WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?
A Critical Discourse Analysis of Czech-Language News Stories About Covid-19 Mis- and Disinformation

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Title

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Abstract

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic was accompanied by wide-ranging mis- and disinformation appearing largely on online platforms like social networking sites. The World Health Organization and the European Union urged citizens to be critical of sources and evaluate the information they were receiving about the pandemic. Since the promotion of information literacy relies upon the concept of source evaluation, understanding the discursive techniques used within trusted sources is of crucial importance. The aim of this thesis is to provide insight that can be used within information literacy efforts and research—specifically in the Central and Eastern European context. This is accomplished by through the examination of the representation of Covid-19 mis- and disinformation in news discourse in the Czech Republic. I used Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis and the theoretical lens of sociotechnical practice to investigate the coverage of mis- and disinformation about Covid-19 in four of the most widely consumed and trusted online news platforms in the Czech Republic. Using a framework for analysis I designed to investigate discursive practice surrounding Covid-19 mis- and disinformation, I collected and analyzed 36 Czech news articles published between January and April 2020. As a result of this analysis, I identified four patterns of discursive practice. I categorize and describe these patterns as the discourses of *war*, *information as disease*, *clickbait* and *information literacy*. I also describe how each of these discourses seeks to interact with and uphold structures of trust and authority in a manner particular to their context—and I reflect on their potential consequences for the promotion of information literacy. The results of this analysis provide insights that illuminate the potential for trusted sources to act as an intermediary for information literacy promotion, as well as its potential to muddy the waters of source evaluation. Further, this project highlights the need for further research into trust, authority, and information consumption—and the interplay between information literacy and the information sources that are considered reliable.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

This thesis centers the interaction between mainstream Czech news media and the 2020 Covid-19 infodemic. The spread of information during the pandemic has provided rich material for academic study in a wide variety of fields, not least for Information Science. In the years prior, terms like *fake news*[1] and *alternative facts*[2] had become part of common parlance, and social media had served to transform the way information travels and is interacted with. The World Health Organization (WHO) labels infodemics as:

> "[…] too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response."
>
> *(World Health Organization 2021)*

In short, the spread of mis- and disinformation in the context of a pandemic has tangible health consequences. According to the WHO, "an infodemic can intensify or lengthen outbreaks when people are unsure about what they need to do to protect their health and the health of people around them" (World Health Organization 2021). European citizens are urged by the EU to be critical of sources of information, and to be aware of disinformation spreading on the internet (European Commission 2021). But how can this be implemented in a media landscape overwhelmed with sources, and a Europe with starkly varying cultural heritages when it comes to trust in authority and mainstream media sources? With the overwhelming amount of information available online, it has become harder to identify what information should be trusted.

Dominant approaches to information literacy have not yet been effectively adapted to meet the new challenges that the digital information landscape has posed (Elmwood 2020). These approaches have largely included instructions to use reliable sources—in other words, sources that have a track-record of reliability. Instructions for determining what is and what is not reliable are at risk of circularity. For example, a 2019 document published by the European Parliamentary Research Service lists a series of steps that can be used to identify and distinguish "fake news"

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[1] For a discussion on *fake news* and contemporary right-wing nationalist movements, see the introduction of Noortje Marres's article "Why We Can't Have Our Facts Back" (2018).

[2] The term *alternative facts* gained popularity after Kellyanne Conway (then senior advisor to American president Donald Trump) used it in a television interview to defend falsehoods being promoted by the Trump administration (Bradner 2017).

from accurate and reliable information. Step four, titled "check the sources" explains that readers should ask the following question: "Does the author use reliable sources (for example, well-established and respected media outlets)?" (Bentzen 2019). This means that readers are instructed to judge information as reliable, if the information is credited as coming from somewhere else reliable. This necessitates ground rules of trust—certain sources need to be commonly agreed upon as reliable, "good," sources. Information literacy education efforts rely on the readers having a common baseline understanding of what can and cannot be trusted, in order extrapolate and judge further sources (see Haider & Sundin 2020, p. 7 for discussion of lack of trust in the source evaluation process).

The academic frameworks that make up current understanding of information literacy come largely from the perspective and context of Western European, Northern American, and Australian democracies. The problem of mis- and disinformation,[3] while increasingly part of public discourse in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States of America after Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as American president respectively, has been a reoccurring and complex problem in Central and Eastern European countries long before the last five years (Jankowicz 2020). An understanding of information literacy and the lifecycle of mis- and disinformation that takes into consideration the perspective of the post-Soviet mentality is limited outside of these specific geographies. As is discussed later in this paper, this mentality consists of distrust of official narratives and skepticism of authority. It is precisely this problematic that is the point of departure for this project.

As an American citizen who spent my childhood in the Czech Republic, I have often felt as though I live in between two worlds. As a foreigner and outsider in the place I called home for fifteen years, perhaps it is no surprise that after almost ten years back in the United States I chose to relocate again to Sweden. With these experiences has come a perspective that is paradoxically both removed and personal. Issues specific to Central and Eastern Europe are of personal interest to me, but I no longer have family that reside there. With this study, I have returned to this place that remains so close to me and my personal history, and to the language, Czech, that though I never spoke at home, I learned in kindergarten, picking it up over a few months as children do. My elementary school education

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[3] As is elaborated later in this paper, I have made a conscious choice to use the term *mis- and disinformation* as opposed to other popular terms such as *fake news, conspiracy theory, alternative facts,* among others. These other terms are used broadly in contemporary culture and media and have connotations that I do not wish to convey (see *2.2 Mis- and Disinformation in the Czech Republic* for further discussion of this).

was entirely in Czech. Unless otherwise credited, all translations in this thesis from Czech to English are my own.

1.1 Research Problem

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Czech Republic was already contending with the spread of disinformation online (Kenety 2021; Kopecký, Voráč, Mikulcová, Krejčí & Gómez García 2020). These conditions, coupled with the national and regional propensity to question authority and distrust official narratives, have provided a fertile ground for a widespread infodemic (Dentith 2020). The Czech Republic is not alone in facing the challenge of Covid-19 mis- and disinformation, and online sources of its spread have been the subject of a wide variety of recent studies—with a particular focus on dissemination through social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter (Ahmed, López Seguí, Vidal-Alaball & Katz 2020a; Ahmed, Vidal-Alaball, Downing & López Seguí 2020b; and Gallotti, Valle, Castaldo, Sacco & De Domenico 2020, to name a few). The very existence of the infodemic, coupled with the results of the aforementioned studies, indicates that information literacy measures in place have not been sufficient in meeting the challenges of the spread of mis- and disinformation. This is further affirmed by two recent literature reviews (De Paor & Heravi 2020; Wang, McKee, Torbica & Stuckler 2019). According to their findings, limitations to contemporary information literacy frameworks include a lack of strategies for understanding and addressing the complex set of behaviors surrounding lack of trust in the establishment. I argue that addressing these limitations must be especially relevant for areas like the Czech Republic, where lack of trust in the establishment is particularly high.

Unsurprisingly, the Covid-19 infodemic has resulted in a flood of news stories about particular instances of mis- and disinformation. In fact, Google searches of terms associated with mis- and disinformation such as [QAnon] or [5G coronavirus] draw scores of hits from established news sites about the presence of these beliefs, particularly in the social media context.[4] These articles are *about* the existence of mis- and disinformation—and do not affirm it as truthful. In other words, news about so-called "fake news" has become almost a genre in itself. It is this genre that is at the center of this thesis project. The way in which these articles portray mis- and disinformation and depict its illegitimacy and/or falsity is undeniably a piece of the puzzle for understanding how best to promote information literacy. If efforts

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[4] As observed in Google searches conducted by the author in December 2020 and January 2021.

to address the Covid-19 infodemic are to rely upon trusting legitimate news sources, it is of key importance to also understand the ways in which these news sources are portraying the mis- and disinformation that is spreading so rampantly online.

Originally developing as a response to technological developments, information literacy has continuously been in the position of responding to changes (Kapitzke 2003). In order for information literacy to adapt to the present circumstances, a greater understanding of what these circumstances in fact are is necessary.

1.2 Objective, Aim and Research Questions

The objective of this research project is to identify, describe and analyze the discourses present in the established Czech news media regarding the Covid-19 infodemic. The aim of this thesis is to provide insight that can be used within information literacy efforts and research—specifically in the Central and Eastern European context. This project centers the Czech-language news media and the specific conditions of disinformation in the context of the Czech Republic's particular history, culture, and media landscape. The material examined is limited to major online Czech news sources.

This thesis project is carried out in order to answer the following questions:

1. How do Czech-language news stories discursively represent Covid-19 mis- and disinformation in the context of the ongoing infodemic?

2. How do Czech-language news stories about Covid-19 mis- and disinformation engage with the notions of trust and authority?

3. What consequences do the discourses present in Czech-language news stories about Covid-19 mis- and disinformation have for the promotion of information literacy?

While there are recent studies concentrating on how readers evaluate online media sources, there has been a dearth of studies focusing on the ways that the news portrays information literacy and mis- and disinformation. My hope is that this study can contribute toward furthering the understanding of the mechanics of digital infodemics from an Information Science perspective.

1.3 Outline

Above, I have introduced and presented the problem, objective, and research questions that this master's thesis seeks to investigate and answer. The following section, titled *Historical Background*, serves to introduce the particular circumstances at play in the Czech Republic. The impact of the communist experience on public trust in authority, the state of the news media, and the online mis- and disinformation landscape all serve to frame my later analysis. Next, in a section titled *Previous Research & Relevant Perspectives* I review existing research on the Covid-19 infodemic with a focus on research specifically within the context of the Czech Republic. Further, I present research conducted within Information Science about information literacy, trust in authority, and the spread of mis- and disinformation. Lastly, I discuss *Conspiracy Theory Theory* and the *Sociotechnical Practice*—perspectives that help to guide my project. The next section, *Critical Discourse Analysis,* is where I discuss my choice of this theoretical and methodological approach for this thesis. I also describe my methodological design and the framework for analysis I created. Furthermore, I provide a detailed description of my selection criteria for analysis. I also describe the limitations and demarcation of this research project, as well as my perspective on the ethical considerations. The section titled *Result & Analysis* is where I present my research—outlining selected observations and interpretations of the material studied. After this, the section titled *Discussion* returns concretely to the original research questions guiding this thesis. I present and describe the four main types of discourse that I observed as a result of my study, and how they interact and serve to uphold perspectives on trust and authority. I further connect these findings to the implications they have for information literacy. In the final section, titled *Concluding Remarks*, I present possible new directions for future research based on the findings presented here. Lastly, I reflect on the purpose of this paper and summarize my conclusions.

2. Historical Background

This thesis investigates the discourse in Czech-language news media as it relates to mis- and disinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic. In this chapter, I present the circumstances and historical background of the Czech Republic's information landscape prior to the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. These conditions contextualize my later analysis.

2.1 Trust in Central and Eastern Europe

There is a particular set of circumstances in post-Communist Central and Eastern European countries that has a strong effect on citizens' trust in authority. The collective experience during Communism contextualizes widespread skepticism that the public is being told the entire story through officially recognized channels—such as news conferences, public service or established independent news media (Krastev & Holmes 2019). In a chapter of the book *Conspiracy Theories in Eastern Europe: Tropes and Trends*, M R. X. Dentith (2020) argues that it is reasonable to believe that conspiracies are taking place and that citizens are not being told complete and accurate information if such occurrences are part of the local collective memory. Further, he explains that much of the research and theoretical understanding of those who believe in conspiracy theories originates from the point of view of democratic societies. Dentith argues that theorists working within Western universities and perspectives have not interrogated their own biases effectively and have placed value judgements on conspiracy theories and theorists. The resulting understanding of conspiracy theories is extremely limited when it comes to applications to societies with different circumstances. Dentith's argument is highly relevant for work on information literacy and for this thesis in particular.

The relevance of the argument put forth by Dentith (2020) for studies on mis- and disinformation within the Central and Eastern European context is further strengthened by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes (2019). The authors present an analysis of the geopolitical landscape of the region after the fall of Communism in the late 1980s. They argue that post 1989, politicians in Central and Eastern Europe have been in the position of negotiating two conflicting notions of "normalcy"—the status quo from the Communist era in opposition to Western norms newly propagated in the area. Practices considered in the West to be undemocratic and unethical were part of standard operating practice in Central and Eastern Europe

(Krastev & Holmes 2019, p. 50). After 1989, Central and Eastern Europeans were faced with these two conflicting operating practices:

> Bribery, for example, must henceforth be labelled 'abnormal,' just as law was declared, by definition, 'impartial and fair'. But the fact that such Western assumptions could be easily parroted on command did not make them any more congruous with Eastern realities.
>
> *Krastev and Holmes (2019, pp. 49-50)*

Taken alongside Dentith (2020), this doubled and conflicting normalcy lends credence to the idea that the citizens of a Central European, post-Communist nation like the Czech Republic would be suspicious of an official political narrative that claims all activity to be above board, legitimate, and normal—from a Western European perspective.

2.2 Mis- and Disinformation in the Czech Republic

Within the broader context of the contemporary global information landscape, the spread of *misinformation* and *disinformation* has been identified as a powerful phenomenon (Sullivan 2019). These two terms are often used interchangeably along with other terms like *propaganda* and *fake news*. In *How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News and the Future of Conflict*, Nina Jankowicz argues that conflating these terms obfuscates understanding and discussion of the actual phenomena at play (2020, p. xix). Using Jankowicz's logic as frame for the use of terminology used within this thesis, I recognize that *misinformation* and *disinformation* are key terms here, and it is important that I clarify from the outset the difference between them, and my choice to use them together. The key distinction is that misinformation refers to the spread of false information, while disinformation refers to the purposeful and deliberate spread of false information (see Wardle 2017 in Tandoc, Lim & Ling 2018, p. 4). Throughout this thesis, I have chosen to use both terms together in order to make clear that it is both the purposeful and unintentional spread of false information that is being referred to. Further, I avoid the use of the terms *conspiracy theory*, *propaganda*, and *fake news* unless quoting other authors or discussing the frequent use of these terms in media and online public discussion at large.

Social network sites like Facebook, Twitter, and reddit have enabled the increased horizontal spread[5] of mis- and disinformation between ordinary citizens. There are

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[5] Horizontal spread refers to information distributed between members of the public rather than top down from authorities and experts. For example, information that is spread on social media by ordinary non-expert cirizens and even within comment sections of traditional hierarchical media outlets such as online newspapers (Wang et al. 2019).

a multitude of perspectives that can be adopted in order to interpret and analyze this phenomenon. As stated previously, this thesis investigates the particular discourses present within Czech-language news coverage on the spread of false information. In the context of this focus, two key factors that preexisted the Covid-19 infodemic stand out as being particularly significant in the Czech information landscape context. One, discourse surrounding what is described as "information warfare" tactics waged by the Russian government. Two, the spread of online hate through Czech-language digital forums and social media. Taken together, these two pre-existing conditions give context to the infodemic that has occurred in conjunction with the Covid-19 pandemic—and to the analysis that is the focus of this thesis.

