Perspectives and reviews in the use of narrative strategies for communicating fake news in the tourism industry

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Abstract. *In this article we review research from the past decade that explores how elements of communication from social media and press articles influence the decision making for choosing a travel destination. 'Fake news' has the potential to impact opinions, expectations and behaviour of tourism consumers. Perceived as an important threat to modern democratic societies, the course of intentional false data dissemination is able to disrupt perception and throughout the normal functioning of state institutions and private companies. Hence, manipulation of information shapes differently the image of tourism destinations, accommodation units, cruise ships and even tourist attractions mostly in order to produce higher economic benefits. Unfortunately, sometimes 'fake news' spreading could be detrimental to tourist destinations and operators. In order to pursue, cope, absorb and adjust threats related to 'fake news', we will use and approach in a later work the aspects regarding a 'societal resilience'*

Keywords: narrative strategies, fake news, travel industry, strategic communication, social influence, societal resilience.

Introduction

The "fake news" expression has been introduced in the media area in the last years, being perceived as a serious threat to democracy and freedom of expression. The term gained popularity with the election of Donald Trump in the United States (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) and was later used in the vocabulary of Western experts in political communication, political science, international relations or security studies.

Although the expression gained popularity quite recently, it is actually much older than we could imagine. Various governments and state leaders from all around the world have often used disinformation campaigns to advance their interests in the international arena.

In the twentieth century, due to the development of technology and communications, the propaganda used by some state actors reached unimaginable levels globally, influencing the dynamics of domestic policy in several states (Fascist, Nazi or Communist propaganda). Subsequently, the evolution of the Internet and social networks provided governments and individuals with an environment conducive to the uncensored dissemination of ideas on a larger scale. It has been used since ancient times to create chaos and mistrust, to undermine opponents and promote long or short-term strategies. What differs today is the technology that has brought the biggest change since the invention of printing.

Of course, newspapers, radio and television have changed the world. But the civilization built on the Western pattern in the last centuries has known how to find the means to make the

media a responsible space or as responsible as possible. The waters have been split in two, the quality press and the tabloid press. People knew what they were reading, what was news, and what sensationalism was. The norms of journalism adopted by the mainstream press have brought prestige, the readers being convinced that they are not wrong if they give credibility to the publications in the quality area.

However, the digital revolution has created a completely different landscape. Every smartphone user has become a much more informed person, that's for sure, but not really better informed. Many are, in fact, much better misinformed. For two reasons. First comes from the anyone who posts anything which comes in mind. Second is the multitude of theories and perceptions regarding social, political and religious aspects, which led to the development of influential narratives.

The tourism area couldn't be ignored in the midst of the social marvel of 'fake news' spreading all over the world. Data, statistics and reviews in tourism play an essential role as the industry is exceedingly dependent of information that is continuously created, shared and expended by millions of individuals around the world. Within the wake of later prove from different settings, 'fake news' has the potential to impact opinions, desires, tendencies and conduct of tourism buyers. Moreover, the control of data may shape in an unexpected way to the advantage or disservice of tourism goals and administrators.

Literature review

What is Fake News?

According to Vladimir Volkoff (2004), persuasion is a form of subtle communication with clear objectives: to finally change an opinion, an attitude or a behavior, but with the agreement and through pseudo-convincing internalization from the target. It is widely used in complex strategies such as manipulation techniques. Its use has been driven by the social successes of political-propagandistic and advertising communications.

'Fake news' has proven to have vast implications on public matters (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) However, tourism sector cannot be disregarded amidst the social phenomenon of this volatile trend. News satire and parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018), all of these words have been associated over the years with the term 'fake news'.

Persuasion therefore involves an active relationship between sender and receiver involving a "negotiation" of the meaning of messages between the two, which presupposes a certain degree of semiotic and psychological freedom of the receiver, according to Dima and Vlăduțescu (2012). Disinformation is based on a process of persuading the recipient of the communication act (Siegrist, et al., 2010), but it is a very complex technique through which information is constructed with the highest degree of veracity.

Umberto Eco said that the usual idiot has gained a voice in the community and is still being listened to. Second, organized groups systematically spread false or partially false news for various purposes, often political purposes. For those who have carefully considered the opportunities offered by technology, it has become clear that the possibilities for manipulating people are currently limitless. Organizations and states that want to influence the choices of the population in another country can do so.

