

PHENOMENON OF FAKE NEWS

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Abstract

Analysis of Fake News phenomena – mainly looking for an answer where are the Fake News sources and who is responsible for their effects - psycho and social aspects of fake news mechanism. Additionally, focusing on evolution of its definition and their taxonomy. At the end, fake news are analyzed as a 21st century biggest thread of new media and looked for the lasts trends in counteracting.

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Stories related to the phenomena of fake news have become a permanent feature in the headlines of newspapers since 2016 and are increasingly reflected in the social media. The ability to evaluate information coming also from, it might seem, proven sources is becoming a must-have of the 21st century. [Harari, 2018] The proposed work aims to analyze the latest phenomenon - Fake News. The crucial question will be who is behind this phenomenon and why it happens. Analytical and empirical studies will be used in the dissertation, drawing on information from fields such as psychology, sociology, media and digital technologies. The following text shows a cross-section of information concerning fake news: their history and sources, psycho-social aspects and the latest trends in counteracting their spread. This article analyzes the literature of the subject and related fields, as well as available reports and documents, both created at the polish national and global level.

The term fake news is problematic when it comes to its definition. It is used by many different people from different backgrounds and appears in various contexts and situations of everyday life. Naturally, it seems necessary to provide a correct definition of this term. So what is fake news? If we take a closer look at the activities of some politicians and their devoted followers, we get the following definition of "anything reported, something we don't want to believe in". This is not the most accurate definition, because it allows us to classify fake news as reliable, non-fraudulent information. [Grzesiak 2017] By imposing such a definition, we encounter the risk of stretching it at the discretion of the person expressing an opinion. For example, leader of a country could define any fact coming from abroad as fake news, so that the nation could be subordinated to the opinion of one individual, living in an alternated reality.

Rejecting the above definition, it is vital to ask whether fake news can be treated as a specific kind of propaganda. This approach is tricky. The propaganda activities should not be taken into consideration in isolation from the actual fake news, but it would be

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more appropriate to classify these activities as a subset of the fake news. Thanks to this, propaganda stands out from other subsets with its intention to create a specific organizational, political or commercial advantage of the agenda - something that is not 100% true for all fake news. [Boese, 2018]

The widest definition, appropriate for fake news, is “any incorrect information that has been created intentionally under the guise of a fact”, and this is what we will focus on later in this text. [Barclay, 2018]

Fake news is located in a bionomy of tribal bias, civic education without media literacy, proliferation and media fragmentation. They are both innovative and nothing new at the same time.

They are based on advanced microtargeting practices provided by the analysis of metadata and lack of education in media literacy for a wide range of the society. Fake news works by targeting specific desires, identification, attitudes and emotions. Without understanding every aspect and wider bionomy in which it functions, every pedagogical intervention will treat the symptoms, not the cause.

Taxonomy of the fake news includes phenomena, each of them are well-functioning in current sociopolitical landscape and each overlapping with the others:

- a historical precedent
- current reality
- an invective used to arouse doubts and distrust [Tandoc, 2018]

Fake news will therefore operate on an emotional or affective process identified by political psychologists as “biased reasoning” and “cognitive error”. Fantasy, emotions, fear and desire play here the leading roles.

A perfect example of an ideal environment for fake news was, and still is, the social network site Facebook, thanks to the utilization of data, audience targeting and reach, during the presidential campaign in the U.S. in 2016. This site has used all types of fake news that have been recognized and classified in methodology so far. [Journell, 2019]

To better understand the definition of fake news, taking a closer look at their different forms is required. Literature does not have a closed catalogue of fake news forms, but for the purposes of this text we are able to quote the following classification of 7 types of mis and disinformation, created by the journalist Claire Wardle:

1. Satire or parody
2. Misleading content
3. Imposter content
4. Fabricated content
5. False connection
6. False context
7. Manipulated content

Matthew Gentzkow and Hunt Allcott, who define that kind of news as “new articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and can be deceptive to readers”, identify fewer types:

- intentionally fabricated articles (news)
- satirical articles which may be interpreted as non-satirical

They also mention a few other types that are slightly further away from this definition:

- unintentionally erroneous report
- gossip that is not the product of a particular false article (news)
- conspiracy theories

- satirical articles which are treated as non-satirical (unlikely)
 - political lies
 - information that is stretched and deceptive, but not completely untrue
- Naturally, the more opinions, the more differences. [Allcott, Gentzkow, 2017]

For this purpose, focusing on the three most important types:

- Mercenary Fake news - created intentionally in order to make money, but without political, organizational or commercial intentions. Example: click baits, harvesting hate clicks and paid for ads.
- Fake news with an agenda - when news is created intentionally to promote a specific agenda, it becomes propaganda. Example: online commentators who speak out and manifest themselves as propagandists.
- Satirical fake news - a completely different type that contains satirical stories created for humorous purposes, but also, in many cases, as a political or social commentary. Example: satirical essayists, political comics.

