Social Media, Fake News, and COVID-19
By Ece Sahin, LL.M. Candidate 2020

Governments and citizens around the globe are working hard to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this is not only a fight against the virus, but also against the anxiety that the virus caused. Day by day, the psychological war against the virus escalates by the leakage of fake news.

Fake news has been used for various agendas in recent history. Research shows that Americans fear fake news more than they fear terrorism because fake news deteriorates their confidence in government institutions.

Lately, fake news saying that President Trump will declare a national quarantine has started to spread around the nation. Such messages urge people to stock up on food and supplies, and "forward" the information "to their network." But rather than being helpful, such misinformation spurs disrupted supply chains and food waste.

Other rumors spreading around social media state that COVID-19 is a bioweapon, notwithstanding the constant confirmation by health officials that COVID-19 is not a genetically manipulated virus. President Trump has responded by saying that "foreign groups are playing games," using fake news as a political tool.

As social media companies take measures to combat fake news, the originators change tactics and have started to disseminate fake news in image form. These image often look sophisticated, as if they have been released by a governmental institution. Furthermore, images are more difficult for computers to analyze and fact-check than are words alone.

COVID-19 related fake news has elevated the debate surrounding the weaponization of social media. Social media companies are manipulated by the spread of misleading information. Furthermore, social media companies have demonstrated how they can manipulate speech by deleting and blocking information around their platforms.

The persuasive power of social media highly depends on the credibility that users give to the platform. Users should be careful to assess the information they see on social media, rather than automatically forwarding what they have read. Otherwise, users contribute to the idea that social media companies have become more powerful than governments via their ability to manipulate public information.