2.2.1 Information War

Prior to the influx of mis- and disinformation being spread in the context of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, the Czech Republic was already engaged in combating what has been described as "information warfare" (Rychnovská & Kohút 2018). This war is described as being waged by the Russian government (Rychnovská & Kohút 2018; Siegel 2019). Continuing to employ the same general disinformation strategies previously used during the Cold War, Russia has adapted them to fit the modern digital climate. Websites and social media networks are the primary tools used to spread disinformation (Bokša 2019). In a 2019 policy paper on Russian information warfare, Michal Bokša argues that citizens of Central and Eastern European are particularly susceptible to these disinformation tactics (2019). According to Bokša, this susceptibility relies on the fact that "while trust in traditional media platforms is often critically low in the CEE region, trust in the newer platforms has been particularly high there compared with the rest of the EU" (2019, p. 10). Bokša cites the results of the *2018 Market Insights: Trust in Media* report. This annual report uses the interesting though highly vague measure of *trust in the internet* across countries in the EU.[6] According to this study, the average trust in the internet in the EU in 2018 was 34%—compared to the significantly higher 50% in the Czech Republic (see Market Insights: Trust in Media 2018 in Bokša 2019). Other Central and Eastern European countries also placed higher than the EU average. The 2020 report reported similar results (see Figure 1) (EBU Media Intelligence Service 2020). Despite the lack of clarity as to the precise meaning of *trust in the internet*, Figure 1 demonstrates a clear pattern among Central and

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[6] The Market Insights Trust in Media 2020 report describes the following methodology: "This report is primarily based on data from the 92nd Standard Eurobarometer, where the Net Trust Index is deducted from. The 92nd wave of the survey was conducted in November 2019 in the 28 EU member states and the five candidate countries" (p. 3). Although the report does not define exactly what is meant by trust in internet—I still find it to be an interesting comparison between the different EU countries, and a pattern can certainly be observed based on geography and history.

Eastern European countries on this metric in relation to Western Europe—where a majority reported "low" or "no" trust in the internet. One can speculate that perhaps this could indicate higher trust in finding one's own information among Central and Eastern Europeans—compared to the trust placed in official narratives propounded by politicians, state-run organizations, and reported by traditional news media.

Figure 1. Trust in the internet

TRUST IN THE INTERNET
(Net Trust Index 2019)

● High trust
(Net Trust Index higher than 10)

● Medium trust
(Net Trust Index between 0 and 10)

● Country not included

● Low trust
(Net Trust Index between -1 and -10)

● No trust
(Net Trust Index below -10)

NET TRUST INDEX =
'% of people who tend to trust' – '% of people who tend not to trust'
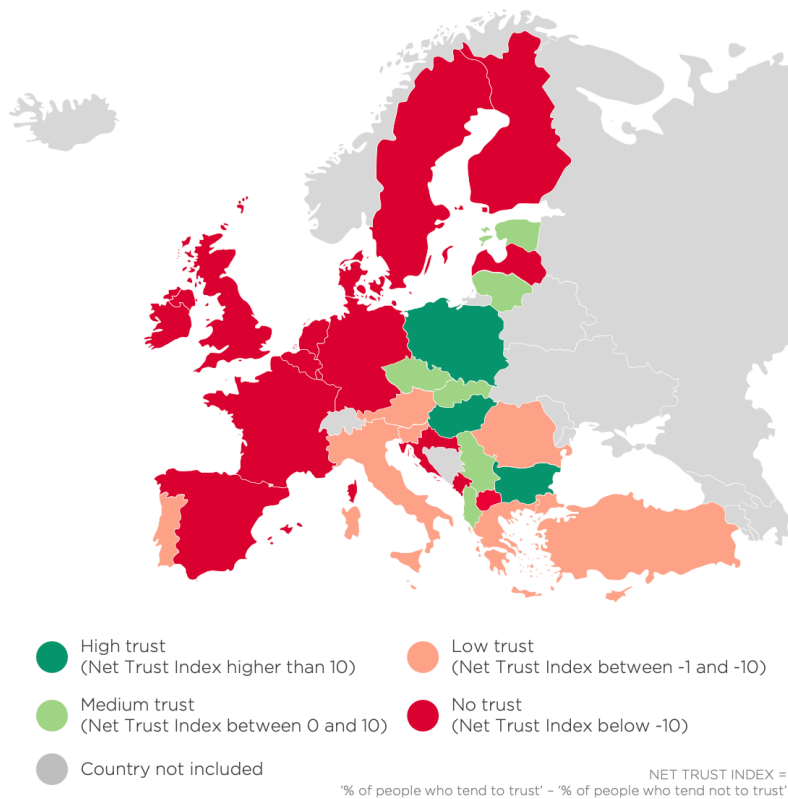
(EBU Media Intelligence Service 2020, p. 42)

Confirmed Russian information warfare efforts in the Czech Republic include for example the spread of disinformation about politician Jiří Drahoš in 2018 during the Czech presidential election. Drahoš was baselessly claimed to be a pedophile, and this information was spread on both social network sites and disinformation websites (Siegel 2019). The Prague Security Studies Institute identified the conspiracy theory as being first expounded on a so-called "pro-Russian" site (Siegel 2019). As is the case with information warfare efforts and election manipulation tactics broadly, it is difficult to determine the actual effect of such strategies. However, Drahoš—who had been a front-runner—lost the election.

With a population susceptible to information warfare tactics due to low trust in traditional media platforms and high trust in alternative online sources of information, the Czech Republic was already in a vulnerable position with regards to potential infodemics prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.2.2 Hate Speech in the Czech Republic

Hate speech against immigrant and minority groups in the Czech Republic is a problem that has been identified by the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) (Council of Europe 2020). This commission was created by the Council of Europe and is an independent body that monitors human rights within the 47 member states, of which the Czech Republic is one (Council of Europe 2020). The most recent report on the situation within the Czech Republic was published in 2020 and is the sixth such report since 1998. These sequential reports build upon each other, monitoring the situation, making recommendations for improvements, and tracking changes that have been implemented since the publication of previous reports. According to this most recent report, anti-immigrant and anti-minority hate speech is on the rise (Council of Europe 2020). Two groups in particular are identified as being particular targets of racist hate speech—Muslim and Romani residents. This hate is present in politics—the report outlines examples of such racist speech by the extremist political party Freedom and Direct Democracy Party,[7] including "a Facebook post made in January 2019 by one of the party's MPs comparing Muslim migrants to an invasive species of plants and animals that ought to be banned from entering the European Union" (see Willoughby 2019 in Council of Europe 2020). Racist speech against Romani residents is also present in politics—including speech coming from president Miloš Zeman during a 2017 interview[8] (Zeman 2017). An article published on romea.cz included a translation[9] of Zeman's comments about Romani residents in answer to a question about the status of human rights in the Czech Republic:

> As far as the Roma go, you, know, I do not believe it is worthwhile for there to be positive discrimination of Romani people, because even positive discrimination is still discrimination. That means we are supposed to approach everybody the same way. I am glad to use this category of inadaptables, and I define it as meaning people who refuse jobs offered to them even though they are absolutely healthy. It's probably true that 90 % of them are Romani, but 10 % of them might be white slobs, and we must approach them in absolutely the same way. If we discriminate against either group, whether positively or negatively, then we are violating human rights.
>
> *Ryšavý (2017)*

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[7] Svoboda a přímá demokracie (SPD)
[8] Quote begins after minute 27:00 of the interview.
[9] Translation credited to Gwendolyn Albert (see Ryšavý 2017, p. 221)

The ECRI report points toward the function that comments like Zeman's have in reinforcing old stereotypes about Romani people, and completely ignoring actual current conditions—"the situation of many Roma is still characterized by a vicious circle of under-education, leading to limited opportunities in the labour market, and frequent de-facto residential segregation" (Council of Europe 2020, p. 25). Public comments, images, and clips serve to normalize prejudice against minority groups such as Romani and Muslim Czechs and are then able to be widely shared online and commented on.

While Muslim and Romani people are the most targeted by hate speech in the Czech Republic, there has also been a significant rise in incidents of anti-Semitism. Images and comments spreading hate have appeared online on Czech-language websites and forums. The Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic publishes a yearly report based on anti-Semitic incidents reported through their online form (Federace židovských obcí v České republice, n.d.) and also through official reports made to the Czech police. According to the most recent report at the time of writing, while reported anti-Semitic incidents toward individuals offline have remained relatively stable, there is evidence of an exponential increase of images and comments appearing online and threatening the Jewish community as a whole (Federace židovských obcí v České republice 2020). The report includes a comparison between incidents reported through the Federation's online form in 2018 and 2019 (Federace židovských obcí v České republice 2020, p. 32). Incidents are divided into four different categories, the first three being physical attacks; threats, insults and harassment; and desecration of Jewish property. These first three types of incidents show low and comparable rates in 2018 and 2019. The fourth type of incident shows not only a high increase between years but also much higher rates compared to the other types of incidents. Incidents in this category are texts, depictions and audiovisual expressions of an anti-Semitic nature.

The anti-Semitic imagery outlined in the report use familiar tropes—caricatures of Jewish figures recognizable from cartoons dating back to World War II. For example, the trope of the Jewish puppet master, "pulling strings behind the scenes and controlling the world" (Antisemitic Imagery and Caricatures 2020), appears in multiple iterations. In the chapter "Construction of the Jewish Enemy—Nothing New"[10], Martin Šmok (2016) argues that the "otherness" of Jews in Czech spaces has long been closely tied to collective ideas of the German enemy. Perception of the Jew as working for German control of the Czech lands has been present since

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[10] "Konstrukce židovského nepřítele – nic nového"

the 19th century—and continues to find echoes in mis- and disinformation and online anti-Semitic incidents in the present day (Šmok 2016, pp. 198-199). In the context of the Covid-19 infodemic, this can point toward a possibility and potential for xenophobic disinformation to take hold.

2.3 Czech Newsmedia

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism publishes a yearly "Digital News Report." This report presents findings based on research on news consumption habits and attitudes in different local markets. The current most recent report, from 2020, compiled research about the news markets in 40 different countries, including the Czech Republic (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi & Nielsen 2020). This research includes statistics regarding the weekly on- and offline reach of various media platforms, sources of news, and devices used to access news. There is also information about which sources are most trusted and which social media platforms are most used. Beyond presenting the results of the yearly research on news consumption, the 2019 edition of the report also includes a more detailed discussion of the media landscape of the Czech Republic credited to Václav Štětka of Loughborough University (Newman, Fletcher, Nielsen, Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen 2019, p. 78). This discussion highlights what is described as a media landscape characterized by "control shifting toward domestic tycoons" which constituted a marked shift away from the previous concentration of ownership among foreign investors (Newman et al. 2019, p. 78).

The shift toward ownership of media platforms by domestic billionaires has concrete implications for the Czech media landscape. Specifically, these new owners of media companies have a vested interest in the stories being reported. Even if influence is not actively asserted over the stories being reported, just the very appearance of impropriety can have a powerful effect on trust and perception of the media in the Czech Republic on the part of citizens. One particularly glaring case is that of MAFRA, a media conglomerate owned by AGROFERT (AGROFERT n.d.), which is a multinational company owned by Andrej Babiš, the prime minister of the Czech Republic. MAFRA owns many of the most widely read and distributed online and print media platforms in the Czech Republic (MAFRA 2021).

Beyond rising ownership of Czech media platforms by Czech billionaires, there has also been a marked increase of interest in expanding to ownership of international media platforms. One example of this is a major transaction between the French

company Lagardére and the company Czech Media Invest. Czech Media Invest acquired two Czech nationwide radio stations in the transaction, as well as others in Central and Eastern Europe, and a number of French magazines. This acquisition was followed by further investments in the French market, including a small stake in the newspaper *Le Monde* (Newman et al. 2019, p. 78). According to the Reuters report, these "investments symbolise rising power as well as appetite of the Czech business tycoons to extend their media empires beyond national borders" (Newman et al. 2019, p. 78).

3. Previous Research & Relevant Perspectives

Previous research relevant to the topic of this thesis spans a wealth of different academic disciplines. Mis- and disinformation, information and media and health literacy, trust in authority—these topics have been researched from the perspectives of Information Science, Sociology, Philosophy, History, Political Science, and Public Health, among other disciplines. My aim with this thesis is to contribute to research within Information Science—specifically in relation to information literacy and how it relates to broader circumstances of society, community and digital culture. The research presented in this section is only a small selection of the broad material that is available and serves the purpose of contextualizing my research and analysis. A full summary would require more space than this thesis project allows. Beyond the research presented here, I also describe two relevant perspectives for this thesis—conspiracy theory theory and the sociotechnical perspective—both of which inform this project.

I have not identified existing research that approaches the topic in the same fashion as this thesis (that is to say, studying the discourses used to depict mis- and disinformation within news sources). The previous studies presented here are nonetheless closely related to this project and serve to both frame it and elucidate its relevance for the field.

3.1 Covid-19 Infodemic

In less than a year (the time between the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and the writing of this thesis), a wealth of research on the subject of mis- and disinformation and health literacy has already appeared in peer-reviewed journals. One factor that has been identified in a variety of different studies is the adaptation of old existing misinformation to fit the Covid-19 pandemic. Preexisting theories such as the effects of 5G networks on the human body (Ahmed et al. 2020b), anti-vaccination and QAnon (Butler 2021) theories have been rephrased, adapted, integrated, and newly popularized in order to explain Covid-19.

Adaptation of existing misinformation to fit an emerging health crisis is not a new phenomenon. This phenomenon was also previously observed by Laetitia Atlani-Duault, Arnaud Mercier, Cécile Rousseau, Paul Guyot and Jean-Paul Moatti (2015) in the context of the H1N1 virus epidemic in France in 2009. Examining what they

term "subterranean discourse," Atlani-Duault et al. (2015, p. 46) analyzed influential comments on newspaper articles about the epidemic and accompanying vaccine effort. They found a high volume of comments using phrases specifically designed to elude comment moderation and that placed blame on Jews and Freemasons for the epidemic and drew connections to older conspiracy theories. This bears a striking similarity to movements blaming Jews for the spread of the Plague during the middle ages. Mobs attacked Jewish communities and blamed them for the spread of the disease despite official pronouncements by the pope and local church officials to not blame or attack Jews (Perry & Schweitzer 2008, p. 26)

Riccardo Gallotti, Francesco Valle, Nicola Castaldo, Pierluigi Sacco and Manlio De Domenico (2020) use the infodemic that has accompanied the Covid-19 pandemic as a case study for tracing the relationships between local information habits and the spread of the virus. Since efforts to manage and mitigate the spread of the virus have relied largely upon personal actions such as washing hands, social distancing, and mask-wearing, "responsible behaviours driven by reliable information at all scales are key for the mitigation of adverse effects" (Gallotti et al. 2020, p. 1289). Gallotti et al. (2020) also observed that increased spread of Covid-19 was correlated with a shift in information habits. They write: "Overall, the global level of infodemic risk tends to decrease as COVID-19 spreads globally, suggesting that epidemic spread leads people to look for relatively more reliable sources" (Gallotti et al. 2020, p. 1288). In particular, they identify Italian-language Twitter as having had a marked shift towards more reliable information when the virus became widespread in Italy. The study does not identify causal effects; however, the hypothesis is presented that perhaps wider media coverage and exposure of experts, and social media influencers spreading reliable information can be responsible for this effect.

Daniel Romer and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2020) conducted a study using surveys of American adults that investigated participants' adoption of measures that were recommended by health authorities and beliefs and information habits. They found that participants who believed in false conspiracies and misinformation were less likely to have adopted recommended measures to prevent the spread of the virus, and also more hesitant toward vaccination. Unlike Gallotti et al. (2020), Romer and Jamieson (2020) did not find a shift toward more reliable information over the course of the pandemic and increased spread of the virus. However, both studies point towards the importance of media consumption for developing opinions about

Covid-19—which in turn has a strong impact on outcomes for following official health authority guidelines.