In the world of fake news, its creators always have a plan. This plan may involve making money (fake news usually spreads viral), the plan may have political color (fake news to convince the public of political views and/or politicians), but whatever this plan would be, the fake news have consequences in the real world. [Barclay, 2018]

Some U.S. analysts are worried that foreign intelligence agencies are meddling in the media world by using fake news to influence elections. On the one hand, nothing stands in the way of information published on the Internet by a satirist from Canada, being considered a real news and transmitted in this form further in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia, and then causing an avalanche of clicks among U.S. readers. On the other hand, what effect could have the news, which would be published intentionally, in order to gain benefits?

Experts say that the psychology behind social media platforms, and more specifically their dynamism which makes them strong sources of disinformation, is important, especially for those who consider themselves infallible. Skepticism about online news has been an appropriate filter, but only for some time. Currently, one's prejudices allow fake news to bypass "security", especially when we collide with appropriately selected by the algorithm content, often called "meme". At a time when political disinformation is ready at once and on demand, Facebook, Google and Twitter serve as distribution channels - platforms that spread false information and help to find an absorbent audience. [Nyhan, 2010]

On the other hand, Colleen Seifert (professor of psychology at the University of Michigan) points out that people have a gracious attitude towards Facebook as their curator, but it has his own motive in this. What it actually does, is to attract the eyes of users for its own benefit - hosting news (including false news) makes you constantly online just to "keep scrolling". This kind of behavior is an ideal basis for spreading untruth while engaging two pre-digital scientific positions: urban legends as "memes"(and the viral idea) and individual prejudices (automatic, subconscious presumptions that create views). [Lewandowski, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, Cook, 2012]

The first prevention process is based primarily on data-driven and built into the algorithms of social media. The wide rotation of bizarre, easily verifiable rumors is not entirely dependent on guerrilla fever (even though it originates from it). However, despite many research, analyses, comparisons of data and counter-arguments, many people treat fake news as a source of knowledge and opinion, living in restrictive information bubbles, which contain only scandals consistent with their attitudes. [Reuters, 2017]

It is worth mentioning that social media algorithms have, among other things, the function of evolutionary selection. This means that most lies and false rumors disappear unnoticed, but some of them, rare creations with a twist of urban legend find psychologi-

cal attraction and become viral. From a pure psychological point of view, subtle, individual prejudices are at least as important as rankings and are these that allow the spread of fake news. Only an understanding of what a given news or comment has to say requires a temporary questioning of its truthfulness. Mentally, the reader must temporarily accept the assimilated information as probably true. The cognitive link is created automatically: Trump-Orange, Clinton-Saxophone, men with beer-welfare. The overthrow of these false claims requires the person, first, to mentally articulate them, to strengthen the subconscious connection that extends beyond human presumptions. Over time, for many people it is these false internal connections that will become stronger, without correction or withdrawal from a given view. In recent research on prejudices and their impact on the spread of disinformation, this and several other automatic cognitive connections have been qualified as supporters of false information. In other words: seeing only the headlines appearing many times in our news feed, will make us confident that they are more and more credible (before we even look into them). [Ward, 2019]

Since companies such as Google or Facebook have been involved in the search for perpetrators, despite their own role in spreading fake news: Google has announced that they will ban any website that publishes the fake news, while also using their online advertising service. Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, announced that they were considering various options, including easier flagging of suspicious content by users. [Miller, 2019] The latest news from the world of social media is the WhatsApp problem. Due to its open (free) nature, it will be affected by the problem of spam, scam and fake news itself. The application has introduced a simple mechanism of checking the received graphics for its truthfulness. This function checks if a given graphic has already appeared on the web and where. Is fake news in instant messengers an exaggeration? We know that there are countries where fake news is a plague. For example, India is under fire from malicious campaigns aimed at blackmailing users to transfer money to specific accounts or to suffer consequences of their sensitive information leaking. Cybercrime is developing very fast - in this case, the graphics are designed to attract potential victims. WhatsApp itself has already introduced restrictions on forwarding messages, precisely in order to limit the possibility of forwarding often dangerous content. [Internet: WhatsApp, 2019]

We must remember that both cybercriminals and other content promoters try to use various channels to distribute dangerous content or fake news. Many of the social media applications implement new functionalities and changes in algorithms dedicated to security. These more focused on aggregation of information make attempts to identify topics or groups of views that are less exposed. An ideal example here is the latest Facebook step concerning information provided by the so-called anti-vaccine movements. They will be more difficult to access and be promoted, all thanks to their recognition as "fake news" and particularly dangerous. It can be concluded that numerous internal as well as external factors influence a people in making fake news decisions, and a greater fraction of these is socio-economic in nature.

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