

## „FAKE NEWS” - A NEW METHOD OF MANIPULATION OR OF INFORMING THE PUBLIC?

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### Abstract

This article presents the main theoretical and practical aspects regarding the “fake news” phenomenon. The issues addressed represent both ideas from the literature review and the results of my efforts to understand and explain what I consider worth writing about “fake news”. This paper deals with: mass-media as a means of information, the measures taken against this type of “fake news”, the lack of institutional support in Romania, manipulation and propaganda. This paper aims to improve civic education: a small guide to identify media manipulation, the way in which people can identify a fake in the media (photo or video image). In Romania, in order to introduce such elements in education an in-depth study and, a thorough analysis of the specialised literature is required. One should start with the formation of an institutional framework and with the training of specialists in the fields of communication and public relations.

**Keywords:** „fake news”, mass-media, manipulation, propaganda.

### INTRODUCTION

Communication represents an essential factor that lies at the core of human interaction. No matter if we refer to a face to face interaction or a virtual one, the way in which we address each other is highly significant.

Mass-media reflects and may sometimes impose a way of life that is defined according to the values, interests and aspirations of the people with public notoriety. To broadcast information, to spread knowledge, to create and spread entertainment have become ordinary actions without which it is difficult for us to imagine our daily life. Selecting information turns mass-media into a social influencing tool. Nowadays, it is impossible for us to ignore the media, we can only offer it extended attention or not.

In modern societies, political propaganda has an essential role in informing, but also in manipulating the masses, which are presented

with an image which sometimes replaces reality. The citizens are inoculated with a certain image that, professionally achieved, seems to be the reality itself. They come to believe that such an image is truly real and they no longer ask themselves whether it is authentic or not (ROȘCA, 2016).

Manipulating events with the purpose of a politic, economic or emotional gain, is not a new practice. The novelty is represented by the fact that propaganda and fake news also use the online environment, both of them mainly representing methods of distorting the truth, of emotional persuasiveness, which aim to instigate mainly to negative actions. If in the past some news read in the paper or seen on TV was discussed in the family or in the group of friends or colleagues, now every like, share or comments increases the chances of it reaching new readers or of it becoming viral. What we regard as news can also be “fake news” spread with the help of fake accounts, bots (accounts controlled by some software) or with the help of trolls (people who act anonymously or hide behind some nicknames and how make a habit of posting and commenting in the virtual environment, an activity aimed at creating discord on the internet and at stirring quarrels or irritation) (VOICU, 2018).

### The degree of actuality and the way in which the topic is presented in the specialized literature

Mass-media represents a system with some organic components: the public, the message producers and broadcasters, the control and management systems, the internal and external socio-historical conditions in relation to a human community (group, state, nation) or even with the humanity in its whole. The term mass-media

refers to the group of mass information means or even to the mass communication, in its whole. By joining the English word mass (mass of people) and the Latin word media, the plural of the noun medium (intermediary, broadcaster, means, environment – physical or spiritual), on British field, a unique synthesis was achieved. In its broadest sense, the term “medium” refers to the channel through which the message goes from the transmitter to the receiver or even the distance between the source and the addressee. In the last decades, the term media successfully replaces the whole mass-media expression, referring, at the same time, to the message production and broadcasting technique, to the sum of the messages therefore broadcasted and even to the producer group of these type of messages (POPA, 2002).

In Segiu Tămaș’s Political Dictionary, mass-media is defined as representing the group of modern technical means of informing and influencing the masses or, in other words, the mass communication achieved with the help of the written press, radio, TV, cinema, discs and other means (TĂMAȘ, 1993). The significance, the place and the functions of mass-media in the society are thoroughly studied.

“The function represents the contribution that an element brings to the satisfaction of a requirement that it is part of, contributing to its maintenance and development” (ZAMFIR & VIĂȘCEANU, 1998).

In the Dictionary of Sociology coordinated by Gilles Ferreol, the function is defined as a relationship between two or more elements, characterised through its role or purposefulness (FERREOL, 1998)

The six functions analysed, which are seen as dominant, are the following:

- the information function
- the correlation (interpretation) function
- the cultural and educational function
- the communication (connection) function
- the entertainment function
- the mass-media speech and language function (POPA, 2002).

