

Fake News and Potentially Manipulative Content

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At the core of numerous definitions of fake news lies a statement that it contains information that does not correlate with facts and that it is directed towards disinforming the public in a conscious manner, which implies that the major features of fake news are untruthfulness/incorrectness and intended deception. For this reason, Jaster and Lanuis attribute the lack of truth and lack of truthfulness to the notion of fake news and, using this as a starting point, they claim that fake news is “wrong or deceptive (lack of truth) and that it is released with the intention of deceiving or, eventually, discrediting or neglecting the truth (lack of truthfulness)”. In her efforts to draw a line between fake news and the contents similar to it, Milica Kulić defines the former as “incorrect information containing unprovable, mostly completely fabricated data or claims, as well as quotations, released with a view to deceiving audiences”.

Keywords: “fake news” and potentially manipulative content ; digital media

1. Fake News and Potentially Manipulative Content

There is a lack of research into the role of age regarding the consumption of ‘fake news’ on social media ^[1], but we know that the hyper-production of fake news and potentially manipulative content is followed by a multitude of definitions and classifications that attempt at clearly dividing fake news from content that is similar in its nature but different in terms of their function, intention, format, and structure. In that sense, one of the important features is either the presence or the lack of an intention to deceive audiences. It is possible to observe fake news and potentially manipulative content as various forms of media manipulation, and this particular research is interested, apart from fake news, in the following phenomena: disinformation, satire, clickbait, conspiracy theory, and photo-manipulation. With regard to the latter list, the idea of manipulation is best reflected in the phenomena of “fake news”, clickbait, and photomanipulation. The rest of the aforementioned contents are potentially manipulative, which depends on the context and perception of the user of such content, but these phenomena cannot be generally considered as featuring any intention of manipulation.

At the core of numerous definitions of fake news lies a statement that it contains information that does not correlate with facts and that it is directed towards disinforming the public in a conscious manner ^[2] (p. 48), which implies that the major features of fake news are untruthfulness/incorrectness and intended deception. For this reason, Jaster and Lanuis attribute the lack of truth and lack of truthfulness to the notion of fake news and, using this as a starting point, they claim that fake news is “wrong or deceptive (lack of truth) and that it is released with the intention of deceiving or, eventually, discrediting or neglecting the truth (lack of truthfulness)” ^[3] (p. 208). In her efforts to draw a line between fake news and the contents similar to it, Milica Kuljić defines the former as “incorrect information containing unprovable, mostly completely fabricated data or claims, as well as quotations, released with a view to deceiving audiences” ^[4] (p. 13).

As a prevalent form of media manipulation, and one quite similar to fake news, there is the notion of disinformation, “which is based on facts, but which misrepresents them—that is, which contains a ‘mixture’ of facts and false information or semi-truths” ^[5] (p. 52). In relation to fake news, disinformation is a wider notion, with the key difference being reflected in the fact that the latter is not necessarily intentional, meaning that there is no intention of deceiving audiences. Matthew R. X. Dentith claims that in the case of disinformation, “one does not necessarily deal with completely fabricated information, but that it may contain some elements of truthfulness, yet not the entire context, that it may be completely false, or that it may lack one piece of information so that the picture would be complete, and the media release truthful in its entirety” ^[6] (p. 66).

Unlike fake news and disinformation, satire does not represent a form of media manipulation. Yet, if there is no reference to the fact that it is a case of satirical contents based on fabricated news, it is possible to perceive such contents as true to reality. This sort of danger is exactly what Bhawna Narwal points to, stating the following: “This type of news is intended for entertainment and parody—the purpose is not to harm anybody but it can be misinterpreted as facts. Lots of websites and social media offer critical commentary on society, celebrities and politicians to amuse readers, but these stories have the potential to fool” ^[7] (p. 977). In relation to fake news, which is based on incorrect information whose purpose is to deceive the public, satirical news is “based on information that is exaggerated, overturned, and accentuated in order to point to deceptions”, implying elements of humour at all times ^[8] (p. 13).

Clickbait represents one of the most widespread forms of manipulation in digital media, but it is not its exclusive feature. According to the results of a research work entitled *Dezinformacije u onlajn sferi: slučaj BiH* (Disinformation in the online sphere: the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina), clickbait appears as the second most common type of media manipulation

[7] (p. 21). In reality, it appeared as a technique for drawing attention much earlier in the form of sensationalist and intriguing titles in tabloids. With regard to digital media, it does not relate solely to titles construed in a sensationalist manner, but, in general terms, to contents whose primary function is drawing attention and generating “clickability” on a massive scale. “The review of the literature on the subject allows us to point out two main notions or definitions: a restrictive one that reduces clickbait to the strategies used in the formulation of news headlines, and a more general and inclusive one that encompasses different formulas to attract readers’ attention and increase traffic to a webpage” [8] (p. 97).