3.1.1 Czech Covid-19 Infodemic

In the chapter *2. Historical Background*, I have outlined the circumstances in the Czech Republic prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, specifically with regard to trust in traditional news media and political messaging—and the online spread of mis- and disinformation that target minority groups. It is in this context that mis- and disinformation specifically related to Covid-19 began to spread throughout Czech-language social media network pages, digital forums, and websites. Kamil Kopecký, Dominik Voráč, Klára Mikulcová, Veronika Krejčí, and Gerardo Gómez García (2020) published a study conducted in November 2020 using surveys. 941 respondents (all active social network site users) answered questions about examples of mis- and disinformation they had encountered online. Participants answered questions about their social media habits, where they encounter disinformation, and which examples of disinformation related to Covid-19 they had encountered. Kopecký et al. (2020) designed this survey using multiple choice questions, and respondents had the opportunity to add other examples of what they considered to be disinformation as an answer to each question. The results of this survey paint a clear picture—disinformation regarding Covid-19 had become widespread on the Czech language web. Not only had the vast majority of respondents encountered multiple forms of disinformation online, but some respondents gave answers that make clear they were proponents of disinformation themselves. For example, Kopecký et al. (2020, p. 17) point out that 19.13% of respondents identified public service media as being one of the spreaders of disinformation, and that this group of respondents also wrote that Covid-19 does not exist and that the disinformation that is being spread is mostly coming from the government and other official media channels.

3.2 Health Literacy

Although this thesis does not specifically investigate health literacy, it is closely related to that field of research. The Czech news articles that this thesis analyzes represent widely available information sources that are trusted as providing accurate information on current events and the Covid-19 pandemic specifically. The way that misinformation on the pandemic is represented in these online articles provides clear insight into how these issues were represented to the Czech people. There are a number of studies that have served to shape the understanding of health literacy and its relation to the internet. The ability to seek information online has

transformed the ways in which people interact and participate in questions of health. Participation in online forums, social media platforms and comment sections gives individuals the opportunity to inform themselves on issues related to their health, and to make decisions about treatments and assessments about the risks inherent. It is within this context that the Covid-19 pandemic has occurred, and mis- and disinformation about the virus has flourished.

A number of studies from the early 2000s frame the understanding of health literacy as it relates to the internet. A systematic review written by Gunther Eysenbach, John Powell, Oliver Kuss and Eun-Ryoung Sa (2002) presents research on how users evaluate information on the internet, and on the quality of health information available online. They found that most studies have determined that there are definite issues with regards to the quality of information available (Eysenbach et al. 2002, p. 2695). This is closely related to the work of Astrid Mager (2009) in which online health information is examined through the lens of sociotechnical practice from the perspectives of both the information providers and users. Mager (2009) identifies the role of the search engine and net-savvyness of website providers in positioning health information for users. The primacy of the search engine in presenting information means that net-savvy website providers who update their sites frequently are better positioned to have their information seen by users. This has clear implications for the quality of information that is being seen—in that it is the manner of presentation that determines who is seeing what, rather than the quality of information being presented. Mager (2009) further discusses the fact that while information widely available online can be potentially misleading and harmful for patients seeking information, it is simultaneously incredibly difficult to impose quality controls upon internet sources. Users seeking information online through search engines use keywords to find relevant webpages with information and have little understanding of how the search engines and algorithms work— often perceiving them as neutral actors. A quality control system on specific websites has little effect on the search process, as users pay more attention to the keywords used than to the sources of information on specific pages (Mager 2009).

Three studies investigate patient decision-making as it relates to online information consumption (Fox, Ward & O'Rourke 2005; Henwood, Wyatt, Hart & Smith 2003; Wyatt, Henwood, Hart & Smith 2005). Flis Henwood, Sally Wyatt, Angie Hart and Julie Smith (2003) examined the role of the internet for middle-aged women in the decision to undergo hormone replacement therapy. The study contextualized these women's decision-making processes within what they identify as "informed patient

discourse." The authors found that despite the wealth of information available online, the patients interviewed relied mostly on their doctors to make decisions for them and lacked the information literacy skills to be able to confidently utilize the internet in this context. A later article by the same authors (Wyatt et al. 2005) investigates the so-called "digital divide"—and how lack of access and inequality of access to the internet is a complex issue. Their research indicates that having a computer in the home does not necessarily mean that an individual has access to online information. They argue that access includes both the ability to use the internet and also comfort in using it. A third article (Fox, Ward & O'Rourke 2005) outlined research centered on a web forum focused on the use of drugs for weight loss. The authors studied the communication between participants in the forum, and the way that certain patients emerged as "experts," informing other users.

The research outlined here indicates that while the internet has had great implications for health literacy and has enabled patients to access a tremendous wealth of information, it does not inherently act to improve literacy. The availability of so much information has been accompanied by a magnitude of challenges—with regard to access and quality control, among others. In the context of this project, this serves to underscore the need for more understanding of what the content of online information is and exactly what kind of discourses it is perpetuating about health issues.

3.3 Information Literacy and Online News

A number of studies have been done to investigate the relationship between online journalism and information literacy—and specifically users' ability to evaluate the sources they encounter online. Stephanie R. Bluemle (2018) presents an analysis of the limitations of contemporary information literacy education strategies—specifically within the university context. According to Bluemle, the contemporary political landscape is characterized by "post truth politics." A 2016 study from the Stanford History Education Group showed that students of middle school, high school and college age could not effectively identify accurate information online. Bluemle argues that this clear difficulty in critical information evaluation points toward the limitations of current practices for teaching information literacy. She identifies the Association of College & Research Libraries' (ACRL) "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education" as a dominant framework used in teaching these critical skills, and specifically the understanding of authority as not being sufficient within the current information climate. This gap between the understanding of information literacy and the practical implications of widespread

mis- and disinformation are at the center of this thesis. Bluemle neatly identifies the lack of complexity in the ACRL's framework and concludes that this teaching approach lacks two important elements that are present in society with regards to the notion of authority. Firstly, frameworks like the ACRL's do not account for the emotional aspect of trust and authority. Secondly, these frameworks do not address the relationship between evidence and interpretation of information.

Cara Evanson and James Sponsel (2019) conducted a survey study of first year American college students about their news consumption and source evaluation. The students answered questions about their habits and were presented with screenshots of three different news stories and questions about them. One of these screenshots was a tweet that included what is known as an imposter URL—a URL that is designed to look like an established source but leads to a different website. In the case of this study, the imposter URL participants encountered was nbc.com.co—intended to serve as an imposter of the established American news website nbc.com. Evanson and Sponsel found that 24% of respondents answered that they were willing to share the tweet in question—implying that they had judged the source to be trustworthy and actually coming from nbc.com. Evanson and Sponsel conclude that approaches to teaching information literacy need to be in constant flux—rising to meet the challenges of new media platforms and information habits in the digital age. This is greatly complicated by the fact that perpetrators of disinformation are in a constant state of adaptation to better be believed. In this thesis, I investigate how websites that are trusted and established news sources describe and portray mis- and disinformation. Evanson and Sponsel conclude that "students need exposure to real and fake news in an educational environment where they can learn how to become adept evaluators of the news they will encounter outside of the classroom" (2019, p. 242).

Work has been done to develop pedagogical approaches that address the problems of website source evaluation as identified by Evanson and Sponsel (2019). Victoria Elmwood presents one such approach in the article "The Journalistic Approach: Evaluating Web Sources in an Age of Mass Disinformation" (2020). Elmwood advocates for an approach that is "less strictly evaluative and is instead discursive and analytical as a result of its focus on description of and context-specific uses" (Elmwood 2020, p. 283). An example of this kind of approach put into practice can be found in Lane Glisson's article "Breaking the Spin Cycle: Teaching Complexity in the Age of Fake News" (2019). Glisson, a librarian, shares difficulties

encountered when teaching literacy in the current media climate, and examples of lesson plans used to teach source evaluation skills in a nuanced fashion.

The current media climate has had clear implications for information literacy and has challenged those who teach these skills to adapt and develop new methods for teaching source evaluation. New approaches such as those outlined by Elmwood (2020)—theoretically, and Glisson (2019)—practically are complex and require a great amount of time and effort on the part of librarians or other information educators to implicate. Outside of the school and university context, it is difficult to imagine how these approaches could be systematically put into practice.

3.4 Conspiracy Theory Theory

In the chapter "Conspiracy theory, epistemology, and Eastern Europe," in the anthology *Conspiracy Theories in Eastern Europe: Tropes and Trends*, M R. X. Dentith (2020) problematizes the assumptions often made within scholarship on conspiracy theories. Dentith uses Eastern Europe as a microcosm for demonstrating the shortcomings of what he identifies as a particular perspective on research and theoretical understanding. Primary to the study of conspiracy theories is the matter of defining what exactly they are—and it is contention on this matter that leads to contention within scholarship on their nature.

> In the existing literature there are—in essence—two competing definitions of "conspiracy theory." One definition takes it that they are *merely* theories about conspiracies. The other posits that they are typically *unwarranted* theories about conspiracy: they are theories that are suspect for epistemic or psychological reasons.
>
> *Dentith (2020, p. 269)*

The latter definition imbues a value judgment upon both conspiracy theories themselves, and furthermore on those who believe them. This is in contrast to Dentith's definition of conspiracy as "an activity undertaken in secret by two or more people toward some end" (2020, p. 269), and further that these events do occur—and have at times been revealed to the public long after their actual occurrence.

In this paper, Dentith's conspiracy theory theory informs and underpins my critical discourse analysis of the Czech-language news articles about mis- and disinformation that are the center of this thesis project and lies in part behind my decision to avoid use of the term *conspiracy theory* when discussing mis- and disinformation. The awareness of the complexities behind this terminology within

both colloquial and academic usage attunes my interpretations of the discourses present within the articles I analyzed.

3.5 Sociotechnical Practice

The sociotechnical practice approach is outlined in the article "Information Literacy as a Sociotechnical Practice" (Tuominen, Savolainen & Talja 2005). According to the authors, information literacy has historically been seen as existing in a vacuum. They are critical of historically dominant frameworks such as Carol Kuhlthau's information search process theory that promote ideals of information literate individuals that able to be independent of social and cultural influences and take a clinical approach to judging information (Tuominen, Savolainen & Talja 2005). The authors argue that this understanding is limited and simply does not take into consideration the inherently social nature of groups and communities. The sociotechnical approach "sees that knowledge and meanings are built through dialogue and debate" (Tuominen, Savolainen & Talja 2005, p. 337) and acknowledges that social circumstances affect readings.

The material aspects of information consumption are, likewise the social aspects discussed above, central to the sociotechnical approach toward understanding information literacy. Jutta Haider and Olof Sundin describe this sociomaterial understanding using the example of algorithmic information systems, writing that they "do not just mediate information, collect data, visualize patterns or bring about associations between data entries" (2020, p. 3) but that they also "shape and make (im)possible information, data, trust and mistrust, or relations between people in very profound ways"(2020, p. 3). Sociotechnical and sociomaterial approaches to information literacy thus acknowledge the lack of neutrality in the ways in which information is communicated and received.

The aim of this research project, as is discussed in the introduction to this thesis, is to identify the discourses present in Czech-language news articles covering Covid-19 mis- and disinformation. Seeing information literacy as a sociotechnical practice places it in the context of the communities and technologies that information exists within and through. In the case of this research—this means placing information literacy in the Czech Republic in the context of both the increased use of digital media in the consumption of information, and also historical context of Central and Eastern Europe when it comes to skepticism and trust (and mistrust) of official narratives.

4. Critical Discourse Analysis

In this chapter, I present my use of critical discourse analysis—a scholarly approach in which theory and methodology are closely intertwined. The following sections present the reasoning behind my choice of this approach, as well as the specific methodology I have designed that guides my analysis.

4.1 Critical Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method

Critical discourse analysis is an approach that draws out subterranean ideologies in texts. This practice consists of reading between the lines, analyzing the unspoken meanings and signifiers that together imbue texts with cultural and ideological meaning. Patterns in choices are analyzed as frameworks that can be categorized and understood as constituting different discourses. Many choices that are read as neutral are inherent in the construction of texts and images, but these choices communicate and affect meaning and even serve to construct our reality:

> CDA typically analyses news texts, political speeches, advertisements, school books, etc., exposing strategies that appear normal or neutral on the surface but which may in fact be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular ends.
>
> *Machin and Mayr (2012, p. 5)*

Teun van Dijk defines critical discourse analysis as "a type of discourse analysis research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts" (see van Dijk 2001 in Aditi 2012). Consideration of the inherent power dynamics between established news sources and alternative sources of information such as social media groups, forums, and blogs is a guiding framework for my analysis of news stories about Covid-19 mis- and disinformation.

Norman Fairclough is one of the founders of critical discourse analysis. In his book on the subject, *Discourse and Social Change* (1992), Fairclough provides an introduction and general framework for its adoption within various fields of social scientific and linguistic research. He defines discourse as "a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (Fairclough 1992, p. 64). As such, the discourse manifests in a wide variety of types of expression—including speech, forms of text, and even imagery. Within critical discourse analysis, the role of the researcher reflects discourse's duality in both representing and constructing meaning in society. The

researcher describes *and* interprets discourse (Fairclough 1992, p. 73) —and looks beneath the surface of the straightforward, superficial meaning of words. He explains, "It is of limited value to think of a language as having a vocabulary which is documented in 'the' dictionary, because there are a great many overlapping and competing vocabularies corresponding to different domains, institutions, practices, values, and perspectives" (Fairclough 1992, p. 76). The role of the researcher as interpreter and revealer of the underlying meaning of language is primary in this methodology.

Fairclough further argues that the political and ideological nature of discursive practice has both the power to reinforce existing power structures, but also the power to transform them (Fairclough 1992, p. 65). This idea is closely tied to the concept of *hegemony*. Fairclough defines hegemony as "the power over society as a whole of one of the fundamental economically-defined classes in alliance with other social forces" (Fairclough 1992, p. 92). This power is not uniform and stable, instead, different alliances form and shift, and hegemonic struggle is ongoing. Discursive practice becomes a form of expression of hegemonic struggle. As such, different ideologies and political perspectives can coexist in the same documents— changing accepted interpretation and discursive practice on a certain subject slowly over time. Critical discourse analysis aims to reveal these underlying perspectives and connect discursive practice to social practice.

As a material for study using critical discourse analysis, news articles are an inherently appropriate and fruitful subject. Widely consumed and written on their face to convey factual information about current events, critical discourse analysis offers the researcher an opportunity to peer between the lines and focus on the underlying discourses at play. Iulian Vamanu (2019) presents a broader umbrella term that he calls *critical discourse research* to refer to a set of discursive scholarly approaches, including critical discourse analysis, and to argue for its relevance in interdisciplinary work—and in Library and Information Science in particular. Vamanu argues that this approach can particularly relevant within the study of what he terms "propagandistic" fake news—i.e. propaganda, partisan, and conspiracy theory news. Authors within the social sciences active in discursive studies form a "theoretical-methodological cluster" (Vamanu 2019, p. 200). Giving a name to this cluster, Vamanu (2019) argues that critical discourse research can be used to better develop educational strategies for teaching media and information literacy. Work within critical discourse research broadly focuses on three domains of analysis: "the contexts within which it appears, the formal structure of the text, and its content"

(Vamanu 2019, p. 200). Despite not seeking to analyze the kind of material that Vamanu terms propagandistic or fake news, his argument for the relevance of the CDR approach for developing information literacy holds true in supporting my choice to use critical discourse analysis in this thesis. The research questions that guide this project investigate the discourses present in communicating the mis- and disinformation present in the Czech Republic during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this research project, I seek to identify the discourses within news stories related to Covid-19 mis- and disinformation, specifically in relation to notions of trust and authority. Machin and Mayr (2012) describe news as "a very peculiar social construction of reality" (p. 22), and it is precisely my interest in the underlying ideologies inherent in this construction of reality that have led me to choose critical discourse analysis as the guiding approach for this project. Informed by both the relevant previous research and historical background presented earlier in this thesis, I enter the design of my project with a special interest in discourses that may relate to the concepts of information war, public health, and pedagogy (that is to say, pedagogical approaches to information literacy).

