

## BREAKING (FAKE) NEWS: AN ALTERNATIVE TRUTH

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### Abstract:

*Today, the traditional role of the fourth estate is overshadowed by an offensive phenomenon: fake news. The term – popularized by the former US President Donald Trump – highlights that, nowadays, concepts such as truth or precision may undergo adjustments or interpretations. Some of the reasons why people create fake news are to make money, to deceive or to harm, to influence other people, to cause social disruptions and so on. Among those who create this type of content are a) those journalists who turn from gatekeepers into moneymakers; b) other public persons who use fake news to denigrate other people; c) useful idiots – those naive or credulous people who promote fake news without actually understanding the cause's goal; d) trolls – people paid to create and share fake news in social media, and promote a certain agenda in order to influence other people; e) bots – automated software agents that have a political agenda and try to manipulate via propaganda and fake news. The spread of disinformation through social media has a direct link with phenomena such as ideological polarization or segregation of online users. To stop the fake news phenomenon, it is necessary to focus on transparency, confidence, and media education.<sup>1</sup>*

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### News, friend or foe?

Strictly speaking, a news story is either a report of a recent event or an addition to a story of public interest. However, its definition remains broad, as efforts to explain, in detail, what is involved in

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writing or obtaining it would not define exactly what a news story is (Zelizer, 2008). Until an agreed definition is developed, the determining factor in the process of conferring news value on an event remains the journalist: while “news is a social construct, an object, a commodity, its value is a cognitive construct, a mental evaluation” (Shoemaker, 2006, p. 105).

Traditionally, through the news it disseminates, the media aims to satisfy the public's needs for information and entertainment, “creating a way of life and being defined according to the interests, aspirations, values of those involved in public life: an instrument for transmitting information, a mirror of reality (...) a megaphone for public opinion, an instrument that encourages dialogue on public issues (...)” (Bârgăoanu, 2006: 19). If yesterday, media such as newspapers, radio or television were the traditional ways of transmitting news to citizens, today, information is increasingly present in online, as the Internet “has dramatically changed the communication environment by introducing new communication channels – e-mail, online publications, websites (...) –, which have changed the communication behavior of millions of people around the world” (McCombs, 2005, p. 544).

*These days, you can hardly talk about “real news” with a capital R. The news cuts out a certain part of reality, interprets it, frames it, and places it in a context* (Bârgăoanu, 2018, p. 137-138). *New media* offers a different perspective in approaching news: a publicized subject can be known and understood without the mediation of a journalist – the news consumer can intervene and express himself directly, from a click away, on a subject. An individual, via the free expression of the online environment, can make judgments, become visible in his virtual circle of relations, influence other Internet users and become an opinion shaper. This title gives him the “power” to guide, induce panic or error, deceive, influence the decisions of masses of people, etc.

The advantages of the new media, which include this unfiltered expression, also have their downside: the “amplification of various types of disinformation”, which potentially pose a risk to democracy, national security and society (HLEG, 2018, p. 10).

Today, the traditional role of the fourth estate is overshadowed by an offensive phenomenon: *fake news*. A phenomenon which since its

inception has underlined the fact that, in a modern age, concepts such as *truth* or *accuracy* can be subjects to adjustment or interpretation. Faced with such a challenge, the journalist has to fulfil (at least) two tasks: a) to present the facts as accurately as possible and b) to engage in a 2.0 process of filtering information.

The shrinking number of advertising spaces, the shrinking number of newspapers or their move in online, the limitation and, also, the loss of jobs in the field are contributing, day by day, to the degradation of journalism and the reduction of possibilities to verify, certify and filter correctly the information. All of this, cumulatively, allows for the development of the harmful phenomenon of fake news (Pritchard, 2017).

