

BIOPOLITICS AND NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE IN THE COVID-19 INFODEMIC: THE EPISTEMIC OF AN EPIDEMIC* **

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in Wuhan, China in 2019 has led to a global crisis with significant loss of lives. However, in addition to this health crisis, it has also given rise to a parallel crisis- an infodemic reminiscent of the political deception during the post-truth era in 2016. The primary aim of this study is to discuss the epistemic foundations of fake news spread during the COVID-19 pandemic through the concepts of biopolitics and neoliberal governance by Michel Foucault, and to reveal the impact of this fake news on the responsibilities of governments and companies related to the pandemic. Drawing inspiration from Foucault's concept of episteme, the study aims to understand how misinformation related to the pandemic shaped within a conceptual framework rooted in neoliberal governance. Furthermore, specific to this study, eight categories such as competition, inequality, vaccine nationalism, individualization, society's alignment with market logic, the embedding of science with capital, the dominance of popular culture, surveillance have been formulated to identify the epistemic codes of fake news related to the pandemic. This framework will be used to comprehend the socio-cultural impacts of the infodemic during the pandemic and shed light on the potential corrosive effects of this misinformation on the responsibilities of governments and companies.

Keywords: infodemic, biopolitics, neoliberal governance, COVID-19
JEL Classification: D8, L0, M38

COVID-19 İNFODEMİSİNDE BİYOPOLİTİKA VE NEOLİBERAL YÖNETİMSELLİK: BİR SALGININ EPİSTEMESİ

Özet

2019 yılında Çin'in Wuhan şehrinde ortaya çıkan KOVİD-19 salgını, önemli can kayıplarının yaşandığı küresel bir krize yol açmıştır. Ancak bu sağlık krizinin yanı sıra, salgın paralel bir krizin de doğmasına neden olmuştur: 2016'daki post-hakikat döneminin siyasi aldatmacasını anımsatan bir infodemiye. Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, KOVİD-19 salgını sürecinde yayılan yalan haberlerin epistemik temellerini Michel Foucault'nun biyopolitika ve neoliberal yönetimsellik kavramları üzerinden tartışmak ve bu yalan haberlerin salgınla ilgili devlet ve şirket sorumluluklarına olan etkilerini ortaya koymaktır. Foucault'nun episteme kavramından ilham alarak, çalışma, salgınla ilgili yalan haberlerin neoliberal yönetimsellik anlayışından kaynaklanan bir düşünsel çerçeve içinde nasıl şekillendiğini anlamayı hedeflemektedir. Ayrıca, yine aynı kuramsal izlekten bu çalışmaya özgü olarak oluşturulan rekabet, eşitsizlik, aşı milliyetçiliği, bireyselleştirme, toplumun piyasa mantığına göre şekillenmesi, bilimin sermayeye eklenmesi, popüler kültürün hakimiyeti, gözetim gibi sekiz ana kategori altında salgınla ilgili yalan haberlerin epistemik kodlarını belirlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çerçeve, infodeminin salgın dönemindeki sosyo-kültürel etkilerini anlamak ve bu haberlerin devlet ve şirket sorumlulukları üzerindeki potansiyel aşındırıcı etkilerine ışık tutmak için kullanılacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: infodemi, biyopolitika, neoliberal yönetimsellik, Kovid-19
JEL Sınıflandırması: D8, L0, M38

* This article is derived from a presentation at the 1st Interdisciplinary Art, Design, and Social Sciences International Symposium, organized by Beykoz University's Faculty of Art and Design on May 4-5, 2023, under the title "Borderless: Making Worlds & Beyond."

** This article is written based on the doctoral dissertation prepared by Müge Yılmaz under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ayşe Nevin Yıldız in the Communication Sciences Ph.D. program at Hacettepe University Institute of Social Sciences.

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1. Introduction

COVID-19 is a type of flu that emerged in China's Wuhan city in 2019, affecting the whole world. According to the World Health Organization's (WHO, 2023a) data as of May 2023, it has caused nearly three million deaths in the United States, over two million deaths in Europe, and close to two hundred thousand deaths in Africa, representing a factual reality of almost seven million deaths worldwide. However, despite COVID-19 pandemic being a serious global health crisis, it has also brought along a crisis of misinformation, much like the post-truth era characterized by political lies in 2016. This study aims to reveal the effects of this fake news on state and corporate responsibilities regarding the epidemic by examining the epistemic foundations of the fake news that occupied the agenda during the COVID-19 epidemic through Michel Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and neoliberal governmentality. Foucault's concept of episteme refers to the fundamental network of relationships that helps us understand the dominant thought patterns, knowledge production, and processes of meaning-making within a specific period. (Foucault, 2014, p. 221) Fake news about the epidemic also affects the information production processes during the epidemic period. The episteme of the COVID-19 infodemic will reveal in which political, commercial and social contexts the fake news that emerged during the epidemic was shaped. In this context, this study, which associates the dominant way of thinking of the pandemic period with neoliberalism, aims to initiate a discussion on what misinformation about the biggest health crisis of the 21st century makes less visible within the framework of French philosopher Michel Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and neoliberal governmentality. Whether fake news is produced intentionally or unintentionally, it is functional, and the capital and the government can take advantage of the structure of fake news that occupies the agenda to hide their own responsibilities. For this reason, presenting the conditions that create the infodemic within its own episteme will also be important in making visible the functions of fake news. Drawing on Foucault's theoretical framework, this study engages with eight specific categories —competition, inequality, vaccine nationalism, individualization, society's alignment with market logic, the embedding of science with capital, the dominance of popular culture and surveillance— crafted uniquely for this research to discuss the epistemic codes of the pandemic under overarching titles. Thus, the infodemic era is examined not only within its historical context but also through selected examples of misinformation, aiming to elucidate how false news agendas have eroded factual reality.

Within the general framework of the study, the second section initially provides an overview of the COVID-19 Infodemic, followed by the third section, where Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and neoliberal governance are discussed. This discussion encompasses the evolution of sovereign power into modern biopolitics and subsequently into the power of the neoliberal individual, all within the context of the pandemic. In the fourth section, the epistemic codes of the COVID-19 Infodemic, shaped by the understanding of neoliberal governance, are examined under eight specific categories derived from this theoretical framework. This study, grounded in Foucault's theoretical approaches, contributes uniquely to the literature by scrutinizing the pandemic's episteme through the lens of the eight categories established for this research.

As a result, this study, based on Foucault's episteme approach, aims to comprehend the intellectual forms of the pandemic period and, in this context, associate the episteme of infodemics with neoliberal governance. Thus, the intended goal is to direct the discussions on infodemics towards questions such as "under what conditions do we encounter misinformation?" and "what are we overlooking while misinformation dominates the agenda?"

