

Pandemics and Infodemics: The Narrative of  
Uncertainty and the Uncertainty of the Narrative □

الأوبئة و أوبئة المعلومات: سرد الشكوكية وشكوكية السرد

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Received: 06/07/2023

Accepted: 08/01/2024

**Abstract:**

The history of cataclysmic events is a history of uncertainty. In this paper, we aim to highlight this tendency along with the precariousness of the metanarrative of the pandemic vis-a-vis rising counternarratives or what has recently been dubbed 'infodemics'. We posit that the history of pandemics has never been inoculated from such overabundant (mis)information. The article integrates three strands of knowledge. We will do so by considering the literature on pandemics as well as by exploring the links between pandemics and infodemics. We situate this in relation to contemporary discussion about COVID-19 and infodemics, but only in conjunction with previous episodes of pandemics (and even epidemics), we argue, does the picture yield a meaningful interpretation.

**Keywords:** Covid-19; infodemics; uncertainty; metanarrative; New Media

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**ملخص :**

تاريخ الأحداث الكارثية هو تاريخ الشكوكية. نهدف في هذه الورقة إلى تسليط الضوء على هذه الرؤيا جنباً إلى جنب مع عدم استقرار السرد الكبير للوباء في مواجهة الروايات المضادة المتصاعدة أو ما أطلق عليه مؤخراً اسم "وباء المعلومات".

المقال يدمج ثلاثة فروع من المعرفة. أولاً، نضع في المقدمة الرؤى القائلة بأن المعلومات لا تساوي المعرفة التي تفسر صعود وانتشار المعلومات المتنافسة. ثانياً، من خلال النظر في كيفية تحويل السرد الفائت إلى وباء معلومات، فإننا نأخذ في الحسبان الارتقاء التاريخي لوباء المعلومات وكيف تظهر كموازنة في اختلال توازن بنية السرد الشامل. أخيراً، نفترض ضمناً أن الأحداث الرصينة، مثل الوباء الحالي، مرشحة لاختطاف المعلومات وأن السرد الشامل المنتخب، بالمعنى الدارويني، من المرجح أن يتجاوز حتى المعلومات التي تعتبر علمية وموثوقة وذلك من خلال دراسة أدبيات الأوبئة وكذلك من خلال استكشاف الروابط بين الأوبئة وأوبئة المعلومات.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** كوفيد-19، وباء المعلومات، الشكوكية، السرد الشامل، الاعلام الجديد

**Introduction**

“SARS equaled fear. SARS equaled the unknown. SARS equaled the uncontrollable. SARS equaled death”. So was Jon D. Lee’s (2014, p.2) comment on the eruption of the SARS pandemic and the chaos that ensued in 2003, and so is the rhetoric of lethal outbreaks of diseases and the condensed narrative chronicled throughout history. The above apocalyptic description captures a moment of the defeat of man against natural disasters. It is a momentary capture of the prevalent feeling, a rather laggard in a list of overwhelmingly crippling feelings: death, which consensually signifies a decapitating feeling of defenselessness, of surrender when overwhelmed by the novelty of the uncharted territory, which then ends on a bad note, albeit chaperoned by uncertainty as its long-life comrade.

Certainly, disastrous events breed uncertainty, and uncertainty, in turn, is the incubator of the verbal (digital and otherwise) potentiality of man in his bid to rid himself of the shackles of the uncontrollable. Otherwise

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known as narrative, the linear sequence of telling<sup>1</sup> is understood in its loose sense as encompassing a timeline of events with corresponding action and interaction, moored by cause-and-effect defining its intelligibility, and which is observed *prima facie* as relieving the unwelcome and unmitigated burden inflicted by moments of crisis—mild and severe ones—such as the outbreak of widespread diseases.

In this paper, we will advance the thesis that narratives (or counternarratives) are the last defensive wall against a double tyranny: that of the disease and the centralized information, particularly when it comes from the scientific community or authoritative bodies. This is where decentralized information or to use a more accurate term, infodemics, enter the scene. In doing that, we briefly make visible the remark that information is dissimilar to knowledge, which may explain, albeit very feebly, the phenomenon of infodemics.