The use of Fake News

People receive information directly, without having time to verify what is true and what is not (Rubin, et al., 2016). Several algorithms have been created using Machine Learning for fake news detection (Gravanis, et al., 2019). On the other hand, the people themselves provide through the activity they have on social networks the information necessary to discover their preferences, fears, degree of preparation, belonging to an ethnic, political and social group

(Onete, Vargas and Chita, 2020). Subsequently, the subject receives the selected information according to his psychological profile. The results are spectacular.

A study conducted by Talwar et al. (2019) shows that self-disclosure, online trust and social media fatigue are associated with the sharing of fake news.

Two major electoral processes, in two established world democracies, Britain and the United States, have been influenced by online campaigns. In the UK, Brexit promoters have won by making full use of false news in the most sensitive areas for many voters, such as immigration, job losses, and the repatriation of funds which were used as contributions to the European Union. Subsequently, it was found that most of the Brexit camp's statements on these issues were false. In the United States, the fake news was aimed at discrediting the Democratic candidate and presenting the Republican candidate in a more favorable light, whose campaign themes targeted, as in the case of Brexit, immigration, jobs threatened by foreigners and taking the country back. Officially, the American authorities accused a foreign power, Russia, of interfering and influencing the American electorate, which is an unprecedented fact in history.

Results and discussions

The term 'fake news' in tourism can be manifested in various forms. The review of practical evidence also leads to identify and include examples of 'fake news' in the travel and tourism industry. The recipe that has been working for a long time is the polarization of very controversial topics, which arouse very heated discussions and debates. For example, the binary discourse "We vs They" type. First, the elements with polarizing potential are identified. What are the topics that can split a society? Once identified, it goes on to identify the public that is either for or against. This false news is created by experts in the field of disinformation. There are mixed teams of sociologists, psychologists and secret agents working on this ingredient, adapted to the local specifics. The tool that these disinformation specialists use is Facebook - the most efficient source of personal data, where users make it visible for free.

In 2017, the Lithuanian national tourism agency was mindful for using pictures irrelevant to the nation to promote the state in an online showcasing campaign (BBC, 2017). The Bali Development Planning Agency in Indonesia claimed that various countries were circulating false statements about the danger of the volcanic eruption of Mount Agung in Bali, in order to detract visitors from the island. In 2017, the controversial case of a Polish tourist murdered in Egypt became a case of public domain (Bower, 2017). The discussion regarding the tragic events rapidly spread on social media, aided by the creation of Facebook groups and an online poll launched by a tabloid news website. Undoubtedly, while the sad facts remain central to the story, the online debate spurred by diverging versions of the truth and politicized propaganda divulged by online sources caused a collective negative effect for Egypt's image, resulting in numerous travel cancellations to the country by Polish travelers following the tragic events (Colhon, 2013). Recently, the Ministry of Tourism from India had to officially deny the fabricated order with their own logo saying 'hotels and resorts across India will remain closed till 15th of October 2020 due to coronavirus disease' that was spread on social media. Another travel sector which was recently affected by 'fake news' is the cruise industry that has been hit hardest by the COVID19 pandemic. Undocumented articles related to crew member deaths on board cruise ships, disastrous management and future bankruptcy of cruise lines are just a few examples of how 'fake news' spreading could be detrimental to cruise industry, in this particular case. On the other hand, cruise industry has overcome numerous challenges in the past, and it is expected that the industry will rebound and prosper with even further enhancements to their already rigorous health and safety protocols in place in the future. According to Gallego et al. (2020), the security policy is not just a domestic issue, but also affects international tourism demand.

Figure 1. Types of Fake News

Source: Authors' own research

Some examples to illustrate the figure above and better explaining these types of fake news are: mis-information: someone sharing a post on Facebook without date information, but not realizing that it contains out of date info; dis-information: a competitor posts false statistics about your organization with a direct intent to harm your activity; mal-information: using a real picture of a big and violent protest in order to exaggerate another protest which has nothing to do with the one presented in the picture.

These techniques succeed mostly because of the psychological vulnerabilities which are found along the route of processing and consuming information (Busu, Vargas and Gherasim, 2020). There is a wide range of such features, like social belonging, the overwhelming amount of information, cognitive biases or the polarization of specific topics. Therefore, fake news are difficult to fight against because they resonate emotionally and cognitively to an intended audience, mechanism which is known as 'belief perseverance' – people's incapacity of changing their minds after being shown new and different information (Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, 2015). A different point of view or a different fact would matter little when it is faced against strong emotional and social aspects related to someone's sense of identity or community (Calvert, 2014).