4.2 Selection of Articles and Scope of Research

In my process of selection of material for study, I aimed to choose articles on platforms that enjoy both broad consumption and trust among citizens as reputable sources for news. In order to accomplish this, I used data presented in the 2020 Reuters Digital News Report (Newman et al. 2020)—the latest in a series of annual reports that catalogue research on digital news consumption in a variety of countries. This most recent report presents a list of online news brands which surveys indicated have the widest reach among internet users in the Czech Republic. In order to appropriately limit the scope of my research I chose to focus my data collection to online news outlets that had a reported weekly use of 25% or above, which was a total of four different news websites: *Seznam Zprávy*, *iDnes.cz*, *Novinky.cz*, and *Aktuálně.cz* (Newman et al. 2020, p. 78). The reported weekly reach was 38% for *Seznam Zprávy*, 37% for *iDnes.cz*, 30% for *Novinky.cz*, and 29% for *Aktuálně.cz*. The trust scores reported among all survey participants who had heard of the brands were 5.97/10 for *Seznam Zprávy*, 6.31/10 for *iDnes.cz*, 6/10 for *novinky.cz*, and 6.16/10 for *Aktuálně.cz*. These trust scores presented in Newman et al. (2020) are published in a list combining online outlets with TV, radio and print media. To provide context for the trust scores—two public broadcasters, Czech Radio and Czech Television, enjoyed the highest trust scores among survey respondents familiar with them, and these scores are 6.58/10 and 6.51/10

respectively. These two news broadcasters scored higher in terms of public trust than the most trusted online outlets. However, the online outlets that were most consumed still had relatively high trust scores. Therefore, I feel comfortable concluding that the four online news outlets I have chosen to use in my data collection all enjoy both relatively high trust and weekly reach, compared to other media sources in the Czech-language market.

Figure 2. Distribution of articles from different news brands in selected material
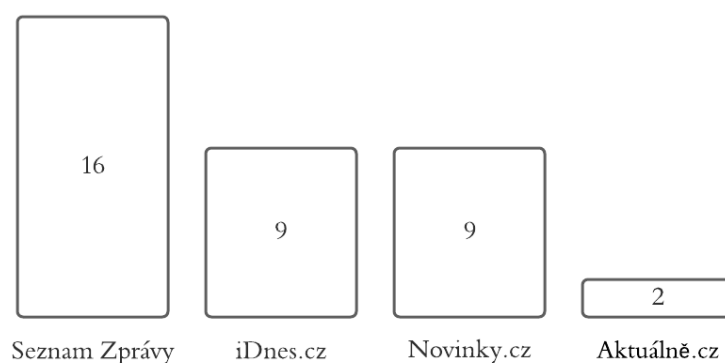
After choosing *Seznam Zprávy*, *iDnes.cz*, *novinky.cz*, and *Aktuálně.cz* as the four online news brands to focus my research on, I then spent some time browsing and familiarizing myself with the layouts of each website, and with their respective search functions. I also conducted a number of searches using Google Search to familiarize myself with the general news coverage of Covid-19 related mis- and disinformation. Following this, I conducted searches on *Seznam Zprávy*, *iDnes.cz*, *novinky.cz*, and *Aktuálně.cz* using the following terms [conspiracy coronavirus][11], [disinformation coronavirus][12] [conspiracy theory coronavirus][13], and [infodemic coronavirus][14]. I chose these terms based on the language used in my previous, more general Google searches. I then collected relevant articles that I found on each of the four platforms—these were articles that had Covid-19 mis- and/or disinformation as their main topic, and that were not categorized as blog articles or opinion pieces. Finally, I limited the articles in my sample to those published between January 1 and April 30, 2020—roughly covering the beginning and first wave of the pandemic. This resulted in 36 articles total. I chose to proceed with this process for selection despite the fact that the distribution of articles across the four different online news outlets was not even (see Figure 2).

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[11] [konspirace koronavirus]
[12] [dezinformace koronavirus]
[13] [konspirační teorie]
[14] [infodemie koronavirus]

4.3 Framework of Analysis

Working in large part off of the concrete tools and techniques for multimodal critical discourse analysis outlined by David Machin and Andrea Mayer in *How To Do Critical Discourse Analysis* (2012), I constructed a framework for analysis that I used as a guide for analysis for each of the 36 articles in my sample. This framework was designed to enable me to analyze both the form, content, and linguistic choices made in the news articles. The context of each article was considered first individually and then in relation to one another. In constructing the analysis framework, and later in conducting the analysis itself, I relied heavily upon the research questions that guide this thesis:

1. How do Czech-language news stories discursively represent Covid-19 mis- and disinformation in the context of the ongoing infodemic?

2. How do Czech-language news stories about Covid-19 mis- and disinformation engage with the notions of trust and authority?

3. What consequences do the discourses present in Czech-language news stories about Covid-19 mis- and disinformation have for the promotion of information literacy?

Informed by the sociotechnical perspective, I have paid special attention to the specific societal circumstances of the Czech Republic. Discourse that can be related to information skepticism, information warfare, and distrust of official narratives have special significance. Similarly, discourses that are related to information literacy and education are of particular interest.

The structure of analysis for each article was as follows:

1. Semiotic Choices:
An analysis of the linguistic and visual choices inherent in the title, text, and accompanying illustrations of the article. I identify what kinds of words are chosen, and what kind of language structures are used—for example, formal vs. informal language. Beyond identification, I connect these choices to ideological positions.

2. Social Actor Representation
Here I assess how individuals and institutions are represented. Questions asked during analysis are, for example: Are these descriptions general or specific? Are political actors described as groups or as individuals? Is passive language used that

obscures the actors involved? How do these depictions reinforce, deconstruct, or connect to ideologies of authority and trust?

3. Hedging
Here, I identify the uses of direct and indirect language. In what contexts is direct language used? In what contexts does the author hedge and choose for uncertainty to permeate a text?

4. Rhetoric and Metaphor
In this step of my analysis I identify choices of rhetorical style and metaphor—and connect these choices to discourses surrounding information literacy, authority, expertise, and information warfare.

4.4 Demarcation and Limitations

As a methodological approach, critical discourse analysis does not include defined rules for data collection or analysis—instead, the researcher is largely responsible for determining an appropriate use and interpretation of it (Wodak & Meyer 2009, p. 27). The methodology I designed and described above is itself demarcated and limited by my own interpretation and adaptation of critical discourse analysis. One key factor that influenced my choice and design of methodology is the particular nature inherent in the construction of a research project appropriate as a master's thesis. The research and writing of this thesis needed to accommodate a scope achievable within a limited time period—in this case, one semester of study. Therefore, newspaper articles collected and analyzed were limited to those published within a four-month time frame (January-April 2020), and to a specific set of four online news outlets.

As discussed above in the chapter *Historical Background*, the situation of the Czech Republic as a Central European post-Communist democracy places the information landscape there in dialogue with other democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. Unlike media in English—media in Czech is largely limited in consumption by citizens and residents of the Czech Republic. This factor makes my findings more specific than they would be had I analyzed articles written in English, and also more significant in relationship to the situation within a geographically and linguistically limited region.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

In contrast to other research methods that rely on private individuals as participants using surveys or interviews—or even social network analysis that examines private individuals' online posts—I do not have to contend with questions of ethics regarding privacy, anonymity, and consent in the writing of this thesis. Using critical discourse analysis as described above, I conducted a qualitative research project, and have relied upon my own observations and interpretations of the newspaper articles I have selected. As a result, it is my own actions as a researcher that are the site of the ethical considerations in this project. Because of this, my own background and perspective are important to understand and interrogate. In this research project, I have examined articles written in the Czech language, published on Czech-language news websites. It is important to knowledge the personal distance I have from Czech culture and society. As I wrote in the introduction to this thesis, I see my outsider status as a strength—one that enables me to keep a scholarly distance to the material I am analyzing. However, at the same time, it is also true that this distance can also be a limiting factor for my ability to interpret the material I am analyzing. In the writing and researching of this thesis I have straddled this line.

A weakness identified in discourse analysis as a whole (and also specifically at critical discourse analysis) is the subjectivity of the entire process (Wildemuth 2009). In the writing of this thesis, I have aimed to address this concern by being as transparent as possible with the development of my methodology, selection of articles, and analysis of materials.

5. Result & Analysis

As described above, I collected and analyzed 36 articles published on four main online Czech news platforms. Using the analysis guide described in *4.3 Framework of Analysis*, I applied the critical discourse analysis perspective to consider the visual and linguistic choices made in each article. In conducting this analysis, I paid special attention to sociotechnical factors—that is to say historical and cultural precedents, the local media landscape, and the specific circumstances involved in the consumption of news via websites and shared links on social media. In the following sections, I present and summarize the commonalities and patterns I observed within and between the articles. Where possible, I have created and interspersed figures in the text that serve to illustrate my analysis. For the sake of streamlining the reading of this text, I have chosen to use my English translations in the body of my analysis. Each translation is accompanied by a footnote containing the original Czech title or quote and the source reference. Complete citations for the articles in my sample can be found in Appendix 1.

5.1 Semiotic Choices

5.1.1 Article Titles

The first step of my analysis of the sample material was to take a close look at the choices made regarding to the titles of the articles. This close reading led me to divide the titles into three main categories (see Figure 3). The first category, that I term *straightforward*, consists of titles that are formal in tone, and closely relate to the main thrust of the article's content. Titles in this category include "Russian state media accuses USA and pharmaceutical companies of spreading coronavirus,"[15] "More than half of Czechs have encountered fake news"[16] and "Facebook introduces a new warning about fake news,"[17] among others. The majority of the articles in my sample fall into this category.
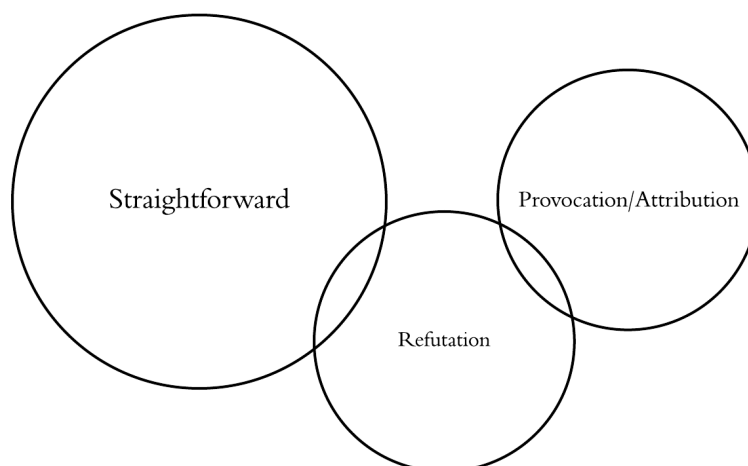
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[15] "Ruská státní média obvinila ze šíření koronaviru USA a farmaceutické firmy" (Šíma 2020)
[16] "Více než polovina Čechů naletěla několikrát na fake news" (*Novinky.cz* 2020i)
[17] "Facebook přináší nové varování před koronavirovými falešnými zprávami" (*Technet* 2020)

Figure 3. Categories of Article Titles

The second largest category consists of titles that I call *provocation/attribution*. These titles begin with a short provocative clause or sentiment that is then followed up by a statement that consists of an explanation or attribution of that provocation. For example, titles such as "Created in a lab? The basis for conspiracies surrounding coronavirus,"[18] "Drink hot water and avoid the virus, advised hackers using the name of a doctor,"[19] "It is a biological weapon; the Vatican is hiding something. Coronavirus attracts lovers of conspiracies"[20] and "Stop creating hoaxes, this makes the fight against coronavirus harder, says WHO director."[21] In all of these article titles, the provocative first clause catches the readers' attention, while the second clause provides an explanation or clarification—elucidating the fact that the newspaper article is not necessarily claiming the stance of the provocative first clause. Another example of this type of title is: "'The USA is like a developing country, disaster awaits,' warns Czech doctor"[22] (see Figure 4). This first part of the title: *The USA is like a developing country; disaster awaits* is provocative in nature. The second part of the title: *warns Czech doctor*, both attributes and clarifies the provocative first part of the title. This choice enables the article writer and publisher to benefit from readers' curiosity and piqued interest at unexpected or provocative information, while simultaneously clarifying from the outset that the provocation is the subject of the article, not the stance of the journalist.

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[18] "Vznikl v laboratoři? Na čem jsou založené konspirace kolem koronaviru" (Lázňovský 2020)
[19] "Pijte horkou vodu a vyhnete se viru, radili lidem hackeři jménem lékařky" (Černý 2020)
[20] "Je to biologická zbraň, Vatikán něco tají. Koronavirus přitahuje milovníky konspirací" (Novák 2020)
[21] "Přestaňte si vymýšlet hoaxy, boj s koronavirem jen ztěžujete, vzkázal šéf WHO" (*Novinky.cz* 2020h)
[22] "USA jsou jak rozvojová země, čeká je katastrofa, varuje česká lékařka" (*iDnes.cz* 2020d)

Figure 4. Sentence Diagram
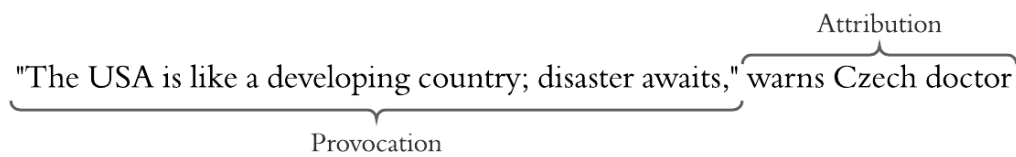
The third category I observed among the article titles in my sample is one that I have termed *refutation*. Titles in this category directly refute mis- and disinformation. As depicted in Figure 3 above, this category overlaps with the other two (*straightforward* and *provocation/attribution*). For example, titles that overlap between *refutation* and *straightforward* include "Seniors in isolation for safety reasons, not because of Euroscepticism"[23] and "Coronavirus is not a Muslim weapon,"[24] among others. Examples of titles that overlap between *provocation/attribution* and *refutation* include, "They aren't going to put chips in us, like ex-tennis player Safin claims"[25] and "No, cocaine really doesn't help. The French government refutes myths about coronavirus."[26]

As of research from 2020, Facebook was the top-ranking social media brand for Czech users (Newman et al. 2020)—both in terms of social media news consumption and for use in general. In fact, 45% reported using Facebook for consuming news. Titles of articles shared online are of special significance—as readers need to click through to access the original website and the full text. Provocative, eye-catching, "clickbait" titles are used to grab the attention of the user and lead them to click through. The *refutation* and *provocation/attribution* titles that I observed in my sample neatly straddle the line of journalism and online marketing. I argue that the choices made in the writing of these articles seeks to both inform readers of the news—but also appeal to public interest in provocative topics.

