

Fake News and Adequate Behavioural Culture of Information Security

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Received 27 September 2019; Accepted 20 February 2020

Abstract

The paper is an extension of a series of the author's publications devoted to the extremely topical subject-matter of our day - fake news (its essence, genesis and development, its relationship to telecommunications systems and its relation to information security, and even its use as a tool of hybrid wars and asymmetric threats, as well as its consideration as a phenomenon accompanying information in/security). Different target situations have been addressed in the use of fake news in the paper: undermining a political opponent's /business competitor's credibility, broad social basis of perception and multiplication of fake news. It is concluded that there is an inadequacy and asymmetry between the highly developed technologies of global society, and the low capacity for selectivity and ability to analyse facts by no small part of society, which is an indicator of both an insufficiently mature consciousness and lack of a properly shaped value system.

Keywords: fake news; information security; communication theory; behavioural culture; social experiment; fact check

"Fake news is a real problem, it's a problem that requires serious research to solve... It's such a complex problem that it must be attacked from every angle." – Filippo Menczer – Indiana University School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering

1. Introduction

The *fake news* construct is now an indispensable part of our everyday life - it has taken over radio and television broadcasts, it is used in printed mass media and whether with a shade of irony or not - in social networks and in direct everyday communication. In the nonprofessional discourse, this construct is used more intuitively, implicitly containing negative connotations. Why negative: mostly because of the general meaning of the first element of the phrase - "fake". In this case, the supporting word in the word combination and of the construct (notion) do not match: the construct's semantics in general tips its scales not in the direction of the noun - "news" (which is usually a mainstay in word combinations), but to the meaning of the adjective - "fake". It renders the essence of the word "*news*" pointless: providing a "new message, news" [1], "recently received or *noteworthy information*, especially about *recent events*" [2], "*information* or reports about *recent events*" [3]. Fake news do not give us clarity about facts, events and personalities, they do not provide a "new message", "information about recent events" which is noteworthy: they provide "distorted" information - information as if displayed in front of a funhouse mirror: in its reflection elements of the basic image can be recognised, but it is generally unrecognisable, quite different from the original and in a grotesque form.

Fake news is such a solid amalgam of real and fictional

facts that we often find it difficult to discover which of them prevails or whether the information provided is truthful or just a lie, or a clever mixture with malicious intent. Such news is increasingly common in our daily lives. Do we know what it is like? What is its essence? - Isn't it the result of unchecked journalistic information or of an unconscious journalistic mistake in their feverish daily lives? No, it is not about such informational failures. They are involuntary, not intentional, undesired by their authors; in the worst case, it is a matter of informational slip due to professional bad faith - failure to pre-screen and check the relevant data from different angles.

When we talk about fake news nowadays, we mean deliberately substituted or "distorted" facts, intentional and very subtle intertwining of truth and hoax - to the extent that makes the prime source unrecognisable. It is done from mercenary motives: making money, gaining influence, discrediting a competitor - in political, business, international, or professional circles (at work, in various guilds), in interpersonal relations [4]. A characteristic feature of fake news is their avalanche-like spreading, mainly due to the fact that they are relied on to be multiplied by various means of telecommunications, providing speed and mass spread of information.

2. Related research

Although it has a practically ancient history¹ the phenomenon *fake news* has not been the target of research studies during the centuries passed, but yet it turns out to be one of the most controversial topics nowadays because of its significance for politics, trade, advertisement, interpersonal

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relations, etc.

This term is in the field of vision of the European Commission, respected mass media, researchers, methodologists. Many specialists aim their attention towards it, it is the focus of the European Commission for Digital Economy and Digital Society and its Commissioner, Maria Gabriel. The ambivalence of the construct is one of the reasons it has not yet received a formal definition in European Commission documents although other topical issues such as "illegal content" on the Internet are found in the document mentioned [5].