### **Fake it till you make it: a historical perspective**

It's not from today, it's from (the day before) yesterday. The craft of building from scratch or distorting a truth to achieve some goals (be it political, economic, social or other) is not a practice of modern society. For example, according to Sun Tzu, author of *The Art of War* (ed. 2017), all armed conflicts are based on deception: when you want to attack, you pretend to be powerless; when you want to use force, you pretend to be inert; when you are close to your enemy, you give him the impression that you are far away, and when you are really far away, you have to make him believe otherwise.

The printing press (around 1450) contributed to the spread of fake news phenomenon, which gained momentum due to the lack of verification and filtering tools. Existing sources at that time, from official ones to eyewitnesses, were not based on *objectivity* or (*journalistic*) *ethics*, historians being the only *fact-checkers* of those times (Soll, 2016).

In recent history, the phenomenon of fake news has been evident since 2016, with the UK's decision to withdraw from the European Union – *Brexit* – and the presidential election in the United States.

UK has decided to leave the European Union and held a referendum (in June) in which over 30 million people took part. The debates and activities (in real-life/ on social media), which were carried

out by the two camps – *Leave* and *Remain* – contained, among other things, incorrect information or fake news and fostered *ideological polarization* (Spohr, 2017). The result of a study, which analyzed (on Facebook) news consumption and the phenomenon of *selective exposure*, revealed the existence of two well-isolated *echo chambers* (Bângăoanu, 2018), formed after online users chose to focus on certain topics and, by default, ignore others (Del Vicario et al., 2017). On other social platforms, such as Instagram and Twitter, supporters of the *Leave* camp were not only twice as many, but also five times more active than those of the opposing camp (Polonski, 2016). After polling day, Arron Banks (the main *Leave* camp backer) said that while *Remain* focused on the facts, what really mattered was the emotional connection with people – for example, while *Remain* bet on the subject “economy”, *Leave* chose “migration” (Booth, Travis & Gentleman, 2016).

*Every time he (Vladimir Putin) sees me, he says, “I didn’t do that.” And I believe — I really believe that when he tells me that, he means it* (Donald Trump statement; Borger & Holmes, 2017). The end of 2016 culminated with the election of a new president in the US: Donald Trump. An analysis conducted shortly after Election Day showed that fake news related to the event, which had been shared on social media for three months prior to 08.11.2016, had higher engagement than the most prominent news published by important media sources (Silverman, 2016).

In the first part of 2018, Cambridge Analytica was involved in a resounding media scandal. The entity in question – a company specialized in creating strategies and personalized messages that are tailored to each voter’s psychometric profile – along with the Republican Party’s online campaign team and marketing agency Giles-Parscale, were involved in the online visibility of candidate Donald Trump during the 2016 US presidential election. Cambridge Analytica’s access to the Republican Party’s database has made it one of the most powerful election machines in the world: the company’s method of constructing voter profiles has sparked discontent even among Republican campaign consultants, who have complained of professional ethics violations (Taggart, 2017).

A leap to Southeastern Europe: the 2019 Romanian presidential election. In the run-up to the election, and in the interval between the two rounds of voting, Facebook “hosted” a series of fake news stories, created and directed at both citizens in the country and those forming the Romanian diaspora. In the context, articles pointed out that a) the Minister of Finance wanted to tax both money transfers from abroad and the salaries of Romanians abroad; b) one of the candidates was allegedly aided in his communication with journalists by a headset through which he received answers from a third person during a press conference; c) members of a political alliance in Romania were allegedly urging the population to boycott the country's presidential elections.

The emergence and global spread of the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has fueled the practice of disseminating information designed to create confusion or insecurity among the population, a practice labeled by the World Health Organization (WHO) itself, via its official website, an *infodemic* (2020).

If at first, some media sources (domestic or international) with personal agenda reported that the virus a) was created in a laboratory to serve political interests, b) was a pretext for the establishment of a new world order, c) was aimed to reduce the number of elderly people that put pressure on the economy (by paying pensions), d) was linked to 5G networks, etc., now, as we go through the immunization period, the fake news rhetoric has quickly folded into the new reality: vaccines are part of a plan “to microchip” the population.