2. COVID-19 Infodemic

COVID-19 is an infectious disease that emerged in Wuhan, China in 2019, causing a major global health crisis. Also known as the coronavirus, this flu virus primarily spreads among humans through respiratory transmission. With approximately seven million deaths attributed to COVID-19 (WHO, 2023a), the pandemic has put significant pressure on the healthcare systems of many countries, affecting millions of people. According to the World Health Organization's June 2023 data, the recorded number of COVID-19 cases worldwide is approximately around 767 million (ibid.). This figure highlights the significance of governments' pandemic management policies once again. In order to control the spread of the virus and protect public health, governments have implemented various measures. These measures include social distancing rules, mandatory mask-wearing, hand hygiene practices, and mobile patient tracking systems to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Additionally, measures such as border closures, travel restrictions, quarantine and isolation measures, contact tracing, and disease surveillance, along with mass vaccination programs, are among these precautions. However, the effects of COVID-19 have not been limited solely to the health sector; it has also deeply impacted various areas such as the economy, education, and social relationships. Moreover, the uncertainty and fear caused by the pandemic create a conducive environment for the spread of fake news.

World Health Organization (WHO, 2023b) Director-General, Dr. Tedros, emphasized during the early stages of the pandemic that "we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic.," stating that "fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous." The term "infodemic," representing the misinformation related to the pandemic, was not only used for the first time during the COVID-19 outbreak but also does not solely denote the spread of false information through social media. The term "infodemic" was initially coined by David Rothkopf (2003) in The Washington Post during the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak in 2003. It is a blend of "information" and "epidemic" and signifies the rapid dissemination of both accurate and inaccurate information in the digital media age. Just as false information spreading rapidly in the field of health can lead people to incorrect treatments and increase health problems, similarly, the rapid dissemination of only accurate information can also have its dangers. This is because in the fields of science and medicine, there are constant new discoveries, research, and developments, which means that even accurate information that spreads quickly can become incorrect or incomplete over time. Just as the fact that correct information is not disseminated to as wide an audience as misinformation, similarly, the information that accurate information has been updated or debunked may not gain as much attention as its initial presentation. For instance, at the beginning of the outbreak, there were different opinions regarding the importance of wearing masks, but later on, it was proven that mask-wearing is effective in preventing the spread of the virus (McDonald, 2021).

However, mask skepticism continued during the pandemic, referencing the uncertainty during those debates. Similarly, there have been constant updates and changes in treatment protocols and vaccine developments. Therefore, when considering the concept of infodemic, it is essential to focus not only on the uncontrolled and rapid dissemination of false information but also on the significance of conveying accurate information, just like in journalistic practices, following the 5W1H (where, when, why, how, who) framework. Especially, the reliability and currency of accurate information in the specialized field of medicine are closely related to how it is conveyed. Because accurate information, when taken out of context and disseminated with different implications, can also become material for manipulation. For example, despite knowing that the existence of vaccines has led to a decline in the momentum of the pandemic, on social media, the side effects of vaccines are often shared based on personal experiences, leading to the reproduction of vaccine skepticism. Similarly, according to a news report by Yeni Akit Gazetesi in Turkey (2021), the side effects of the vaccine created a trending topic on social

media with the hashtag "#biontechyanetki."² The news text contained tweets mentioning individuals who developed wounds, irregular heart rhythms, and even died of heart attacks after being vaccinated, emphasizing the fears that citizens have about the side effects of the vaccine while also criticizing the government for not providing sufficient informative information about vaccine side effects (ibid.). However, it wouldn't be wrong to say that conspiracy theories rather than critiques of governments are at the center of vaccine debates. But, according to statements from the World Health Organization (Taylor and Diamond, 2023), as of May 5, 2023, due to vaccines and treatment methods, COVID-19 is no longer classified as a 'global health emergency' after three years. With 13 billion doses of vaccines administered worldwide, the virus's death rate has decreased from 100,000 weekly deaths in January 2021 to only 3,500 deaths as of April 24 (BBC, 2023). A similar result was obtained in a study conducted in Turkey, which investigated the link between the vaccination rates of COVID-19 patients in intensive care and the course of the disease. According to the study, unvaccinated patients generally have a higher 28-day risk of death, although this varies by age and disease history (Yıldırım et al., 2023, p. 5). Similarly, according to research at 21 hospitals across the United States, vaccinated patients admitted to hospitals with COVID-19 had significantly lower disease severity than unvaccinated patients for all the variants (Lauring et al., 2022). In other words, contrary to the debates, it is the pandemic itself that is causing deaths, not the vaccines, and vaccines have helped reduce the deaths caused by the pandemic, ultimately contributing to ending the global health emergency. Additionally, it is a factual reality that scientifically produced COVID-19 vaccines do have side effects, of course. However, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023c), these effects are generally mild and temporary and far less harmful than the damage and risks caused by the disease itself.

As we can see from this example, infodemic not only involves the spread of misinformation but also the manipulation of accurate information by taking it out of context. For all these reasons, the concept of infodemic has been brought back into focus by the World Health Organization (WHO) during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a study covering a four-month period in the early stages of the pandemic and analyzing 2,311 contents in 25 languages from 87 countries, the most common types of infodemic during the pandemic are generally rumors, stigmatization, and conspiracy theories (Islam et al., 2020, p. 1621). It is highly possible

² The meaning of this Turkish hashtag "#biontechsideeffects" is that it is being used to categorize or label posts, comments, or content on social media platforms that discuss or share information about potential side effects related to the BioNTech (Pfizer-BioNTech) COVID-19 vaccine.

for everyone experiencing the pandemic to come across false information about the outbreak not only on social media but also in traditional media content. In the uncertain and panic-filled environment of the pandemic, people felt obliged to take any information seriously, from Whatsapp groups to TV channels, in their quest for the fastest updates. Based on March 11, 2020, as the official announcement date of the pandemic in Turkey, a study by Soğukdere and Öztünç (2020, p. 59) evaluated disinformation related to COVID-19 that was only present on social media and verified by Teyit.org. The study showed that after the disease arrived in the country, false news sharing increased by two-fold compared to the period before the disease's presence. Additionally, according to the findings of the study, Twitter was the platform with the most false news sharing, and news organizations used social media as a source of news and shared false news without verification (ibid.). Furthermore, a "trust crisis" regarding official announcements has begun to emerge as the gap between information and data from alternative media and mainstream media widens (Ertuna, 2020, p. 119). As seen, the COVID-19 pandemic, which became a global health crisis between 2019 and 2023, has brought about an uncontrollable infodemic as well. In light of all this information, the topic to be discussed in this study is how the infodemic process conceals the responsibilities of governments and companies during the pandemic, through the framework of biopolitics and neoliberal governance.