5.1.2 Image Choices

All but one of the articles in the sample included accompanying images. The total number of images per article varied—some included a single image that appeared

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[23] "Dezinfoservis: Senioři v izolaci z bezpečnostních důvodů, ne kvůli euroskepticismu" (Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis 2020)

[24] "Dezinfoservis: Koronavirus není zbraň muslimů" (Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis 2020)

[25] "Dezinfoservis: čipovat nás nebudou, jak tvrdí bývalý ruský tenista Safin" (Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis 2020)

[26] "Ne, kokain opravdu nepomáhá, musí vyvracet francouzská vláda mýty o koronaviru" (*Novinky.cz* 2020f)

after the title, while others included multiple images and visualizations dispersed throughout the text. A small number of the articles were published as image galleries, where the reader can click through to the next slide and see an image that is then accompanied by a long caption. For the purposes of this study, I choose to focus on the first image that accompanies the article—the image that appears directly under the title. I argue that much like the title, this main image is of special significance—regardless of how much time the reader spends consuming the article, they will have seen this image. Furthermore, it is this image that often appears in thumbnail form alongside the title when an article is shared via social media.

Figure 5. Categories of article main images
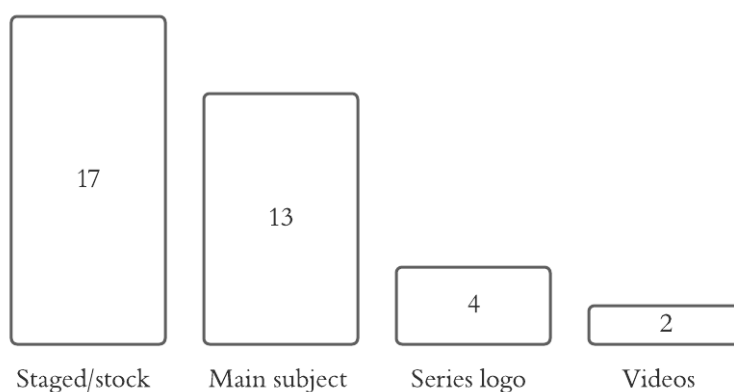
I observed that the article main images in my sample fell into four different categories (see Figure 5). The largest category (17 of the 36) consisted of images that were either explicitly staged images or stock photos. For example, a stock photo of a man holding a rolled-up piece of paper is seen from below through what appears to be a glass surface, with three lines of a white powdery substance beside him. The lines and his right hand holding the rolled-up piece of paper are in focus, while his face and left hand (which is wiping his nose) are blurry. This image accompanied the article titled "No, cocaine really doesn't help. The French government refutes myths about coronavirus."[27] Another article in this category is illustrated by an image depicting a white, blonde woman wearing a white coat and lab glasses pushed back on the top of her head (Lázňovský 2020). She appears to be grinning but not happily. Above her head is the word *conspiracy*[28] followed by a question mark and an exclamation point. In the foreground stand different bottles labeled with chemical names and filled with different colors of liquids. The

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[27] "Ne, kokain opravdu nepomáhá, musí vyvracet francouzská vláda mýty o koronaviru" (*Novinky.cz* 2020f)
[28] "konspirace"

woman's hands frame the image, covered in white plastic gloves as she appears to wrap her arms around the variety of bottles on the glass table in front of her. The caption underneath reads: "Conspiracy theories about Covid-19 are more and more popular in recent weeks…" The colors in the image are bright, and the woman's face appears to be directly facing a light source. A "tongue-in-cheek" nature is implied by these choices—this is not an image depicting secretive, suspicious behavior. Instead, the colors are clownish in nature, and the woman's wild grin appears absurd and ridiculous rather than scary. There is an undeniable paradox inherent in the articles that fit into this first category—these articles are published on the websites that have the highest rates of public trust, but the images are enacted—they explicitly do not represent reliability.

The second largest category consists of articles that were accompanied by main images that depicted the main subject of the article—either a person or a place. For example, a photograph of a politician or public figure, or a photograph of a building that is the headquarters of a certain institution. The images in this category are not explicitly edited or photomontaged—they are straightforward and convey a more serious and factual tone than stock photos. These images fit more closely within traditional journalistic discourse. The third and fourth categories that I observed contained much smaller numbers of articles. Four articles used a logo as their main image—these articles were all part of one series of articles on disinformation published on *Seznam Zprávy*[29]. The logo consists of a black background with a simple graphic design in white and yellow. A white shape with the words "data against covid"[30] forms an arrow that points toward a yellow circle with a simplified Covid-19 molecule inside of it. Two articles used videos as their main images—these videos were closely connected to the content of the articles.

5.1.3 Body Text

The next step in this stage of my analysis was to look closely at the content of each article. What kinds of choices with regards to article length, formatting, and word choice are prevalent and what do these choices communicate to the reader? The observations I collected regarding these types of choices during my reading and analysis of the articles in my sample center around a number of similarities especially in relationship to communication formality. Choices with regard to word choice and formatting of these articles leads to a more informal tone with the reader.

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[29] The four articles containing this logo are: Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020c), Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020g), (Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis 2020k), and Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020l)
[30] "Data proti covid"

One trend that is consistent throughout my entire sample is the use of short paragraphs, and the division of longer articles into shorter thematic sections. A number of articles chose to use breakout sections—short separate texts that can be used to define terms, or give backstory on a news story in a way that is separate from the general body text of the article. A number of articles published in *Novinky.cz*, including "Stop creating hoaxes, this makes the fight against coronavirus harder, says WHO director"[31] and "Disinformation and hoaxes about coronavirus are spreading like lava on the internet"[32] contain interactive maps with the number of Covid-19 cases present on the day the article is being digitally accessed. Readers can click on individual countries or view the entire world map and change the settings to toggle between number of cases, number of deaths, number of recoveries, and number of active cases. Articles in the "Dezinfoservis" series published on *Seznam Zprávy* include breakout texts describing the series, the actors involved in writing it, and even encourages readers to contact them directly to give feedback and ask questions.

Similar to the choice to divide text up into smaller, more digestible pieces was the choice to use less formal language. There is a stark difference between formal written Czech and more informal and colloquial language. The language used in the online articles I collected and analyzed falls on this spectrum of formality more towards the informal—both in word choice and sentence structure. An example of this is the article "Created in a lab? The basis for conspiracies surrounding coronavirus."[33] The style of this article is quite informal, using shorter sentences, casual rhetorical questions, and speaking familiarly with the reader. For example, the introductory paragraph includes the questions "Where do the roots of these speculations lie?" and "So what is the evidence for conspiracies surrounding the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2?" The use of the word "so"[34] is informal and familiar. This kind of language serves to imply that the reader is following along with the author, Lázňovský, in investigating and learning about these different theories. Other examples of these types of semiotic constructions include the first sentence in the section titled "Hybrid?"[35] Lázňovský writes "Since we now know that the new coronavirus contains suprising innovations the question arises of how

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[31] "Přestaňte si vymýšlet hoaxy, boj s koronavirem jen ztěžujete, vzkázal šéf WHO" (*Novinky.cz* 2020h)

[32] "Dezinformace a hoaxy o koronaviru se po internetu šíří jako lavina" (*Novinky.cz* 2020b)

[33] "Vznikl v laboratoři? Na čem jsou založené konspirace kolem koronaviru" (Lázňovský 2020)

[34] "tak"

[35] "Kříženec"

and when they appeared."[36] This phrasing places the reader on par with the journalist—considering and working through the evidence together. Other repeating formatting choices within the sample of articles was the choice to use embedded tweets and instagram images—in cases where these tweets and images were the subject of the article.

5.2 Social Actor Representation

Within critical discourse analysis, the term *social actor* is often used to describe individuals and groups of people (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 77). In the following sections, I present my observations and interpretations of the types of discursive practices present in relation to the depiction of social actors. I have divided this analysis into three categories—*experts, consumers of mis- and disinformation,* and *spreaders of mis- and disinformation*. I observed different patterns of discursive practice for each of these three categories of social actors—each relevant to the aims of this thesis.

5.2.1 Experts

The articles analyzed in this research all center around mis- and disinformation about Covid-19. I observed the ways in which social actors were used in these articles to signify expertise and authority about the virus and the ongoing pandemic. Importantly, and in stark contrast to the choices made regarding the portrayal of actors depicted as untrustworthy or malicious (as is further discussed in the following section *Spreaders of Mis- and Disinformation*), impersonalization is used in order signify authority and trustworthiness (see Figure 6). By choosing to foreground institutions or groups rather than individual actors, the authors and editors of the articles in my sample signify to the reader that these are sources that can be trusted. Even in cases when individual actors are named as experts and authorities, their institutional affiliation was still used to imbue them with an aura of trust and reliability. The affiliation that constitutes the organizational actor does not necessarily have to be an actual official institution—it can also be a more informal category—like a profession.

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[36] "Když nyní víme, že nový koronavirus obsahuje překvapivé inovace, nabízí se samozřejmě logická otázka, jak a kdy přesně vznikly."

Figure 6. Impersonalization using individual and organizational actors within expertise discourse
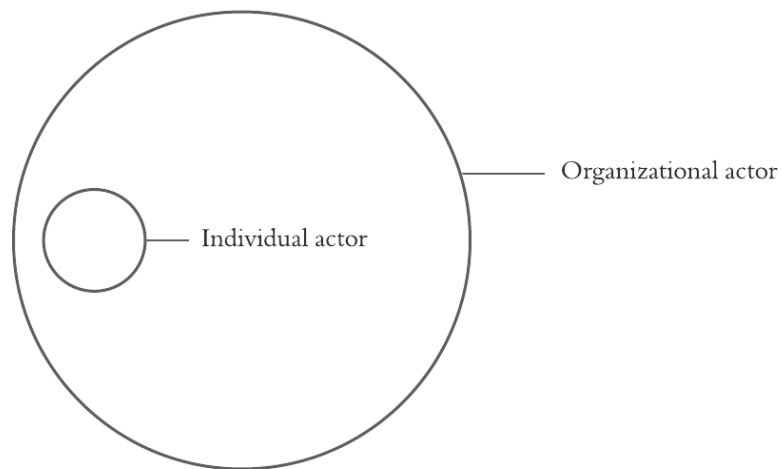
Examples of impersonalization abound in the articles in my sample. In the article titled "I did not die after receiving the coronavirus vaccine—Brit refutes fake news"[37] the first sentence of the article refers to a "British microbiologist". No further details about her are given until the following paragraph of the article. Her nationality and her occupation are foregrounded—and are used to imply the legitimacy of her claims. Another article (titled "It is a biological weapon; the Vatican is hiding something. Coronavirus attracts lovers of conspiracies"[38]) illustrates this phenomenon of impersonalization with respect to government organizations—"Canadian officials" are credited as refuting a rumor that coronavirus was stolen by "the Chinese" from a Canadian laboratory. No further specifics are given. Similarly, the first sentence of the article "Stop creating hoaxes, this makes the fight against coronavirus harder, says WHO director"[39] foregrounds Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus's role as General Director for the WHO by listing his occupation first before his name—and not using his name at all in the title of the article.

In the beginning of the article "Created in a lab? The basis for conspiracies surrounding coronavirus,"[40] the journal the *Lancet* is described as the "most famous and definitely largest professional magazine in the world." In this sentence, the function of the *Lancet* is primary—the author of the article, Lázňovský, does not present where it is published and what fields the journal publishes articles within. Instead, the journal is presented simply as an important authority. Lázňovský then

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[37] "Po očkování proti koronaviru jsem nezemřela, vyvrací Britka falešnou zprávu" (*iDnes.cz* 2020c)
[38] "Je to biologická zbraň, Vatikán něco tají. Koronavirus přitahuje milovníky konspirací" (Novák 2020)
[39] "Přestaňte si vymýšlet hoaxy, boj s koronavirem jen ztěžujete, vzkázal šéf WHO" (*Novinky.cz* 2020h)
[40] "Vznikl v laboratoři? Na čem jsou založené konspirace kolem koronaviru" (Lázňovský 2020)

goes on to explain that the journal had published a letter from experts in public health expressing grave concern about conspiracy theories and their confidence that Covid-19 was not artificially created. Later in the same article, two individual actors are presented. These actors, both males with Czech names working at institutions in the Czech Republic, are described using their full names. One of them is further described as a biologist at a specific university. The other is described as working at the Institute of Vertebrate Biology at the Czech Academy of Sciences.

The cases I presented above are representative of the discursive practice evident in the newspaper articles I examined. By foregrounding organizational actors that are recognized as reliable and trustworthy, the writers of these articles appeal to notions of expertise and trust without providing further detail about the process of acquiring the knowledge that is being presented as factual. This phenomenon is particularly meaningful in relation to information literacy, and efforts by organizations like the EU, the WHO, and national governmental and public health organizations to encourage citizens to get factual and up-to-date information. The discourse around trust and expertise in the news articles I examined relies a great deal upon trust already present for institutions like the WHO, or universities in the Czech Republic or internationally—specifically in Western democracies. In the case that trust for these institutions is lacking in the reader there is little in the articles in the sample I examined that would build that trust and lead to the reader choosing this source as factual over others.

5.2.2 Mis- and Disinformed Actors

The next group of social actors I observed in the article sample are what I term *mis- and disinformed actors.* These are the people who are portrayed as being believers of what the articles call conspiracy theories and fake news about Covid-19. Much like the ways in which I have described experts as being portrayed, the choices made in the depiction of mis- and disinformed actors serve to impersonalize them. The reader consumes information filtered through the discursive choices of the article writers. The mis- and disinformed actors portrayed in the articles are impersonalized through the foregrounding of their belongingness. In other words, these social actors are described as being parts of larger groups, and, significantly, they are othered from the reader. In my interpretation of the material, the choices made to depict mis- and disinformed actors serve to separate them from those that are consuming the articles.

One example of this othering and impersonalization of mis- and disinformed social actors is a recurring focus on mis- and disinformation outside of the Czech Republic. The article titled "Spoiling the fight against the virus? Opponents of vaccination give experts headache"[41] addresses the anti-vaccination movement. The beginning of the article quotes a Facebook user named Sarah, writing on a local Texas anti-vaccination group page, "They will vaccinate my daughter over my dead body."[42] Sarah is placed within the larger context of the Texas and more broadly USA-based anti-vaccination online movement. The article describes Texas as being one of the states in the USA with the largest such movements—and having gained so much traction as to lead to having elected a number of anti-vaccination politicians into office. Later in the article, mention is made of the Czech Republic's high vaccination rates. Vaccination mis- and disinformation is described as being very much an international problem—not a problem that is currently affecting the Czech Republic, and therefore, the readers of this article.

Aside from mis- and disinformation spreading in the USA, another common reoccurring example in the newspaper articles I analyzed was a theory evidently spreading in France that the use of cocaine could protect from coronavirus. Two articles in the sample addressed this theory: "Neither cocaine nor alcohol protect against coronavirus, governments warn citizens"[43] and "No, cocaine really doesn't help. The French government refutes myths about coronavirus."[44] Both articles address a warning issued through an official French government twitter account, warning citizens that using cocaine will not protect against the spread of Covid-19. In both of these articles, believers in this misinformation about cocaine are described impersonally—no specific examples of believers are given, nor are their characteristics elaborated upon.