The author of this paper has been dealing with the phenomenon *fake news* for almost two years – since the *Collins* publishers nominated it to be the word of 2017 due to its over-frequent usage, defining it as “*False, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting*” [6]. In a paper dedicated to the genesis, nature and further development of fake news in different discourses we added some more features to the construct - “*Fake news is carefully crafted distorted information with pre-calculated financial, political or other benefit*” [7]. The semantic difference between “false news” and “fake news” is clarified on the derivative base and connected with the semantic usage of the two constructs in [8]. The primary reasons for the increasing rate of spreading of fake news – the ubiquitous use of telecommunication tools and the important role of human factor – are explored. Pragmatic practices to detect fake news and verify its (in) authenticity are pin-pointed as well, ensuring the information security of a person and thus society. Another publication examines fake news and the closely related phenomena *clickbait* (and the models on which it functions) and *malware*, as well as their reversing interactions, known recently as “*phishing*”. Furthermore, signs by which these negative phenomena can be recognised are indicated and effective steps for proactive behaviour to neutralise them are likewise suggested [9].

One more paper addresses fake news as a threat to information security and considers its classification by categories [10]. Some of the information security phenomena closely related to the regarded construct are mentioned in it: along with *clickbait* – *botnet* and *darknet*. There exist counterpoints to fake news that support information security measures such as “white hats” – the ethical hackers penetrating computer systems to test their security, and the recently established European Commission’s High-Level Expert Group (HLEG). Last but not least, analysis shows that fake news and hybrid wars have a common genesis – the application of disinformation in all its types, leading to the crafty unrecognisable intertwining of truth with lie, as well as the omnipresent application of the tried and tested propaganda tool; history and nowadays practice prove that fake news is very often one of the tools of hybrid wars [11]. The article draws parallels between the two phenomena and examines similarities and differences.

3. From harmlessly distorted information through parody to the omnipresent fake news

We have already pointed out that fake news has a long history, dating from ancient times and bearing the seal of disinformation and propaganda. Sometimes the phenomenon might not be harmless for the other people like in Benjamin Franklin’s letters published in *The New-England Courant*

almost three centuries ago under the pen-name of the entertaining middle-aged widow Silence Dogood.ⁱⁱ Looking into the name from an analytical perspective, it can be established that its invention was deliberate and it belongs to the type of so-called “speaking names” (meaningful names): if we try to decode it we will get the message “Silence do(es) good” which would mean “If you do good to others, good will come to you”. But why Silence? It is associated with good manners not to boast when doing good. This can be obtained implicitly in the way she signed her letters: “I remain, Sir, your *humble servant*, SILENCE DOGOOD” [12].

Hiding behind the “mask” of another name, the author receives a certain freedom to express his beliefs. Franklin invented an overall biography of his “mask”: her father had died on her birthday, she herself became a widow. All this was necessary to endue the moral authority of the correspondent, who would easily be transferred to the opinions she expressed, which almost completely coincided with the views of the sixteen-year-old Franklin himself. In this series of fourteen letters, Franklin enlightened such problems as “rights and freedoms”, freedom of speech, tyranny, literature issues, he also created the concept of a “useful citizen”. Thus, by resorting to the cunning to be published at such a young age and to have the opportunity to share his views with a big deal of his contemporaries, but without recourse to propaganda for self-interested motives (which is one of the main characteristic features of fake news), Benjamin Franklin links reality, imagination, and fiction with ... disinformation (which in this case is just writing behind the facade of a non-existing person). Providing it comes to disinformation, when intention and results are harmful, then the “distance” from it to fake news is just a step towards deliberate lies created to harm someone, discredit a political opponent or commercial rival, or to calculate a financial profit from unfairly advertised items.

Sometimes parody stays in-between cases presenting situations non-harmful for the others but yet not corresponding to facts and the ones which are classified as fakes. A lot of people in Bulgaria still recall the 1991 satirical TV programme named “Cuckoo!” announcing that a radiation leak accident occurred in the nuclear power plant Kozloduy. The idea was for the nation to learn how the responsible authorities would react in case of an accident in the nuclear power plant, and how helpless the state was to face major threats and cataclysms, as well as how powerful the influence of the only then national television was, and how much society needs alternatives. German broadcaster ZDF, Reuters, the Spanish Telegraph Agency, Agence France-Presse, and others were also deceived. This broadcast led to considerable panic among the population: it only occurred five years after the real catastrophe in the Chernobyl nuclear power plant when the responsible authorities had retained unforgivable silence about what was happening, and in some cases worse, had convinced people that nothing dangerous for their health and life had occurred.