3. The Biopolitics and Neoliberal Governance of the Pandemic

The discussions about the COVID-19 pandemic frequently intersect with the concept of biopolitics proposed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, which also encompasses periods of pandemics such as the plague, leprosy, and smallpox. (Aydın, 2021; Demir, 2020; Sotiris, 2020; Peters, 2020) Governments all around the world have implemented various measures and sanction packages to prevent the spread of the virus and control the pandemic, which is one of the main reasons why these concepts have resurfaced. However, it is essential to expand beyond Foucault's discussions of surveillance and disciplinary approaches during the COVID-19 era and also consider his debates on neoliberal governance. (İnceoğlu and Çoban, 2021; Sparke and Williams, 2022; Šumonja, 2021) As Foucault stated in his book "The Birth of Biopolitics" (2015, p. 155), the discussions on biopolitics expanded in the 20th century to include an analysis of the "governance corresponding to the management of people's behaviors" in the functioning of neoliberal policies and the changing and evolving power relations associated with it. In this context, Foucault's analyses of power should be considered in

conjunction with power analyses that extend beyond his own era. Therefore, the COVID-19 period should not be only discussed through the concept of surveillance, but it should be opened up to encompass various power dynamics, such as the sovereignty based on the fear of agricultural-based torture in the 17th century, the disciplinary biopolitical approach with the establishment of modern states in the 18th century, and the neoliberal governance centered around competition in the 20th century. Foucault's analyses of power should be seen as complementary and intertwined, encompassing different periods rather than focusing solely on sequential power techniques.

Biyopolitics, in Foucault's work, first appears in the lecture text on public health titled "The Birth of Social Medicine" in 1974 and is further expanded in the Collège de France lecture texts on "The History of Sexuality" in 1976. Biyopolitics refers to the tactics and strategies employed by modern power structures to produce, govern, and discipline bodies/subjects, which have become the central focus of power. This concept is used to understand the efforts of power in governance, disciplining, and regulating individuals and populations. Biopolitics also encompasses policies and strategies related to individuals' bodies, health, reproduction, life spans, and other biological characteristics. (Foucault, 2020, p. 99-100) Neoliberal governance, another concept developed by Foucault, refers to the dissemination of market-based principles and techniques in the management of society (Foucault, 2015, p. 127-128). This governance approach aims to reduce the state's intervention in the economy, rely on the efficiency of market mechanisms, and emphasize individuals' self-governance responsibility. Foucault's analysis of "governance" does not create a rupture with his earlier analysis of power but becomes part of the field opened up by the problem of biopower (p. 282). In biopolitics, the focus of power is on governing and regulating people's lives, while control and strategies over the population are also prominent. Neoliberal governance, on the other hand, incorporates market-based principles and techniques into the framework of biopolitics. In this context, "governance" takes on the meaning of "the art of exercising power in the form of the economy" (p. 283). Thus, in Foucault's analysis of power, different forms of power intertwine with each other, highlighting that power exhibits both periodic changes and a continuous and enduring structure. This emphasis is important in demonstrating the interplay of various forms of power and their persistence over time. Foucault argues that the impact of power on life developed in two different ways starting from the 17th century. The first is the "anatomy-politics" of the body, which involves viewing the body as a machine to be disciplined, developing its capabilities, and integrating these processes into economic control systems (p. 102). In this context,

institutions such as hospitals, schools, and prisons are used as disciplinary institutions that determine what is considered normal and abnormal according to the objectives of power, and they are not fundamentally different from one another. This approach involves the development of individuals' capabilities, the control of their bodies, and their integration into economic control systems. Secondly, the biopolitics of the population emerged in the mid-18th century, based on an understanding of the human species that relies on biological processes. In this approach, there is a power mechanism that regulates factors such as reproduction, birth, death, health status, and life expectancy, with the aim of controlling life itself (p. 103). Thus, the anatomo-politics of the body focuses on the production of individual bodies, while the biopolitics of the population represents the control of the population on a broader scale. Foucault points to the panopticon model as a surveillance power mechanism in the 17th century, and discusses a positive power mechanism that focuses on individuals' biological bodies to make them productive.

However, with the 18th century, Foucault states that these policies shifted from a focus on disciplining individuals to a focus on the population, leading to the emergence of biopolitics or governance. Foucault approaches neoliberalism in three ways: economically, by re-implementing certain economic theories already in use; sociologically, by basing relationships within society solely on trade; and politically, by concealing the state's administrative and pervasive intervention (p. 109). In this context, neoliberal governance is the conceptualization of the state's covert power that shapes individuals and populations through market principles. Foucault's approach to neoliberal governance also involves sharing power with individuals. In the late 19th century, the essence of the market based on competition is not equivalence, exchange, and reciprocity as in classical liberalism, but rather inequality. (p. 104). Therefore, Foucault does not only point to a consumer form but rather signifies a society subjected to the dynamics of competition. "The desired homo economicus is not the individual of exchange, trade, and consumption, but the individual of enterprise, initiative, and production." (p. 128). The transformation of states into politically or commercially profit-oriented neoliberal governance mechanisms has also turned individuals into a performance society. Consequently, the responsibilities of "the state that sustains or abandons to death" have been distributed to individuals in the form of "survival of the fittest." Even in developed countries, the concept of the welfare state has started to erode, and precarious forms of work, such as flexible working hours, have increased. As observed during the pandemic, even in a crisis like a pandemic, private companies have laid off employees, leading to a rise in independent "freelance" or

remote work arrangements, and people have been forced to accept increasingly difficult conditions just to survive. States integrated with capital have played a significant role in the erosion of social rights. This is because the neoliberal state approach prioritizes economic interests and the growth of capital, embracing policies such as privatization of public services and deregulation. As a result, the fading social rights have been replaced by a governance approach where market conditions determine priorities, replacing the states' egalitarian policies. Together with the emergence of entrepreneurial subjects under these challenging conditions, "the operational conditions of neoliberal governance have transformed from being primarily based on rights, duties, and laws to being driven by interests, desires, investments, and competition" (Ören, 2015, p. 161). The structure of power, which expanded from monarchs to modern states, has been distributed to "entrepreneurial subjects" through 20th-century neoliberal policies. The responsibility for determining their own destinies has been entirely left to individuals, with the narrative of freedom and free market. The role of the state has become limited to serving market interests. Consequently, this form of governance has extended the distribution and management of power into the biopolitical realm, incorporating capital, and emphasizing an administrative approach where economic freedom and competition are at the forefront. As Dias and Deluchey (2020) pointed out, "The war is no longer of one individual against the other but the society as the battlefield of a total war: we are necessarily someone's adversaries" (p. 5).

In conclusion, Foucault's "toolbox" of biopolitical discussions, which focuses on modernity shaping not only individuals' behaviors but also their biological lives and populations, has provided a highly fruitful framework for understanding the pandemic era, extending from the modern state to the neoliberal individual in terms of power analyses. Furthermore, this theoretical trajectory is also significant for comprehending the infodemic period in conjunction with the conditions that created it and the functions of fake news.

4. Biopolitics and Neoliberal Governance in the COVID-19 Infodemic

The COVID-19 epidemic has brought about a worldwide infodemic, and in this process, the concepts of biopolitics and neoliberal governmentality have come to the fore in the analysis of the epidemic. In this context, we can give examples of some of the resources published while the epidemic continued: "Pandemic Neoliberalism Media" (2021), compiled by İnceoğlu and Çoban, "The Unraveled World: Accountings on the COVID-19 Pandemic" (2021), compiled by Erkan Ünal and featuring authors such as Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, Ingar Solty; Özen

B. Demir, "Pandemic: Medicopolitics of the Epidemic: COVID-19 Chronicles" (2020). It is possible to say that discussions about the epidemic often intersect with Foucault's concepts of biopolitics, surveillance, and neoliberal governmentality.