Next is the conspiracy theory notion, which refers to “a media release that makes claims concerning some organised and harmful actions of an entity, but that offers no proof for such claims (...) conspiracy theories emerge at the moment when the very assumption of possible harmful action is presented as a fact, without any actual investigation into the subject matter and presentation of any piece of evidence to support the claim” [2] (p. 52).

Multimedia, as one of the features of digital media that makes it superior to traditional mass media, implies a possibility of the visualisation of media contents as well, which is largely realised, apart from various illustrations and video footage, by means of photography. The latter, as a valuable asset within the context of gaining information, represents, at the same time, a means of manipulation that can significantly contribute to the credibility of fake news and potentially manipulative content, without verifying their authenticity [9][10]. “The manipulation of images has become an increasingly common occurrence with the advent of digital photos, powerful image manipulation software, and knowledge of techniques” [5] (p. 144). Where the subject matter of our research is concerned, the most significant definition of “fake news” is the one that features it as information that is not consistent with facts and that is intended for the conscious and deliberate manipulation of the public [3] (p. 48), since it successfully divides “fake news” from other potentially manipulative content.

2. Recognition and Verification of “Fake News” and Potentially Manipulative Content

The recognition and verification of “fake news” and potentially manipulative content represent significant competences in the contemporary digital environment. In this sense, digital media users have at their disposal tools whose usage, in addition to possessing certain knowledge and skills, makes an important contribution to identifying contents primarily intended for deception and manipulation.

The hyper-production of “fake news” and potentially manipulative content is mostly evident on Facebook, but the activity has been lately gaining strength on Twitter [11] as well—the social media company that provides the most popular service for mainstream media reporting. Tools such as Bot Sentinel, Botcheck.me, Botometer, and Hoaxy are intended to detect and monitor trollbots and false accounts, and they have been developed for Twitter exclusively [12]. The Objective Analysis Effective Solutions—Fighting Disinformation network database features the tools of “Dirt Protocol” and “Emergent.Info”, which offer a high level of interactivity to users [4] [13].

In addition, the same database offers tools for verifying the credibility of photographs as well, along with metadata on photographs, video contents, and texts [5] [13]. With regard to the aforementioned, the tools for verifying newspaper contents and for differentiating between the notions of “fake news”, satire, conspiracy theories, and the like are the following: Disinformation Index, Factcheck.org, Factchecking, FakerFact, Fakey, Lead Stories FactChecker, KnowNews, and Polygraph (BBG).

Although the existing technical tools are indisputably useful, it is necessary, within the context of responsible and adequate media usage and the recognition and verification of “fake news” and potentially manipulative content, that users should continually develop their media literacy competences [14][15], the complexity of which implies special training courses for media users—in other words, media literacy. For that reason, the key factor is education in the field of media, which implies “gaining knowledge about every single form of media, whether printed, electronic, or digital. Under no circumstances is this type of education to be confused with media-assisted learning, which is within the domain of media didactics” [16][17] (p. 25).

3. Influence of “Fake News” on Media Users’ Emotions

The key to the success of fake news is that it relies, for the most part, on media users’ emotions, along with other elements of cognitive partiality, in opposition to critical thinking. One of the disturbing features with regard to fake news consumption is the fact that users are actually under the impression that other people are more influenced by fake news than they are [18][19]. “Given that fake news is seen as potentially harmful [18][20], a small but growing number of studies have documented the effect of fake news on TPP, generally indicating that TPP persists in the context of fake news” [18][19] [21] (p. 6).

Sivrić [22] points out that social media, so far, has been observed as mere places to have fun, but it has lately gained much more impact. By using social media, people, often unconsciously, become a part of social spheres circulating fake news and disinformation “for various reasons, such as satire, humour, and fun” [22] (p. 10). In their paper, Martel, Gertler Rand, and Pennycook [23] refer to the claims of scholars who advocate the thesis that a negative, anxious, and sad state of mind

increases the overall quality of searching for information, skepticism towards fake news, and doubt and the amount of critical thinking about opposed standpoints, whereas positive moods increase users' level of gullibility and decrease their ability to detect deception [24][25][26][27]. The factor that makes a difference between fake and credible news is that articles featuring the former show "higher levels of anger and disgust and substantially lower levels of 'joy' in their article body than real news stories" [28] (p. 18).

As for the contents of fake news, it could be filled with images and narratives of violence which, according to Katarina Kacer [29], can urge us to develop emotions, such as compassion, pity, and empathy for victims and fascination for such scenes, but contents like these often open an opportunity for the radicalisation of viewers, for developing some mental unease by disturbing one's mental balance, as well as for becoming numb and indifferent to suffering. Kacer [29] says that this depends, in the first place, on the level of cognitive involvement, where the intensity of the latter is disproportionate to the influence of the message.

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