It has now become something of a commonplace to accuse New Media of the unwelcomed ramifications it has caused in the arena of information in what has been recently labeled ‘disinformation’ and ‘infodemics’. The issue surely took on a heightened significance within the context of the recent pandemic, as the subversion of the official story and medical opinion on the matter crystallized in a distinctive way to compromise amorphous truth and knowledge in favor of a wholesome picture that explains their frailty vis-a-vis the waves of infodemics which correlated with those of the pandemic. While we acknowledge that the scale at which this has been done is hitherto unprecedented due to the interconnectedness of the world, we posit that the history of sober events has never been inoculated from infodemics and by extension uncertainty. And while the term infodemics may seem an anachronistic concept, it still accounts for the spread of non-official narratives. In this paper, we aim to highlight the precariousness of the metanarrative of the pandemic vis-a-vis a rising counternarrative and how it is conducive to uncertainty. The article integrates three strands of knowledge, first by foregrounding the insight that information does not equal knowledge which explains the rise in competing information. Second, by considering how metanarrative is convertible into

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<sup>1</sup> Linear because a narrative has underpinned the logic of cause and effect which render it self-sustained.

infodemics, we account for a historical upscaling of infodemics and how they arise as a counterbalance in the imbalance of power structure. Lastly, we make implicit the hypothesis that sober events are candidates for the hijack of infodemics and how an elected comprehensive narrative, in the Darwinian sense, is likely to overrun even the information deemed ‘scientific’. We will do so by considering the literature on pandemics as well as by exploring the links between pandemics and infodemics. we situate this in relation to contemporary discussion about COVID-19 and infodemics, but only in conjunction with earlier episodes of pandemics (and even epidemics), we argue, does the picture yield a meaningful interpretation.

### 1. Infodemics and New Media

Even Though the New Media seems to be inseparable from any discussion about any crisis, nothing seems to be new under the sun. We will contend with a somewhat dimply account of New Media and infodemics as a different representational vehicle that ushers in new terminology. In relation to the transformative effects of the new media, Lynch (2011) makes the following argument: “The strongest case for the fundamentally transformative effects of the new media may lie in the general emergence of a public sphere capable of eroding the ability of states to monopolize information and argument, of pushing the transparency and accountability”<sup>2</sup> (p. 301–10) perhaps because there exists “no accountability for user generated content” (Bennet & Livingston, 2021, p. xxi). In a similar fashion, the very word ‘infodemics’ and its linguistic variants are indicative of the interference of the human and non-human(bots) entities in the act of deliberately or unintentionally manufacturing falsehood to undermine the official narrative. The rationale for doing the act of infodemics, that is manufacturing and disseminating false, unchecked, or otherwise rebellious and highly charged information, it seems, stems from the reflexivity to react back to the old order of things. This is a point which we reserve for later.

In the context of the current pandemic, the New Media as a hypothetical imperative has become an indispensable source of health

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<sup>2</sup> Lynch, M. After Egypt: *The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State*, Perspectives on Politics, Volume 9, Issue 2, June 2011,

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information, thereby increasing the visibility of unscientific or pseudo-scientific information. The wake of COVID-19 sought the spread of information<sup>3</sup> in untrusted sources such as social media networks where people have migrated en masse. An all-purpose channel ideal for information dissemination. Networks particularly provide optimal conditions for the spread of this sort. Today experts are not speaking about how much information is being generated but are already devising ways to counter the spread of infodemics.

The word infodemics was first used in 2003 following the crisis of information or “information epidemic” which correlated with the SARS epidemic. Recently, it gained renewed usage with the outbreak of COVID-19. The term started to progressively diffuse when, in referring to the surge of information (both accurate and inaccurate), the Director-General of the World Health Organization Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said, “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic”

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of infodemic, an infodemic is both quantifiable and qualifiable: it’s too much information and information that has not been filtered through rigorous scientific analysis or evaluation. On that account, spatial dimension does not appear in the definition on account of its infiltration of every corner of the globe. Infodemics can be differentiated from misinformation in that Aristotle’s law of Excluded Middle may or may not legitimize its definition. Furthermore, it indicates that the spread has a risky edge and that the global healthcare system has been compromised. Consequently, the current scholarship on misinformation has become very descriptive with a moralistic tone underpinning its rationale. The word is featured in a derogatory way. In the Foucauldian sense, it designates wars of information from an asymmetrical power relationships standpoint. However, in its simplest conception, it constitutes a case of contemporary communication in the digital revolution. The remarkable use of it has become so normalized that we now speak about ‘disruptive information’ or ‘Inflammatory content’. For present purposes, we will contend with the following definition of infodemics as “Information of questionable quality” and build upon it<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> I used the notion of information in its broadest sense, which includes both information, disinformation and misinformation.

