

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRUST IN MEDIA AND FAKE NEWS: A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

Although the existence of fake news can be found in the last decade, this subject succeeded to impose and gain coverage among the current research topics, becoming important through the harmful effects it can produce, but also through its continuous dynamics and evolution. Through this paper we aim to present some theoretical perspectives on the phenomenon of fake news, then we will aim to make the connection between fake news and trust in the media (in any of its type, mass-media or new media). Through the theoretical analysis we aim to develop some hypotheses and subjects which could lead to future research. Therefore, by the present analysis – which has as scope the exploration of the possible relations between the population’s trust in the media and fake news – we focus on developing a theoretical framework, so that possible results could enhance a better knowledge and combatting the negative effects of this phenomenon.

Keywords: fake news, media, trust in media, false news.

Résumé

Bien que l’existence du phénomène *fake news* peut être trouvée dans la dernière décennie, il a réussi à s’imposer et à gagner de l’espace parmi les sujets de recherche actuels, étant devenu important par les effets nocifs qu’il peut produire, mais aussi par sa continue dynamique et évolution. Par le présent travail nous avons l’intention de présenter quelques perspectives théoriques sur phénomène *fake news*, ensuite nous essaierons d’établir une connexion avec la confiance dans le média (sous quelque forme que ce soit, média où le nouveau média). L’objectif que nous proposons, par la présente analyse théorique, est de développer quelques hypothèses et thèmes, qui pourraient constituer l’objet de recherches supplémentaires. Par cette analyse ayant pour objet l’exploration des possibles relations entre la confiance de la population dans le média et le phénomène *fake news*, nous avons l’intention de suivre le développement d’un cadre conceptuel, afin

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que les possibles résultats pourrons être utilisées pour une meilleure compréhension et lutte contre les effets négatives du phénomène.

Mots-clés: fake news; média; confiance dans le média; des fausses nouvelles.

Rezumat

Deși existența fenomenului fake news poate fi găsită în ultima decadă, acesta a reușit să se impună și să câștige spațiu printre temele de cercetare actuale, devenind important prin efectele nocive pe care le poate produce, dar și prin continua sa dinamică și evoluție. Prin lucrarea de față ne propunem să prezentăm câteva perspective teoretice despre fenomenul fake news, apoi vom încerca să facem legătura cu încrederea în media (în oricare dintre forme, mass-media sau new media). Obiectivul pe care ni-l propunem prin analiza teoretică de față este să dezvoltăm câteva ipoteze și teme care ar putea constitui subiectul unor cercetări viitoare. Prin analiza de față, ce are drept scop explorarea posibilelor relații dintre încrederea populației în media și fenomenul fake news, urmărim dezvoltarea unui cadru conceptual, astfel încât posibilele rezultate ar putea fi utilizate în mai buna cunoaștere și combatere a efectelor negative ale fenomenului.

Cuvinte cheie: fake news; media; încredere în media; știri false.

1. Introduction

Recent years have highlighted the phenomenon of fake news along with some significant events in social life and political scene: two notable events worth to be mentioned are: Brexit and the 2016 United States presidential elections. These events revealed the harmful effects that the use of technology and the information ecosystem in the service of political agenda can have. Since then the phenomenon of fake news became more visible, used both as [pseudo]journalistic genre and fake label (Egelhofer, Lecheler, 2019). The meanings of the „fake news” concept are diverse – in this paper, we will refer as it as any news or information which is intentionally distorted, then spread on various communication channels (mass-media, new media, social networks) by an organisational or state agent which has a clear strategy and goals that are pursued through misinformation actions (Allcott, Gentkow, 2017; Figueira, Oliveira, 2017; Voicu, 2018; Bârgăoanu, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018). Thus, our aim is to problematise the relation between the trust that the population has in the media (using data sources and public reports) and the manner in which this impacts the existence and evolutions of fake news. First, we will present some perspectives and theoretical foundations related to fake news phenomenon – more exactly – some characteristics, typologies and analysis frameworks of this phenomenon.