This directly alludes to another piece of fake news dated 80 years ago – again a fictional story. It was a brilliant set up made by the young American director Orson Welles – a radio narration, masterfully depicting Herbert George Welles' novel “War of the Worlds” (1898). The plot of the radio play represented an alien invasion and the director used a number of tricks, sound and other effects that made listeners believe they were really following a live story – the

director gave the floor to seemingly different experts and even included "eyewitnesses" in the reportage. Thus, every listener had the impression that it was an alien attack aiming to immerse the whole world in blood, with New York on its way to be captured by means of poisonous gas.

Again, like in the commented Bulgarian satirical broadcast "Cuckoo" 28 years ago, this parody caused panic on the streets of the city. No one involved with Welles' radio broadcast expected to deceive listeners to the degree they had [13]. Orson Welles and his team did not want to fool or frighten people, but *rather to offer them entertainment*. However, they did not consider the fact that in 1938 – on the eve of the World War II, there was a real military threat: the alarming news from Nazi Germany made the British even carry out mock drills with gas masks and people in different countries were tense and frightened.

Later on, "the association of the lexeme *fake* with the word "news" has begun in comic American broadcasts and its use has been expanded by John Stewart, a contemporary American television star, comic, satirist and writer, and Chris Morris, a British writer and director well known for the satirical form and news broadcasts" [7].

4. Theory of Communication – The incitement of addressers in creating/spreading fake news – The reaction of addressees

The harmless distortion of information that is not to the detriment of anyone and is not done for personal gain (as in the cited case with B. Franklin), as well as presenting facts and people in a parody must be clearly distinguished from the phenomenon of "fake news". With regard to this, there are further important aspects that should be explored as well; one of the most important of these is the need for the phenomenon to be viewed bilaterally. According to the *theory of communication*, one of the conditions for its implementation is the presence of two parties, two communicants – one that creates or transmits a certain message (addresser) and another – who receives it (addressee, recipient). Of considerable importance are the reasons because of which the addresser makes up and spreads the news and, on the other hand, the reasons because of which the addressee's attention is attracted to and retained by such news, as well as the motives that turn the addressee into an addresser, thus helping news spread quickly. The spread of fake news is subject to the communication theory: it is created by the addresser (person, institution, party, corporation) in order to reach as many recipients as possible, then it must be so grabbing, non-standard and shocking both as information and layout, so it would be able to achieve the purpose they were conceived for at any price – to be read by a maximum number of addressees who would then be inclined to promptly forward the news to more and more recipients. The impact on the recipients must be so strong, featuring curiosity and even eccentricity, so as to make them pass on the news to as many people as possible, being glad that they have "shone" with originality and resourcefulness among the circle of their acquaintances.

In order to understand the essence of fake news, it is important to clarify the incitement of the addressers in the creation/spreading of fake news, the purpose of which is knowingly replaced or "distorted" facts, deliberately and very skilfully intertwined with "exact doses" of truth and lie – up to the unrecognisability of the origin. There are many

examples of fakes on the Internet and mass media aiming to *politically discredit*. A large amount of them were made up during the political campaign for the elections of the US president in 2016. Then Donald Trump announced any news that didn't match his point of view to be fake news, and the media broadcasting such news – to be fake media. But this did not prevent the presidential campaign activists from throwing into the media milieu the fake news that his main opponent in the presidential campaign - Hillary Clinton and the chair of her campaign John Podesta – are linked to a child sexual exploitation structure. In social networks this discrediting and untrue information became known as the *pizzagate* scandal, and for a time it played the role for which it was created – turning voters away from the candidacy of H. Clinton.ⁱⁱⁱ There are numerous examples of fake news for political discreditation: "Pope Francis endorsed Donald Trump for president", "Ireland is officially accepting "Trump refugees" from the US", "ISIS Leader Calls for American Muslim Voters to Support Hillary Clinton", "U.S. Representative Ilhan Omar Says "We are here to take over America", "WikiLeaks Confirms Hillary Clinton Sold Weapons to ISIS"^{iv}, etc.