### **Fake news: conceptual delimitations**

Romanian language does not have a specific term that conveys exactly what fake news is. In this case, some clarifications are necessary: a) *fake news* ≠ *false news* because false news does not cover, at the semantic level, “all the differences and nuances” (Voicu, 2018, p. 16); b) *fake* ≠ *false* because “we are not dealing with something false, which can be set in opposition (at least, not always) to something true”; the practice of “false-true” pair exposure can be misleading, as the phenomenon in question covers “a much wider spectrum, with forms of manifestation that oscillate between the extreme “completely false/

untrue” to... it is hard to say which is the other extreme” (Bârgăoanu, 2018, p. 137-138).

Moreover, policy makers and researchers or experts in the field either hesitate to use the term “fake news” or reject it altogether. Political or scientific articles (such as the *Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Fake News, Disinformation, and Propaganda* signed in March 2017 or *A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation Report of the independent High-level Group on fake news and online disinformation* signed in March 2018) have used the term “disinformation” to refer to this type of content.

For example, the deliberate avoidance of the use of “fake news” term by the High-Level Expert Group (HLEG – European Commission), has been explained by two reasons: (a) the term does not accommodate the complexity of the phenomenon of disinformation (which involves, not just partially or completely false content, but information that is fabricated in a mixture of facts and practices that is far from the classic meaning of news); (b) the term is not only inadequate, but also misleading (given that both some politicians and their supporters use to negate issues they do not agree with or to undermine the media).

Here, it is necessary to make a distinction between what false and fake news represent: while false news is an inaccurate, apparently harmless information, generated (mostly) with the intention of increasing the audience/web traffic (through the number of clicks), fake news represents the product of a strategy (managed by an individual/ group of individuals, a company, a state etc.), which aims to manipulate the population, in medium and long term, in order to achieve a desired goal.

Other definitions that explain the term “fake news”: a) “widely disseminated news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and likely to mislead readers” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213); b) “plausible” news that “incorporates and melds half, if not quarters of truth and fake” (Bârgăoanu, 2018, p. 135); c) “fabricated”, “distorted or truncated” information, disseminated in traditional and online media “by a state or an organization”, and benefiting from “a budget, a strategy and an ideology, with the aim of deepening existing social tensions and creating confusion” (Voicu, 2018, p. 12); c) information that can be

divided into either deliberately invented news or news that, although only meant to fool/ entertain the public, is taken seriously (Rubin, Chen & Conroy, 2015).

A fake news often contains: a) sensational or shocking headlines (consisting of negative words, often written in capital letters and accompanied by exclamation marks), referring to a person known to the public or to an important event with (often negative) effects on citizens and which, by their construction, encourage the reader to access the news, even though its information content does not correspond to the headline; b) invented information or interpretations of real information, taking it out of context in order to mislead and to meet the intended purpose. News items are presented bombastically and summarily written, do not bear an author's signature (if there is one, it belongs to editorial office or is a pen name), do not present additional supporting data/information, do not provide other sources through which the veracity of the published content can be verified (and when they exist, the sources are obscure). Here it is also important to underline that, given the continuous transformations that the phenomenon undergoes, no standard recipe can be developed to be applied as a template in the work of detecting fake news.

### **Fake news: reasons & creators**

The reasons are diverse: from financial gain to pure passion or simple fun. *Financial gain* – news that goes viral online (through significant number of clicks) also brings with it significant advertising revenue. The existence of an *ideology*: some fake news creators construct their news in such a way as to favor their preferred candidates (Dewey, 2016; Sydell, 2016). By appealing to issues that fuel racial, ethnic or religious tensions, they aim *to deepen rifts in society* (Voicu, 2018). *The intent to cause harm* is manifested by tarnishing the image of a person/ entity, etc. Mostly, fake news is used as a weapon of denigration; there are extremely rare instances where it has been used to promote something or someone (Hunt, 2016; Wardle, 2017). Other reasons: *passion* and *entertainment*. Some individuals are so drawn to an idea, person or entity that it can affect their judgement and turn

them into creators and/ or newsmongers of fake news. Such individuals can be “blinded” by their beliefs and come to perceive fake content as accurate and useful for further dissemination (Wardle, 2017). In other cases, by disseminating fake news, the intent to harm is not a priority: some individuals just want to have fun.