<sup>4</sup> Swire-Thompson & Lazer (2020) define misinformation as “information that is contrary to the epistemic consensus of the scientific community regarding a phenomenon” (p. 434)

### 1.1. The Crisis of the Pandemic

From the first ever recorded pandemic to COVID-19, the timeline of pandemics indicates that the question of the pandemic is one of temporality rather than probability. We are notoriously tempted to conclude that pandemics are never far from the surface. Apropos of this, Kari Nixon (2021) notes that the issue of the pandemic has always been a question of “when rather than ‘if’” (p.1). By the same token, the British sociologist Gerald Delanry stresses the omnipresence of infectious diseases, arguing that “the greatest danger to social life has been the unrelenting presence of epidemics”. This seems to be the irrevocable consensus, which through sheer repetition has spread across a range of academic disciplines and has echoed an affixed truth that is impervious to the medical advancements of the modern world. That is to say that pandemics are there and are likely to stick with us. And if anything would link the past to the present while blurring the background noise of modernity, that would be it, the pandemic. It entangles the past with the present and accentuates the verisimilitude of different epochs while heralding a future with a likely course of events. This is the history of humanity and suffering, stripped to its bare sense. In this regard, Kyle Harper (2021) brilliantly illustrates the historicity of the pandemic, tainted by atemporality, “We know we are living through something historic, and at times it can feel like we are living in history, in the past” (pp.29-30)

Because we assume that links with the past are cut by the force of modernity, that the landscape and complexity of today’s world are incomparable to past events, nevertheless, all that seems today a recent development in events is deeply moored in the human psyche. History, says Mark Twain, “doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” This seems a good starting point for our exposition of the similarity between past, present, and future events. We dispense with the notion of repetition, but we hold onto the element of correspondence.

To a great extent, the current pandemic is very indistinguishable from past waves of pandemics. There existed 249 episodes of pandemics throughout history, some of which have altered history such as the Justinian plague, Black Death (also known as ‘Bubonic plague’),

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Smallpox, Spanish Flu, AIDS...etc., and besides the catastrophic death toll and the aftermath they cause, the similarities lie in how the general public responded to the coming of the disease, and in the kind of unscientific interpretations that reigned for too long (even within the medical practice), some of which have proven to be difficult to eradicate, hence our exposition of infodemics.

Prediction, treatment, and justifications are the fertile ground upon which past and present narratives grow into being. The unoccupied (or half-occupied) room of interpretations abounds in all colors of explanation, and in the face of a dying *Übermensch*, the most significant of these interpretations is perhaps the recourse to a religious explanation as an encompassing one<sup>5</sup>. This interpretation of the causes of the disease still remains with us<sup>6</sup>.

One of the salient impetuses of this is the element of unknowability. With the advancement in medical knowledge, pandemics remain an indispensable factor that reminds us of our epistemic ignorance. Professor of practical philosophy Erik Angner (2020) concedes, “In the middle of a pandemic, knowledge is in short supply.” and such a scarcity spans different queries.

### 1.2. On Crisis and Uncertainty

For as far back as history goes, the idea already implied in the notion of the pandemic is that of crisis which in turn generates uncertainty and disruption. Kapoor & Klueter (2020) assert that “Uncertainty and disruption are two sides of the same coin”. Given the centrality of the notion of uncertainty, that it might be said to be the epicenter of the Cartesian framework or the vast field of epistemology as a whole, its global disruptive implications became a cliché from the onset of the pandemic till now. Epistemic plight would then be the defining factor of confluence between uncertainty and the end, an end, in the

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<sup>5</sup> Before Germ Theory could be theorized, there was wide acceptance of miasma as the causal factor in the outbreak of diseases. The theory became obsolete only towards the end of the nineteenth century.

<sup>6</sup> Today, it is widely conceived of diseases such as pandemics as a divine punishment, particularly in communities of faith. For similar insights on this, see SLM Rifai's (2020) ‘*The COVID-19 Pandemic and Natural Calamities from a Religious Perspective*’

Machiavellian sense, which isn't considerate of the means as long as it satisfies a chartered scheme of meaning.