Similarly, I also observed this impersonalization of mis- and disinformed actors in articles that specifically addressed theories and ideas spreading within the Czech Republic. The articles titled "More than half of Czechs have encountered fake news"[45] and "Drink hot water and avoid the virus, advised hackers using the name of a doctor"[46] both demonstrate choices in discursive practice that create a distance between the reader and the actors portrayed in the text. Specifically, "More than half of Czechs have encountered fake news" describes the results of a survey study

[41] "Zkazí boj proti viru? Odpůrci očkování opět dělají odborníkům těžkou hlavu" (*iDnes.cz* 2020e)
[42] "Vakcínu mé dceři dají jen přes moji mrtvolu." (*iDnes.cz* 2020e)
[43] "Kokain ani alkohol před koronavirem neochrání, varují své obyvatele vlády" (*iDnes.cz* 2020b)
[44] "Ne, kokain opravdu nepomáhá, musí vyvracet francouzská vláda mýty o koronaviru" (*Novinky.cz* 2020f)
[45] "Více než polovina Čechů naletěla několikrát na fake news" (*Novinky.cz* 2020i)
[46] "Pijte horkou vodu a vyhnete se viru, radili lidem hackeři jménem lékařky" (Černý 2020)

but does not engage the reader directly as someone that could possibly be one of the many who have encountered such so-called "fake news." Despite the relatively informal tone of these articles (discussed above in *Semiotic Choices*), the reader is not addressed as a possible actor within the scenarios described. These choices have potential consequences for information literacy efforts. Is maintaining a distance from mis- and disinformation an effective way to dispel it? And further, is it easier to see the mis- and disinformation for what it is if one is not being actively and personally questioned? If the answer to these questions is yes, then the choices regarding actor representation in the articles in this sample can be seen to work positively toward better informing the public and working in concert with public health and information literacy strategies.

5.2.3 Spreaders of Mis- and Disinformation

In contrast to the impersonalization I observed with regards to descriptions and portrayals of *expert* and *mis- and disinformed* social actors described above, choices made in describing social actors who fit the category of *spreaders of mis- and disinformation* fit a distinctly different pattern. As opposed to being largely impersonalized and therefore contextualized within a larger group—such as an organization, a nationality, or even an age group—social actors who are portrayed as spreading mis- and disinformation are largely individualized in the articles in the sample.

For example, the article "Russian state media accuses USA and pharmaceutical companies of spreading coronavirus"[47] includes a description of Igor Nikulin as a "controversial biologist." Supporting the use of the word "controversial" to describe Nikulin, the article also provides a contextualization—explaining that Nikulin had previously blamed the United States for the poisoning of a former Russian agent in 2018. Nikulin's belief in this is described as "belonging to his favorite"[48] theories. The choice to describe a theory as being a "favorite" of a social actor serves to personalize and individualize the actor. Although Nikulin is described as a biologist—he is not portrayed as representative of a particular institution or organization. Instead, he is broken out and individualized as an actor that is not speaking for others in the way that is very different from the way that experts and mis- and disinformed actors are portrayed in the material I collected.

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[47] "Ruská státní média obvinila ze šíření koronaviru USA a farmaceutické firmy" (Šíma 2020)
[48] "patří mezi jeho oblíbené"

Another example of the individualization present in the discursive presentation of social actors in this category is evident in the article, "Disinfoservice: The pandemic is not a fiction."[49] This article is a part of "Disinfoservice," the series of articles published on *Seznam Zprávy* mentioned above that is specifically designed to fact-check mis- and disinformation. This particular article addresses claims made by Pavel Kamas, who is described as being a "publisher of anti-Semitic literature."[50] The text elaborates and quotes a video that Kamas made public on his Facebook profile, in which he discusses his theories as to the origins of Covid-19. After presenting the misinformation in Kamas's video, the article includes a short break-out text titled "Who is Pavel Kamas?"[51] Following that is a section that fact-checks the false claims made by Kamas in the Facebook video. Kamas's presentation in the article as a social actor is highly individualized. His background and beliefs are presented, and although his affiliations and publishing work is discussed, his individual identity is clearly foregrounded. I observed the same phenomenon in other articles in the sample that dealt with spreaders of mis- and disinformation, including "Disinfoservice: They aren't going to put chips in us, like ex-tennis player Safin claims,"[52] "A mask does not protect against coronavirus,"[53] and "No, cocaine really doesn't help. The French government refutes myths about coronavirus,"[54] among others.

The divide I have observed between discursive portrayal of social actors as impersonalized versus individualized is not starkly black and white. Instead, it can be understood as a spectrum—actors can be more or less individualized or impersonalized in bodies of text and in images. In the case of social actors who are responsible for the spread of mis- and disinformation, I observed that despite largely being represented as individuals, there were also instances in which they were also, to a more limited extent, represented as part of a larger group. I explore this more in the following section *Rhetoric and Metaphor,* specifically in the subsection *War Discourse.*

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[49] "Dezinfoservis: Dezinfoservis: Pandemie není výmysl" (Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis 2020f)
[50] "vydavatel antisemitké literatury"
[51] "Kdo je Pavel Kamas?"
[52] "Dezinfoservis: čipovat nás nebudou, jak tvrdí bývalý ruský tenista Safin" (Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis 2020a)
[53] "Rouška před koronavirem neochrání" (Přádová 2020)
[54] "Ne, kokain opravdu nepomáhá, musí vyvracet francouzská vláda mýty o koronaviru" (*Novinky.cz* 2020f)

5.3 Hedging

Hedging is a term used to describe language that separates a speaker from fully committing to that which they are stating (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 192). David Machin and Andrea Mayer define hedging as "a term used to describe the way that in language we often use terms or grammar to soften the impact of what we have to say, or to mitigate something" (Machin & Mayr 2012, pp. 186-7). The use of modals in language signify the degree of hedging that the author or speaker is utilizing (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 221). The degree of hedging can be described as existing on a spectrum of modality—from low to high (see Figure 7). This is because a single text can consist of statements that exhibit varied degrees of hedging. For example, statements regarding the intent of a social actor can be hedged and exhibit high modality, but the conclusions drawn as to the veracity of the information can be presented with very low modality—all within the same article. In the following sections, I present my findings with regard to the use of low and high modality in the articles in my sample. In my analysis, it has been my aim to take a nuanced view of this phenomenon.

Figure 7. Spectrum of hedging from low to high modality
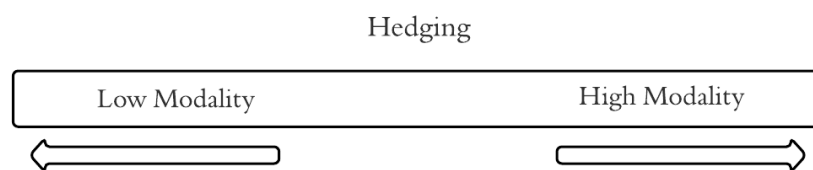
5.3.1 Low Modality

Above, I have already mentioned the "Dezinfoservis" series of articles published on *Seznam Zprávy*. The articles in this series specifically focused on factchecking mis- and disinformation that the authors observed to be relevant and circulating at the time of publishing. This series exemplifies the instances of low modality—and the use of language that is definite in nature. Other articles in the sample that served to factcheck claims about Covid-19 that were demonstrated as false were also characterized by low modality.

Formally, the articles in the "Dezinfoservis" series follow the same general framework. Each article begins with a short introduction to the series:

> Deceptive and alarming information has been appearing in conjunction with the new coronavirus. Analysis by the C19 initiative and its affiliated public infoservice is now being regularly published on *Seznam Zprávy*. What has been circulating the internet in recent days?[55]
>
> *Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020a-m)*

After this introduction, each article in the series is divided into sub-sections based on recent instances of potentially misleading information. Each sub-section has a title, which introduces the information that will be investigated. This title is then followed by two further sub-sections. The first is called "What is it about?"[56] and the second is called "Fact-checking." In my observations of these articles, a clear pattern emerged of a discursive practice characterized by the use of definite verbs. I read the articles in this series to be very straightforward—they are designed to be concise and clear. The low modality of the texts contributes to my interpretation. For example, the article, "Disinfoservice: They aren't going to put chips in us, like ex-tennis player Safin claims"[57] uses very clear language with little hedging in the reporting of statements made by former professional tennis player Marat Safin regarding the use of Covid-19 vaccines as a deception in order to insert microchips in people around the world. The text reads: "this is a claim that is completely unsubstantiated and does not rely on any evidence or facts."[58] This use of clear and definite language is accompanied by the heavy use of links throughout the article, that serve to provide more information about the information being presented. Furthermore, readers are encouraged to contact the team behind the article with potential questions.

5.3.2 High Modality

I observed that the articles in my sample was typically characterized by lower modality. This was not a surprising finding, given that, as I explained above, many of the articles performed the function of factchecking mis- and disinformation. However, despite the frequent occurrence of categorical refutations of false information, there were also many instances of text that was modulated. Interestingly, despite the fact that language using high modality serves to commit to statements to a lesser degree than language with lesser modality, it can also be used to "give the impression of in fact being precise and detailed" (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 13). The articles in the "Dezinfoservis" series discussed above include areas of high modality in precisely this way—often mixing high and low modality

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[55] "V souvislosti s novým koronavirem přibývá klamavých a poplašných informací. Ty analyzuje iniciativa c19 a její ověřený infoservis teď pravidelně najdete i na Seznam Zprávách. Co kolovalo po internetu v posledních dnech?"

[56] "O co jde?"

[57] "Dezinfoservis: čipovat nás nebudou, jak tvrdí bývalý ruský tenista Safin" (Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis 2020a)

[58] "Jedná se o ničím nepodložený osobní názor, který se neopírá o žádné důkazy ani fakta."

in a manner that contributes to an impression of reliability. For example, the article "Disinfoservice: Statistics about Covid-19 are skewed, but are not the result of fraud"[59] contains analysis of information that had been spreading about manipulated statistics on Covid-19. The claim is factchecked, and the language used to determine its veracity contains a high degree of modality. This use of modality is exemplified by the statement, "The doctors' quotes are partially legitimate."[60] The use of "partially" in this sentence is then further elucidated in the rest of the article. Ultimately, the information being analyzed is judged to be "manipulation, clickbait, and traces of conspiracy theory."[61] This conclusion is drawn without stating categorically that the information was false. Instead, a more nuanced interpretation was achieved through the use of modulated language.

Not all of the articles in the sample use high and low modality in the manner described above. Instead of using modulated speech as a way to connote precision and nuance, a large number of articles in the sample used language that conveyed uncertainty in a way that threatens to leave the reader without a clear sense of information conveyed. I observed this to be the case when high modality is used in describing the sources of information. For example, in the article titled "Facebook introduces a warning about false information about coronavirus"[62] the author explains that "since the beginning of the epidemic, news has appeared on the internet that have are marked as manipulative, deceptive, or even false."[63] In the next paragraph, the author credits disinformation about Covid-19 being a biological weapon as being proclaimed false by "Western media and several institutions"[64]— and as having been fabricated by Russia or China. In these two instances of hedging, the author uses passive language to describe certain information as false—but does not provide the specific source that has made these claims. The statement that news has been "marked" as mis- and disinformation does not state with certainty that this has been revealed by the work of the journalist—instead, the burden of determining whether information is false or not is left to the uncredited sources who have made that determination. This leaves the reader in the position of not being able to further investigate the story if interested. Similarly, the statement that "several institutions" had credited false information as originating in Russia or China is also lacking in

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[59] "Dezinfoservis: Statistiky o covid-19 jsou zkreslené, nejde ale o podvod" (Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis 2020k)

[60] "Citace lékařů jsou částečně legitimní." (Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis 2020k)

[61] "Článek jsme vyhodnotili jako manipulaci, clickbait a náznak konspirační teorie. " (Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis 2020k)

[62] "Facebook zavede varování před lživými informacemi o koronaviru" (*Novinky.cz* 2020d)

[63] "Od propuknutí epidemie se na internetu objevilo poměrně velké množství zpráv označovaných za manipulativní, zavádějící nebo přímo lživé." (*Novinky.cz* 2020d)

[64] "Podle západních médií i některých institucí" (*Novinky.cz* 2020d)

clarity. Rather than using hedging in a way that conveys nuance or precision, I would argue that this kind of use conveys the precise opposite. The reader is left in a position of needing to unquestionably trust that the writer of this article is reliable.

5.4 Rhetoric and Metaphor

In my observations of the material in my sample, I made note of choices of rhetorical style and metaphor. These observations led to interpretations of the wider discursive practices that are embodied in the articles.

5.4.1 Describing Mis- and Disinformation

During my reading and analysis of the material, two distinct patterns emerged in the rhetoric chosen to describe mis- and disinformation. One pattern is the use of a light-hearted tone—and the implication that the mis- and disinformation being addressed is too absurd to even merit a serious response. The other pattern was quite different—a more serious rhetorical style that addressed, factchecked, and provided sources for the reader about the mis- and disinformation. In the following sub-sections, I present my observations and interpretations of these two different rhetorical approaches.

5.4.1.1 Absurdity

As mentioned above, the one rhetorical approach to mis- and disinformation that I observed was that of (often but not always light-hearted) dismissal. This approach is characterized by the use of the language that writes off the information deemed untruthful, and designates it as barely meriting of response—besides perhaps amusement that anyone would believe it to be true or spread it. Articles that used the rhetorical approach used words such as "nonsense"[65] to describe false information and informal constructions such as "of course none of the above is true."[66] The article "Beware fake news! Police are investigating a recording about a curfew in the Czech Republic"[67] quotes Czech Prime Minster Andrej Babiš using precisely this kind of rhetorical tactic in a response via Twitter to a misinformative audio recording that had been spreading on Czech social media: "It is nonsense […] nothing like this was every even considered. […] Please, don't share this information, don't scare people, there's no reason. Don't be cruel."[68] The article also includes an embedded Tweet that Babiš wrote on the subject, in which he

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[65] "nesmysl" (*Novinky.cz* 2020g)

[66] "Nic z výše uvedeného samozřejmě není pravda" (*Novinky.cz* 2020d)

[67] "Pozor na fake news! Nahrávkou o zákazu vycházení v ČR se už zabývá policie" (*Novinky.cz* 2020g)

[68] "Je to nesmysl" […] Nic takového nikdy nebylo na stole […] Prosím vás, nedělejte to, neděste lidi, není k tomu důvod. Nebuďte zlí." (*Novinky.cz* 2020g)

included two emojis—one of a monkey covering his eyes and one of a face with rolled eyes and a half-frowning mouth. This is not a response that can be considered a formal rebuttal of false information. Instead, it writes off the audio recording in question as completely absurd, and, while perhaps disturbing and upsetting, certainly not worth a point-by-point demonstration of its falsity. The tone of the newspaper article inhabits this same rhetorical approach, consisting largely of official quotes and tweets urging readers to simply disregard the misinformation in question.

I observed another example of this type of rhetorical approach in "Disinformation and hoaxes about coronavirus are spread by users."[69] This article discusses the spread of "disinformation and hoaxes"[70] through social media. These users are described as "simply believing whatever they read on the internet."[71] Not only does this statement serve to place distance between the reader and the social actors who are described as spreading mis- and disinformation,[72] but it also carries the implication that it is absurd to believe in this information in the first place. It does not leave open the possibility that there could be any reason for anyone to believe mis- and disinformation, or that any more formal approach needs to be taken to factcheck that which is false.