In terms of the pandemic, the concept of biopolitics refers to the government's efforts to regulate and control biological life during large-scale events such as health crises, while neoliberal governmentality represents a management approach based on free market principles and emphasizing individual responsibility. Establishing connections between infodemic and biopolitics and neoliberal governmentality debates will initiate another discussion on the functions of fake news. With this theoretical path, it will be possible to make an episteme of the COVID-19 infodemic. Owing to the fact that neoliberal forms of governmentality do not only represent an approach that highlights individual responsibility during the epidemic period, but also represent the operation of many areas such as competition, inequality, vaccine nationalism, the embedding of science with capital and the dominance of popular culture, surveillance according to market logic. Consequently, it becomes feasible to engage in an epistemic discourse regarding the manner in which misinformation about the epidemic obscures neoliberal crises.

Foucault's concept of episteme aims to look at events from within his own age; It is a set of relationships that can be discovered and combined in a certain era. (2014, p. 221) While the concept of episteme does not exclude micro-level relationships, it generally represents the dominant relationships in the current era. The dominant doctrine of the COVID-19 era is a neoliberal form of governmentality that includes biopolitics. Foucault's theoretical framework, which has been around since the 1970s, revolves around the concept of competition, incorporating both power dynamics and the individuals themselves into the realm of capital through an 'entrepreneur of the self' perspective (2015, p. 190). Therefore, the power technologies and responsibilities developed by the modern state for population management; It is also distributed to individuals themselves. However, this power sharing occurred in order to ensure their reproduction according to the market logic, rather than reducing the power of states and capital. For instance; during the pandemic, blame for the deaths of elderly individuals experiencing financial difficulties and unable to access healthcare is often placed on the individuals themselves, not on the governments. The ways of survival are no longer paths of solidarity in every aspect of life, but ways of surviving in a competitive environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the erosion of the social state and the prioritization of capital interests over societal interests, in line with the neoliberal policies that have been ongoing since the 1980s. The globally escalating unemployment rates during the pandemic have led to the worsening working conditions of labor classes condemned to insecurity and uncertainty by neoliberal capitalism for a long time (Ertuna, 2021, p. 92). Profit-oriented sensational health journalism has contributed to the spread of misinformation (İnceoğlu and Çoban, 2021, p. 29), and in the atmosphere of uncertainty created by fake news, the "inflated panic itself has been used as a mechanism for the production of consent by the power and capital" (Demir, 2020, p. 67). Certainly, the COVID-19 pandemic has obscured many neoliberal crises, such as uncertain market supply systems, economic inequalities, and racial disparities intersecting, temporary and flexible workers, social alienation, and the biopolitical abandonment of various marginalized groups (DiMuzio & Robbins, 2020, p. 20).

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic not only renders neoliberal crises more visible but also contributes to the rapid erosion of the social state, fostering the collaboration between states and capital. Moreover, misinformation related to the pandemic has further undermined the visibility of neoliberal crises, manipulating the challenges faced by society and steering the narrative away from real issues. This situation has contributed to the rapid erosion of the social state during the pandemic process and further strengthened the authoritarian structure of states in collaboration with capital. For example, while news claiming that vaccines are designed to secretly implant chips in people continues to circulate in WhatsApp groups and social networks (Spencer, 2021), global vaccine inequality has not received as much attention. Allegations that the pandemic was created in a laboratory by hidden forces to reduce the world population (FactCheck.org, 2023) have not garnered as much attention as the inadequacies and negligence of governments and capital in being unprepared for such a major outbreak. Those seeking to draw attention to factual reality have been subjected to censorship through emergency law during the crisis period. Just like Dr. Li Wenliang, discredited by the Chinese government for filming a video to warn his colleagues about the outbreak at the beginning of the pandemic, only to be later declared a hero by China after his death from COVID-19 (Hua and Shaw, 2020).

This theoretical discussion aims, within the scope of this study, to discuss the episteme of the COVID-19 infodemic from a plane grounded in biopolitics and neoliberal governmentality. Thus, it will assist in understanding the operational modes of capital and political power, shedding light on the functions of misinformation. The discussed topic can be approached from

various perspectives, but within the framework of this study, a discussion will be conducted under eight categories specific to this work. The epistemic processes shaping the pandemic and its infodemic include; competition, inequality, vaccine nationalism, individualization, society's alignment with market logic, the embedding of science with capital, the dominance of popular culture and surveillance. With these categories, while evaluating the infodemic within its historical context, an effort has been made to determine how fake news, occupying the agenda, erodes the factual reality.

4.1. Competition

It is possible to say that pharmaceutical companies entered into intense competition in developing vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the world. Vaccines have been of vital importance in combating the pandemic, both to stop the spread of infection and to reduce the impact of the disease. However, it has also created a new market for companies and governments to increase their profits. As a result, the race for vaccine and treatment development has become a significant part of the process between pharmaceutical companies and the countries they are associated with. But, in contrast to the competitive environment, which is always a component of international politics, the global level of risk posed by the virus led companies and governments to collaborate through internationally established platforms for sharing knowledge to understand the disease. Thanks to these global knowledge-sharing networks, which are essential for understanding the genetic structure of the virus and conducting research on the disease, the identification of the disease that took three months during the 2003 SARS virus outbreak only took days in the COVID-19 process.(Guillou, 2020) The genetic sequence of the virus for the treatment and production of the vaccine was published on January 12, 2020, by GenBank, an open-access genetic sequence database. (Storz, 2022). This rapid and transparent sharing of crucial information enabled researchers and health authorities worldwide to swiftly analyze the virus's genetic makeup and expedite the development of potential treatments and vaccines. The National Institutes of Health (NIH, 2023), affiliated with the United States and the World Health Organization, can be exemplified as health organizations supporting these data-sharing platforms. The WHO COVID-19 Research Database (2023) and platforms listed by the NIH (2023), such as open-access databases like Nexstrain³, Reactom⁴, PubMed Central (PMC)⁵, and the National Covid Cohort