Indeed, the literature on the covid-19 crisis which spans a wide range of scholarly production indicates that the world would never be the same. For a start, reality has become defamiliarized, and for many people, the pandemic provided a firm basis for some of the fundamental existential questions whose implications will remain profoundly with us<sup>7</sup>. This conclusion is a welcome one in light of the growing evidence. The private realm, too, has been infiltrated by exogenous causes that threaten the default security that people enjoy in times of peace.

It seems only fitting to regard this historical phenomenon (i.e., pandemic) through what it does and what it causes and unravels rather than what it is. To begin, the gap between the world past-covid and the world post-covid is unbridgeable, and the rupture it caused seems to run down its course. The pre-pandemic appellation suggests that a new calendar has been set. As is the case with any disastrous event, we speak about the world before and after corona. Furthermore, the suspension of the old order heralded a new one where liberties are compromised and where economies, social, and international science are irreparably damaged. Koffman et al. made the interesting point that "The peak of this pandemic may stretch systems"<sup>8</sup> (p. 214) and these are all, it seems, indices for a post-covid world.

Covid-19 occurred at a critical time when capitalism is being questioned. From the relative socioeconomic security to how people feel about themselves, especially with social distancing, and how they feel internally within themselves, the private realm has been hijacked, and it would be a grave misinterpretation to overlook the psychological dimension of times of crises on individuals. On equal grounds, Delanry (2021) makes the case that the pandemic is dressed up as a "psychological trauma" (p.1) among other things. Moreover, the pandemic outsourced capitalism's inherent fault lines, made them

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<sup>7</sup> We are unlikely to internalize the consequences of the pandemic deeply.

<sup>8</sup> Koffman, J., *Uncertainty and COVID-19: how are we to respond?*, Journal of The Royal Society of Medicine, p. 214



visible, brought them to the fore, and created a crisis that will “outlive the pandemic itself” (ibid. p.2). Indeed, “the pandemic has intensified the precariousness and anxiety that contemporary society engenders” (ibid. p. 3)

On an abstract level, an ahistorical reading of pandemics finds them a source of political and social transforming effects. Above all, science has taken great strides towards understanding the far-reaching repercussions of individuals which snowballed into fully-fledged phenomena.

The recent threatening pandemic brought about an en masse convergence of individual uncertainties<sup>9</sup>. In the expanding literature concerning COVID-19, uncertainty seems to be the locus around which an amalgam of social, economic, and political trends is formed. Robert Wuthnow (2010) makes the striking remark about perilous times, he writes, “The uncertainty, the scale of the impending catastrophes, and the inability to comprehend them are surely a source of profound anxiety.” (p. 8) His mentioning of uncertainty is neither accidental nor insignificant. Social historians and mathematicians make generous use of the word “uncertainty” and for a reason. Besides epistemological and ontological questions, the impending danger has always haunted man, often in the form of ‘uncertainty’.

In its communicative aspect, uncertainty is seen to thrive in a background of crisis, and in this respect, it is tangential to the narrative of human survival<sup>10</sup>. Seen from this light, uncertainty

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<sup>9</sup> Which are not neatly divided across national borders of socioeconomic status.

<sup>10</sup> To substantiate the above claim, and to assist our understanding of how pertinent the topic of uncertainty during the pandemic, we resorted to Google scholar to scrape for different journals pertaining to the titles containing any of our keywords of interest: 'COVID, Pandemic, Uncertainty' from 2020 onwards. In order to automate the process of collecting data, we used Python (ver. 3.9) to write a script that would collect, list, and paginate through the domain of 'Scholar.Google.Com' using the queries we mentioned below<sup>10</sup>. with limits defining the size of our datasets, our findings so far were as follows: Uncertainty in title: 325, No Uncertainty in title: 662, Total: 987. Therefore, at the time of writing this paper (December 2021), and with the imposed limitations from Google on automated requests, there exist 325 published research papers with the word uncertainty in the title. This renders the

recruits an arsenal of weaponry just so that the moot points and the pangs of existential crisis are subdued and are rendered less intensified.

