

Araştırma Makalesi | Research Article

Fake News Pandemic: Fake News And False Information About Covid-19 and An Analysis on Fact-Checking from Turkey in Sample Teyit.org

Yalan Haber Salgını: Teyit.Org Örneğinde Covid-19 Salgınının Başında Türkiye’de Yalan Haber ve Yanlış Bilgi Akışı ve Doğrulamaya İlişkin Bir Analiz



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Abstract

As in all crisis periods, eyes have turned to both mass media and social media platforms in the period of COVID-19. Misinformation about the spread of the disease, preventive measures and treatment methods can leave much deeper effects than the false news seen in other periods and cause the pandemic to spread further and seriously affect public health. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic becomes even more dangerous with the fake and false news pandemic, which is effective on a global scale, and the need for news validation activities and the organizations that carry out this process increases. In this study, fact-checking activities carried out by Teyit which continued to work as a member of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) in Turkey, during the pandemi period were discussed. In the study, when compared to the same time period in 2018 in Turkey, the number of suspects examined by Teyit in the first three months of the year 2020 has been shown to increase. In addition, it was determined that the policy category, which ranks first in the questionable content type that has been passed through the fact-checking process, has been replaced by the health category.

Keywords: Communication, COVID-19, Fake News, False News, Fact-Checking, Teyit.org.

Öz

Tüm kriz dönemlerinde olduğu gibi, COVID-19 salgınında da gözler hem kitle iletişim araçlarına hem de sosyal medya platformlarına çevrilmiştir. Hastalığın yayılması, önleyici tedbirler ve tedavi yöntemleri ile ilgili yanlış bilgiler, salgın öncesi dönemde görülen yanlış haberlerden çok daha derin etkiler bırakabilir ve hastalığın daha da yayılmasına ve halk sağlığını ciddi şekilde etkilemesine neden olabilir. Dolayısıyla küresel ölçekte etkili olan yalan ve yanlış haber salgını ile COVID-19 salgını daha da tehlikeli hale gelmekte ve haber doğrulama faaliyetlerine ve bu süreci yürüten kuruluşlara olan ihtiyaç artmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, Uluslararası Haber Doğrulama Platformu üyesi olarak çalışmalarını sürdüren Teyit’in salgın döneminde Türkiye’de gerçekleştirdiği doğrulama faaliyetleri ele alınmıştır. Çalışmada, Türkiye’de 2018 yılının aynı dönemine kıyasla, 2020 yılının ilk üç ayında Teyit’in sorguladığı şüpheli sayısında artış olduğu görülmüştür. Ayrıca teyit sürecinden geçen şüpheli içerik türünde ilk sırada yer alan politika kategorisinin yerini sağlık kategorisine bıraktığı belirlenmiştir. COVID-19 ile ilgili şüpheli içeriklerin daha çok sosyal medya platformlarında görüldüğü ve Wardle’ın (Wardle, 2017) kategorizasyonuna göre yalan haberlerin yüzde 66’sının tamamen aldatma ve zarar verme amaçlı üretildiği de çalışmada elde edilen bulgular arasındadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İletişim, COVID-19, Yalan Haber, Asılsız Haber, Doğrulama, Teyit.org.



Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic, which caused almost the entire world to turn into a dystopian science fiction movie set, has increased the need for information as well as other crisis periods. While sharing the mass media and social media platforms in this life-and-death issue, it was observed that the fake news and false information increased, as in every crisis period. Stating that people always use myths to relieve their anxiety Keyes (Keyes, 2004) emphasizes that in our age, the speed of the spread of these myths and the ability of people to spread these myths increased. As a matter of fact, many claims have arisen in different countries ranging from conspiracy theories related to the source of the virus, the spread of the disease and treatment methods especially in the pandemic period via the Internet (Misinformation related to the 2019-2020 coronavirus pandemic, 2020). WHO explained the fact that an excessive amount of information, including inaccurate content, made it difficult for people to access the reliable information they need (Report-13, 2020). WHO Director-General Ghebreyesus (Ghebreyesus, 2020) also stated that “we’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous.”

It is observed that the need for fact-checking organizations, which are presented to the public in the period in question and that reach a large number of people through different tools, investigates the reality of the information. In the report published by the Reuters Institute, it was stated that independent fact-checking outlets responded rapidly against the increasing amount of misinformation regarding COVID-19, and “the number of English-language fact-checks rose more than 900% from January to March” (Brennen, Simon, Nielsen, & Kleis, 2020).

The aim of this study is to examine the fact-checking activities carried out in the early stages of the epidemic by Teyit, operating with a steam of taken precedence over fake news and misinformation spread in Turkey. For this purpose, the following research questions have been prepared.

R.Q.1. How did COVID-19 pandemic affect the spreading of fake news and misinformation?

R.Q.2. In which categories are the suspicious contents about COVID-19 analysed by Teyit focused on?

Fake News and False Information in State of Emergency

Social media usage rates are increasing day by day around the world. According to the “Digital 2021” report prepared by We Are Social, 4 billion 33 million people use social media platforms, 98.8% of users access social media platforms from mobile devices (Social, 2021). This intensive use leads to the rapid spread of fake news and false information on social media platforms. There are many studies examining this issue. To these; (Geeng, Yee, & Roesner, 2020), (Alcott, Gentzkow, & Yu, 2019), (Cinelli, ve diğerleri, 2020), (Moravec, Minas, & Dennis, 2018), (Talwar, Dhir, Kaur, Zafar, & Alrasheedy, 2019), (Gottlieb & Dyer, 2020) and (Meinert, Mirbabaie, Dungs, & Aker, 2016) can be cited as examples.

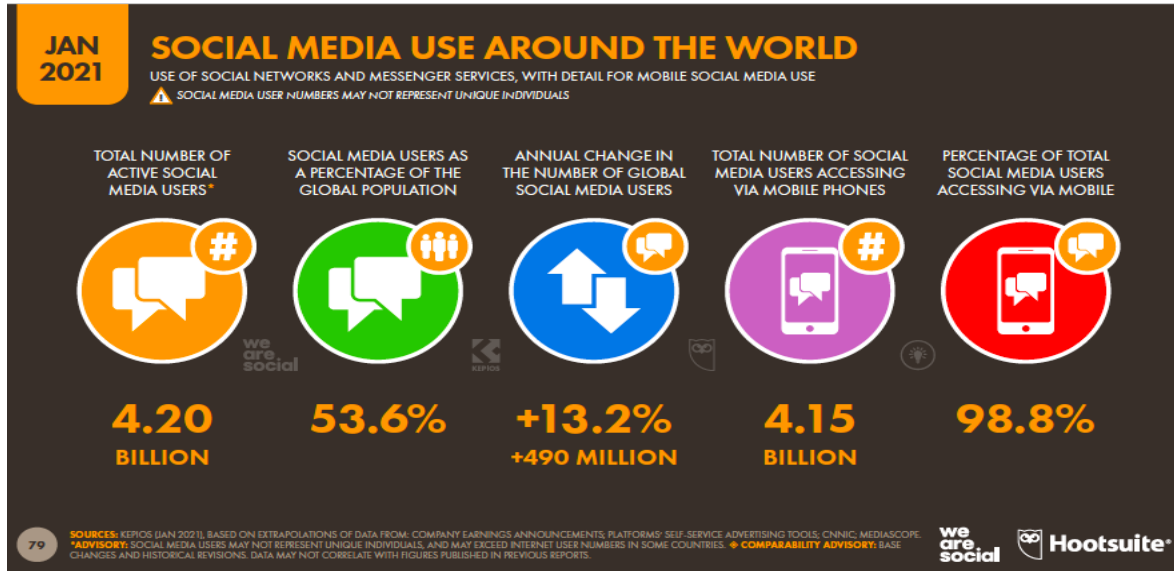


Figure 1. Social Media Use Around the World. (We Are Social, 2021).

When we look at the current studies in the literature on the Covid-19 pandemic and disinformation, different categories are seen. These studies can be grouped as follows: digital and traditional media; ; (Andreu, 2020), (David & Sommerlad, 2021), (Tunez-Lopez, Vaz-Alvarez, & Fieiras-Ceide, 2020), (Güz, Seden Meral, Bozkurt, & Durmaz, 2021), (Akyüz, 2020), (Çelik, 2020), (Topsakal, 2021) social media; ; (Cinelli, ve diğerleri, 2020), (Al-Zaman, 2021), (Shani, Dirkson, & Majchrza, 2021), (Röchert, ve diğerleri, 2021), (Al-Rakhmi & Al-Amri, 2020), (Kouzy, ve diğerleri, 2020), (Islam, ve diğerleri, 2020), (Hossain, ve diğerleri, 2020), (Tasnim, Hossain, & Mazumder, 2020), (Soğukdere & Öztunç, 2020), (Ateş & Baran, 2020), (Çerçi, Canöz, & Canöz, 2020) content types; (Brennen, Simon, Nielsen, & Kleis, 2020), (Sanchez & Pascual, 2020), Covid-19 vaccine topics (Savolainen & Reijo, 2021), (Loomba, Figueiredo, Piatek, Graaf, & Larson, 2021), (Marco-Franco, Pita-Barros, Vivas-Orts, Gonzales-de-Julian, & Vivas-Consuelo, 2021).

Various books and book compilations on this subject have also been brought to the field. For example, the book published by Christian Fuchs draws attention as an important work on COVID 19 and disinformation. Fuchs touched on the following points in his book titled "Communicating COVID-19 Everyday life, digital capitalism, and conspiracy theories in pandemic times". According to Fuchs (Fuchs, 2021) "conspiracy theories are nothing new and are not specific to the digital age but especially social media is an area where conspiracy theories about COVID-19 spread in different forms easily and quickly: Fuchs argue that "the communication of COVID-19 conspiracy theories is characterised by appeals to anti-intellectualism, the rationality of irrationality, deterministic logic, personalisation and the use of the friend/enemy scheme" (Fuchs, 2021, s. 267).