³ <https://nextstrain.org/>

⁴ <https://reactome.org/>

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/about/covid-19/>

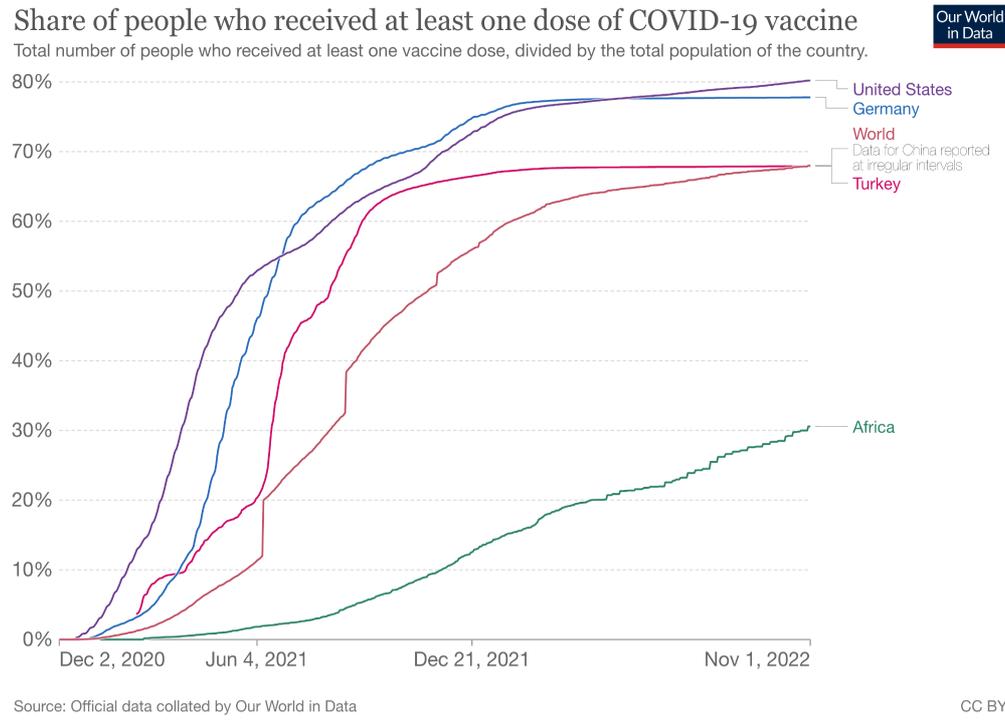
Collaborative (N3C)⁶ serve as examples of national and international data-sharing platforms related to the pandemic. As a result, the processes of developing vaccines and treatment methods progressed more rapidly. However, the collaboration during the production of vaccines and treatments took a commercial form afterward, leading to vaccine inequalities. Moreover, vaccine inequality further exacerbated the vulnerabilities in accessing healthcare for disadvantaged groups.

4.2. Inequality

According to the WHO (2023d), most COVID-19 vaccines are used in high and upper-middle-income countries, while people in low-income countries have not been able to access vaccines equally. Furthermore, this situation not only affects those without access to vaccines but also jeopardizes the management of the pandemic. The WHO Chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus underscores that the persistence of vaccine inequality contributes to the ongoing propagation of COVID-19 and poses a potential threat of mutations that might compromise the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines. (Schlein, 2021). While vaccines have become a profit method, the scientists who developed the vaccines have been excluded from this profit scheme either. Sparke and Levy (2022, p. 87) have observed that many vaccine scientists worldwide, such as the Oxford University ChAdOx vaccine team, who prefer to freely share their innovations for the purpose of providing humanitarian benefits, have instead seen their intellectual property monopolized by pharmaceutical companies, serving the profit-driven interests of their shareholders, after signing private licensing agreements with companies like AstraZeneca. Firms have monopolized researchers' altruistic and often voluntary efforts to boost their profits, leading to vaccine access starting primarily in developed countries and favoring the upper-middle class. As of April 2022, a significant portion of Africa still lacked any vaccine and treatment access at the population level, and even in the African countries that started vaccination, the number of doses administered per person remained extremely low (ibid.). As of November 2022, while 68% of the world's population had been vaccinated, the United States had a vaccination rate of 80%, Germany 77%, and Turkey 67%, whereas this rate was around 30% in Africa. (Table 1, Table 2).

⁶ <https://covid.cd2h.org/about>

Table 1: The Selected Populations Vaccination Rate as of November 2022



Source: (Our World In Data, 2023)

Table 2: The Selected Populations Vaccination Rate as of November 2022

Nov 1, 2022	
United States	80.21%
Germany	77.77%
World Data for China reported at irregular intervals	68.01%
Turkey	67.89%
Africa	30.57%

Source: (Our World In Data, 2023)

Despite the note stating that data from China may not be reliable, one can still observe rapid access to vaccines in developed and developing countries worldwide, while it is evident that access to vaccines is significantly low for a socio-economically below-average country like Africa. Thus, in 2020, the WHO, along with other components, established a global collaboration platform called COVAX to ensure widespread and effective distribution of

COVID-19 vaccines, primarily in low and middle-income countries worldwide (WHO, 2023). We can consider the efforts of the WHO and its components to minimize the risks of vaccine inequality as a naturalization of its existence. The pandemic, similar to vaccine inequality, has disproportionately affected vulnerable groups created by factors such as hunger, poverty, violence against women, and migration. It has acted as a ‘fragility multiplier’, for example, women – who represent 39% of global employment – have accounted for 54% of overall job losses during the pandemic. (WHO, 2022f, p. 8)

However, despite all the inequalities created and exacerbated by the COVID-19 health crisis, the topics dominating the agenda in newspaper headlines were different, driven by the race to quickly join social networks and interactions. Rather than focusing on issues such as vaccine and treatment access inequality and pharmaceutical companies selling vaccines to governments at a cost, conspiracy theories about vaccines took center stage. Rumors circulated, suggesting that the virus and even the subsequent treatment methods and vaccines were created by certain powers or by Bill Gates with the aim of reducing the global population due to factors such as climate change and rapid population growth, and these ideas managed to find their way into the agenda of everyone in general. We can discuss the agenda journey of vaccine and treatment access inequalities during the pandemic through three main aspects. The first aspect is the loss of the fourth estate (watchdog) role of mainstream media organizations in the principles of the separation of powers, due to their alignment with the neoliberal economic system. Media organizations have transformed from upholding ethical principles of journalism to becoming content factories focused on commercial and political interests. (Yén-Khanh and Phelan, 2023; Yılmaz, 2021, p. 219) Press freedom being restricted by censorship and political decisions, media companies engaging in a race for rapid content production driven by interactions, the insecurity of journalism as a profession, declining incomes of journalists, preference for short, consumable news over long news articles, and people's habit of consuming news from social media are all contributing factors. Mainstream media organizations have also played an active role in the dissemination of false news, not just social media, as they prioritize producing content to engage in the competition on social media rather than providing verified and well-sourced news. Therefore, both social media and mainstream media organizations are actively involved in the spread of false news.

Secondly, the presence of spreading fake news, especially by segments such as anti-vaxxers or followers of the #plandemic movement, who believe that the pandemic is fake or intentionally

planned and managed (Fichera et al., 2020), leads to a shift in the focus of the pandemic away from factual reality. This situation effectively diverts attention from the mistakes of governments and companies that have failed to fulfill their responsibilities in pandemic management, making them invisible. As a result, governments and companies can more easily manage mass movements that may arise against them by popularizing conspiracy theories that shape the agenda. Additionally, in an environment of information pollution, especially during a serious crisis situation, governments can quickly legitimize more authoritarian forms of governance to meet the increasing security needs of society. This allows them to increase their power over the media and society, making it easier for them to obscure their responsibilities. Anti-vaxxers, due to their mistrust of political and capital power, unknowingly contribute to the same system by believing in conspiracy theories. Rather than criticizing the neoliberal system, their focus on misinformation about vaccines and the pandemic serves the functionality of making the responsibilities of power and capital invisible.