The effects of mass-media oscillated between two options regarding the importance and the power of influencing the media, their capacity of

producing certain repercussions. Therefore, the assessments were present under the idea of the media’s “omnipotent effects” or under that of “the minor (limited) effects”. The judgements regarding the effects changed substantially through the course of years, shifting from something that was called punctual, direct and short-term effects to diffuse, direct and long-term effects (DRĂGAN, 1996). They are felt in different areas of the society acting on individuals, groups, institutions or the whole society. At the same time, they can influence human personality in its cognitive dimension, changing the image of the world, the affective dimension, the creation or change of some attitudes and feelings, or the behavioural dimension, changes in the individuals’ way of action and social mobilisation phenomena. Generally, opinions varied, in a cyclic manner, from the idea of the strong effects to that of the weak effects and the other way around (COMAN, 2016). Specialists acknowledge three types of reactions to the mass-media messages: agreement, identification and internalization. According to the significance of these types of reactions we can also anticipate some types of effects: the agreement leads to poor effects of the mass-media messages, identification may create limited effects among receptors, and internalisation leads to strong effects. The latter obviously influence, in a significant manner, the behaviour of the receptors. Therefore, following the reception of a message that can induce a strong effect, the reactions are immediate and of three types:

- the stimulus-answer model
- the hegemonic model
- the dependence model

At the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the term manipulation referred to a practical method through which gold and silver were extracted. In the second half of the same century, the notion gets the meaning of “manual movement subordinated to some scientific or technological operation” and later on that of intellectual act, in phrases such as “to manipulate the questions”, “thinking manipulates ideas”. In 1864 the negative side of manipulation occurs, referring to “actions that are meant to deceive, fraud, and to obtain on behalf of an audience the acceptance

of some ideas without being conscious of this objective” (BRETON, 2005).

According to the dictionary of sociology, manipulation represents the action of determining a social actor (person, group or community) to think and act in a manner compatible with the interests of the initiator and not with the interests of the social actor, by using some persuasive techniques that intentionally distort the truth, giving the impression of the freedom of thought and decision (ZAMFIR & VIĂȘCEANU, 1998).

According to the amplitude of the changes determined in a certain social context, Bogdan Ficeac groups manipulations as being small, medium and large (FICEAC, 1997).

According to the way in which they are used, R.V. Joule and J.L. Beauvois identify three manipulation techniques: striking, foot in the door and door in the face (JOULE & BEAUVOIS, 1997)

Manipulation is possible when some of our specific individual traits are specified: greed, low intellect, fear or other human weaknesses.

In modern societies, political propaganda plays an essential role in informing but also in manipulating the masses, who are presented with a certain image that, at times, replaces reality. People are presented with certain image, professionally achieved, that looks like reality itself. They come to believe in such an image and they do not ask themselves whether it is genuine or not (ROȘCA, 2016).

Propaganda represents the systematic activity of broadcasting, promoting and spreading some doctrines, thesis or ideas from the stand points of some social groups or ideologies, with the purpose of influencing, changing or forming some conceptions, attitudes, opinions, beliefs or behaviours, designed in such a manner that will lead to reaching the goals and the interests of the group it serves. In the sociology of the propaganda special attention is awarded to the broadcasting means and methods (ZAMFIR & VIĂȘCEANU, 1998).

The fake news phenomenon, respectively the mixture between the truth and the lie or with distorted information in the content of the news, spread a lot lately and it became harder and harder to control. Nowadays fake news adopted new forms: it is so carefully created that readers

do not realise that it is false or fake. Moreover, it is personalised for each particular group in order to resonate with certain readers or even with all the readers and to trigger an emotional response as strong as possible. The updated options of fake news are precisely targeted, using data offered by Facebook, Twitter, Google, or other sources (ȚIMONEA, 2017).

Taking into account the fact that we know very little about the extent to which online audiences are exposed to fake news and about the way in which these access points are included in the special digital news regime, the purpose of this paper is the expose the simplest ways in which one can recognize “fake news” or to disassemble this phenomenon.

Fake news is written evasively and often exaggerated, without offering sources, statements or the context of information, with links to obscure sites. It uses unclear statements, such as “it was found that...”, “x said that in a recent press conference”, “this is what a journalist from .... said”, usually launching assumptions, rumors or conspirations. It generally uses shocking titles – some of them written in capital letters or contain words written in capital letters. As a result, when people read such piece of news they should be careful and look at some of the following aspects:

- whether or not they heard about that particular site before;
- whether or not there is a mailbox of the editorial staff or a contact address;
- whether or not there is more than one source that can verify the news;

An authentic piece of news can be verified from other sources as well.