The categories of those who “help” create and disseminate fake news are diverse: from journalists to *trolls* and *bots*. When it comes to filtering information, some *journalists* turn off from the role of gatekeeper and end up voluntarily creating and disseminating fake news according to some reasons they have and consider right: increasing readership, drawing advertisers, following a parallel agenda that differs from the official one etc. At the same time, *public figures* – other than journalists – use fake news either to reinforce their already created image (ethos) or to denigrate other people or entities known to the public. On the other hand, *terrorist organizations* use the Internet in general and social media in particular to promote, (also) through fake news, their “successes” and “infinite” power, the “high” standard of living enjoyed by their members or the “top” facilities of access to education and health (Al-khteeb & Agarwal, 2015).

The term *useful idiot*, which is common in political and journalistic jargon, refers to those people who propagate fake news without actually understanding what is at stake. These people are useful in such activities, as they are easily manipulated by those who manage their activities. Also, there are people selected and paid – *trolls* – a) to generate and disseminate fake news, in online, regarding people or events known to the public, b) to promote a particular agenda, c) to influence masses of people. “Hate speech, ridiculing serious news stories, diverting attention to topics that generate a strong emotional response” are some of the purposes of trolls’ posts. “They take advantage of the Internet subculture to set the public agenda” (Voicu, 2018, p. 347). In contrast with bots, trolls are much more difficult to identify given that they express a behavior similar to that of classic social media users.

*Bots* – automated software agents “which interact with servers, run simple and repetitive tasks”, and that are built “on the principle of neural networks and endowed with some degree of artificial

intelligence” (Voicu, 2018, p. 11). They are “actors with a political agenda” who “mimic behavior in social media” with the aim of “manipulating and disrupting communication” and “delivering propaganda and fake news” (Voicu, 2018, p. 348). In the fake industry, they are responsible for controlling the online activity carried out by specifically created fake accounts, which are tasked with disseminating misleading content (Boshmaf et al., 2011). A bot automatically produces content and interacts with individuals on social media trying to alter their information consumption – in the case of fake news and misinformation; these bots are programmed to mislead the reader, manipulate his decisions, and misinform him.

### **Fake news: the environment**

Fake news is created and posted on *social networks* and *websites*, some of which are specifically created to promote such content. Some of these sites usually do not have a long lifespan; their administrators do not seek to invest in their image, reputation or quality, but aim to maximize their revenues and achieve other goals in the shortest possible time. Many of these sites bear names similar to those of known news agencies, such as [nationalreport.net](http://nationalreport.net), [usatoday.com.co](http://usatoday.com.co), [washingtonpost.com.co](http://washingtonpost.com.co) (Sydell, 2016) and are interlinked with social networks, search engines and mainstream media, which give them high visibility.

On the other hand, the dynamic nature of social networks offers any individual, regardless his training or intention, a dual role – creator and consumer of information. The importance of social networks for the fake news industry cannot be overlooked. Through the advantages of these platforms – a) the ability to gather, at the same time, a significant number of people; b) the possibility for any individual to become “a voice” to be listened and followed; c) the speed with which a piece of information is posted and then distributed; d) the possibility to access them from anywhere in the world, at any time – the amount of fake content can be replicated considerably compared to that of an authentic one (Potthaus et al., 2017). While, initially, the role of social networks was to unite individuals and groups in order to interact and share

common values, today, free access and lack of terms of use have created the environment for the development of the fake news phenomenon. The majority of the generation living online is not sufficiently prepared and not sufficiently interested in understanding what news is and how it differs from other types of information; this generation lacks the cultural DNA that their parent's generation possesses (Richardson, 2017).