The third aspect is that the outputs of scientific studies, along with the processes that led to them, are evaluated without knowing the efforts of scientists and their rights over the treatments and vaccines they have produced. The rapid production of mRNA vaccines adapted to COVID-19 as a result of research dating back to 1987 has not received as much attention as the claim that the Gates Family is involved in a conspiracy to control the world with vaccines and the COVID-19 pandemic (Brown, 2020). The focus has shifted from the almost 36-year effort of scientists in vaccine development to the hysteria of capital owners killing people. In the neoliberal order, justified concerns arising from the erosion of the social welfare state and people's increasing job insecurity etc. have changed their course with conspiracy theories, not only making scientists invisible but also rendering vulnerable groups invisible.

4.3. Vaccine Nationalism

Vaccine nationalism encompasses the prioritization of one nation to rapidly procure and stockpile vaccines from limited global vaccine producers, disregarding the needs of other countries. (Sparke and Levy, p. 89) This approach creates imbalance and injustice in global vaccine distribution by withholding fair and equal sharing of vaccines with other nations. The world's wealthiest countries have secured billions of doses by pre-ordering enough to protect their populations multiple times, leaving fewer vaccines available for other countries, and this situation also poses a risk of increasing treatment prices. (WEF, 2021; Riaz et al., 2021) Furthermore, vaccine nationalism also carries the risk of weakening global health security and

efforts to combat the pandemic. This is because controlling the pandemic requires cooperation and solidarity among all countries, but nationalist attitudes have made the reliability of vaccines a subject of debate for political rather than scientific reasons. In this context, on August 11, 2020, when Russia announced the Sputnik V (FAS, 2020) vaccine, it did not receive sufficient attention in the media in the United States, but it has been widely discussed on international social media platforms, particularly in Mexico, Venezuela, Turkey, and India. According to the social media research conducted by the FAS Disinformation Research Group between August 17th and 25th, Sputnik V content has been identified in 10 different languages (ibid.). The narrative that emerged in countries like Mexico and Venezuela, which have tense political relations with the United States, supports Russian efforts. However, between August 18th and 22nd, bot detection platforms estimated that 71.5% of the accounts tweeting about Sputnik V were likely bots, based on repeated patterns in their posts. The inference from this research is that the inorganic creation of positive reactions towards Sputnik V could potentially divert public opinion away from American vaccination efforts and favor Russia and Sputnik V. Additionally, the potential participation of countries such as Mexico, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Israel in Russia's vaccination effort could put the United States in a challenging diplomatic situation (ibid.). It speculates that the Russian vaccine, with its name reminiscent of the world's first satellite launched into orbit during the Cold War space race, provided a suitable ground for the Cold War. (Beaumont & Harding, 2020) The disinformation related to Sputnik attracts attention not only with political news but also with gossip news. For instance, the false claim that Russian President Vladimir Putin's daughter died after receiving the Sputnik V vaccine has been shared approximately 11,000 times on Facebook and has been debunked by Snopes (FAS, 2020; Evon, 2020). These vaccine debates based on nationalist policies have also played a role in people developing a distrustful approach towards vaccines.

We can also consider vaccine nationalism not only within the context of international relations but also within the scope of national policies, in line with neoliberalized nationalism. During the pandemic, leaders such as Trump, Merkel, Macron, and Johnson used the war metaphor in relation to democracy in their fight against the virus, with their main focus being to keep the economy alive. (Ünlü, 2022, p. 142-144). The war metaphor during the pandemic serves a functional purpose in preventing criticisms of political decisions under the state of emergency, while also demanding people to adhere to quarantine rules and risk their lives by working for the continuity of the economy. This economized political approach not only assigns an economic role to citizens but also gives rise to a form of neoliberal nationalism with an

economized sense of patriotism. (p. 148) At this point, we can say that national and international nationalist goals are shaped by the logic of the market in societies during the pandemic crisis. Moreover, the leaders emphasizing the continuation of production with war metaphors have not only deepened inequalities but also obscured their own negligence by allowing the spread of racist rhetoric directed towards other groups.

4.4. The Society's Alignment with Market Logic

In COVID-19, workers, doctors, security personnel, and other officials continued to work at the risk of their lives. Stay-at-home campaigns either did not adequately address the hardships of those who had no income and stayed at home or only addressed them after a long time. During the pandemic, countries were structured to protect sectors that serve markets and production. The elderly, refugees, minorities, and lower classes were treated as if they were last on the list to be rescued in a fire-like situation. As Badiou pointed out, the pandemic has exposed the contradiction between economy and politics. However, while Badiou may not expect this contradiction to lead to serious political consequences, he does acknowledge that the health system, schools, equitable education, care for the elderly, and addressing crises in these areas have become quite visible. He suggests that it may be possible to create a new public opinion and consensus by addressing these issues. (Badiou, 2020, p. 65-69). Indeed, as we reach May 2023, four years after the pandemic, it is possible to say that neoliberal crises have deepened further, and biopolitics has become more tightly intertwined with capital. The increase in precarious remote work arrangements, post-pandemic economic crises making it difficult for people to pay for healthcare expenses, the health sector shifting towards more profitable specializations resulting in a decrease in trained experts in other fields, brain drain of health professionals from less developed and developing countries to more advanced countries, and a decrease in the numbers of existing experts – all these examples indicate that even Badiou's less optimistic approach may not be possible.

As society is shaped by the logic of the market, vulnerable groups such as low-income families, refugees, the elderly, and minority communities can be perceived as expendable. Furthermore, they can be not only discarded but also blamed and held accountable through disinformation that invisibilizes their grievances. In this context, in the neoliberal order where society is shaped according to market logic, it is also possible to say that disinformation is produced for these purposes. We can cite the findings of the European Union's (Szakacs & Bognar, 2021, p. vi) research on "The Impact of Disinformation Campaigns About Migrants and Minority Groups

in the EU" as an example of this situation. In Rome, anti-gypsyism led to false claims about Roma communities being 'hotbeds' of infection. Germany, Croatia, and the Czech Republic saw disinformation about migrants being 'secretly allowed' into the country. Conspiracy theories with anti-Semitic undertones have also seen a surge in Europe. In the United States, Russian trolls spread similar anti-Semitic conspiracy theories as the far-right. Extremist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS used disinformation for recruitment purposes, while some groups framed the COVID-19 pandemic as God's punishment of enemies. Additionally, the pandemic has fueled an increase in anti-Asian racism in Europe, leading to social media campaigns like #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus ('I am not a virus') (ibid.).

In conclusion, throughout the pandemic, states prioritizing capital and the economy have governed society according to market logic. Just as seen in the aforementioned examples of racism, false news has served the interests of states and capital by diverting attention, obscuring these discriminatory neoliberal policies, and exacerbating polarization within society. While these discussions should focus on why the public health policies of states are so weak during a global crisis, minorities are often blamed and marginalized instead. Considering society's alignment with market logic, it's also appropriate to mention the impact of vulnerable groups' higher health cost burdens on states. When considering both states and individuals who support discriminatory narratives, this situation highlights the contribution of fake news to distancing the neoliberalized society from humane values. Furthermore, along with fake news that assists the substitution of humanitarian values with economic interests, the responsibilities of capital and states are also rendered invisible.