Although it is stated that the fake news is not a new phenomenon and it has many examples during its long journey throughout history (Uberti, 2016), there are various opinions on the reasons why it has been so much discussed and gained importance. According to (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), referring to the increasing number of fake news spreading for financial or ideological reasons, the first reason for this is "barriers to entry in the media industry have dropped precipitously, both because now it is not difficult to set up websites and to monetize web content through advertising platforms". In addition, the widespread use of social media platforms, which provide an available environment for fake news and false information, is also an important factor. Political polarization and

decreased trust in media is another important factor in terms of fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, s. 215).

Factors such as having an ideological affinity to the information content or compliance with their own opinions play an important role in the tendency to believe in fake news. This situation prepares the environment available for the reproduction of reality and the “post-truth era” as (Keyes, 2004) calls it. In the post-truth era, emotional narratives can become even stronger than facts and objective data (Tunçer, 2018), people can unconditionally adopt content that appeals to their fears, concerns, or is appropriate for their value and belief systems. Pointing out that people in the dense information environment about COVID-19 compare what they read with their current beliefs and accept the appropriate ones, (Mecier, 2020) expresses the view that “drinkers believe that alcohol can be a treatment and racists blame Chinese scientists for the virus spreading”.

Some of the content, especially through social media, contains useless statements about the disease. However, content containing false information may become deadly threats to public health, as it sometimes contains advice that can harm people. For example, it is stated that 44 people in Iran lost their lives due to the bootleg alcohol they drank to protect them from COVID-19 (Vanderslott, 2020).

Fuchs (Fuchs, 2021) states that it would be better to use the term “false news” instead of “fake news” as an expression of “ideological attempts to manipulate the public’s perception of reality”. Emphasizing that an environment in which citizens are afraid for themselves and their relatives due to “crisis situation, uncertain future, collective shock and fear of death” and similar reasons, he points to the two types of false news in coronavirus news and exemplifies them. The first category is false news about the origin of the coronavirus. The claim that COVID-19 was developed and spread as the biological weapon of China, the coronavirus as part of the North Korean government’s plan to overthrow Trump or benefit from Israel’s financial crisis will be exemplified in this category. The other category is false news about how the virus is transmitted and how it can be killed. As an example of this category, Fuchs (Fuchs, 2021, s. 391), shows the shares such as “5G wireless networks caused the outbreak of coronavirus”, and various methods that allegedly killed the coronavirus (vinegar, boiled ginger and even cow urine) but without medical validity.

Social media platforms that are open to user-generated content, available for publication in a short time, without editorial filtering or limited, and the areas where fake news and false information about COVID-19 are seen the most. Such sharing affects public health, on the one hand, and fuels racism on the other. For example, after the intensive sharing of “Chinese passengers from Wuhan with fever slipped through the quarantine at Kansai International Airport” message that spread on social media in a short time, the #ChineseDon’tComeToJapan became a trend topic in Japan and the Chinese were even accused of being a bioterrorist (Shimizu, 2020). Also in Turkey many content have been circulating on various social media sharing initially including Twitter “from making fun of eating habits with the Chinese to producing hate speech with political references”, far from being contained accurate information about unqualified and epidemics” such user-generated content on a created an “information fog” in front of real and reliable sources (Binark, 2020).

In the study, fake and false news was called as a pandemic. Since, just like the spread of a virus, fake news or false information can easily cross geographical boundaries, and

similar claims are circulating in different continents and in different countries. In addition, pseudo-pandemics can lead to lethal consequences, just like coronavirus, and the spread of fake news and false information may threaten public health. Moreover, this pandemic can affect large masses regardless of language, religion, race and development level. For example, in the the African continent countries, as well as in different continents of the world, baseless shares about COVID-19 are frequently seen, and information without medical validity is described as “a tsunami of misinformation and disinformation” (Hassan, 2020).

Many baseless news about COVID-19 spread to large masses in European countries and USA. Undoubtedly, social media is one of the main arteries of the rapid spread of such content. Because especially young people use social media effectively and intensively in information exchange. In a study conducted in 10 countries, it was observed that especially young people between the ages of 18-34 follow social media (54%) as much as major news organizations (56%). However, in the same research, the rate of those who are concerned about the spread of fake news and false information about the virus is 74%, and the rate of those who say “It has been difficult for me to find reliable and trustworthy information about the virus and its effects” is 45% (Report, 2020).

The Role of Politicians, Scientists and Celebrities in Relaying False Information

During the pandemic period, the source of fake news or false information was not limited to only anonymous social media messages and WhatsApp messages of unknown origin. Some of the false information that frightened people or caused confusion and ultimately real damage came from politicians, scientists or public figures. For example, the conspiracy theory in 56 languages as “the virus is China’s biological weapon” was found to be supported by politicians in the USA, including a senator and a former advisor. President Trump, on the other hand, was criticized for underestimating this serious problem since he compared the COVID-19 to common flu in the first period of virus spread (Jablonska, 2020). British Prime Minister Johnson, instead of taking precautions restricted public life etc., he carried out a policy such as the spread of the disease and the immunity of people with a “Darwinist approach” (Fuchs, 2021, s. 377).

The claims voiced publicly by Trump as “many surgical mask were stolen from a hospital in New York” and also another claim by the Italian Nationalist leader Matteo Salvini as “China produced coronavirus in the laboratory” were shared by large amount of people. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian expressed the claim that the virus is not of Chinese origin. In India, politician Subramanian Swamy explained that the virus in the country is more self-lethal than other countries, while Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro said it is effective in the treatment of anti-malaria drug COVID-19. However, all these claims made by politicians have not coincided with the concrete data available until now (Morris, 2020).

Brennen et al (Brennen, Simon, Nielsen, & Kleis, 2020, s. 5) states that only 20% of COVID-19 false information claims come from politicians and celebrities. However, although this ratio seems to be low, it should be taken into consideration that the awareness of these people and the intensity of being followed in the media and social media have a great impact on the spread of false information. Indeed, the report underlines that the misinformation sharing of such well-known figures constitutes 69% of social media participation in the research.

Though in Turkey, some scientists' "predictions" related with disease have turned up to be wrong over time, whether there are people believing these claims or how much/ what effects such wrong information did in society is not known. For example, according to Dr. Oytun Erbaş, as Turkey has more complicated gene comparing to Asian race and the virus would be affected very little. Dr. Oytun also claimed that as short people from yellow race lived in China, coronavirus had spread because of people's genetic origins and the virus could not come to Turkey even it came it would not cause a pandemic. The video of the statement made by Erbaş on a YouTube channel spread over social networks in a short time, became the subject of news in the mainstream media, after which some even called him "coronastar" (Baştürk, 2020).

While addressing the false news as pandemi, we also pointed out that it may have a negative impact on public health, as well as its global spread. Indeed, with the world's echoed in different countries 5G claimed that links between the new coronavirus has not only spread on social media platforms, newspaper columnist in Turkey have also been voiced in the comments or on mainstream television channels. In addition, under the title of "conspiracy theory that celebrities believe in", this unfounded claim was conveyed to the public with various news sites and television news bulletins (Yılmaz, 2020).

The founder of Teyit, Mehmet Atakan Foça (Foça, 2020), in his post on his Twitter account, argues that the mainstream sees social media as the number one culprit of false news because of its uncontrolled and maverick structure, but "the biggest information noise is created by columnists and televisions". Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler, (Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017), emphasize the importance of this subject with these words "we should study the role of elites and the media more closely to understand better not only how misperceptions emerge, but which misperceptions emerge as well".

Teyit as an Example of Fact-Checking Organization in Turkey

Fact-checking organizations were established in the early 2000s in the US to verify political statements and news that are considered suspicious (Cherubini & Graves, 2016, s. 6). The first organization in Europe started operating in the mid-2000s and the first fact-checking platform within this scope was established with the aim of following the elections in the UK. These platforms are generally defined as "platforms that provide services for the control of claims contained in public information for the purpose of researching primary and secondary sources" (Brandtzaeg & Folstad, 2017, s. 65).

Today, the number of fact-checking platforms is increasing in parallel with the speed at which content containing false information goes into circulation. There are 349 fact-checking platforms in 78 countries depending on the IFCN (Lab, 2021).

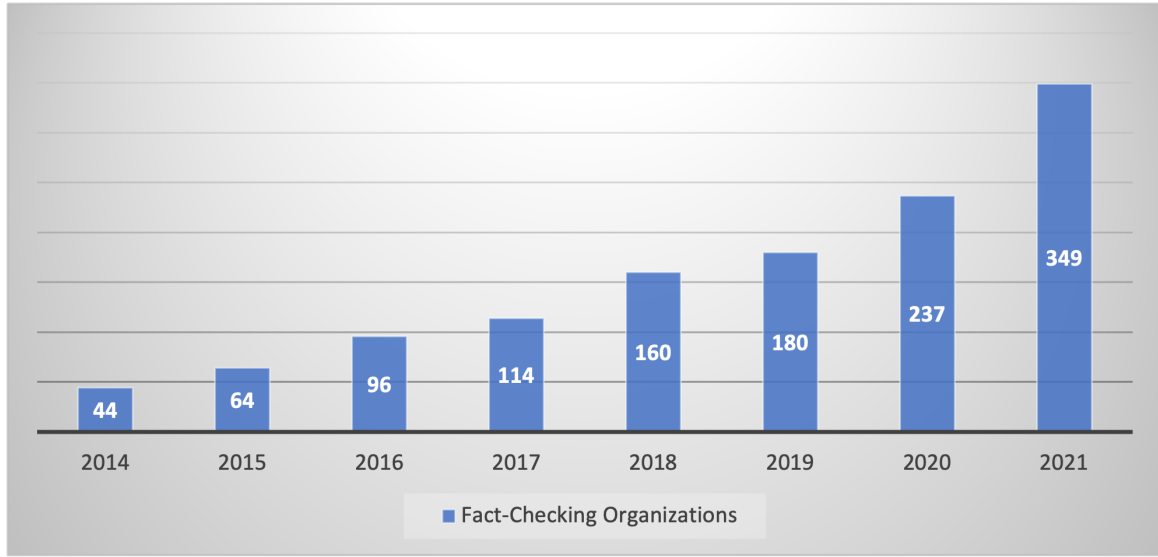


Figure 2. Number of fact-checking organizations in the World
Source: (Lab, 2021)

A fact-checking organization, Teyit, that subscribes to the IFCN, by subscribing to the principles specified since 2017, and on the website (www.teyit.org), which “scans, choses, investigates suspicious information and delivers them to readers by turning them into analyses” was founded by journalist Mehmet Atakan Foça on 26 October 2016. Platform team; consists of 29 people in total, including founder, chief editor, editor, project assistant, editor, writer, digital content strategist, visual editor, videographer, administrative assistant, creative director, interaction editor, motion graphic designer, community manager and trainees.