- can the authors of the article be identified?
- is there a personal documentation or does it only cite sources and authors that cannot be verified?
- does it include shocking titles?
- are the issues in the title supported by the rest of the article?

If these aspects characterize a title, some news or an article, then we certainly deal with “fakenews” (ȚIMONEA, 2017).



### A false image

The false image is the one promoted the most in the media. In order to verify whether a picture is real or is has ben modified on the internet, we only need a few seconds. Since most of the users do not have enough knowledge about how one can prove if a picture is real or not, we can find out the truth using some simple methods. The simplest one is with the help of Google Chrome. Using this browser, we only need to click right on the image that we want to check and to choose the option "Search Image on Google".

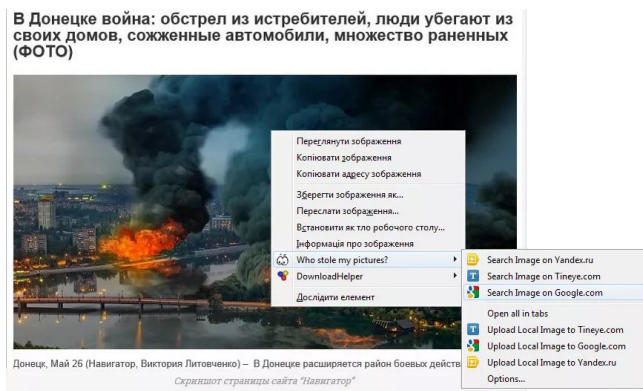


Fig.1. Ways of checking an image (ŞANKOVSKI, n.d.)

If the browser used does not include this automated search option according to the photo, one can install a special plug-in, "Who stole my pictures", "Кто украл мои фотографии" in Russian language. This one has the advantage that the search option is not only on Google, but also on Yandex and TinEye, looking into all the three search engines at the same time. Since we lack both Chrome and the necessary means to install the plug-in, we move the picture that we consider to be fake from the site of its location, using the mouse, into a new window, accessing the Google image box, and then we lower it into the search bar (ŞANKOVSKI, n.d.). By doing this we can simultaneously verify two essential hypostases:

- if the image is genuine or it was achieved by modifying the pictures (photoshop or photo editor). In this case we notice that a flame was attached to the original image in order to present the bombardment that the city of Donetsk was exposed to.

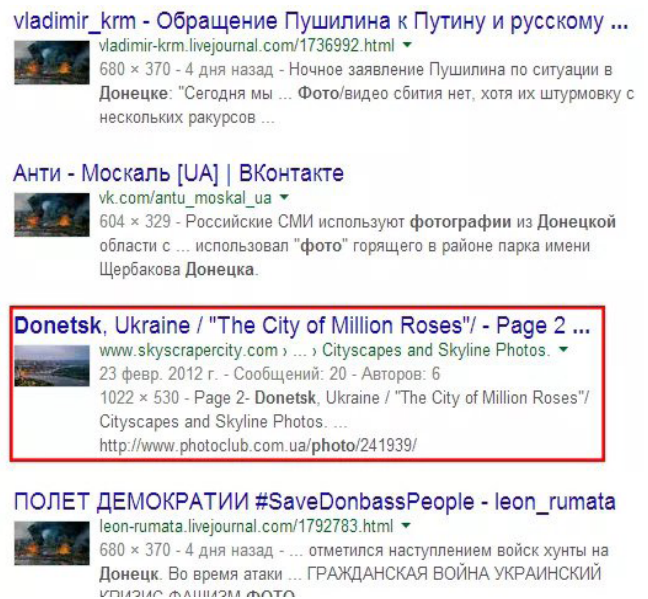


Fig. 2. Ways of checking an image (ŞANKOVSKI, n.d.)

- the date the image was published and what the photo shows in reality

### Fake video image

It is more complex to work with fake video images than with pictures. If there are suspicions that the video images are fake, try one of the following methods:

- if you look at the incorporated YouTube window on another site, move towards the YouTube site in order to obtain more information about that particular film (click on the logo of the video-service in the right up corner).