It is clearly the case that our understanding of the pandemic (in the disease itself as well as what it germinates, sometimes irreversible global ramifications) is still in a pre-embryonic stage. Jonathan Koffman and al. (2020) discuss the novelty of the pandemic in terms of our understanding of it, he contends, “Our understanding of the disease is still very much in its infancy.” (p. 211). Nonetheless, it appears that there is so much more to the idea of understanding than just asking questions and reaping the results in the form of experiments or the probabilistic hedges that pave the way for hypotheses and theories to be formed. Time is at stake, and if there is anything that the layman is intolerant of is the longevity of the answer, and if there is anything that he would welcome with open arms to our ready-made answers that are based on theoretical constructs. The question, then, that should be asked is: do non-specialists need to understand the disease? What if we cast it in the mold of other diseases to extrapolate patterns of frequency?

Putting it into popular perspective, we proceed under the assumption that when diseases are declared a pandemic, this speaks to the defeat of man, however, nothing could be further from the truth. Vulnerability forges forays into uncharted territory; it poses itself as excessive demand for what is left of the resources and abilities of people. It speaks to the ‘purposeful agency’, and people, armored by the instinct to fight back to make sense of the world. This predisposition may have grown from “a feeling of conviction attaching to the blind resultant of the interplay of chain stimulations in their various strengths” (Brun & Doguoglu, 2008, p. 55), and they ultimately react back.

Anyone writing about uncertainty in the “post-truth age” has to be very reflective of the gripping power of passive-active engagement in

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notion of uncertainty an observable phenomenon across many fields and one which merits more research.

the making of history, with an emphasis given to the collective power of the human psyche in easing itself out of the conundrums that spring out to life in any form that could annihilate its existence, and in writing off information that does not amount to knowledge; to substitute it with comprehensive narratives that pay special tribute to the meaning embedded in crisis eruptions, perhaps even more paradoxically during the times when the world is faced with a crisis of meaning. This, I declare, has been the conventional tradition, or more like a genetic predisposition of man for millennia, a coping mechanism in psychological terms. Additionally, what we seek to discuss in this paper is the creative, non-conformist impulse that peaks during times of uncertainty. Our focus on the non-conformist impulse is particularly on the dual role of uncertainty in eroding and repairing epistemic damage through simple and sometimes convoluted ways.

### 1.3. The Aesthetics of Non-Conformism

The word ‘non-conformism’ may supplement the initial understanding of the rising of counternarratives, but it only provides a narrow angle from which the workings of them are eclipsed. This certainly defies the arbitrariness of the non-conformism spirit that we go a step further to account for its aesthetics, and what we mean by that is that it is tamed through the mode of representation that it adopts and deploys, and they differ significantly within the pool of options of creativity.

It is important to understand the range of expressiveness as the tone of counternarratives, and it is even more important to understand the centripetal and centrifugal forces of those narratives in being disparate versions of the stories they perpetuate (i.e., holding disparate views and ideas), as well as convergent and concurrent ones when observed from the lens of digital advocacy, and this is what, as I argue, gives it a non-conformist edge. A force that gathers momentum in providing alternative stories against the dominant one. This is where the aesthetics of non-conformism is at play.

The construction of subjectivity invites the redundant view that such counternarrative differ in their mode of analysis and the semantic content they encapsulate, which will then be deplorable in the battle

of subjectivity; and in the arena of information sensitivity, against dry science which explains the things in themselves. Of course, such practice is pervasive in the crack of systems that are notoriously unmendable, which is in stark contrast to the flexibility and adaptability of mankind in the face of a deferred “being”, an organic continuity of the “being” or what is philosophically referred to as the “becoming”.

It is worth dwelling on the way counternarratives shape our identities, and it is particularly significant to consider the mass collusion epitomized in the overabundance of information as the people’s task in the writing/making of history, and thus, mold their own identities. And so the possibility of playing a role in the field of power plunges into a relentless process of the formulation of identity. Identities are a function of meaning in a process that involves many variables and many factors (wavering or constant) in the unfolding of life so that their visibility does not go unnoticed. It correlates with a crisis eruption as they exacerbate whatever issues seem to be dawning their way.