5.4.1.2 Formal Refutation

Different from the more informal rhetorical approach described above, I also observed that many articles in the sample chose to address mis- and disinformation more formally. I have termed this rhetorical approach *formal refutation*. This approach is characterized by more thorough and serious factchecking. For example, articles in the "Disinfoservice" series already discussed utilized this approach. Providing sources and links to back up claims, the articles in this category address false information step by step.

Similar to the *absurdity* approach for addressing false information, there are, from an information literacy perspective, potential consequences for the *formal refutation* approach. On one hand, serious factchecking of blatantly false information can serve to give credence and gravity to it. On the other hand, in a situation, like the Covid-19 pandemic, false information that can appear ridiculous and even humorous to some people can simultaneously lead to concrete and damaging consequences (such as vaccine skepticism or reduced adherence to public

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[69] "Dezinformace a hoaxy o koronaviru šíří sami uživatelé" (*Novinky.cz* 2020c)
[70] "dezinformací a hoaxů" (*Novinky.cz* 2020c)
[71] "jednoduše věří tomu, co si na internetu přečtou (*Novinky.cz* 2020c).
[72] This phenomenon is discussed above in section *6.2.2 Mis- and Disinformed Actors*.

health recommendations). Perhaps a more formal approach to dispelling false information has a higher chance of changing readers' minds, or even arming them with information with which to discuss with others.

5.4.2 Metaphor

David Machin and Andrea Mayer define metaphor as "the means by which we understand one concept in terms of another, through a process which involves a transference or 'mapping' between the two concepts."(2012, p. 221). The choice of certain metaphors can work to support, subvert, and discursively convey ideologies and power structures through language. In the newspaper articles in my sample, I identified two particular recurring metaphors that are of relevance to the research question that guide this thesis. The following sub-sections present these two main metaphors.

5.4.2.1 Metaphor of War

The first metaphor that I observed recurring in different articles throughout my sample was the metaphor of war. The articles that utilized this metaphor include "Spoiling the fight against the virus? Opponents of vaccination give experts headache,"[73] "The Alliance opposes Russian coronavirus disinformation,"[74] "Stop creating hoaxes, this makes the fight against coronavirus harder, says WHO director,"[75] "The first disinformation about coronavirus came from Russia, China used it to defer attention,"[76] and "Disinfoservice: Statistics about Covid-19 are skewed, but are not the result of fraud,"[77] among others. The metaphor of war is used to frame the discourse surrounding both the Covid-19 pandemic and infodemic. An example of this is the phrasing: "according to experts, opponents of vaccination can become an obstacle in the battle against coronavirus."[78] With this metaphor, a power dynamic is evident between *experts* who can be trusted and who have information that can be trusted—and those who are *opponents* of this true narrative. The use of metaphor in describing disease (and the consequences thereof) is a subject that has been discussed at length by Susan Sontag (1979), among others. The metaphorical treatment of Covid-19 pandemic in the articles I analyzed was intertwined with the depiction of the Covid-19 infodemic. In essence, in the context of this metaphorical treatment, the "war" being waged on Covid-19 is fought on two fronts—one that is medical, and one that is about information.

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[73] "Zkazí boj proti viru? Odpůrci očkování opět dělají odborníkům těžkou hlavu" (*iDnes.cz* 2020e)

[74] "Aliance se ohradila vůči ruským dezinformacím týkajícím se koronaviru" (*iDnes.cz* 2020a)

[75] "Přestaňte si vymýšlet hoaxy, boj s koronavirem jen ztěžujete, vzkázal šéf WHO" (*Novinky.cz* 2020h)

[76] "První dezinformace o koronaviru přišla z Ruska, Čína ji využila k odvedení pozornosti" (*Aktuálně.cz* 2020)

[77] "Dezinfoservis: Statistiky o covid-19 jsou zkreslené, nejde ale o podvod" (Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis 2020k)

[78] "Odpůrci očkování mohou podle odborníků představovat v boji s koronavirem překážku" (*iDnes.cz* 2020e)

Earlier in this paper, in the section *2.2.1 Information War*, I discuss the presence of geopolitical tactics that use information to gain power and influence politics abroad. The instances of use of the war metaphor that I observed in the articles in my sample were tightly bound to the pre-existing political dynamics that exist between the Czech Republic and Russia. The article "The Alliance opposes Russian coronavirus disinformation"[79] employs the war metaphor in a manner that engages explicitly with the historical relationship between the Czech Republic and Russia. The article opens with the statement, "NATO has objected to lies and disinformation related to coronavirus that are being spread through Russian media and online platforms."[80] After this introduction, the article is divided into five different sections. Each one addressing a different myth. The phrasing used to describe several of these myths serve to further the war metaphor. For example, "NATO is unable to support allies in the fight against Covid-19"[81] and "Covid-19 is a weapon created by NATO"[82] The repeated use of this metaphor serves to subtly reinforce the particular ideological perspective of geopolitical conflict.

5.4.2.2 Metaphor of Fertility and Wealth
The second recurring metaphor that I observed in the sample I analyzed is that of *fertility* and *wealth*. This metaphor is used in a number of articles in order to discursively represent the information landscape associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Examples of articles in which I observed this metaphor include: "Disinformation and hoaxes about coronavirus are spread by users,"[83] "Facebook introduces a warning about false information about coronavirus,"[84] "Coronavirus myths. Neither garlic, hot water, nor garlic will help,"[85] and "Rasism during the pandemic is blooming. Not only Asians are suffering, WHO director complains,"[86] among others.

The use of this metaphor can be divided into two categories—that is to say, the metaphor of wealth can be separated from the metaphor of fertility. In this analysis, I have chosen to group them together because of similarity in function between them. Both are used to connote ideas of multitude and plenty. An example of use

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[79] "Aliance se ohradila vůči ruským dezinformacím týkajícím se koronaviru" (*iDnes.cz* 2020a)
[80] "Severoatlantická aliance se ohradila proti lžím a dezinformacím, které v souvislosti s pandemií koronaviru šíří ruská média a dezinformační internetové platformy." (*iDnes.cz* 2020a)
[81] "NATO nedokáže podpořit spojence v boji proti covid-19 (*iDnes.cz* 2020a)
[82] "Covid-19 je zbraň vytvořená NATO" (*iDnes.cz* 2020a)
[83] "Dezinformace a hoaxy o koronaviru šíří sami uživatelé" *Novinky.cz* (2020c)
[84] "Facebook zavede varování před lživými informacemi o koronaviru" (*Novinky.cz* 2020d)
[85] "Koronavirové mýty. Nepomůže česnek, horká voda ani alcohol" (*Ona* 2020)
[86] "Rasismus během pandemie kvete. Netrpí jen Asiaté, postěžoval si i šéf WHO" (Kučerová 2020)

of the wealth metaphor is the description of the pandemic being a "gold mine"[87] for creators of false information online. The fertility metaphor is used to convey a similar message. For example, in the description of the public fear of Covid-19 being a "fertile ground for spreaders of deliberate lies and fabrications."[88] Both of these choices of metaphor serve to subtly convey and lend credence to the presence of threat from potential actors who seek to take advantage of the public especially during times of crisis.

[87] "zlatý důl" *Novinky.cz* (2020c)
[88] "Obavy lidstva z koronaviru jsou živnou půdou pro šiřitele záměrných lží a výmyslů." (*Ona* 2020)

6. Discussion

In the previous chapter, I have shared the results of my critical discourse analysis. This analysis was designed and carried out in order to answer the three research questions posed at the beginning of this thesis:

1. How do Czech-language news stories discursively represent Covid-19 mis- and disinformation in the context of the ongoing infodemic?

2. How do Czech-language news stories about Covid-19 mis- and disinformation engage with the notions of trust and authority?

3. What consequences do the discourses present in Czech-language news stories about Covid-19 mis- and disinformation have for the promotion of information literacy?

In this chapter, I return to these questions and present the answers arrived upon— referencing and contextualizing much of what I have presented in the previous chapter of this thesis.

6.1 Identifying Discursive Representations

The first research question guiding this thesis focuses on identifying discourses present in the material analyzed:

1. How do Czech-language news stories discursively represent Covid-19 mis- and disinformation in the context of the ongoing infodemic?

In conducting the critical discourse analysis at the heart of this project, a variety of patterns emerged in the representation of Covid-19 mis- and disinformation. Based on the analysis that I conducted using the research framework I designed I am able to identify and categorize four main types of discourse that are present and embodied through different linguistic and formal choices made in the construction of the articles I analyzed. I have termed these four types of discourse *war discourse, information as disease discourse, information literacy discourse*, and *clickbait discourse*.

6.1.1 War Discourse

The first discourse that I identified based on my analysis is one I have termed *war discourse*. In the above section *5.4.2.1 Metaphor of War* I identified the use of war or battle as reoccurring throughout the articles analyzed in order to characterize efforts to spread accurate information about Covid-19 and the concurrent spread of mis- and disinformation. I see the use of this metaphor as being at the heart of war discourse but it is not the sole characteristic of it. I describe above how language with low modality is used to refute mis- and disinformation categorically. This contributes to the portrayal of accurate information in stark opposition to false information. The "war" against "false" information must be fought by spreading accurate information. Depicting the "false" information as absurd (discussed at length above in *5.4.1.1 Absurdity*) There are allies and enemies in this war, and very little nuance. The enemies are spreaders of mis- and disinformation (discussed above in the section *5.2.3 Spreaders of Mis- and Disinformation*) and these actors are largely individualized within this discourse. War discourse uses this individualization to point to specific "enemies."

6.1.2 Information as Disease Discourse

A second discourse that I identified as a result of my analysis is what I have termed *information as disease discourse*. Much like war discourse, this discourse is closely tied to the use of certain metaphors. In this case, it is the use of the metaphor of fertility and wealth (described in detail in *5.4.2.2 Metaphor of Fertility and Wealth*) that this discourse builds upon. Characterizing mis- and disinformation as something that can spread or grow like a living being, means that is can also be understood as something that can be parasitic—like a cancer or other form of disease. Information as disease discourse uses this metaphor. Interestingly, it is closely related to war discourse, in that the metaphor of war is often used in discourses surrounding illness that are dominant (see Sontag 1979). For example, "combatting" or "winning the fight" against an illness are commonly used constructions. Information as disease discourse is also used within Information Science specifically in discussions of information literacy. For example, the very concept of infodemic (used throughout this paper) is derived through the comparison of the spread of mis- and disinformation to the spread of disease.

6.1.3 Information Literacy Discourse

A number of the articles in the material I examined employed a discourse I have termed *information literacy discourse*. This discourse is characterized by the use of higher modulation and nuanced factchecking—for example acknowledging that

information can be partially true but misleading. It is also characterized by very clear reference to sources for information, and the making explicit of which sources are believed. For example, the use of impersonalization when supporting claims—such as referencing that a statement is backed by a professor of a certain subject at a certain accredited institute. The series of articles titled "Disinfoservice" (introduced above in *5.2.3 Spreaders of Mis- and Disinformation*) actively inhabits the role of fact-checking. As a collaboration between the online news platform *Seznam Zprávy* and the C19 Disinfoservice Initiative[89] the explicit intention behind these articles is to address mis- and disinformation that is circulating through the Czech population and then providing transparent and nuanced information about the degree to which the mis- and disinformation is a misrepresentation or contains inaccuracies. These articles have a clear pedagogical goal—clearly intending to educate the reader. Online journalism has a clear relationship to information literacy—but it is one that is often implicit. Strategies for information literacy build upon the concept of knowing which sources to trust. By explicitly engaging with these questions and arguing for the trustworthiness of certain sources over others, information literacy discourse within journalism strengthens the relationship between information professionals and those reporting the news. This is made especially clear in articles like the "Disinfoservice" series—which have fact-checking mis- and disinformation as their subject.

6.1.4 Clickbait Discourse

The fourth form of discourse that I have identified as a result of my article analysis is one that I have termed *clickbait discourse*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines clickbait as "Internet content whose main purpose is to encourage users to follow a link to a web page, esp. where that web page is considered to be of low quality or value" (OED Online 2021). This discourse can be seen as being in stark opposition to information literacy discourse. As opposed to making explicit the nuance of the factchecking process and using a pedagogical approach with semiotic choices, the use of clickbait discourse acts to blur the line between journalism and the business of online clicks. I observed this discourse as manifesting in the form of a number of semiotic choices. For example, choices made when titling news articles. The title form that I termed *provocation/attribution* (see section *5.1.1 Article Titles*) use provocative statements to catch the eye of the reader, and then include explanatory statements that attribute the provocation to a source. The first part of the statement, the provocation, catches the eye of the reader and invites them to click a link and read the rest of the article. As I discuss in section *5.1.1 Article Titles*, many Czechs

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[89] Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis

encounter news stories via social media. Provocative titles invite user clicks in a media landscape in which users are bombarded with information and links.

In addition to the use of provocative, eye-catching titles, clickbait discourse is also manifested in image and formatting choices. As I discuss in *5.1.2 Image Choices*, 17 of the 36 articles I analyzed were accompanied by staged or stock images. These images are not straightforward journalistic images. They contain obvious editing, and actors posing—for example pretending to be ingesting cocaine (*Novinky.cz* 2020f). Other articles were formatted as photo galleries—readers click through different stock images and read very short pieces of text accompanying each image. Very little content is communicated, and it is difficult to imagine that these articles are intended to do more than gain clicks.

6.2 Trust and Authority

The second question posed at the beginning of this thesis was:

2. How do Czech-language news stories about Covid-19 mis- and disinformation engage with the notions of trust and authority?

The discourses I identified above have close connections to the concepts of trust and authority and engage with them in different and overlapping ways. The war and information as disease discourses paint accurate information as being in stark contrast to mis- and disinformation. Actors are largely either trusted authorities or spreaders of false content. Information literacy discourse is more nuanced—stories that are mis- and disinformative can be described as being partially accurate, or as misrepresenting accurate information. Clickbait discourse exists in somewhat of a vacuum compared to the aforementioned discourses—since this discourse is exists to promote clicks—and articles constructed as a part of this discourse do not contain a large amount of journalistic content.

Despite these differences in the role of trust and authority across the different discourses I identified, many of them shared a commonality that I believe can have large consequences for the promotion of information literacy. This is the fact that many of these articles seemed to reflexively rely upon their own reliability. That is to say, their own authority as generally trusted and well-regarded online news sources. While this was less evident in articles inhabiting information literacy discourse, I observed that in many articles, simply stating that an official authority has claimed that something is false is considered to be enough to just declare it to

be so—without including when or where something was said or why it should be trusted over another representation of the same story. This is particularly of note in the context of the Czech Republic, as discussed earlier in this thesis. Trust in official narratives is low, and there is good precedent for it as being borne out by facts in the past. It is perhaps of particular importance then that information is well-supported in this context.

6.3 Consequences for Information Literacy

My third research question addresses the relationship between the discourses present in news stories and the promotion of information literacy.

3. What consequences do the discourses present in Czech-language news stories about Covid-19 mis- and disinformation have for the promotion of information literacy?

The Covid-19 pandemic and accompanying infodemic has highlighted the limitations of current information literacy strategies. As discussed earlier in this paper, the changing information landscape has presented new challenges for information literacy professionals. The way people consume information online continues to adapt and change, and narratives surrounding truth, trust and authority are highly politicized. The discourses that I have identified within the Czech news stories I analyzed have a number of possible consequences for the promotion of information literacy.