According to the results of the Eurobarometer survey, conducted by the European Commission, in February 2018, more than half of Romanians (59%) trust the news posted on social platforms, without checking them, Romania being, from this point of view, number one in Europe. Most of those interviewed (79%) say they can distinguish false news, and 1 in 5 Romanians share the information they read (European Commission, 2018).

During the COVID19 pandemic, several mis-information campaigns have been conducted in order to spread fake news. The three main narratives through which the main topics of debate arise are the real origin of virus, the miracle cures and, as usual, big conspiracies. From here, the differences begin: the virus is either made in the USA, in China or in Israel. Then, the purposes for which it escaped differ: it was launched with good intentions to impose a new world order, or to slow down the aging process of the population. There is a common thread, but the intentions are different. In Romania, vitamin C and other miracle cures are narratives that have circulated on TV and on social platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook. It was supposed to have vaccines discovered or stolen from Romania, and even cheap medicines kept away in order to fill the Big Pharma accounts. The conspiracy theory says that everything is part of the agenda for imposing compulsory vaccination, an idea coupled with previous anti-vaccination movements and an attempt to destroy the traditional family and conservative values.

Figure 2. Types of Propaganda

Source: Authors' own research

On the other side, as observed in Figure 2, there is another classification of fake news, depending on its origin. White propaganda is a method of information warfare, but with somewhat more limited effects, given that the source that emits the information comes from a hostile space and it is not hidden. Therefore, it has an impact especially on the supporters in the country on which the white propaganda actions are directed. The role of white propaganda is therefore to strengthen ties with sympathizers, rather than to change the actions of opponents.

In a more sophisticated register, black propaganda “deceives its origins and thereby makes deliberate lies plausible”. Influence is a very complex technique whose effectiveness depends on the credibility of the agent of influence, especially in terms of avoiding any partisan association with the side whose interests it serves consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, the influencing action is not modeled by a lie, but “has a functioning mechanism driven by seduction”. Influence is more psychological than informational.

In 2018, the United Kingdom decided to set up an institution dedicated to combating false news and misinformation, recognizing that this phenomenon is a threat to the security of the Kingdom. In the same year, SAPO, Sweden's intelligence service, issued a public warning about the potential for fake news to pose a national security risk in the context of the September elections. The United States has decided to take action to limit the impact that misleading narratives can have on public opinion, launching security culture campaigns through the intelligence services for the general public. This series includes an article published by the CIA, which advises readers to “think like intelligence analysts” to avoid the danger of being misled by false news.

During the same year 2018, the European Union has developed an *Action Plan* which gathers up efforts belonging to multiple EU institutions destined to counter disinformation in Europe. The mentioned paper is meant to enlarge EU's capabilities and to strengthen cooperation between member states throughout the fight against fake news. Among other actions, the mentioned plan enhances cooperation between online platforms and industries, assigns strategies for improving detection, analysis and exposure of disinformation and builds joint responses to threats. One of the main pillars of the released document defines the term ‘societal resilience’ as means of both raising awareness and empowering all sectors of society, in order to better fight against false information. This set of measures is also destined to improve the media literacy of ordinary citizens and will be approached in a future work.

Conclusion

This paper reviews the literature published recently regarding this subject, but due to the novelty of the topic, the authors used both academic sources that were available in the areas of politics,

journalism, sociology or computer science and non-academic sources as newspaper articles. The phenomenon of 'fake news' is relatively new in the tourism context so further studies on 'truth value' and authenticity could be done. The opacity and indistinct reliability (Fideli, 2020) are only some effects that can deeply affect users and a whole industry when fake news meet tourism and travel agencies. This phenomenon requires more attention by tourism academics in order to analyze consumer behavior and crisis management.

A report by the European External Action Service's Strategic Communication Task Force identified hundreds of cases of misinformation in the current crisis. Between January 22 and March 19, 2020 alone, there were 110 false reports of Russian origin about the coronavirus. The authors and messages are always the same and have a long tradition in the Russian system of influence abroad (EEAS Special Report, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) is already talking about an "infodemia" related to coronavirus. Not only is the virus spreading around the world, but so is a growing amount of information. However, much information is pure misinformation and is used as a means of exercising political influence.

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