A well-informed reader will implicitly understand the purposefulness of these titles and that they are fakes created by Trump's team or by himself, "sewn with white thread". They are of the type "entire sensation = one headline": there is no need for an intelligent reader and a good connoisseur of domestic and international affairs to read the whole article for them to understand that it is a pure sample of insinuation.

In case the news addressee is not as good a connoisseur of the political or commercial situation in their country and abroad, or they do not have the "sixth sense" to help them recognise misleading information from real facts, they should at least heed the daily warnings about widespread fake news and the need to *acquire a culture of adequate behaviour therein*. It consists of adhering to some basic rules facilitating the identification of fake news [8], one of which is checking the information it conveys on specialised sites – the so-called *fact check sites*. Acquiring such media culture would help us be quick on the uptake about the nearby situation and not take everything written / spoken at face value. Thus, referring to just few of the recently created many fact checking sites, it will become clear that most of the aforementioned assertions about the presidential campaign in the United States are fake news: "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President"^v, "Ireland is officially accepting "Trump refugees" from the US"^{vi}, "ISIS Leader Calls for American Muslim Voters to Support Hillary Clinton"^{vii}, and "U.S. Representative Ilhan Omar Says "We are here to take over America" (Not only is this quote made up, it runs counter to the several public statements Omar has made on the topic of being both Muslim and American).^{viii} Some news is a mixture of fake and real news – "E-mails released by WikiLeaks confirm Hillary Clinton sold weapons to ISIS."^{ix}

Besides being created for political discredit, fake news is also being fabricated to compromise a *business competitor*. Such is, for example, the received by the author of this study warning against the use of medicine *Paracetamol*, designated P/500 – a very white and shiny paracetamol, as doctors claimed it contains the "Machupo" virus, also known as the Bolivian haemorrhagic virus - one of the world's most dangerous viruses with a highly lethal outcome (the message followed by an extensive description of the damage to the virus). The message was sent with the instruction to be

forwarded to as many users as possible: a case of applying the theory of communication, which usually aims to multiply the number of addressees. Two years ago, we were informed that one should pay for using the services of the messaging application Viber. The message was accompanied again by the instruction that all the user's contacts were to be informed. The former is obviously a commercial provocation^x on the one hand, and on the other – it was probably connected to the intention for the application to be blocked (commercial subtext is also transparent). In the latter case, an intention to harm the messaging application can be established, preventing its normal functioning (albeit not for a long period of time).

Every one of us has examples of professional and interpersonal "fakes" in our everyday life, we can easily find many other ones in various telecommunication means.

Fake news is being created for a wide range of addressees to influence public opinion in a particular way or for a material benefit to be derived. When disseminated, there is inevitably a "quarantine period" that is needed to check the reliability of information like vigilant users usually do. The Bulgarian Commissioner for Digital Economy and Digital Society, Maria Gabriel, has recently said in an interview "Educated people say they more often encounter fake news as well as they can easily sift out fake from real information" [14].