Teyit explained the analysis production process including many different steps. In the first step stated as scanning, the platform collects notices that users send via WhatsApp, social media and e-mails and suspicious information that the editors find by internet scanning everyday in a panel called “Dubito”. Then these contents are prioritized according to various criteria. The claim suggested in consequence of the evidence obtained as a result of the research and the result are clearly revealed.

Does the video show people with the coronavirus?

ALİ OSMAN ARABACI • 27/02/2020 • 17:13

CLAIM: The video shows people who are sick because of the coronavirus.

FALSE

The video, shared on Facebook on January 29, 2020, was viewed by 500,000 people and shared by 5,000 users. Also, it was shared in Arabic and English.



Figure 3. Fact-checking result of a claim shared on Facebook by Teyit
Source: <https://teyit.org/en/does-the-video-show-people-with-the-coronavirus/>

A summary of the findings is included in the text, the origin of the claim, its prevalence, the analysis part and the background of the subject, if any, is added to the text. Finally, if the claim is considered false; the process is completed by specifying the type and justification of this false information. After all processes are finished and checked, the claims under consideration are categorized as “true”, “false”, “mixed” and “uncertain” and labeled; It is shared with the public on the platform’s website and social media accounts.

Methodology

In this study, it is aimed to determine whether there is a difference in the suspicious content analysed by Teyit compared to previous periods, and if any, how this difference transformed the structure and spreading area of the suspicious content in COVID-19 period. There are two reasons for choosing Teyit.org among the verification platforms operating in Turkey in this research. The first is that it is the first news verification platform in Turkey, and the other is that it is a signatory to the Code of Principles published by the International Fact-Checking Network. In order to answer the research questions prepared for this purpose, content analysis technique was used from quantitative research methods. Firstly, between January 01, 2020 and April 01, 2020, suspicious content reviews shared with the public were archived in this period, and each content was quantitatively grouped under various categories.

The data obtained were first examined in terms of the subject they contain. These categories were created with the titles of health, politics, actuality, sports, science, technology, economy and education, and in which category the number of suspicious content was more intense was tried to be determined. Then the media type of these suspicious content was determined. In this title, the contents have been examined in terms of video, photo, audio, social media message consisting only of text, news published on websites, etc. In addition, the medium through which suspicious content reviews

Sources

AFP, [Article about that the video was not recorded in China](#), 7 February 2020

Lowveldvs, [The company where the father of the child works](#)

YouTube, [A performance of bomskok in another school](#), 21 February 2018

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conducted by Teyit spread in the first three months of 2020 were also covered within the scope of the study.

In order to find out whether the data obtained in the study show a change in terms of quantity and category compared to previous years, the research data¹ that Çiçeklioğlu (Çiçeklioğlu, 2019) conducted was used. From the data in the study in question, the section between January 01, 2018 and April 01, 2018 was selected and the data obtained in the first three months of 2020 were compared, thus, it was aimed to determine whether the COVID-19 pandemic caused a change in the suspicious content category.

Finally, in the study, it has been investigated how much of the data collected under the category of health among the suspicious contents examined by Teyit in the first three months of 2020 is related to coronavirus and COVID-19. The structure of the suspicious content related to the epidemic was also revealed in the study according to which of the fake news and false information production models introduced by (Wardle, 2017).

Results

Within the scope of the research, it was determined that the Teyit analyzed a total of 204 suspicious information between 01 January 2020 and 01 April 2020. Looking at the distribution of suspicious information on a monthly basis; it is seen that 64 suspicious information were examined in January, 65 in February and 75 in March. When the data in the study conducted by Çiçeklioğlu (Çiçeklioğlu, 2019) on confirmation was compared with the number of suspicious information examined during the epidemic period in 2020, it is seen that there is a significant increase in COVID-19 period. While the number of suspicious information examined in January 2018 was 23, 23 in February and 21 in March, it was observed that the suspect information examined in the same date range increased by 137 to 204 in the first three months of 2020.

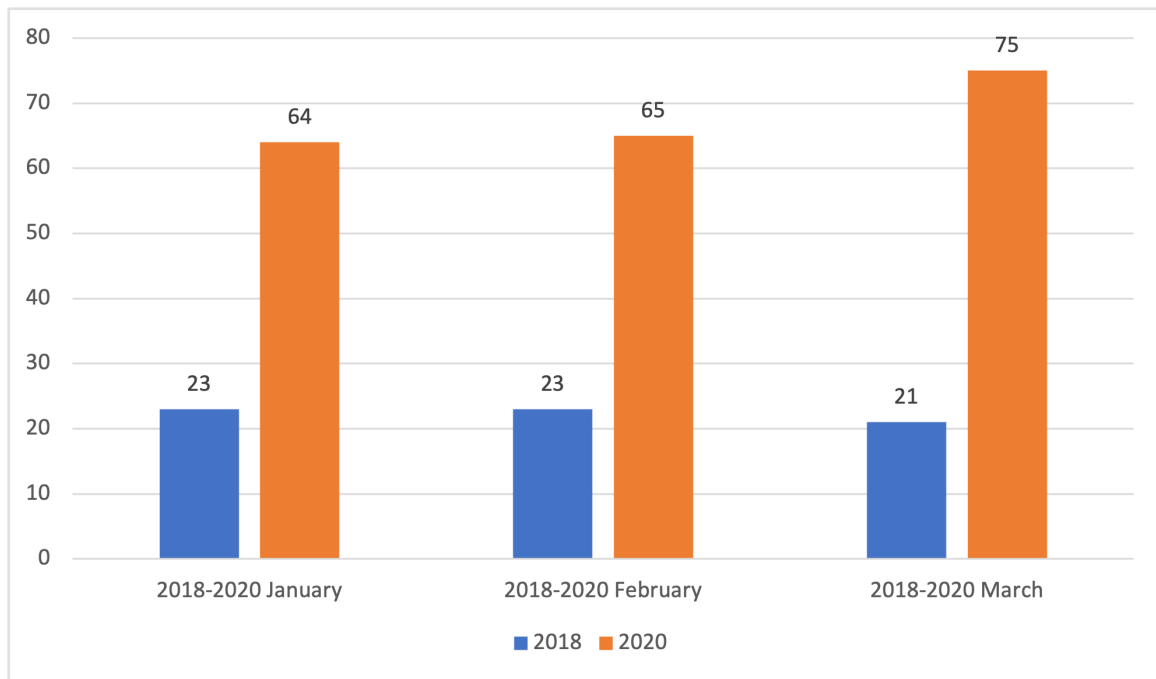


Figure 4. Suspicious content analyzed in the first three months of the years 2018 and 2020
Source: own elaboration.

With the COVID-19 pandemic reaching scary dimensions, the need for Internet and social media users to search for information about the disease has increased. In the Digital in 2020 report, with COVID-19, 47% of the users spent more time on social media, this ratio increased to 58% between the ages of 18-24, and also 76% of the participants it was determined that they used their mobile phones more during the period. Again in the same study, it was emphasized that there was a great increase in searches related to COVID-19 and coronavirus in Google searches in March.

#	SEARCH QUERY	VOLUME GROWTH	#	SEARCH QUERY	VOLUME GROWTH
01	COVID 19	+3,650%	11	CORONAVIRUS ESPAÑA	+750%
02	CORONAVIRUS TIPS	+2,650%	12	CORONAVIRUS FRANCE	+700%
03	COVID-19	+1,950%	13	EBA	+600%
04	WORLDMETER	+1,600%	14	CORONA	+550%
05	HANTAVIRUS	+1,200%	15	ZOOM	+500%
06	CORONAVIRUS INDIA	+1,100%	16	KORONAVIRUS	+500%
07	CORONAVIRUS UK	+1,000%	17	CORONAVIRUS	+450%
08	HAND SANITIZER	+1,000%	18	CORONAVIRUS SYMPTOMS	+450%
09	CORONAVIRUS IN INDIA	+850%	19	CORONAVIRUS NEWS	+400%
10	CORONAVIRUS UPDATE	+750%	20	SYMPTOMS OF CORONAVIRUS	+400%

Figure 5. Top Google queries in 2020

Source: Digital in 2020 Report

While both the intensity of internet searches and the increase in the use of social media indicate that the attention is directed towards the pandemic, our findings reveal that the number of suspicious content examined in an area with such intense interest also increased. Looking at 2018 by category; it is seen that the density progresses as politics (39), actuality (9), health (8), science (3).

2018	2020
Politics: 39	Health: 115
Actuality: 9	Actuality: 69
Health: 8	Politics: 12
Science: 3	Sport: 3
Art: 1	Science: 2
Sport: 2	Technology: 1
Urban myth: 2	Economy: 1
Justice: 1	Education: 1
Magazine: 1	
Technology: 1	
Total: 67	Total: 204

Figure 6. Suspicious information by category in the first 3 months of 2018 and 2020

Source: own elaboration.