2. An overview of fake news

Tandoc et al. (2018) did a literature review of fake news, reaching a total of 34 papers analysed, published between 2003 and 2017. Following this, the authors developed a typology of fake news definitions found on the analysed articles and identify the following types: (1) news satire – which utilises the irony,

exaggeration and humour in order to highlight certain characteristics of a person, situation or event, (2) news parody – it relies on humour, but with a purpose that can be associated with defamation, (3) news fabrication – data, contexts or any kind of information are used with no factual basis; (4) photo manipulation – where can be included the manipulation of images and videos as deepfakes, the use of false statistics, the intentional misinterpretation of data so that these serves the purpose of the attackers; (5) native advertising – includes advertising materials, products placement where the materials are not marked for advertising purposes; (6) propaganda – which, according to the authors refers to „news stories which are created by a political entity to influence public perceptions. The overt purpose is to benefit a public figure, organisation or government” (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 147).

Hirst (2017, pp. 90-91) also developed a typology of fake news, splitting them into: (1) false stories – intentionally fabricated content, without a factual basis, it can be proven as factually incorrect, but could mislead readers; (2) „fake news as stories that originate on satirical websites” which intentionally presents exaggerations and distortions of the facts and events in order to entertain readers; (3) „news-like content that is advertorial and commercial” – the purpose is selling something (a product or a service); (4) fake news used in politics – can have multiple forms such as: accusation of the opposition party of certain facts, actions which can be exaggerated, altered so it can help the attacker’s goal (fake news is used as fake label – we will approach this concept in this paper); (5) „fake news as a form of propaganda” – news that is deliberately falsified in order to obtain commercial or politic benefits; (6) „fake news that is highly ideological”.

Tandoc et al. (2018, 2019, 2020) identified two dimensions which can be used in analysing fake news typology. The authors distinguished between (1) the factual element of fake news and (2) the sender’ intent to deceive, then they integrated the typology mentioned above (*see Table 1*).

Table 1: Typology of fake news definitions – The relationship between factuality and intention to deceive. Adapted after Tandoc et al. (2018)

		<i>The intent to deceive</i>	
		<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>The level of facticity</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Propaganda</i> <i>Native advertising</i> <i>Photo manipulation</i>	<i>News satire</i>
	<i>Low</i>	<i>News fabrication</i>	<i>News parody</i>

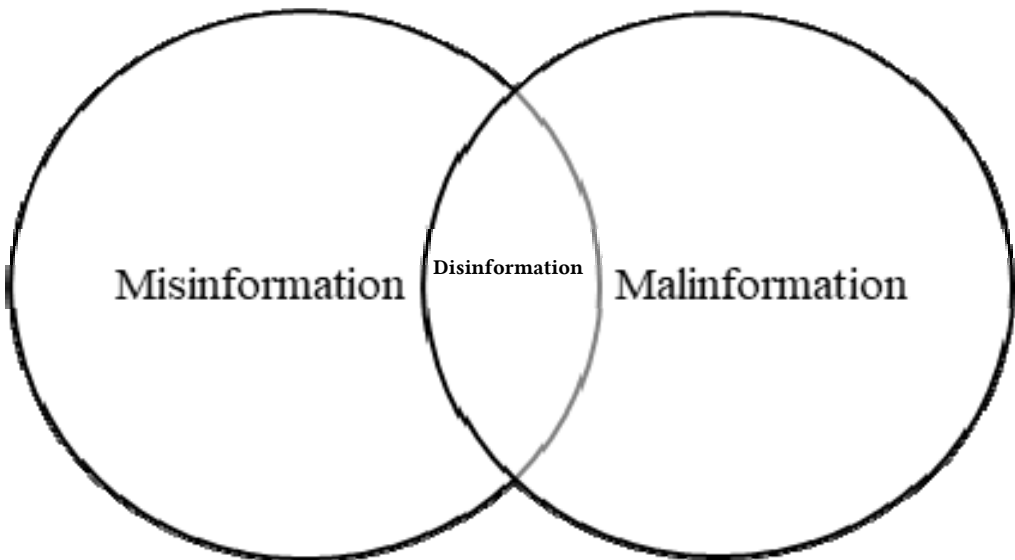
According to the authors, the level of facticity refers to the degree to which the news is based on real facts; the intentional component refers to the degree to which the author / authors of the news intend to deceive or mislead the public.

Thereby, using these dimensions (the intent to deceive and facticity) we can differentiate the disinformation and misinformation. Misinformation is characterised by a lack of facticity and no intention to deceive; on the other side, disinformation is characterised by the lack of facticity and the presence of the intention to deceive.