Firstly, information literacy discourse in news articles makes explicit the relationship between information sources and efforts to promote information literacy. The "Disinfoservice"[90] article series on *Seznam Zprávy* is an example of a collaboration between an organization focusing on information literacy and factchecking and an online news platform. In contrast, the language surrounding mis- and disinformation used in war and information as disease discourses can lack nuance and frame truth in a simplified and sometimes politicized fashion. Believing the "wrong" thing can frame an individual as an enemy of truth. Furthermore, the reliance exhibited in many of the articles upon their own reliability poses a real challenge for the promotion of better information literacy. Particularly in the digital information landscape—positively flooded with sources and articles—simply relying on one's own status as a trusted source is problematic. From the perspective

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[90] "Dezinfoservis"

of literacy promotion—it is difficult to argue for why such semiotic techniques should be trusted as reliable journalism.

7. Concluding Remarks

7.1 Opportunities for Future Research

In many ways, the results of this thesis project ask more questions than they answer. By examining the discourses present in news articles surrounding mis- and disinformation I have approached questions of information literacy from a different direction than previous research on this topic. This raises the possibility for future work that would complete the circle back to how these discourses are perceived and interpreted by readers. For example, conducting studies of reader reactions to different news stories—centering on the Czech Republic or another population with a precedent for lower trust in official narratives. It would also be of interest to study the effect of the consumption of reporting on mis- and disinformation on belief in these narratives. This could build upon previous research which indicates that mere repeated exposure to false information can lead to increased acceptance and belief—and greater likelihood of spreading it further to others (Gallotti et al. 2020). This research could investigate further whether these stories lead readers to seek out more false information, or whether these stories factcheck mis- and disinformation and educate the reader to become more information literate?

This thesis project has centered Czech Republic and the historical and cultural context therein. The news articles selected for analysis were all published during the spring of 2020. Since that time, Covid-19 became a much larger presence in the country becoming a truly local health crisis. Future research could address whether the same discourses continued to dominate the news coverage during this later stage of the pandemic. In particular, portrayals of mis- and disinformed social actors could have changed and become quite different as Covid-19 became a true crisis in the Czech Republic, and as public debate began to discuss mask use, vaccination, and mandated lockdowns. Another opportunity to expand upon this project through the use of the same methodology would be to compare the discourses present in the Czech news online news media with the discourses present in the news media of other countries with similar and differing precedents for trust in media and official narratives.

Lastly, it could be fruitful to discuss portrayals of mis- and disinformation in the news with information literacy professionals. What are their perceptions and perspectives on news reporting on mis- and disinformation? Further, observations

could be done as to the practical efficacy of existing information literacy approaches work in contexts where a group has cause and precedent to mistrust.

7.3 Conclusion

The stated aim of this thesis is to provide insight that can be used within information literacy promotion. Norman Fairclough's conception of critical discourse analysis acknowledges the possibility of change as a result of discourse change (Fairclough 1992, p. 91). The existing discourses surrounding phenomena serve in part to construct the collective reality. In this thesis, I have analyzed and identified the discourses present in Czech online news surrounding Covid-19 mis- and disinformation. I found that while some of the discourses present interacted closely with ideas of literacy promotion and a nuanced understanding of truth and authority—others promoted a much more black and white understanding, often lacking in explanation of references, and employing clickbait discourse to simply gain online traffic to their content. Certainly, more research is needed to understand the mechanisms at play between these types of journalistic content and information literacy promotion efforts. However, it is significant that in the Czech context, where trust in traditional news sources is low, information literacy promotion efforts need to take into consideration the fact that many of the established online news sources offer articles that lack nuance and depth when it comes to treatment of mis- and disinformative narratives about arguably the greatest health crisis of this time.

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Appendix 1. Newspaper Articles

Aktuálně.cz (2020). První dezinformace o koronaviru přišla z Ruska, Čína ji využila k odvedení pozornosti [The first disinformation about coronavirus came from Russia, China used it to defer attention], April 1. https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/prvni-dezinformace-o-koronaviru-prisla-z-ruska/r~1b0a6700735511ea95caac1f6b220ee8/

Černý, J. (2020). Pijte horkou vodu a vyhnete se viru, radili lidem hackeři jménem lékařky [Drink hot water and avoid the virus, advised hackers using the name of a doctor]. *iDnes.cz*, March 17. https://www.idnes.cz/brno/zpravy/hoax-koronavirus-tepla-voda-lekarka-hacker-mail-podvod-fake-news.A200314_539221_brno-zpravy_mls

iDnes.cz (2020a). Aliance se ohradila vůči ruským dezinformacím týkajícím se koronaviru [The Alliance opposes Russian coronavirus disinformation], April 16. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/nato/dezinfo-konspiracni-teorie-rusko-nato-aliance-myty-cviceni.A200416_102448_zpr_nato_inc

iDnes.cz (2020b). Kokain ani alkohol před koronavirem neochrání, varují své obyvatele vlády [Neither cocaine nor alcohol protect against coronavirus, governments warn citizens], March 13. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/koronavirus-francie-iran-nakaza-epidemie-covid-19-alkohol-otrava-smrt-dezinformace-fake-news-kokain.A200310_150153_zahranicni_dtt

iDnes.cz (2020c). Po očkování proti koronaviru jsem nezemřela, vyvrací Britka falešnou zprávu [I did not die after receiving the coronavirus vaccine—Brit refutes fake news], April 27. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/koronavirus-nakaza-covid-19-pandemie-epidemie-nemoc-testovani-vakcina-ockovani-britanie-test.A200427_115459_zahranicni_dtt

iDnes.cz (2020d). USA jsou jak rozvojová země, čeká je katastrofa, varuje česká lékařka ["The USA is like a developing country; disaster awaits," warns Czech doctor], April 7. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/usa-koronavirus-trump-republikani-ceska-lekarka.A200407_114334_zahranicni_jhr

iDnes.cz (2020e). Zkazí boj proti viru? Odpůrci očkování opět dělají odborníkům těžkou hlavu [Spoiling the fight against the virus? Opponents of vaccination give experts headache], April 4. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/usa-vakcina-koronavirus-ockovani-odpurci-texas-rusko-dezinformace.A200402_105228_zahranicni_jhr

Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020a). Dezinfoservis: čipovat nás nebudou, jak tvrdí bývalý ruský tenista Safin [Disinfoservice: They aren't going to put chips in us, like ex-tennis player Safin claims]. *Seznam Zprávy*, April 20. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/dezinfoservis-cipovat-nas-nebudou-jak-tvrdi-byvaly-rusky-tenista-safin-101071

Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020b). Dezinfoservis: Dánsko nemůže vymáhat očkování proti covid-19, vakcína neexistuje [Disinfoservice: Denmark cannot enforce vaccination against Covid-19]. *Seznam Zprávy*, April 25. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/dezinfoservis-dansko-nemuze-vymahat-ockovani-proti-covid-19-vakcina-neexistuje-102358

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Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020d). Dezinfoservis: Letecké snímkování z malých letadel je běžné [Disinfoservice: Aerial photography from small planes is common]. *Seznam Zprávy*, April 16. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/dezinfoservis-letecke-snimkovani-z-malych-letadel-je-bezne-100495

Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020e). Dezinfoservis: Očkování proti TBC jako prevence před covid-19? Jen předběžná studie [Disinfoservice: Vaccination against tuberculosis can be used to protect against Covid-19? Only a preliminary study]. *Seznam Zprávy*, April 15. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/dezinfoservis-ockovani-proti-tbc-jako-prevence-pred-covid-19-jen-predbezna-studie-100294

Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020f). Dezinfoservis: Dezinfoservis: Pandemie není výmysl [Disinfoservice: The pandemic is not a fiction]. *Seznam Zprávy*, April 30. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/dezinfoservis-pandemie-neni-vymysl-103377

Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020g). Dezinfoservis: Patolog upozornil, že oběti měly i jiné zdravotní problémy než covid-19 [Disinfoservice: Pathologist warned that victims had other underlying health problems aside from Covid-19]. *Seznam Zprávy*, April 28. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/dezinfoservis-patolog-upozornil-ze-obeti-mely-i-jine-zdravotni-problemy-nez-covid-19-102819

Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020h). Dezinfoservis: Romové se z Británie nevracejí kvůli zadlužení [Disinfoservice: Romani people are not returning from Great Britain as a result of debt]. *Seznam Zprávy*, April 23. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/dezinfoservis-romove-se-z-britanie-nevraceji-kvuli-zadluzeni-101925

Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020i). Dezinfoservis: Senioři v izolaci z bezpečnostních důvodů, ne kvůli euroskepticismu [Disinfoservice: Seniors in isolation for safety reasons, not because of Euroscepticism]. *Seznam Zprávy*, April 19. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/dezinfoservis-seniori-v-izolaci-do-2021-z-bezpecnostnich-duvodu-ne-kvuli-euroskeptismu-101040

Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020j). Dezinfoservis: Simpsonovi reagovali na prasečí chřipku, nepředpovídali covid-19 [Disinfoservice: The Simpsons referenced swine flu, did not predict Covid-19]. *Seznam Zprávy*, April 24. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/dezinfoservis-simpsonovi-reagovali-na-praseci-chripku-nepredpovidali-covid-19-102135

Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020k). Dezinfoservis: Statistiky o covid-19 jsou zkreslené, nejde ale o podvod [Disinfoservice: Statistics about Covid-19 are skewed, but are not the result of fraud]. *Seznam Zprávy*, April 22. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/dezinfoservis-statistiky-o-covid-19-jsou-zkreslene-nejde-ale-o-podvod-101688

Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020l). Dezinfoservis: Uprchlíků z neoficiálního tábora se omezení volného pohybu netýkalo [Disinfoservice: Restrictions on free movement did not concern refugees from unofficial camp]. *Seznam Zprávy*, April 22. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/dezinfoservis-uprchliku-z-neoficialniho-tabora-se-omezeni-volneho-pohybu-netykalo-101638

Iniciativa C19 Dezinfoservis (2020m). Dezinfoservis: Vitaminem C se proti koronaviru neochráníte [Disinfoservice: Vitamin C does not protect from coronavirus]. *Seznam Zprávy*, April 15. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/dezinfoservis-vitaminem-c-se-proti-koronaviru-neochranite-100336

Kučerová, D. (2020). Rasismus během pandemie kvete. Netrpí jen Asiaté, postěžoval si i šéf WHO [Rasism during the pandemic is blooming. Not only Asians are suffering, WHO director complains]. *Seznam Zprávy*, April 10. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/rasismus-behem-pandemie-kvete-netrpi-jen-asiate-postezoval-si-i-sef-who-99342

Lázňovský, M. (2020). Vznikl v laboratoři? Na čem jsou založené konspirace kolem koronaviru [Created in a lab? The basis for conspiracies surrounding coronavirus]. *Technet*, March 20. https://www.idnes.cz/technet/veda/koronavirus-laborator-umely-cina-wu-chan.A200318_185917_veda_mla

Novák, M. (2020). Je to biologická zbraň, Vatikán něco tají. Koronavirus přitahuje milovníky konspirací [It is a biological weapon; the Vatican is hiding something. Coronavirus attracts lovers of conspiracies]. *Aktuálně.cz*, April 10. https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/zahranici/je-to-biologicka-zbran-vatikan-taji-pravdu-koronavirus-jsou/r~7e1020ec5ebf11ea95caac1f6b220ee8/

Novinky.cz (2020a). Autorka falešné zprávy dál pracuje s ministrem [Author of fake news continues to work with minister], March 11. https://www.novinky.cz/koronavirus/clanek/autorka-fake-news-o-lekarce-ze-soukrome-laboratore-dal-pracuje-s-ministrem-40316114

Novinky.cz (2020b). Dezinformace a hoaxy o koronaviru se po internetu šíří jako lavina [Disinformation and hoaxes about coronavirus are spreading like lava on the internet], January 30. https://www.novinky.cz/internet-a-pc/clanek/dezinformace-a-hoaxy-o-koronaviru-se-po-internetu-siri-jako-lavina-40311691

Novinky.cz (2020c). Dezinformace a hoaxy o koronaviru šíří sami uživatelé [Disinformation and hoaxes about coronavirus are spread by users], March 2. https://www.novinky.cz/koronavirus/clanek/dezinformace-a-hoaxy-o-koronaviru-siri-sami-uzivatele-40315258

Novinky.cz (2020d). Facebook zavede varování před lživými informacemi o koronaviru [Facebook introduces a warning about false information about coronavirus], April 16. https://www.novinky.cz/internet-a-pc/clanek/facebook-zavede-varovani-pred-lzivymi-informacemi-o-koronaviru-40320752

Novinky.cz (2020e). Konspirační teorie o 5G a covidu-19 zaplavují internet [Conspiracy theories about 5G and Covid-19 are flooding the internet], April 17. https://www.novinky.cz/internet-a-pc/clanek/konspiracni-teorie-o-5g-a-covid-19-zaplavuji-internet-40320843

Novinky.cz (2020f). Ne, kokain opravdu nepomáhá, musí vyvracet francouzská vláda mýty o koronaviru [No, cocaine really doesn't help. The French government refutes myths about coronavirus], March 13. https://www.novinky.cz/koronavirus/clanek/ne-kokain-opravdu-nepomaha-musi-vyvracet-francouzska-vlada-myty-o-koronaviru-40316378

Novinky.cz (2020g). Pozor na fake news! Nahrávkou o zákazu vycházení v ČR se už zabývá policie [Beware fake news! Police are investigating a recording about a curfew in the Czech Republic], March 20. https://www.novinky.cz/koronavirus/clanek/policie-se-zabyva-nahravkou-o-zakazu-vychazeni-v-cr-babis-to-oznacil-za-nesmysl-40317537

Novinky.cz (2020h). Přestaňte si vymýšlet hoaxy, boj s koronavirem jen ztěžujete, vzkázal šéf WHO [Stop creating hoaxes, this makes the fight against coronavirus harder, says WHO director], February 9. https://www.novinky.cz/internet-a-pc/bezpecnost/clanek/prestante-si-vymyslet-hoaxy-boj-s-koronavirem-jen-ztezujete-vzkazal-sef-who-40312816

Novinky.cz (2020i). Více než polovina Čechů naletěla několikrát na fake news [More than half of Czechs have encountered fake news], January 31. https://www.novinky.cz/internet-a-pc/clanek/vice-nez-polovina-cechu-naletela-nekolikrat-na-fake-news-40311807

Ona (2020). Koronavirové mýty. Nepomůže česnek, horká voda ani alcohol [Coronavirus myths. Neither garlic, hot water, nor garlic will help], March 29. https://www.idnes.cz/onadnes/zdravi/koronavirus-zdravi-imunita-myty-ochrana-nemoc-covid-19.A200326_100617_zdravi_abr

Přádová, D. (2020). Rouška před koronavirem neochrání [A mask does not protect against coronavirus]. *Seznam Zprávy*, February 11. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/fakta-o-koronaviru-ktery-vyvolal-vlnu-dezinformaci-88744

Šíma, M. (2020). Ruská státní média obvinila ze šíření koronaviru USA a farmaceutické firmy [Russian state media accuses USA and pharmaceutical companies of spreading coronavirus]. *Seznam Zprávy*, March 16. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/ruska-statni-media-obvinila-ze-sireni-koronaviru-usa-a-farmaceuticke-firmy-93171

Technet (2020). Facebook přináší nové varování před koronavirovými falešnými zprávami [Facebook introduces a new warning about fake news], April 17. https://www.idnes.cz/technet/internet/facebook-koronavirus-fakenews-falesna-zprava.A200417_135408_sw_internet_vse