The spread of disinformation through social media is directly related to phenomena such as *ideological polarization* or *segregation of online users* (Del Vicario et al., 2017). Discussions around polarization were amplified in the context of Brexit and the US presidential election (2016), both events highlighting that the two nations were highly divided politically and social groups were ideologically opposed to each other (Geiger, 2016; Oliphant & Smith, 2016). The expression of hostile feelings by American or European citizens towards individuals with whom they were on the other side of the political spectrum was also fueled by people choosing to only obtain information from certain sources that were in line with their beliefs and values. To highlight the existence of the phenomenon of polarization on social networks, Eli Pariser (2011) popularized the term “filter bubbles”. This term highlights the fact that algorithms, which are designed to personalize an individual's online experience, actually place them in a “bubble” where they are surrounded only by that information that corresponds to their consumption behavior. The purpose of these algorithms is to connect individuals to that information they want to know and consequently create a personalized stream of content that offers no other alternatives instead (Rader & Grey, 2015).

Another hypothesis that tries to specify the source of ideological polarization online focuses on what represents the cognitive biases – “confirmation bias” (Voicu, 2018, p. 11; Bârgăoanu, 2018, p. 35) – of individuals. This phenomenon translates into the fact that individuals tend to consume only information that is in line with their opinions and beliefs and avoid all other information that is contrary to their expectations. The human brain engages in a process of ensuring consistency by defending its beliefs, and this happens

involuntarily; individuals are too unaware of the existence of this process in their mind.

At the same time, individuals are being flooded with all kinds of information, invading their space through social media, and they are no longer in a position to search for their own sources of information. This phenomenon has a name – *news-finds-me perception* – and is defined as “the situation in which individuals remain indirectly informed about public issues, despite the fact that they do not actively follow the news” (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017, p. 3).

### **Fake news: who and how (can) reduce the phenomenon**

The lack or the low number of filters – those *gatekeepers* of the traditional media– that filter the content from social media, allows a continuous development of fake content. Quality control of online content is extremely important, and this requires actors and a set of tools to facilitate the process of verifying the information that was disseminated.

Stopping a phenomenon such as fake news requires the adoption of a set of best practices, which “fall into three major categories: transparency, trust building, and media education” (HLEG, 2018, p. 14).

As regards transparency, the following are needed: a) initiatives to identify and verify sources of disinformation; b) taking measures to limit the spread of biased content; c) publicly exposing and dismantling detected cases of fake news; d) promoting quality journalism. For their part, social networks need a) to work to identify and close fake accounts that generate fake content; b) to modify their algorithms in order to increase the visibility of credible, quality content; c) work with fact-checking organizations, which carry out online activities to verify the veracity and quality of online information.

Independent news sources and fact-checking organizations have also started their own activities to verify the quality and veracity of information circulating online, with the goals of informing the public, improving political rhetoric and influencing other journalists (Vargo, Guo & Amazeen, 2017). At the same time, in the whole process of

limiting the phenomenon of fake news, it is also necessary to strengthen societal resilience, media trusts and states (HLEG, 2018, p. 19).

## Conclusions

New media are defined by a series of positive characteristics (such as interactivity, variety, free access etc.), but they also hide a series of dangers (ideological polarization, filter bubbles etc.). Throughout this environment, disinformation has a continuous transformation – from fake news (made by a human operator) to deepfake (made with technology) – and this is increasingly difficult for fact-checkers to detect. Viewed separately, as one piece of a mechanism, the fake news phenomenon remains a challenge for both those who create and those who consume quality information. The impossibility of filtering content online gives some individuals the “chance” to gain notoriety and even compete with important media sources.

Given the manner of response to, for example, election campaigns, social movements or the COVID-19 pandemic, this phenomenon of fake news will always have an alternative truth to illustrate.

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