But there are other types of recipients for which no quarantine period is necessary: they are the perfect addressee for fake news, they can be "hooked up" under all the rules of the "fishing craft". This is evidenced by a social experiment carried out: an advertisement about the recruitment of ..."green caviar pickers" in Denmark was published and widely shared on social networks; there was an incredibly large number of people on the web who answered the advert although every average intelligent Bulgarian knows the meaning of the phrase "изпращам за зелен хайвер" –literal meaning in English "to send somebody for green caviar" (The meaning of the phrase in the "Guide to Bulgarian phrases and expressions" is "deceive, mislead, swindle someone for something" [15]. This phrase is used in situations in the context of sending someone for something in vain: something that does not exist - black, red and other varieties of caviar are known, but not green). The idiom is considered to be a typical Bulgarian expression, the *figurative* background of which does not show any similarity to the idioms of other people. Its semantic correspondence in English is "to send someone on a fool's errand" or "to send someone on a wild goose chase", the latter being an idiom too but featuring quite a different metaphorical image^{xi}, its semantics encompasses the following meanings: "wasting resources working on something that does not exist; spending time searching for something that is simply impossible to find; a foolish search for something that cannot be achieved; a chase for something that's beyond one's reach." [16]) The common semantics of the idioms in both of the languages unambiguously proves that it is foolish to arrange travel abroad with the purpose of picking something...which does not exist. But yet some people did not realise it was a deliberately made up advertisement and with hopes for a brighter future in a well-regulated country like Denmark, they eagerly reached out to the conductors of that social experiment.

Another comparable social experiment, again administered using a means of telecommunication and also aimed at the *study of addressees' reactions* to obviously

misleading facts, features an advertisement for recruiting workers in another country, with the rather improbable promise of *extremely high wages, no pre-employment demands, as well as no requirements for any foreign language knowledge or specific computer skills*. Having believed all those improbable working conditions obviously bordering on hoax, a lot of individuals rang the number from the advertisement. What is more – an entire village responded to it, a villager called to say that all his fellow villagers are ready to set off and to inquire when the bus would arrive and drive them to the advertised destination.

The examples of social experiments discussed above prove that there are recipients having an *extremely low ability to tell fake from real news*, which in some cases is also associated with a very low intellectual level and lack of general knowledge encompassing the current or preceding topical events. These experiments also show some people's inability to *critically and analytically comprehend* information.

The good news in these cases is only the fact that the two fake news examples we presented were merely social experiments and no people found themselves in trouble pursuing excessive wants and desires. These circumstances, particularly in combination with a great amount of impulsivity, the pursuit of quick and easy benefits, and the difficult socio-economic situation, are extremely dangerous and pose a very high risk for a person or a group of people to fall into modern slavery because of unchecked false news, gullibility and recklessly over trusting any published information. For recipients who are unable to separate "the hay from the chaff" any sensational news will spark their imagination, it will prompt a "chain reaction" of a series of forwarded hoaxes to other addressees sharing the sensation.

The bad news is that the spread of fake news is gaining momentum never before seen and has a rapidly expanding social base in our country and around the world, posing an ever-growing threat to contemporary global society.

5. Conclusions

Fake news is a phenomenon with a very long history but with very strong reverberations and a great disruptive effect on the information security of the individual and society both presently as well as in the near future. In studying this phenomenon from various angles (as pointed by Filippo Menczer in the motto of this paper), we have noticed a *trend* related to the degree of development of society in social and global aspects on the one hand and on the other – the invasion of fake news. We found that *the degree to which society is developed is directly proportional to the universality of the "fake news" phenomenon – the more developed a society, the more wide-spread this phenomenon is*. This is due to the inexhaustible cases of the rapid dissemination of news by means of telecommunications and other mass media. Additionally, societies with a high degree of technological advancement offer a much wider range of reasons for fake news to be fabricated, in comparison with their developing counterparts. The opposite trend also holds true- the more unimpaired by the processes of the globalising world a society is, the more unfamiliar this phenomenon is. The *paradox* in this case is rooted in the fact that whilst a modern and technologically advanced society has the tools to quickly check the authenticity of information, using the advances in technology and

communications, fake news nevertheless finds better ground in it.

The conclusion is that there is an *inadequacy and asymmetry* between highly developed technologies and the low capacity for selectivity and ability to analyse facts by a significant part of society, the consciousness of which is not sufficiently mature and lacks a properly shaped value system to be able to withstand manipulative intentions and intrusions of certain factors.

The European Commissioner for Digital Economy and Digital Society, Maria Gabriel, is directly involved in the cause of the widespread counteraction against fake news. One of the important conditions to make it successful is the investment in *media literacy* amongst all members of society, focusing on the *adequate behavioural culture of information security* that has been acquired since school age [Gabriel 2018].