However, in the same period of 2020, the policy was replaced by a health category with a distinct difference in the first place, rather than the questionable content. During the period in question, 115 items related to health were found suspicious and the policy was only in third place.

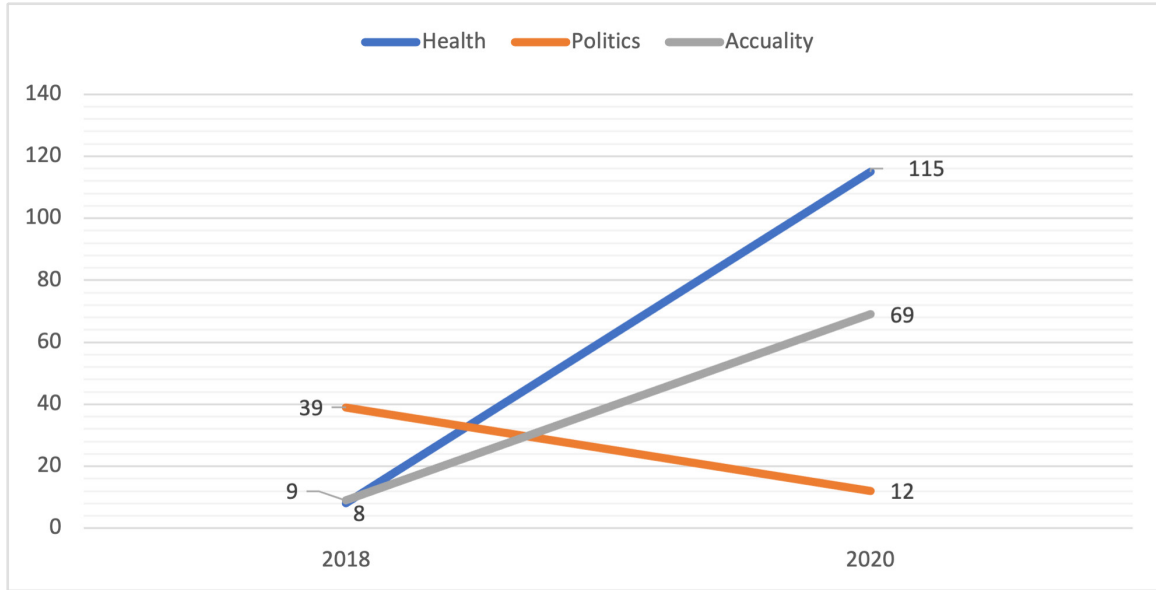


Figure 7. Categorical change in suspicious information examined in the first 3 months of 2018 and 2020

Source: own elaboration.

In fact in other studies on Twitter² about the spread of fake news, it was revealed that the category of politics was the first in the context of fake news (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Of course, the social boots have a great influence on this fake news spread in the direction of gaining political interest. In a study examining 400 thousand claims spread on Twitter in the US presidential election in 2016, it is underlined that social bots play a key role in the spread of fake news (Shao, ve diğerleri, 2018).

Of course, it does not seem surprising that the struggle related to the pandemic and false content increased in terms of both quantity and quality in social media platforms like fact-checking organizations all over the world. But can't this struggle be carried out in "normal" times, for example, against false news about policy issues? (Kreps & Nyhan, 2020) answer this question negatively for a number of reasons. Because it is easier to detect fake news and false information about coronavirus compared to political news, false news about COVID-19 can turn into a life and death issue. In addition, intervention in content related to politics on social media requires a difficult balance between "public loss and freedom of expression". In addition, this situation has an economic aspect. For example, "Facebook does not remove fake ads sponsored by candidates" (Kreps & Nyhan, 2020).

Suspected Content Types and Spreading During the Covid-19 Crisis

When we look at the content types of 204 suspicious information that were passed through the fact-checking process by Teyit in the first three months of 2020, it is seen that the visual elements are dominant. It is revealed that 50 of the total suspicious content consists of video and 46 of them are photo sharing. In addition to these, the social media message (40), news text (38), book content (22), WhatsApp text message (5), audio messages (4) and column (1) include other content types of suspicious information form.

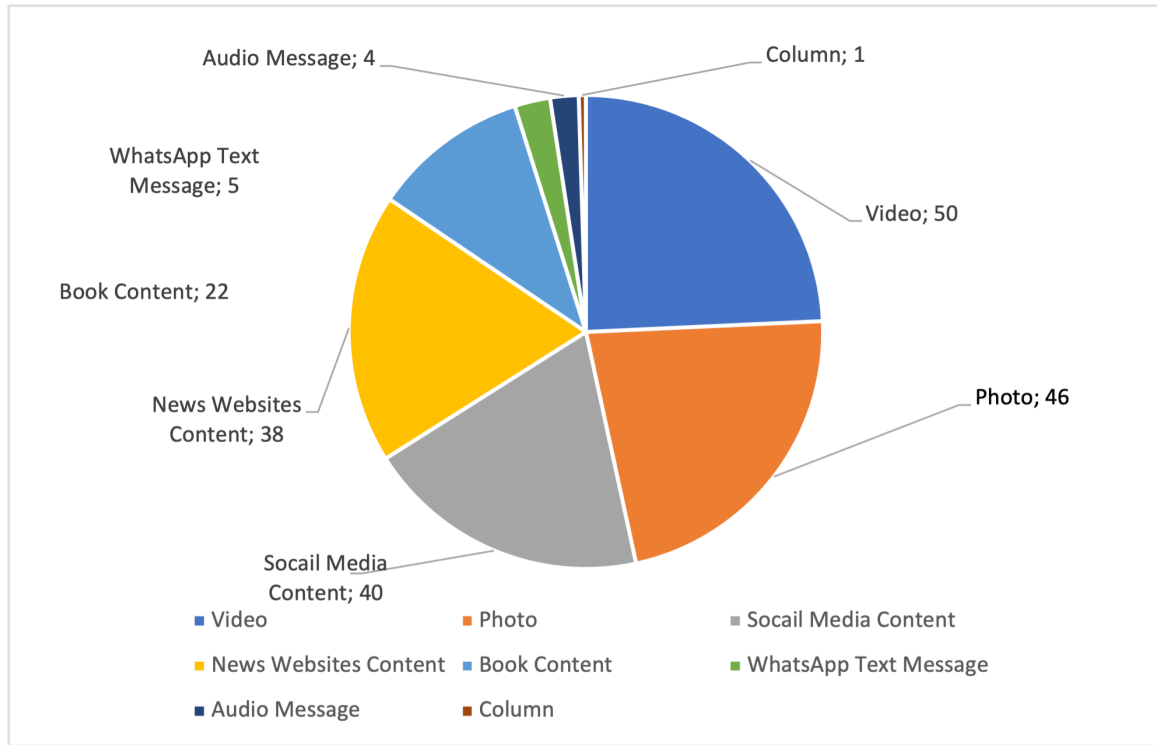


Figure 8. Suspicious information for the first 3 months of 2020 by content types
Source: own elaboration.

According to a report published by Teyit.org, television ranked first in the field of reaching news in Turkey before pandemic has dropped to fourth place and Twitter has become preferred platform to get news. In the report, it was stated that this situation was caused by the fact that the Minister of Health constantly shared the developments related to COVID-19 on Twitter and was related to the concern of reaching the news first-hand along with the decrease in trust in news sources in the process (Saklıca, 2020).

Research reveals that false news spreads over pervasively than true information on Twitter (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). As a matter of fact, when we look at the environments where 204 suspicious information spread in the first three months of 2020, it is seen that the Twitter platform is in the first place with 124 suspicious information³. Facebook follows Twitter with 72 suspicious information. Suspicious information then; news websites (55), books (22), Instagram (14), WhatsApp (11), television (10), YouTube (10) and TikTok (1) are listed.

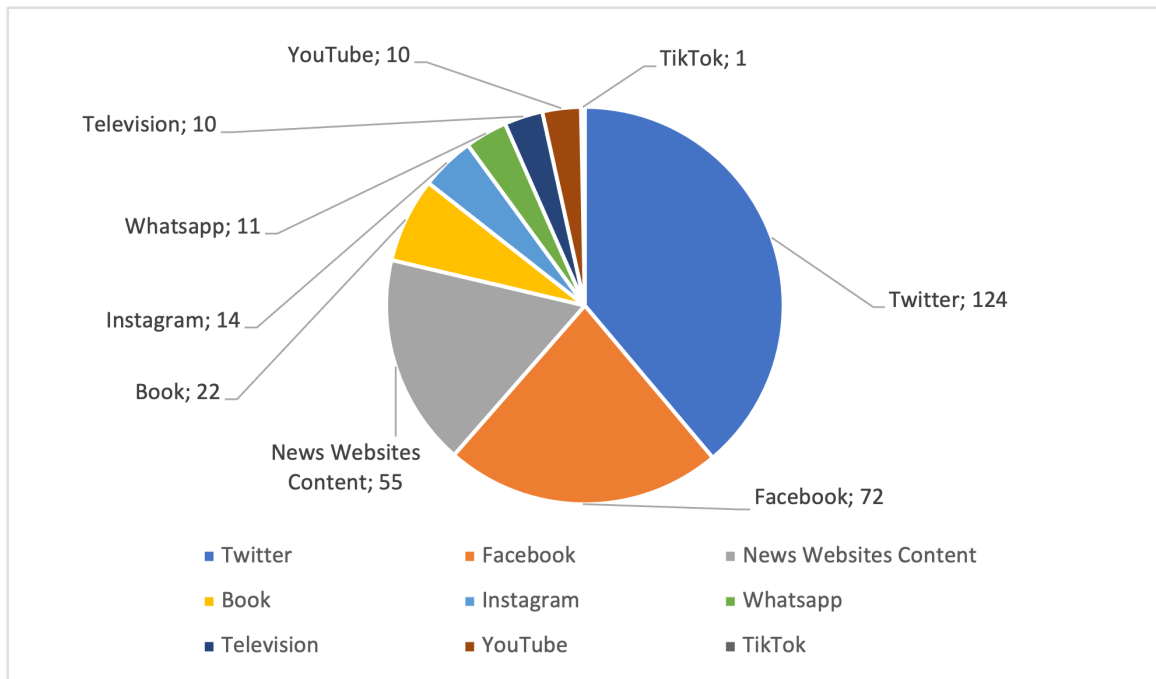


Figure 9. Suspicious information for the first 3 months of 2020 by channels
 Source: own elaboration.