The history of humanity is not one of unhinged upward mobility or progress. Lots of sacrifices, of standing up to reverse the incumbent system have come to shape our understanding of history. People come into the political scene all at once to mend whatever is/has been ossified. There is a compelling case to not depoliticize external conditions as they bear a massive effect on people. This is where “the personal is [truly] political”<sup>11</sup>. Contrary to Marcuse’s conception of the containment of social change as “perhaps the most singular achievement of advanced industrial society” (Marcuse, 2012, p. xliv). There are reasonable grounds to refute his claim, for instance, the evidence from the U.S. election and Brexit, along with other examples—the case of Covid-19 included — demonstrating, beyond any doubt, the penetration of the demagogue into the political sphere, and this is not only a trademark of the contemporary world, but it is an ahistorical truth.

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<sup>11</sup> emphasis my own.

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To return to our discussion about counternarratives in the age of pandemics, the above discussion offers a window into infodemics as the 'Great Refusal'. It seems like people have a say in what they deem to be the best possible outcome in a particular moment of history a utilitarian approach in "maximizing the expected utility" (Halpern, 2005, p. 5), and their resurrection comes in many guises. The most striking one is where they compete with the official narrative, and in the case of pandemics, they challenge the true connoisseurs, particularly the medical body on their traditional/default grounds. They write off institutionalized information to adopt a comprehensive narrative with an enduring effect. The feeling that keeps them moving is perhaps to preserve the sanctity of the individual and the collective. However, what is put at stake is what is known as the Continued influence effect<sup>12</sup>. As the German-American philosopher Herbert Marcuse brilliantly noted "The values attached to the alternatives do become facts when they are translated into reality by historical practice." (p. xlv). This is the authoritative shipwreck at its best, making people the arbiter of their own destiny.

#### 1.4. Infodemics as A Placebo

The idea this subtitle encapsulates explains this fixation with narrative construction. An excursion into the therapeutic dimension that counternarratives provide would suffice our understanding of this historical phenomenon. The logic of narrative construction follows the law of necessity, which is fundamental for the regulation of the deficiency, for filling the void in areas where questions asked are unlikely to be answered by the scientific community, or at least find for themselves prefabricated answers. "The question 'why' is too deep for science. Science instead believes it can only learn 'how' something occurs" (Marcuse, p. xiv). Though narratives, in the form of infodemics, differ in their mode of analysis, they remain complacent with individual and cultural sensitivity as well as the level of literacy that it should find ready acceptance and application, therefore reducing the levels of resistance. "The perfection of epistemic safety"<sup>13</sup> (qtd. in Jenks, 2002, p. 88) for knowledge is "security from error" (Midgley, 1991, p. 36). Lemon (1995) postulates in his poignant book *The Discipline of History and the*

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<sup>12</sup> The continued influence effect is the fact that some claims continue to exert the same effect even when proven to be false or misguided.

<sup>13</sup> Qtd in "*Culture: Critical Concepts in Sociology*", Volume 2, p.88

*History of Thought* that “if we were incapable of narrative that entire aspect of reality constituted by events would be beyond our awareness.” (p. 72)

The story-making process begins by reasoning through analogy. The author of *An Epidemic of Rumors* writes, “The act of understanding anything that is new is accomplished initially by creating for that novel item a story, and that story is created by taking what is known about a similar item and laying that knowledge over the rough form of the unfamiliar” (ibid. p. 72). Herein, The element of drama and the emotive language register on the radar of the infodemics. It’s the art of simplicity in all its complexity coupled with an elaborately woven narrative that fills in ‘the information void’, which is a viable replacement for satisfying some elements, which include, among other things, curiosity, suspense, and intrigue. “Thus, we see what it is that narrative achieves through its explicatory potential, and hence what a substantive and significant role it plays in our perception or construction of a world made intelligible to us through the process of discrimination and classification.”<sup>14</sup> (Lee, 2014, p. 2)

“The human understanding is prone to suppose the existence of more order and regularity than it finds”. Francis Bacon (1620) it is demonstrably the case, picking up this thread, that misinformation is itself distilled information, one that has within it what Kruglanski (1990) calls a ‘cognitive closure’. And on the importance of narratives, Roberts (2001) writes in his great book *The History and Narrative Reader*: “Narrative is a primary cognitive instrument- an instrument rivaled, in fact, only by theory and by metaphor as irreducible ways of making the flux of experience comprehensible”. (p.213)