At the Sixth World Congress of Information Agencies (13.06.2019), organized by the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency and the World Council of Information Agencies, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev warned of the danger of fake news: "Today the truth is often drowned in fake news. Haste takes

precedence over credibility. Words lose the battle with images. Armies of semi-literate trolls have been recruited to discredit ideas and personalities. <...> The destructive effect of information may now be even greater than that from bombs and missiles." [17] This warning is not just a good word delivered from an honourable official at a highly respected forum - it must be heeded by all members of global society, who need to enhance their media and cyber culture; professionals from various fields and different countries have to join forces and demonstrate *proactive behaviour* in the face of the rapidly emerging day-to-day challenges to our information society.

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ENDNOTES:

Fake news originated in the first century BC in Ancient Rome [MacDonald, 2017] and was associated with the disinformation campaign of Octavian Augustus against Mark Antony, which ends with the suicide of the latter. This phenomenon, woven of propaganda and political intent, becomes well known after many centuries namely as *fake news* in English where this construct achieves its "revival" from and begins "to dictate" the terms of its existence in different discourses presently.

He was then only sixteen and therefore wasn't allowed to publish. Benjamin Franklin decided to use a pen-name after he was denied several times to publish letters under his own name in the *Courant*.

More about it – in [Ilieva 2018b: 94].

MIXTURE of fake news and facts; will be commented farther.

Dan Evon. published 10 July 2016. [<https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/pope-francis-donald-trump-endorsement/>]

FactCheck: No, Ireland is NOT "officially accepting Trump refugees". [<https://www.thejournal.ie/ireland-officially-accepting-trump-refugees-inishturk-facts-3074777-Nov2016/>]

Reported FALSE: "There was nothing to this story, which was published by World News Daily Report, a fake news site. WNDR's modus operandi involves attaching unrelated images to clickbait fabrications, using the sensational material to generate traffic on social media. The image appended to this article depicts cleric Maulana Fazlullah (believed to have been involved in the attempted assassination of Malala Yousafzai). The name "Amadh Abu Makmud Al-alwani" appears only in connection with links to this fabricated claim and is not the name of any known or high-ranking ISIS operative." [<https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/isis-leader-supports-hillary/>]

Reported FALSE: "We found no record of Omar having said these words. Further, even as a paraphrase, the sentiment expressed by the meme does not accurately reflect her views. Omar has made several public statements that explicitly detail her perspective as a refugee, immigrant, Muslim, and American citizen, and none of those sentiments involve her view that a Muslim's role is to "take over" American society.

I took an oath to uphold the American Constitution. I am American as everyone else is", she told Late Show host Steven Colbert in April 2019.

In several public remarks, Omar has made the argument that American Muslims are just as American as anyone else and should, especially in a nation founded on the principle of religious freedom, be able to fully express themselves in the public sphere as much as any other American.

[<https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/omar-take-over-america/>]

Reported MIXTURE of fake and real news – *What's True*: In a July 2016 interview, Julian Assange (the founder of WikiLeaks) contended that leaked e-mails painted a "rich picture" of Hillary Clinton's hawkish tendencies with respect to the Libyan intervention and referenced ISIS as the eventual beneficiary of weapons provided for that intervention.

What's False: No WikiLeaks e-mails confirm that Hillary Clinton directly and knowingly "sold weapons to ISIS." [<https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/wikileaks-cofirms-hillary-clinton-sold-weapons-to-isis/>]

it is not difficult with a few clicks online using Fact Check to establish it is an insinuation

The phrase's origin, in reality, has nothing to do with wild geese or chasing them (like the previous phrase which has nothing to do with its supporting word - caviar). The origin of the idiom 'wild goose chase' is rooted in an old form of horse race called "Wild Goose Chase" The race involved several horses racing behind the main lead rider at a predetermined distance. The race more or less resembled the formation in which wild geese fly.

However, the race used to follow an unpredictable course. That's why eventually the phrase came to be used where someone is aimlessly, or uselessly doing something. [Theidioms.com]