Considering the analysis results of 204 suspicious information in the first three months of 2020; It was determined that 191 content contains false information. 8 contents could not be labeled as true or false, therefore they are defined as mixed. Only four of the 204 content that is disseminated in public opinion and taken into consideration by Teyit with the belief that he has suspicious information contain correct information. One content is labeled as uncertain because no fact-checking process can be carried out.

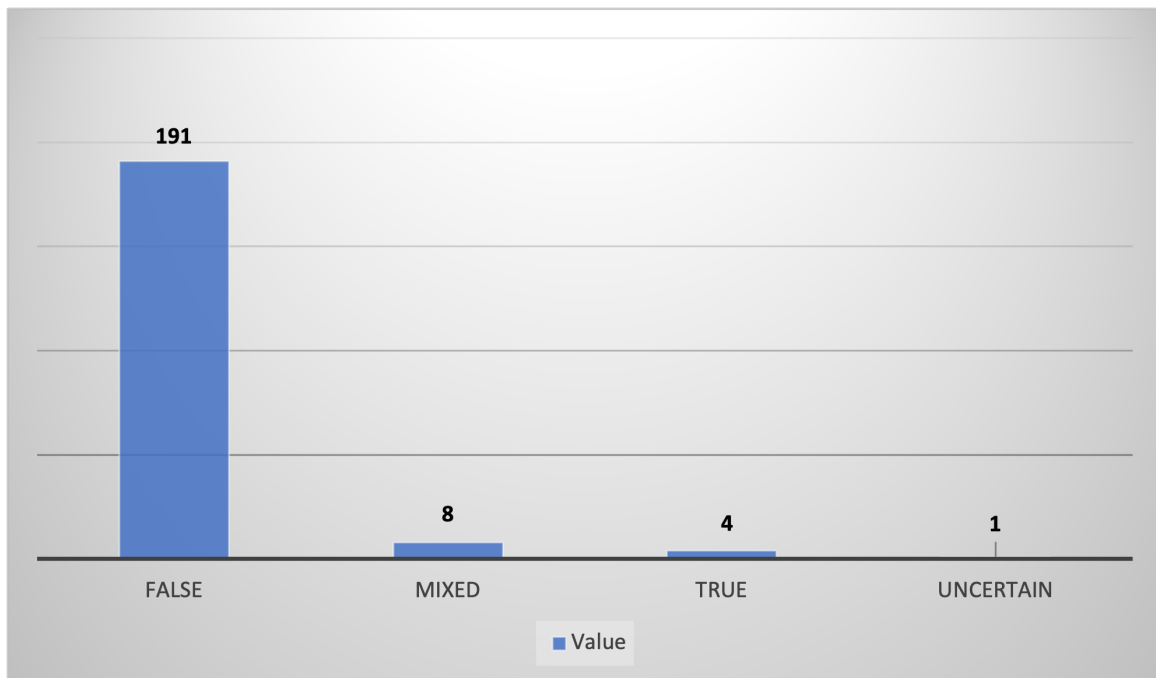


Figure 10. Suspicious information for the first 3 months of 2020 by analysis results.
 Source: own elaboration.

Covid-19 Effect in The Context of Suspicious Content Types and Spreading Area

115 of 204 suspicious information in the first three months of 2020, when the coronavirus began to spread, is in the health category. When evaluated within the context of content types category; it has been observed that health related reviews appear as video (28), book content (22), news (19), social media message (19), audio message (4), WhatsApp message (4). When we look at the channels where suspicious information in the health category is spread; while Twitter ranks first with 58 suspicious information, Facebook (36), news websites (26), books (22), WhatsApp (11), Television, Instagram and YouTube (8), TikTok (1) contain suspicious information determined as other areas. 109 of the suspect information circulated in the health category are on the false label. As a result of the investigation, 5 of the remaining 6 suspicious information were labeled as mixed and one of them as uncertain.

Content Type	Spreading area	Analysis result
Video: 28 Book content: 22 News: 19 Social media message: 19 Photograph: 19 Audio Message: 4 WhatsApp message: 4	Twitter: 58 Facebook: 36 News websites: 26 Book: 22 WhatsApp: 11 Television: 8 Instagram: 8 YouTube: 8 TikTok: 1	False: 109 Mix: 5 Uncertain: 1 True: 0

Figure 11. Suspicious information in the health category

Source: own elaboration.

Stating that there are different types of false news and false information spread in different content and channels, Wardle (Wardle, 2017) examined the problematic content seen in the information ecosystem under seven different headings. The first of these is defined as “satire or parody”. The aim here is to have fun rather than harm. Such content may be in the form of “misleading use of information” or as an imitation of the original source. Apart from the types such as title and content mismatch (false connection), the use of original content in a different context (false context) and manipulation of the original information, there is another category of content produced for purely deception and harm. Wardle (Wardle, 2017) defines such content as “fabricated content”.

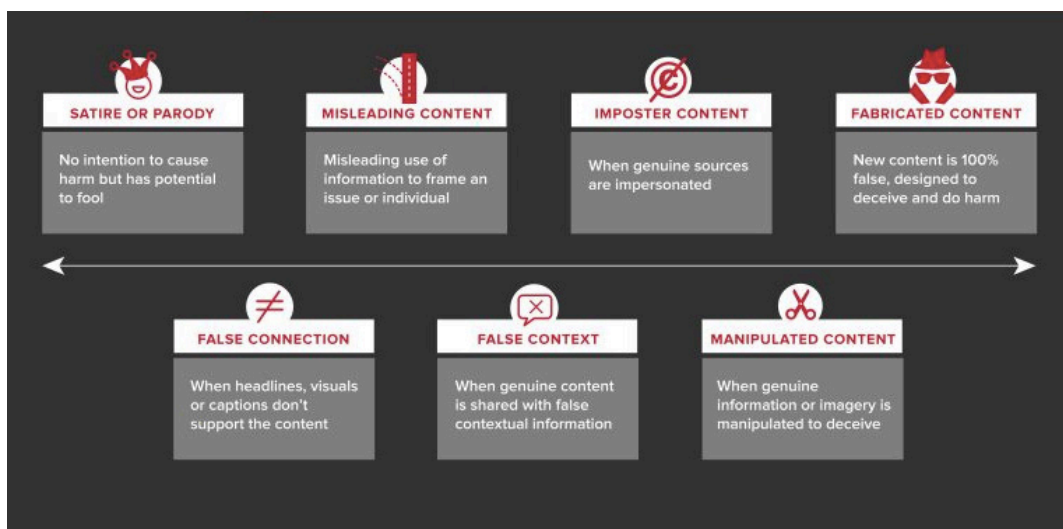


Figure 12. 7 types of misinformation and disinformation (Wardle, 2017)

Source: (Wardle, 2017)

When 109 suspect information with the false label in 115 suspicious information in the health category are evaluated according to Wardle's (Wardle, 2017) categories of mis or disinformation; the most suspicious information appears as fabricated content (61). Suspicious information with the false tag then consists of the false connection (26), misleading content (14), manipulated content (4), satire or parody (2), false context and imposter content (1), respectively.

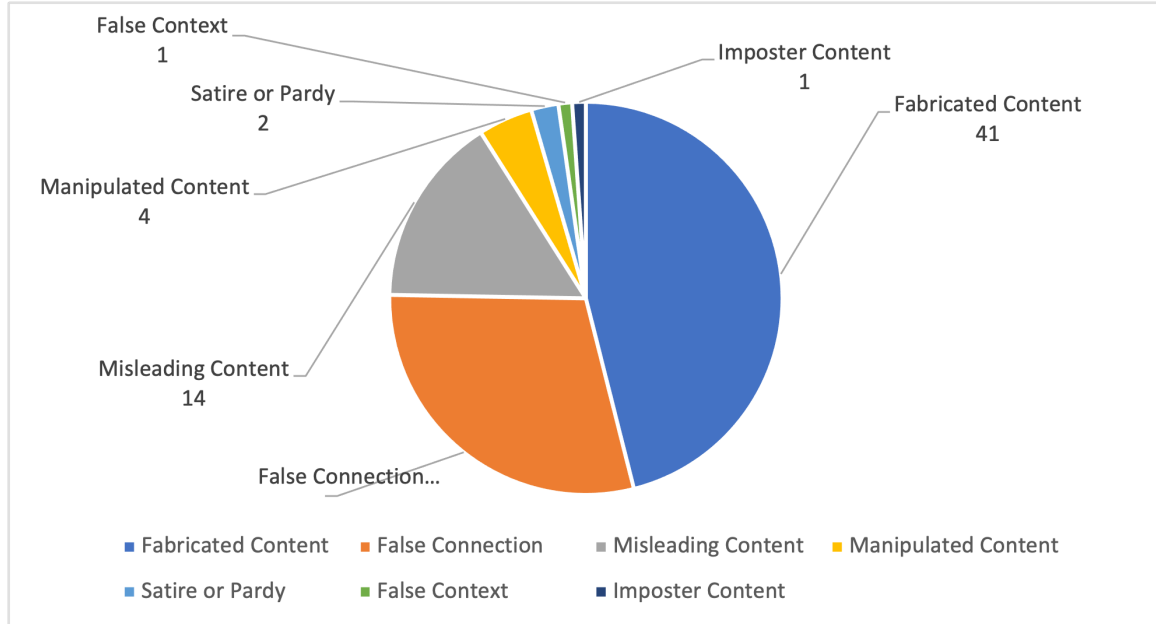


Figure 13. False information types in health category

Source: own elaboration.