4.5. Individualization

The neoliberal order, in times of crisis such as a pandemic, not only utilizes racism but also individualization techniques to obscure inequality. In the competitive-based current economic system, individuals are treated as entrepreneurs, just like companies, and "survival of the fittest" prevails. In this context, we can exemplify the "Luppo Incident" in Turkey (Öztürk, 2020). Luppo is a type of sweet snack referred to as a sandwich cake. What associated Luppo, the snack, with the individualization techniques in the neoliberal order was the images that surfaced on social media in September 2020 during a last-minute curfew announcement in Turkey. People rushed to the streets to stock up on essentials within the limited time frame. A photograph of a person waiting in line with a pack of Luppo became the center of social media outrage, as some criticized it for not being an essential item. The person in the photo faced

serious accusations, such as "putting humanity at risk" and calls for their prosecution. However, the serious problems caused by the unplanned last-minute curfew announcements or the fact that staying at home is not solely an individual choice but also a matter of socio-economic class, could not be adequately addressed or brought to the forefront of the discussion. As Öztürk (2020) pointed out:

“While all this was happening, the production of Luppö continued uninterrupted in factories, and the workers of that factory continued to go out to the streets. However, the ideological hegemony decided to prioritize discussions about what the individual buying Luppö did or did not do, determining the agenda.”

In this context, we can observe fake news individualizes political mistakes, targeting individuals, not the system or politics and prevents those responsible from appearing.

4.6. The Embedding of Science with Capital

With the neoliberal scientific approach, medicine has drifted away from being a part of the social welfare state and has increasingly acquired a commercial dimension. In medical research, more emphasis has been placed on profitable areas like cosmetic products and hair transplant tourism, rather than vaccines and preventive medicine. Particularly, health tourism has gained popularity in recent times, exemplifying this shift. Medical tourism can be described as the phenomenon where wealthier countries benefit from healthcare services in poor or developing countries. India, for instance, is positioning itself as a leading player in the global medical market, establishing a reputation in various healthcare services such as cardiac, cosmetic, and joint surgeries (Smith, 2012, p. 1). Certainly, Turkey is considered one of the preferred destinations for health tourism, along with India. For instance, people from countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, which are among the top countries sending medical tourists to Turkey, come to receive services like hair transplants and cosmetic surgeries. (Özdoğan and İlhan, 2022, p. 267) Although medical tourism is often depicted as being important for bringing foreign currency to the country, it also comes with disadvantages concerning healthcare services.

Medical tourism can dominate the healthcare systems of less affluent countries for economic reasons, potentially weakening the health needs of populations with insufficient resources due to income inequality (Smith, 2012, p. 8).

Furthermore, as centers focused on medical tourism are on the rise, there has been a decrease in interest towards research institutions that would play a crucial role in managing national

crises like pandemics. To exemplify this with Turkey, in 1928, the Republic of Turkey established the Refik Saydam Hıfzıssıhha Müessesesi to safeguard public health. (TTB, 2021) However, despite gaining renewed attention with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, it became evident that this institution had ceased to operate in 2011 due to shifts in health policies. The "Health Transformation Project" implemented in Turkey since 2002 replaced well-established hospitals with city-company hospitals, reducing preventive healthcare services and orienting treatments towards profit (ibid.). This situation highlights the emergence of a city-company hospital culture as a consequence of neoliberal policies.

Moreover, medical tourism may provide more lucrative opportunities for medical professionals, leading them to prefer certain areas of specialization. For instance, in India, approximately 75% of medical specialists are involved in the private sector (Smith, 2012, p. 5). As a result, the chances of low-income populations benefiting from private healthcare services also decrease.

In this context, the discussion of The Embedding of Science with Capital should also be considered among the factual realities that fake news covers while changing the agenda.

4.7. The Dominance of Popular Culture

The integration of medicine with capital has also contributed to scientists being associated with populist rhetoric. Doctors in the spotlight, aware of the increasing market demand for their opinions, did not hesitate to shape their medical statements in ways that could put the public at risk. One such example is Associate Professor Dr. Oytun Erbaş, who gained attention both when expressing his views during the early stages of the disease and later on as COVID-19 spread in Turkey. (Show Ana Haber, 2020). He made statements such as "The virus cannot cause an outbreak in Turkey due to genetic reasons," "COVID-19 may come to Turkey, but it will never cause an outbreak like in China," and "Wearing a mask will not prevent the disease and may even increase the risk of infection due to moisture." (ibid.). These remarks were widely shared on social media with a sense of nationalism. In response to the viral claims, a question was directed at Prof. Dr. Kara in the news report:

“Is the superior gene being sought in Turks?” He clarified, "I wish such a thing were possible, but it is not. Every virus must use a receptor as its gateway to enter cells. This virus uses a receptor called ACE2, which is low in Turkish genes. Therefore, there is a misconception that the virus does not infect Turks. However, this is incorrect. For example, a Turkish citizen died in France due to COVID-19. It would be nice if we had such an advantage, but we don't. The key is not in the genes; trust in personal hygiene.” (NTV, 2020)

As evident from the statement, Professor Dr. Kara has countered the fundamental premise of the assertion, emphasizing that the reported information was not substantiated by evidence but rather speculative in nature.

During the course of the pandemic, while the disease was rapidly spreading worldwide, official statements indicated that COVID-19 reached Turkey in March 2020 (Anadolu Ajansı, 2020). However, prior to the detection of the disease and its severity in Turkey, the statements of Associate Professor Dr. Oytun Erbaş, who had a certain popularity in the Turkish media due to his previous works, were taken as expert opinions. As a result, people who believed in the accuracy of these claims were putting their lives and the lives of the community at risk. Associate Professor Dr. Oytun Erbaş, despite being a medical professional, presents his opinions about the virus in a way that may put the public at risk, even though they are not supported by evidence-based data. In this context, we can observe that he prioritizes populist approaches over the primary goal of his profession, which is public health. This situation is significant as it highlights that the security of accurate information is jeopardized not only in politics but also in scientific fields due to neoliberal policies. Considering the limited number of media professionals specializing in health journalism in the Turkish media and the fact that these news articles are often prepared by non-experts in the field, the populist statements of some scientists pose a more significant danger to public health.

