxiety from a contemporary psychological perspective and the effects of disinformation within these infodemics on anxiety, mental health.

Finally, I set out to analyse news-related attitudes in order to establish possible links and relationships between attitudes and participants' professions, and this is presented in chapter three, entitled *Applied Research*.

The fundamental research questions are: what is the predominant way of following the news and the average hours spent on this activity per profession (health workers, teachers, IT staff), what are the most popular fake news/conspiracy theories among the participants, are there differences in the perception of the news between the three professions, what are the main factors influencing the attitude towards the news.

The general research hypothesis of the paper is that there are external and internal factors that influence participants' attitudes towards news in the context of pandemic and war infodemics.

In this chapter we conducted applied research using a questionnaire addressed to three selected professional categories: teachers, health and IT staff, with a total of 90 participants, 30 people from each category.

We formulated eleven specific research hypotheses, which we followed throughout the processing of the quantitative data, and finally we conducted interviews with three communication specialists, in order to make a qualitative interpretation of the statistical data presented above.

Through the brief analysis of the data, four hypotheses were fully confirmed. Thus, we came to the following conclusions: the majority of participants do not subscribe to conspiracy theories; war-related news is perceived in the most realistic way by personnel working in the IT field; there is a relationship between background and participants' attitudes towards news; the majority of participants believe that measures taken during the war are acceptable and necessary measures, even if they violated citizens' freedom in certain situations.

Three hypotheses were partially confirmed, as follows: the relationship between the background of the parents and the relationship between the level of education of the parents and the attitude of the participants to the news are present but weak, as there is no strong statistical correlation between these factors; the majority of the participants felt that the

measures and restrictions imposed during the pandemic were acceptable and necessary, but at the same time more than half of the participants felt that individual freedom was violated and certain rights were not respected.

In the end, three of the hypotheses were rejected, thus the null hypothesis was confirmed in their case, leading to the following considerations: the predominant way of following the news is not through official government sources or specialist articles, but through TV and news websites; IT specialists do not spend more time following the news than other professional categories; pandemic-related news is not perceived more objectively by health professionals than by other participants.

From discussions with experts in the field, we concluded that we have a problem with awareness of our media consumer behaviour, but our current background and living environment also influence our behaviour.

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