Not to mention that narratives are the groundwork for many theories. The capacity of narratives (and in the context of our article, infodemics/counternarratives) to break into the world to supplement the absence of what ought to be present; to make intelligible phenomena that cannot be understood as a patchwork of incoherent and unfinished story. “Common sense and experience tell us no one

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<sup>14</sup> Lee, J. D. (2014), *An Epidemic of Rumors*, University Press of Colorado, p.2

ever invents a (thereby fictional) story simply for the sake of it. One must have a purpose over and above that of simply rendering a sequence of events intelligible” (Lemon, 1995, p. 72). It follows that making sense of the crisis is a top priority for people, and this is achieved, I believe, through the creation of a self-sustaining model to contain it: a storyline that explains the beginning, has a developmental segment, and an end. Such narratives are impenetrable because they constitute a harmonious belief system, which opens up a vibrant world of possibilities.

Infodemics precisely abound in explanations of the causes, treatment, predictions...etc. This could explain why people ascribe more importance to the story than the authorial fiat would like to impose since humans seek order and patterns through which they categorize what’s happening instead of remaining subjects to, dare we say whimsical science, whose narrative does not reflect faithfully any ‘epistemic closure’.

The symbolism of story-making is in its being a pang of resistance geared towards explaining the inaccessible. The apocalyptic scene which is recurrent in the history of calamities has an emotive symbolism, and it follows a pattern undisguised in moments of ontological insecurity. Both of which are capitalized on. However, in approaching the question of the provisional aspect of narratives of crises, such narratives die out once the crisis is over, and this is in line with what we referred to earlier in our discussion about the law of necessity.

John Zarzan (2021) makes the compelling case that in the grinding machine of history “a rupture, a break is needed. Only then could humanity realize a past, citable in all its lived moments, un-reified” (ibid. p.44). At a symbolic level, here lies the significance of the pandemic unfettered from scientific justifications concerned only with the instantaneous “how” of things, and trespasses it because it only considers the ethereal *raison d’être* of things. It ceases the old to create novel circumstances that would not be envisageable without it. This thread of reasoning is perhaps what prompts micro-narratives to conglomerate in a single sense of unification against a metanarrative. Micro-narratives displace the primary importance of the subject in

itself to a wider consideration that involves the layman's system of belief.

One at this stage might wonder about the epistemic performance and the success it yields to the belief system. According to Catherine Z. Elgin (2008) emotions “share important cognitive functions with perceptions and beliefs” (qtd. in Burn & Doguololo, 2016, p. 33). She adds, “In the grip of an emotion, we notice things we would otherwise miss” (ibid.). In this respect, emotions are a mode of “epistemic access” and the emotions that are tainted by volatility and variability are considered to be an epistemic asset, albeit a questionable one.

### **1. The Uncertainty of the Narrative**

The above discussion does not necessarily pour into a meandering advocacy of infodemics as much as it is an exposition of the impetus for the rise of such a historical phenomenon and how it gains ascendancy in the ladder of authority.

Kyle Harper (2021) affirms, “The rush of new information brings its own kind of uncertainties” and so we are to conclude from the very onset that uncertainty continues to live on because conflicting narratives generate ceaseless content in addition to information of a non-veridical quality. There is always some kind of a residual question, that is: does the narrative (medical and otherwise) match what is being presented?

Albert Camus has brilliantly spoken about the condition of mankind in his arresting novel *The Plague*, suggesting that besides the natural in its phenomenological dimension (that is what we are conscious of as it relates to our sense perception) the epistemological dimension, so to speak, is the dimension which is at play, i.e. the role of perception in providing us with the input about the external world. He writes, “What is natural is the microbe. All the rest - health, integrity, purity (if you like) is a product of the human will”. Such contradictions or anomalies are to mirror human uncertainty.

The dominant cultural and academic discourse reveals ontological insecurity fueled by uncertainty. Conflicting information in turn exacerbates uncertainty, and from this perspective, the certainty of the narrative could never be arrived at. It appears like a *mise en abyme*;



there is uncertainty in the certainty of the subject matter, and there is still uncertainty in what is being circulated and perpetuated.