85 of 115 suspicious information in the health category consists of contents related to COVID-19. When looking at the content types of this suspicious information, news text (22) and video (22) are in the first place. These two types of content are followed by photograph (17), social media message text (16), audio message (4) and WhatsApp (text) message (4).

Online media, including social media platforms, are reported to be the primary news source for users in many countries during the COVID-19 period (Nielsen, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Simon, 2020). However, especially social media offers an environment suitable for the spread of false news. In a study carried out by discussing with 1600 people on COVID-19 misinformation sharing on social media, it was concluded that users shared without thinking enough about whether the content was correct or not (Pennycook, McPhetres, Zhang, G. Lu, & G., 2020).

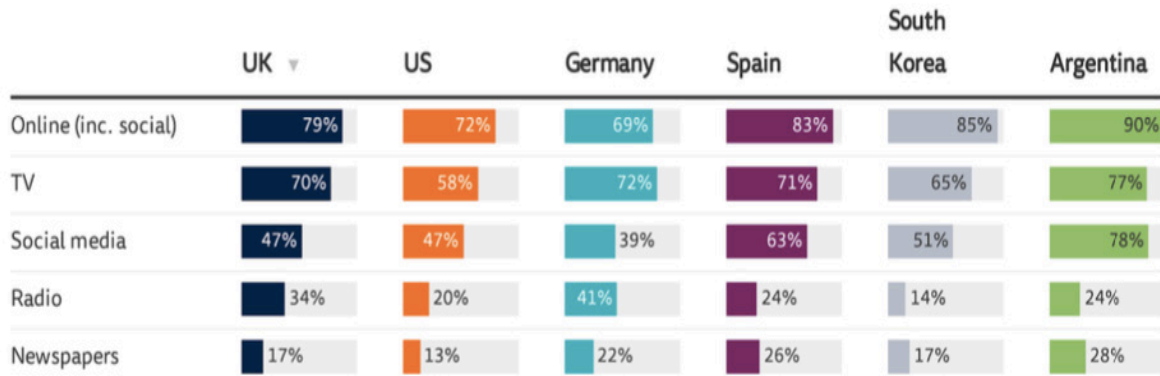


Figure 14. Resources used to receive news in the past week.

Source: (Nielsen, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Simon, 2020)

In the findings obtained as a result of the study, the density of social media platforms draws attention in the channels where suspicious information about coronavirus is spread. The suspicious information examined has been spread through Twitter (57), Facebook (35) and internet news sites (25) respectively. There is also an increase in the spread of suspicious information via WhatsApp messages during the COVID-19 outbreak period. 15 of the suspicious content examined were compiled from WhatsApp messages. Of course, the closed structure of the WhatsApp application makes it difficult to investigate the density and diversity of such content.

So, what kind of topics do these suspicious content about coronavirus spreading in various environments consist of? As emphasized by Fuchs (Fuchs, 2021), some of the suspicious content that Teyit has examined is false news about the origin of the coronavirus. For example, among the 85 suspicious content related to the pandemi, there are claims as the new coronavirus is being tried to spread with Coca Cola, the Gates Foundation is behind the coronavirus pandemi, and there is a link between 5G and the emergence of the new coronavirus. Analysis conducted by Teyit there are false news about how the virus is transmitted and how it can kill. The allegations as the lemon cure eliminates the new coronavirus, our genetic structure will protect us from the coronavirus, the cities will be disinfected by helicopters against the coronavirus, the hair dryer, putting onions in rooms and drinking alcohol protects us from the coronavirus and there is a man eating soft soap againsts the virus, are among the suspicious information analysed by Teyit. As it can be estimated all of these claims circulated in Turkey via social media and WhatsApp were labeled as false content.

In fact, it is known that similar “treatment” recommendations spread in a short period of time during the previous epidemic diseases. Keyes (Keyes, 2004) stated that after the SARS virus, similar “remedies” were circulated on the Internet and underlined that “this is part of a much longer huckster tradition but one given far broader, and faster, reach online.” According to him “The World Wide Web is a mishmash of rumor passing as fact, press releases posted as news articles, deceptive advertising, malicious rumors, and outright scams”. (van der Meer & Jin, 2019) warned as “Anyone can potentially become a victim because of the consequences of misinformation, especially in times of public health crises and disaster situations”.

In the analysis of 85 suspicious information about coronavirus by Teyit, it was concluded that 91% of the contents were false. Six of the suspect information examined are labeled as mixed and one is uncertain.

Content Type	Spreading Area	Analysis Result
News: 22 Video: 22 Photograph: 17 Social media message: 16 Audio message: 4 WhatsApp message: 4	Twitter: 57 Facebook: 35 News website: 25 WhatsApp: 15 YouTube: 7 Instagram: 7 Television: 2	False: 78 Mixed: 6 Uncertain: 1 True: 0

Figure 15. Suspicious information according to the content type, spreading area and the results
 Source: own elaboration.

When 78 suspicious information with the false tag in the suspicious information about the new type of coronavirus COVID-19 are evaluated according to Wardle’s (2017) categories of misinformation and disinformation types; a sequence such as fabricated content (30) false connection (26), misleading content (14), manipulated content (4), satire or parody (2), false context (1) and imposter content (1) emerged.

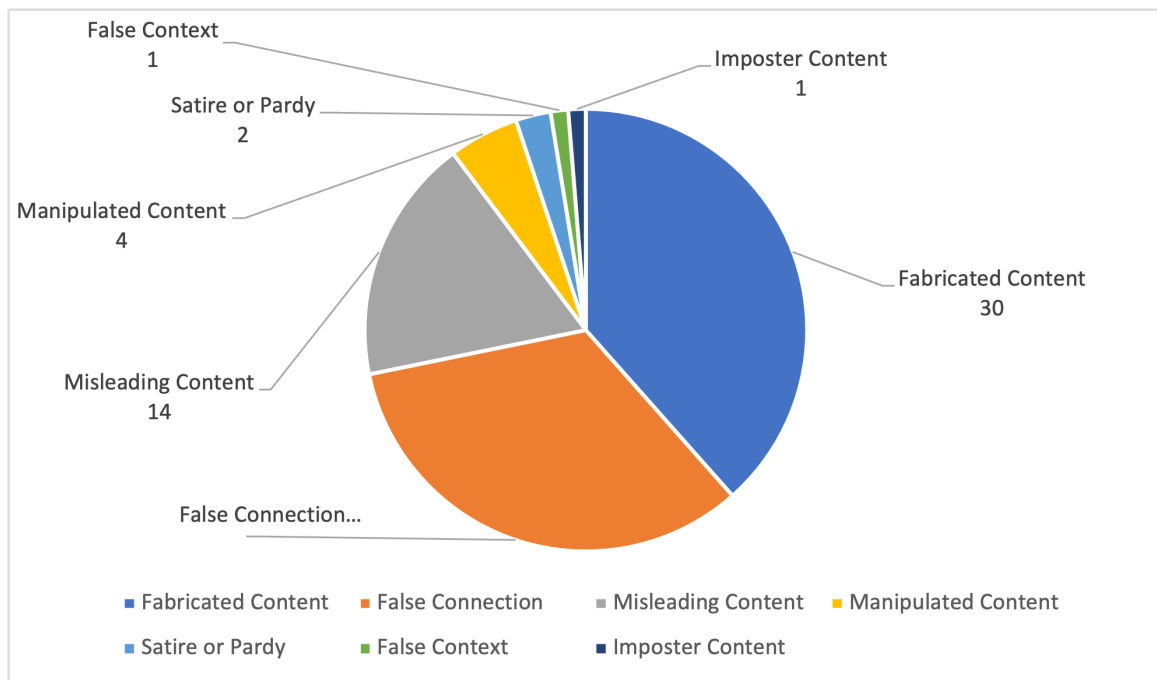


Figure 16. False information according to misinformation types
 Source: own elaboration.

Brennen, et al (Brennen, Simon, Nielsen, & Kleis, 2020, s. 4) have been analyzed of coronavirus false information contents in three main categories as “reconfigured”, “fabricated” and “satire/parody”. The reconfigured category consists of three sub-titles: “misleading content,” “false context” and “manipulated content”. According to the research findings, while the amount of fully fabricated content was determined as 38% and 59% of the content was found to be part of the reconfigured category, which was partially correct, partially incorrect, or composed of incorrect links or manipulated images.