Table 2: The differences between fake news and false news.

	Misinformation	Disinformation
Facticity	(-)	(-)
The intent to deceive	(-)	(+)
	False news	Fake news

In addition to misinformation and disinformation, Wardle (2020) identified a third form – malinformation. The author considers that disinformation combines both elements of misinformation where there is no intention to deceive, and elements of malinformation where the author of the message knows the target and the aspects he /her aims at by spreading the forged information. According to Wardle (2020), disinformation consists of any kind of erroneous content, intentionally fabricated or manipulated, in order to support false conclusions that serve the interest of the agent who initiated the respective action. Figure 1 represents the relation between misinformation, disinformation and malinformation according to Wardle (2020).



Wardle (2020) expressed her dissatisfaction regarding the concept of fake news, respectively with the way this is understood and used, stating that fake news should be replaced with information disorder – this would also include other forms of information distortion, such as propaganda, manipulation or native advertising.

She identified and described three stages of the information disorder: (1) creation – when the message is produced; (2) (re)production – when information is transformed in a media product and it is spread; (3) distribution – the apex, the stage where the information is spreading uncontrollably, it can also return to its second stage (reproduction), when additional elements can be added.

In addition to these three stages of how information disorders occur, Wardle (2020) describe three elements of these stages: the agent who send the information (that can be described by type, level of organisation, motivation, level of automatisisation, audience, the intent to harm and to deceive), the message (duration, accuracy, legality and target) and the receiver of the message (who can be active or passive depending on how the receptor receives the information, described by the type of message reading and action taken after reading).

Another model we consider useful in understanding and explaining the phenomenon of fake news is the model developed by Fârte and Obadă (2018). They focus their attention to capture and describe three dimensions of this phenomenon: (1) facticity level; (2) immediate intention of the source which send the message; (3) potential impact on the audience that receives and interprets the message. Starting from this three-dimensional approach, the authors develop a model of counteracting fake news dedicated for organizational entities, using reactive public relations. Certainly, this model could be implemented in other contexts.

Tandoc (2021) proposed a classical model for analysis the phenomenon of fake news, starting from a well-known scheme of communication (Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver Model of Communication, SMCR). The author analysed each of the four elements: (1) Sender – previously, it was associated with a source such as the newspaper, a television, radio; on Internet, the sender can be any person who has access to a device, an Internet connection and minimal technical skills; (2) Message – in social networks can be accompanied by other factors, such as number of reactions, views, comments or shares – these factors can help spreading the information quickly; (3) Channel – it is represented by the platform where the interaction between sender and receiver takes place, the author highlighted the fact that one of the shortcomings of the research addressing the fake news is that they have focused their attention on Facebook and Twitter platforms; (4) Receiver – is currently facing a big flow of information; the receiver has to select the information received; in this context, we can discuss about the mechanisms that fulfill the function of selective exposure to information, but also the algorithms of the platforms, which make a pre-selection of the information.

3. Trust in media and fake news

Using the conceptual framework presented so far, we will focus on the receptors and interpreters of fake news, as they are the ones affected by the negative effects of this phenomenon, however they can become also amplifiers of it, without having the intention or desire to do it. Thus, we bring into question the trust that the population has in the media. According Flash Eurobarometer 464 from 2018, entitled *Fake News and Disinformation Online*, 37 percent citizens of the European Union (EU28) are exposed daily or almost every day to fake news, and 31 percent are exposed at least once a week. In both cases it was measured the perceived exposure to fake news. Also, same research report shows that traditional media (i.e. radio, television, printed media) enjoys more trust than new media (for example online newspapers and magazines, social networks or messaging applications).

European Broadcast Union (EBU) in their analysis, *Trust in Media (2020)* – using and processing data from Eurobarometer 92 (EB92) – came to some conclusions regarding the confidence of the European citizens in the media: (1) the online channels of communication are less trusted than traditional mass-media; (2) social networks remain the least trusted media in Europe, and the radio is still the most trusted; (3) more trust in news reflects a less level of concern about misinformation/ fake news.

In an exploratory research on media trust and its relationship with fake news conducted by applying a two-wave online survey, Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) found that there is a significant correlation between high levels of perceived exposure to disinformation and low media trust in South Africa.