#### 4. Information and Knowledge

The expression “we live in a post-truth age” has been passed into common parlance recently and has been used in many contexts. Though its origins could be traced back to the revolution in intellectual thought of the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in postmodernism studies, it seemed to gain, in its recent utilization, new depth, and new urgency; a post hoc realization that while it may indicate that truth is porous, penetrable and vulnerable; it comes off as a generalizable statement tolerant of multi representation, hence the overabundance of information. Therefore, we make the triumphant conclusion early on that information does not equal knowledge and the two should not be used synonymously. The expression “we live in a post-truth age” invites a consideration of the distinction between information and knowledge

Information and knowledge seem not to differ in any significant way. In communication theory, information is conceived as an “objective commodity” (Harper, p.28-29). However, information has to do, not with the vehicle we use to communicate, but with what we communicate by means of them<sup>15</sup> that is the semantic content rather than the channel by which it is carried. Information is identified by the elimination of possibilities, a point Dretske (2005) makes; however, what is missing is rather a process of infiltration which includes a constellation of reductive factors conducive to acceptance and application. Some of these factors typically include cultural sensitivity, the congruence with the system of belief where Cartesianism makes a shy appearance.

Knowledge in its most general sense is the unshakable truth, yet we do not wish to dwell on the and accept this definition as the most condensed form of knowledge. Empiricists view knowledge as “grounded in uninterpreted experience to which it is attached by formal

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<sup>15</sup> See Dretske, F. I. (1981), “*Knowledge and The Flow of Information*” for more on the topic of information in communication theory

logic” (Dretske, 1981, p.40). it is an organized system of thought that has ordered and structured information as its basic constituents. We also speak of coherence and exhaustiveness when we say knowledge. In analogic terms, it is akin to a closed system, conversant with other closed systems of some referential points, which makes it flexible and dependable. Information, on the other hand, is structured data.

It seems that the semantic weight is indispensable and is to be considered at all times when making the distinction between knowledge and information<sup>16</sup>, however, a line should be drawn at the unit of the understanding of the grand scheme of things to separate the chaff from the wheat.

In so far as we are concerned with meaning, knowledge can be defined as the employment of information into a system based on belief (in the most commonsensical way), and here is where, I suppose, the distinction is self-explanatory. In the context of our topic, information provides a substantive, surrogate, and intimate knowledge of the subject matter irrespective of the truth or falsity of that which it claims, because it only seeks to satisfy an ‘informational void’. This is compatible with a definition term of knowledge that holds the centrality of the belief as its core, put briefly by Dretske as that knowledge which is “identified with information-caused belief.” (p. ix)

The reason for competing information battles on the grounds of information is precisely because none of them amounts to being a [K]nowledge. The evidence for this can be found in counternarratives which acquire a life of their own, making themselves undisputable, uncontested, and “a piece of certain knowledge” (ibid. p. x) in the context in which they are situated. The role given to figments of imagination as the precursor to reality points to the fact there is a severe absence in the realm of meaning. This could clarify the rather glued chasm between explanation and justification of the explanation; the explanation of the working and the ‘why’ of working, because “to explain something is altogether a logically different activity than to

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<sup>16</sup> The implication for such a distinction resides in the way we value information.

justify its explanation" (Nitecki &, Nitecki, 1992, p. 43) and man is probably found in the second.

## **CONCLUSION**

SARS, the most recent coronavirus pandemic, and past pandemics offer us a generous understanding of what people give prominence to, what gives prominence to 'purposeful agency', and how we, as a species, are attuned to compromise on epistemology to achieve a non-conclusive ontological security which appears to exert an enormous grip on us, thus rendering us disenchanted with the unintelligibility of the information that is being shoved upon people.

Jon D. Lee (2014) confesses that although some of the questions revolving around SARS, such as its origins and its demise give satisfactory answers to epidemiological questions, however, many more questions lie beyond the normal interests of virologists. We infer from this relevant observation the reason behind the crisis of infodemics. We concluded that people are more interested in rendering the crisis an 'intelligible phenomenon'.

The e-society might be revolting and the micro-narratives they generate might be a special currency, however, the phenomenon of infodemics has always flowed organically during moments of uncertainty which peaked during pandemics. Certainly, living through tumultuous times is comparable across different epochs; the only thing is that it is reduced by a factor of New Media in the current pandemic. The approach we took is important as a standard reading against which new events are seen better in light of a close or far past. This paper has given particular focus to the Covid-19 pandemic, to the prominence of the art of narrating the alternative storyline which we argued ought not to be dismissed as an outdated practice.

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