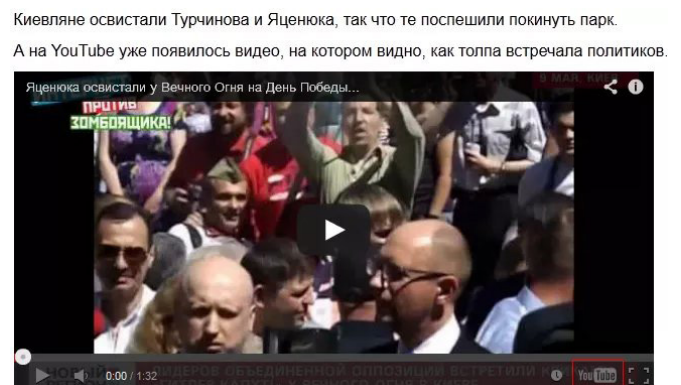


Fig. 3. The people from Kiev clamoured down Turcinov and Iaŭeniuk, who quickly left the park (ŞANKOVSKI, n.d.)

This way we can find out if the piece of news is fake or when the video images were first placed on YouTube.



Fig.4. Iatzenyuk was clamoured down near the Eternal Fire, during the commemoration of the date of the victory in Kiev. (ŞANKOVSKI, n.d.)

In the case that there are no obvious signs of fake video images, one should consider the following aspects:

- if, in the name of the video, a recent date is indicated and this clip was placed on YouTube several times in a short period of time, then there is the possibility of it being fake;
- choose the clip with the highest number of accesses and read the comments below – there is high probability that people who saw the original variant or have even published the link to that particular material, to find themselves among those who have seen the clip;

Another method consists of describing, using keywords, the video images and to introduce these words in the search bar on YouTube or Google (ŞANKOVSKI, n.d.).

## CONCLUSIONS

At the same time with the development of the Internet and of computer science, the websites which provide deceiving or fake information have spread at enormous speed.

The European democracies, and not only they, were not prepared to defend themselves against this avalanche of fake news.

The need for information is vital to the existence of the individual, and since the information does not have any value in itself, it has to be analysed as a product of individual or collective thinking, which has to be beneficial both to the individual and to the society.

Specialists in the field of communication such as Mihai Coman, Dorian Popa, Ioan Drăgan, Coriolan Păunescu and many others, have shown that the media means act not only on the individual, offering behavioural models that can be adopted through learning, but they also influence the culture, the knowledge volume, the values and the norms of a society, as well as human relations. Starting from these fundamental landmarks, the role of mass-media is directed towards modelling the informational flows addressed to the public. We notice that the influence generated by mass-media leads to a change in the perceptions, behaviours and attitudes of the different categories of public in accordance with the values accepted in the contemporary society.

The danger that the “fake news” phenomenon represents triggered reactions at an international level and it led to a series of legislative measures taken against it. In the EU “A code of good practice” was established, but we must also mention the adherence of the most important online platforms, Facebook, Google, Twitter and Mozilla, as well as that of the professional body which represents these platforms and those that represent the advertising sector and the advertising agencies with these norms of social conduct.

If the majority of the European states took preventive measures, adopting laws which prevent fake information, unfortunately in Romania there is no legislative framework aimed at fighting against this phenomenon. The only special norms that refer to the activity of the press and the obligation to broadcast authentic information to the public are found in The Audiovisual law no. 504/2002 and in the Unified Code of Ethics, adopted by the Convention of the Media Organisations in October 2009.

There are different reasons behind the spread of this fake news type of information. From

gaining political and material advantages on behalf of some organizations to increasing the number of sales of some publications, in order to mobilize the population in times of war or for a particular cause.

The news consumer has to be more attentive and more sceptical about the articles that offer sensational titles and that are now extremely easy to broadcast, especially in social media.

Any new technology has both a useful and a destructive potential, all depending on the way in which the society understands to use it. This is why fake news, propaganda and mass manipulation will always be extremely difficult to control. And since manipulation, regardless of its nature and form, is present in the media, and in Romania it is extremely difficult to make a distinction between the publications that manipulate, intentionally or not, and those who do not manipulate, and the media cannot be controlled by anyone on the Internet, and not only, the only antidote against fake news remains our own judgement.

Speaking about the latest tool, the Internet, there are many criticism and limitations but there are also many praises for it. We have to be ready to learn fast from the lessons of the past and to quickly adapt to the digital era. The Internet which is now part of our daily routine has become almost a living condition from a professional point of view.

Although many Western countries posses an important advance in the field, Romania presents a high-quality human resource in the cybernetic field and in those connected to public relations and therefore it can efficiently develop online networks that can facilitate direct relationships among the dialogue partners.

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