4.8. Surveillance

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned into a massive crisis affecting health, social and economic systems around the world. During this era, countries tried to control the spread of the epidemic by taking various measures. The measures taken include a number of surveillance methods such as health checks, isolation practices, digital tracking systems, social distance measures and curfews. Although these methods provide extensive benefits during the epidemic period, they may prevent us from seeing that, as Agamben (2020, p. 14) emphasizes, "life is being reduced to a purely biological state in which its social and political, even human and emotional dimensions are lost." When considered in the light of Foucault's concepts of surveillance and biopolitics, it can be seen that these surveillance measures during the pandemic period are aimed at ensuring the security of societies, but also lead to various discussions about the privacy and freedoms of individuals. It has been reported that "in the Xinjiang region, where Uyghur Turks live densely in China, the people suffered from hunger, were forcibly quarantined, and had difficulty in obtaining medicine and daily needs due to the 40-day isolation imposed due

to the COVID-19 epidemic" (Euronews, 2022). Although China is the country where the epidemic started and is one of the countries that brought the epidemic under control most easily, it has frequently been the subject of human rights violations, as in the case of the Uyghur Turks, with the rules and surveillance mechanisms they implement. We can understand how China has developed its surveillance mechanisms within the scope of COVID-19 measures with its smart city applications. In cities that were monitored by millions of security cameras during the epidemic, the government installed CCTV (closed-circuit television) cameras in apartments, some of which are equipped with artificial intelligence and facial recognition technology, in order to prevent people from leaving their homes during quarantine. (Uludağ & Gün, 2023, p. 160) Moreover, these technologies make Foucault's argument that "surveillance is more effective and efficient than punishment" (Foucault, 2012, p. 23) meaningful today, with governments able to control large population groups in a mass crisis such as a pandemic.

Starting from this point, the point where the concept of surveillance intersects with fake news is related to the fact that fake news occupies the agenda more than the human rights violations created by surveillance. For example; claims such as that COVID-19 vaccines are designed to secretly chip people (Spencer, 2021) and that Bill Gates aims to reduce the world population with vaccines (Korkmaz, 2020) are allegations that the majority face on a global scale on the public agenda, while China's authoritarian surveillance mechanisms against Uyghur Turks, using the epidemic as an excuse. Human rights violations have not occupied the agenda as much as sensational fake news. Moreover, while the Chinese Government apologized for the shortcomings and inadequacies done to the Uyghur Turks, it arrested those who contributed to bringing the issue to the agenda "for spreading rumors" and for "creating opposition and disrupting public order". (Euronews, 2022)

As a result, the surveillance measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic were implemented for the safety of societies and to control the epidemic. However, these measures have created a balance that conflicts with individuals' privacy rights and freedoms. Evaluations made based on Foucault's concepts of surveillance and biopolitics show that surveillance measures during the pandemic period do not only serve the purpose of combating the epidemic, but also interfere with the freedoms of individuals in order to ensure the security of societies. (Agamben, 2020; Demir, 2020; Euronews, 2022; İnceoğlu & Çoban, 2021) Especially in the case of China, it has become clear that the surveillance mechanisms implemented under the pretext of the epidemic lead to human rights violations. According to Foucault (2017, p. 70),

the government, which is not obliged to prove why laws are implemented, seeks to renew its influence within the brilliance of its distinctive expressions, as it cannot provide uninterrupted surveillance. When we consider these expressions within the context of the pandemic, it is possible to say that the sensational structure of fake news reproduces the government with the atmosphere of uncertainty it creates by occupying the agenda. Fake news is on the agenda more than human rights violations created by surveillance. During the epidemic period, various fake news on a global scale, beyond creating information pollution, have shaped the public agenda by overshadowing surveillance and human rights violations.

5. Conclusion

This study endeavors to scrutinize the epistemic underpinnings of misinformation disseminated amid the COVID-19 pandemic by employing Michel Foucault's theoretical frameworks of biopolitics and neoliberal governmentality. Throughout the study, Michel Foucault's theories of biopolitics and neoliberal governance have been used as a basis to discuss how disinformation can function to obscure the responsibilities of the government and capital during crisis periods like the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, it was intended to draw attention to which facts the misinformation about the pandemic, which occupies the agenda, hides within the framework of the conditions that produced them. Within this framework, "under what conditions do we encounter fake news about the epidemic?" an attempt has been made to answer the question. In this context, the episteme of the infodemic has been tried to be classified within the framework of biopolitics and neoliberal governmentality under eight headings created specifically for this study, based on Foucault's theoretical path: competition, inequality, vaccine nationalism, individualization, society's alignment with market logic, the embedding of science with capital, the dominance of popular culture and surveillance.

All these categories are important for us to see how neoliberal governmentality transforms relations in all areas of life, especially in a global crisis such as the pandemic, and how fake news assumes a function independent of its producer in these processes. According to Foucault, neoliberal management does not correct the destructive effects of the market on society, does not create a protective wall between economic processes and society, but intervenes in society itself for the benefit of capital with all its management mechanisms. (Foucault, 2015, p, 126) In this context, people who lost their jobs and cannot access health services during the COVID-19 epidemic, refugees, the elderly, women subjected to domestic violence, those who cannot access vaccines and treatment, those whose wages decrease while their working hours increase,

families who have difficulty in meeting their basic needs due to the economic difficulties, proves that the concept of social state has melted away and been replaced by a capital-oriented management approach. Thus, it is seen how capital-oriented policies intervene in the living conditions and daily experiences of these groups, how this intervention deepens economic inequalities, and how competition comes to the fore instead of social solidarity. This situation is supportive of Foucault's perspective on how the neoliberal governance based on a competitive economy affects society, even during the pandemic.

Moreover, while the difficulties experienced during the COVID-19 epidemic are constantly increasing due to economic effects, on the other hand, they are becoming more complicated with misleading information arising from the infodemic. Because the false news spread about the epidemic not only reinforces panic and fear, but also occupies the agenda by covering up the responsibilities of capital and governments. At the same time, as a result of the competitive economic order, neoliberal subjects have lost faith in the authorities that are supposed to provide reliable information about the epidemic. Considering all these reasons, it is possible to say that the COVID-19 infodemic has turned into a neoliberal management mechanism in the environment of uncertainty and insecurity created. Mirowski's discussion in his book "Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown" (2014) about how although the financial crisis of 2008 caused the neoliberal economy and policies to be questioned, the crises actually reinforce neoliberal policies can be considered in this context. Fake news occupies the agenda in times of crisis such as epidemics, diverting the focus from the responsibilities of power and capital. Thus, neoliberal governmentality always retains the opportunity to reproduce itself under the influence of the atmosphere of uncertainty created by panic, fear and fake news during the crisis period. In this context, the episteme table of the infodemic, which is tried to be presented with eight categories in the study, was produced based on Foucault's theoretical theme in order to support these views.

In conclusion, as we reach the year 2023, which we can refer to as the post-pandemic period, it is possible to say that the questions about why we were unprepared for the epidemic are no longer asked. The times is that normalized mass graves, transported dead bodies in trucks, and deciding processes who would survive at hospital doors have been forgotten. Moreover, the financial crisis experienced during the epidemic period still continues. However, another important point is that while it is obvious that we may encounter a similar epidemic again, we cannot be sure whether the capital and the states that govern us have learned from this epidemic.

Therefore, media and communication science studies play a crucial role, particularly in times of crisis, by performing functions such as understanding the episteme of the era through the news and publications they generate, conducting an archaeological exploration of history, making the stories of disadvantaged groups and others visible, and scrutinizing the governmentality of states and capital. However, even more importantly, the media should not only acknowledge that the combat against fake news is not limited to verifying these news but also creates a deeper field of struggle by investigating the purposes served by these news. This study, within this entire approach, has been prepared with the aim of seeking answers to the question in the pandemic era, "What are we overlooking when fake news occupies the agenda?"

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