Ognyanova et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative research involving 1000 respondents from United States of America, to whom two-wave questionnaires were applied. In the period between the two waves of research, 8 percent of the respondents agreed their online behaviour to be observed by installing a browser extension. The results showed that (1) fake news consumption is associated with a decrease of the trust in the media; (2) fake news consumption is associated with higher confidence in political and governmental institutions for who is in the side of power. According to Ognyanova et al. (2020) there is a link between the two concepts discussed – fake news and the population trust in media.

Summarising everything presented and described in this paper, we could extract some ideas that could be used as subjects in possible future research:

- Trust in the media (low trust) is one of the causes that favoured the emergence of the fake news;
- The emergence and development of fake news led to the erosion of media trust;
- How can data on media trust be exploited to combat and predict the phenomenon of fake news?

- Increasing the trust in media and advocating for accurate information could be elements that can be used for combatting fake news phenomenon;
- What connections can be established between other types of trust (trust in political institutions, public institutions, etc.) and the evolution of fake news? How could these be used to combat the fake news phenomenon?
- The phenomenon of fake news can be explained through a new form / model / pattern of production of the individual or collective image, the topics that the anthropologist Marc Augé deals with in his writings (Augé, 1997). Nowadays, the fictitious production circuit is somewhat flawed, and we also can discuss about a perfect reciprocity between the three poles of the imaginary: individual imaginary, collective imaginary and creation-fiction. If we consider that fake news is ultimately a fiction, then it imposed itself as a supra-reality on the individual and collective imaginary, being aware of its own existence.
- At the same time, this creation-fiction process fully enjoys the availability of the imaginary to feed permanently it with new productions. Of course, we can ask ourselves: why fake news has success? This happens because the creation-fiction process of this phenomenon articulates symbols, images, representation in an accessible and seductive way and manages to create a new creation-fiction pattern. Finally, this phenomenon manages to re-enchantment (Maffesoli, 2007) the world, delivering alternatives to official (or not) versions of the truth. “The paradox of our time is by dis-enchanting the world of old myths, beliefs and fantasies, we live in full fiction (...)” (Gavriliuță, 2008, p. 228); it is a media fiction that substitutes reality in different ways. In essence, such manifestations could express a symbolic deficit that our world suffers from (Augé, 1997). The old myths and the saga are no longer part of the lived experience today. We live in a dis-encharnted world, as M. Weber stated, a world from which the mystery, the magic, the sacred became marginal and obscured areas of human and social experience. However, the success of the fake news shows that the eternal nostalgia of primordial times, our co-substantial living with the sacred (Eliade, 1992), as well as the permanent sensitivities for the symbol, could not be definitively cancelled. Based on these raw data, all the transformations brought by modern science, new technologies and the media industry have found enough ground for manifestation. The media manages to „enchant” the world by creating stories, news, information and proposing its own versions of reality. The seduction exerted by the entire media and the fake news spread by it is justified by our willingness to create and accept alternative worlds or other universes of understanding.

These are only some of the issues we have extracted which can be used for future research. We consider these to be important in the relationship between the phenomenon of false news and media trust. They can be used and modified

according to the interests and subjects researched. We consider essential and necessary multidisciplinary efforts in knowing and understanding the phenomenon of false news, from experts in various fields, such as psychology, journalism, sociology, anthropology, information and communication technology.

4. Conclusion

As previously mentioned, the aim of this paper is to present some theoretical perspectives on the phenomenon of fake news and the current state of knowledge of the phenomenon and to outline any connection between fake news and trust in the media.

Even more, we consider imperative to approach this relationship in future research for a better understanding of how the social body interacts with and responds to fake news, especially in the context of a trust crisis of which could affect not only the media, but also other fields. The answer to this crisis could be one of the appropriate solutions to the issue presented in this paper.

Beyond the intellectual exercise required to study the phenomenon of fake news, understanding the mechanism of production of the phenomenon that ensure its success can paint a clearer picture of media communication and the functioning of the world through the prism of this social lubricant that is communication. As we mentioned before, it is possible that behind some easy explanations, which bring together a multitude of variables (techniques, strategies, interests, calculations, desire to manipulate, entertainment, exhibitionism, audience, etc.), to identify social data and human beings who announce our natural availability to fictionalise reality and transform the fiction into reality. For this reason, the fake news phenomenon remains a provocative one. He can camouflage less visible realities, which are difficult to decipher, but which are part of the deep fabric of society.

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