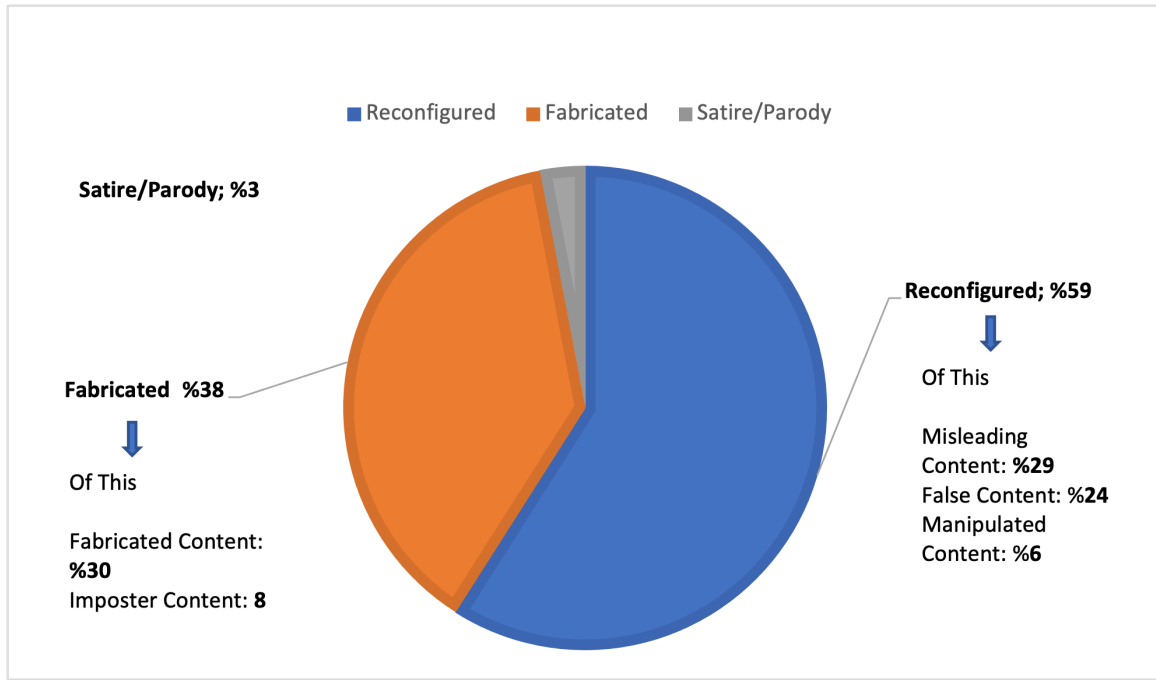


Figure 17. "Reconfigured vs fabricated misinformation"

Source: (Brennen, Simon, Nielsen, & Kleis, 2020)

In comparison with the investigations carried out on the claims relating to COVID-19 in Turkey, the categorization made by (Brennen, Simon, Nielsen, & Kleis, 2020), a similar picture emerges. In the analysis conducted by Teyit on the suspicious content circulated in Turkey, content rates 57.67% seems to be included in the category of reconfigured content. The most important difference between the two tables appeared in the false context subtitle. In the survey conducted by (Brennen, Simon, Nielsen, & Kleis, 2020), while in the context kinds false contents rates 24%, investigations carried out in Turkey this rate is evaluated as 34.61%. Thus, the original content of the false contextual information as described in the form of presentation (Wardle, 2017) false context in which to take more circulation in Turkey and, therefore, it can be said that users should give more attention to the compliance of content and context.

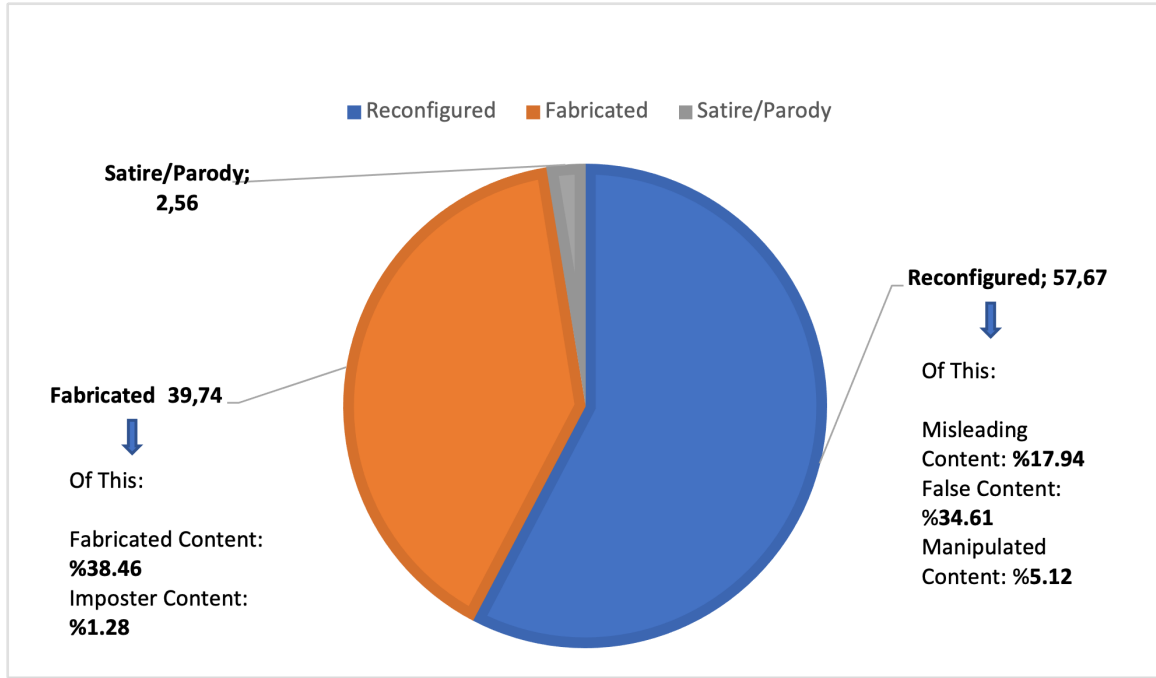


Figure 18. Research findings according to “reconfigured vs fabricated misinformation” figure
 Source: Adapted from (Brennen, Simon, Nielsen, & Kleis, 2020, s. 4)

Conclusions

The two research questions discussed and findings obtained in this research addressed has led to obtain some data about questionable content spreading in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic and fact-checking made by the Teyit that executes fact-checking activities in Turkey.

When the issue of how the COVID-19 pandemic which we primarily deal with in RQ1, affects the spread of fake news and false information is evaluated on Teyit findings, it is concluded that the suspicious content has increased significantly compared to 2018. Another area of change is related to the category of suspicious content. Starting from RQ2 research findings examined have shown that while political category of suspicious content subject to fact-checking activities in Turkey ranked first two years ago, it has been shown that the field of health, in which the eyes are surrounded all over the world, has become the subject of the highest concentration of fake news and false information.

It has been revealed that 91% of the suspicious content circulating about COVID-19 is false after being verified by Teyit. It was observed that the suspicious content examined was taken mainly from social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. In addition, it was found that some of the suspicious content examined contained suspicious content related to the origin of the coronavirus, and that it consists of allegations regarding the transmission and treatment of COVID-19.

Especially in times of crisis such as epidemic disease, the need for news fact-checking activities and the duty of fact-checking organizations increase. In the COVID-19 period, Teyit endeavors to examine suspicious content over various platforms and share its results with the public. Of course, it is obvious that it is not the right approach to put all responsibility on the fact-checking platforms in this period when the false news has also become a pandemic, it has become an international problem and seriously threatens public health.

It is very important to combat fake news in government and company policies as a mission. In addition to the interest of the users in the processes carried out by the fact-checking platforms, the increase in their knowledge about differentiating the suspicious content and how they can verify them personally is of great importance both in the COVID-19 epidemic and in the subsequent periods in order to reduce the spread and effects of the fake news and false information.

Notes

- 1 For another paper produced from this research see (Ünal & Çiçeklioğlu, 2019)
- 2 In fact, although both online sources and social media contain useful information for humanity, they are often associated with false news, so some may stay distant from these platforms. According to (Bok, 1999), “trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain.” It can be pointed out that especially the social media platforms’ continuing the decisive struggle with false news is valuable in terms of gaining trust in the platforms.
- 3 In Turkey, as a major problem in spreading false news through Twitter, fake accounts opposes the subject. Especially, fake accounts opened on behalf of scientists, who are on television and the information they will give have reached a wide audience by the public in a short time. When experts announce their own accounts, fake accounts are opened again with similar usernames and they continue to collect followers with this method (Öz, 2020) Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health has warned the public against fake profiles and sharing, has announced that real social media accounts of the science board members generated coronavirus part of the fight with the public.
- 4 Suspicious information examined by Teyit can sometimes be seen in more than one area, Teyit explains all platforms on which these contents are spread. Therefore, the total number in the table and the number of examinations differ.

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Yalan Haber Salgını: Teyit.Org Örneğinde Covid-19 Salgınının Başında Türkiye’de Yalan Haber ve Yanlış Bilgi Akışı ve Doğrulamaya İlişkin Bir Analiz

Recep ÜNAL (Assoc. Prof. Dr.)
Alp Şahin ÇİÇEKLİOĞLU (Lect.)

Genişletilmiş Özet

İnsanların endişe içinde olduğu ve belirsizliği azaltmak için bilgi arayışına girdiği diğer tüm kriz dönemlerinde olduğu gibi, etkileri dünya genelinde görülen COVID-19 salgınında da gözler hem geleneksel kitle iletişim araçlarına hem de sosyal medya platformlarına çevrilmiştir. Ancak diğer kriz dönemleri ile benzer biçimde COVID-19 salgını süresince de yoğun bir yalan haber ve yanlış bilgi seliyle karşılaşmıştır. Özellikle kullanım sayıları her geçen gün artan sosyal medya platformları bu selin akışkanlığını hızlandırmak için elverişli ortamı sağlamaktadır. Hastalığın yayılması, önleyici tedbirler ve tedavi yöntemleri ile ilgili yanlış bilgiler, salgın öncesi dönemde görülen yanlış haberlerden çok daha derin etkiler bırakabilir ve hastalığın daha da yayılmasına ve halk sağlığını ciddi şekilde etkilemesine neden olabilir. Dolayısıyla küresel ölçekte etkili olan yalan ve yanlış haber salgını ile birleşince COVID-19 salgınının daha da tehlikeli hale geldiği ve haber doğrulama faaliyetlerine ve bu süreci yürüten kuruluşlara olan ihtiyacın arttığı ifade edilebilir.

Neredeyse tüm dünyanın distopik bir bilim kurgu film setine dönüşmesine neden olan COVID-19 pandemisi, bilgi ihtiyacını daha da artırmıştır. Bu ölüm kalım meselesinde kitle iletişim araçları ve sosyal medya platformlarında her kriz döneminde olduğu gibi yalan haber ve yalan haberlerin arttığı gözlemlenmiştir. İnsanların kaygılarını gidermek için her zaman mitleri kullandıklarını belirten (Keyes, 2004), çağımızda bu mitlerin yayılma hızının ve insanların bu mitleri yayma yeteneğinin arttığını vurgulamaktadır.

Nitekim farklı ülkelerde internet üzerinden özellikle salgın döneminde virüsün kaynağına ilişkin komplo teorilerinden, hastalığın yayılmasına ve tedavi yöntemlerine kadar birçok iddia ortaya çıkmıştır (Misinformation related to the 2019-2020 coronavirus pandemic, 2020). Dünya Sağlık Örgütü (DSÖ), hatalı içerik de dahil olmak üzere aşırı miktarda bilginin, insanların ihtiyaç duydukları güvenilir bilgilere erişmesini zorlaştırdığını açıklamıştır (Report-13, 2020). DSÖ Genel Direktörü Ghebreyesus da “Biz sadece bir salgınla savaşmakla kalmayıp; bir bilgi salgınıyla mücadele ediyoruz. Sahte haberler bu virüsten daha hızlı ve daha kolay yayılıyor ve bir o kadar da tehlikeli” (Ghebreyesus, 2020) ifadelerini kullanmıştır.

Söz konusu dönemde kamuoyuna sunulan ve farklı araçlarla çok sayıda kişiye ulaşan bilginin doğruluğu için teyit kuruluşlarına duyulan ihtiyacın da arttığı görülmektedir. Reuters Enstitüsü tarafından yayınlanan raporda, bağımsız teyit kuruluşlarının COVID-19 ile ilgili artan miktarda yanlış bilgiye hızlı bir şekilde yanıt verdiği ve “İngilizce olarak teyitlenen içerik sayısının sayısının 2020 yılının Ocak ayından Mart ayına kadar geçen sürede %900’ün üzerinde arttığı” belirtilmiştir (Brennen, Simon, Nielsen, & Kleis, 2020).

Covid-19 salgını ve dezenformasyon ile ilgili literatürdeki güncel çalışmalara baktığımızda ise farklı kategoriler görülmektedir. Bu çalışmalar şu şekilde gruplandırılabilir: Dijital

ve geleneksel medya; (Andreu, 2020), (David & Sommerlad, 2021), (Tunez-Lopez, Vaz-Alvarez, & Fieiras-Ceide, 2020), (Güz, Seden Meral, Bozkurt, & Durmaz, 2021), (Akyüz, 2020), (Çelik, 2020), (Topsakal, 2021), sosyal medya; (Cinelli, ve diğerleri, 2020), (Al-Zaman, 2021), (Shani, Dirkson, & Majchrza, 2021), (Röchert, ve diğerleri, 2021), (Al-Rakhami & Al-Amri, 2020), (Kouzy, ve diğerleri, 2020), (Islam, ve diğerleri, 2020), (Hossain, ve diğerleri, 2020), (Tasnim, Hossain, & Mazumder, 2020), (Soğukdere & Öztunç, 2020), (Ateş & Baran, 2020), (Çerçi, Canöz, & Canöz, 2020), içerik türleri; (Brennen, Simon, Nielsen, & Kleis, 2020), (Sanchez & Pascual, 2020), Covid-19 aşısı konuları (Savolainen & Reijo, 2021), (Loomba, Figueiredo, Piatek, Graaf, & Larson, 2021), (Marco-Franco, Pita-Barros, Vivas-Orts, Gonzales-de-Julian, & Vivas-Consuelo, 2021).

Bu araştırmada; Türkiye'deki ilk haber doğrulama platformu olması ve Uluslararası Doğruluk Kontrolü Ağı (International Fact-Checking Network) tarafından yayınlanan İlkeler Kılavuzu'nun (Code of Principles) imzacısı olması nedeniyle Teyit.org'un analizleri incelenmiştir. Çalışmanın amacı ise, Teyit'in salgının ilk aşamalarında gerçekleştirdiği doğrulama faaliyetlerini incelemek ve daha önceki dönemle farklı yönlerini analiz etmektir. Bu amaçla aşağıdaki araştırma soruları hazırlanmıştır.

R.Q.1. COVID-19 salgını, yalan haberlerin ve yanlış bilgilerin yayılmasını nasıl etkiledi?

R.Q.2. Teyit'in analiz ettiği COVID-19 ile ilgili şüpheli içerikler hangi kategorilerde odaklanıyor?

Tartışılan iki araştırma sorusu ve bu araştırmada elde edilen bulgular, COVID-19 salgını sırasında Türkiye'de şüpheli içeriğin yayılması ve Türkiye'de teyit faaliyetleri yürüten Teyit.org'un yaptığı teyitler hakkında bazı veriler elde edilmesini sağlamıştır.

Bu çalışmada Teyit'in incelediği şüpheli içeriklerde önceki dönemlere göre bir farklılık olup olmadığı ve varsa bu farkın COVID-19 döneminde şüpheli içeriğin yapısını ve yayılma alanını nasıl dönüştürdüğünün belirlenmesi de amaçlanmaktadır. Bu amaçla hazırlanan araştırma sorularına cevap verebilmek için nicel araştırma yöntemlerinden içerik analizi tekniği kullanılmıştır. İlk olarak 01 Ocak 2020 ile 01 Nisan 2020 tarihleri arasında kamuoyu ile paylaşılan şüpheli içerik incelemeleri bu dönemde arşivlenmiş ve her bir içerik nicel olarak çeşitli kategoriler altında gruplandırılmıştır.

Elde edilen veriler öncelikle içerdikleri konu açısından incelenmiştir. Bu kategoriler sağlık, siyaset, aktüalite, spor, bilim, teknoloji, ekonomi ve eğitim başlıkları ile oluşturulmuş ve şüpheli içerik sayısının hangi kategoride daha yoğun olduğu belirlenmeye çalışılmıştır. Daha sonra bu şüpheli içeriklerin medya türü belirlenmiştir. Bu başlıkta içerikler, video, fotoğraf, ses, sadece metinden oluşan sosyal medya mesajı, internet sitelerinde yayınlanan haberler vb. açısından incelenmiştir. 2020 yılının ilk üç ayı da çalışma kapsamında ele alınmıştır.

Araştırmada elde edilen verilerin önceki yıllara göre nicelik ve kategori açısından bir değişiklik gösterip göstermediğini tespit etmek için araştırma verileri Çiçeklioğlu'nun (2019) yüksek lisans tezinden alınmıştır. Söz konusu çalışmadaki verilerden 01 Ocak 2018 ile 01 Nisan 2018 arasındaki bölüm seçilerek, 2020 yılının ilk üç ayında elde edilen veriler karşılaştırılmış, COVID-19 salgınının şüpheli içerik kategorisinde bir değişikliğe neden olup olmadığının ortaya çıkarılması amaçlanmıştır.

Son olarak çalışmada, Teyit.org'un 2020 yılının ilk üç ayında incelediği şüpheli içerikler arasından sağlık kategorisi altında toplanan verilerin ne kadarının koronavirüs ve

COVID-19 ile ilgili olduğu araştırılmıştır. Salgın ile ilgili şüpheli içeriklerin, (Wardle, 2017) tarafından tanıtılan yalan haber ve yanlış bilgi üretim modellerinden hangisine göre daha yoğun olduğu da ortaya çıkarılmıştır.

RQ1’de öncelikli olarak ele aldığımız COVID-19 salgını yalan haberlerin ve yanlış bilgilerin yayılmasını nasıl etkilediği konusu Teyit bulguları üzerinden değerlendirildiğinde şüpheli içeriğin 2018’e göre önemli ölçüde arttığı sonucuna varılmıştır. RQ2 ile elde edilen araştırma bulgularından hareketle, Türkiye’de iki yıl önce doğrulama faaliyetlerine konu olan şüpheli içeriklerin en çok siyaset kategorisinde yoğunlaştığı; çalışma kapsamında ele alınan dönemde ise sağlık kategorisindeki yalan haberlerin ve yanlış bilgilerin ilk sırada yer aldığı görülmüştür.

Çalışmada, Türkiye’de 2018 yılının aynı dönemine kıyasla, 2020 yılının ilk üç ayında Teyit’in sorguladığı şüpheli sayısında artış olduğu da tespit edilmiştir. COVID-19 ile ilgili şüpheli içeriklerin daha çok sosyal medya platformlarında dolaşıma girdiği ve Wardle’ın (Wardle, 2017) kategorizasyonuna göre yalan haberlerin yüzde 66’sının tamamen aldatma ve zarar verme amaçlı üretildiği de çalışmada elde edilen bulgular arasındadır.

Özellikle salgın hastalık gibi kriz zamanlarında haber doğrulama faaliyetlerine duyulan ihtiyaç ve doğrulama kuruluşlarının görevi artmaktadır. Teyit.org, COVID-19 döneminde şüpheli içerikleri çeşitli platformlar üzerinden incelemeye ve sonuçlarını kamuoyu ile paylaşmaya çalışmaktadır. Yalan haberlerin de bir salgın haline geldiği, uluslararası bir sorun olarak karşımıza çıktığı ve halk sağlığını ciddi şekilde tehdit ettiği bu dönemde tüm sorumluluğu teyit platformlarına yüklemenin elbette doğru bir yaklaşım olmadığı da aşikardır. Bu nedenle daha bütüncül bir yaklaşımla özellikle kriz anlarında yalan haberin dolaşım hareketliliğinin nasıl önüne geçilebileceğinin ve bu tür içeriklerle karşılaşan kullanıcıların yeni medya okuryazarlığını geliştirebilmelerinin yollarının aranması hayati bir önem arz etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İletişim, COVID-19, yalan haber, asılsız haber, doğrulama, Teyit.org.

Bu makale **intihal tespit yazılımlarıyla** taranmıştır. İntihal tespit edilmemiştir.

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