

# Fake News

**Dan-Ion CĂLIN, Alexandru BARCAN, Ciprian CONSTANTIN, PhD**

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” Police Academy, Bucharest, Romania

dancalin228@gmail.com, alexbarcan23@gmail.com, ciprianconstantin07@yahoo.com

## Abstract

*The terms "fake news" and "falsehood" have become ubiquitous in contemporary society. They influence or alter the way in which people perceive reality. The challenge of combating fake news lies in its ability to evade detection and capture the attention of a growing number of individuals. It has the potential to alter the way reality is perceived, impact the reputation of institutions and organisations, and even pose a threat to national security by influencing perceptions of values and risks. In today's context, fake news has emerged as a significant vulnerability, with the potential to be exploited as part of hybrid warfare strategies. One proposed method for combating the spread of fake news is the development of critical thinking skills that are specifically designed to identify such information and mitigate its influence on personal beliefs and values.*

**Index terms:** disinformation, deep fake, fake news, information war, psychological warfare

## 1. Introduction

This article intends to provide an analysis of the fake news phenomenon and its effects on society, democracy, and the individuals who seek to propagate it. To accomplish this, it is crucial to understand the social context and how this phenomenon has gained substantial traction and influence. Historically, human societies have encountered and managed misinformation. However, the distinction today lies in the fact that fake news is increasingly utilized as a tool to achieve social and political objectives.

## 2. What is fake news?

In the absence of a clear definition, fake news is understood to be news that is either completely false or contains incomplete or partially true information. It is published with the intention of forming false opinions among those who access it. The content is fabricated, distorted, exaggerated, taken out of context and presented in a different image. Alternatively, it is a self-serving opinion that has been transformed into valid news with biased argumentation [1].

In 2018, as part of a series of measures to secure the digital information space, the European Commission started work on an EU-wide Code of Good Practice on Combating Online Misinformation, which defines misinformation as "a set of demonstrably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to deliberately mislead the public and which may cause public harm" [1].

## 3. What is the relationship between fake news, propaganda and disinformation?

The term 'dezinformatsiya', derived from the Russian language, has its roots in the actions of Soviet strategists during the 20th century. These actions were designed to disseminate false

information with the intention of influencing public opinion. The subjects of disinformation were primarily selected from topics of broad public interest, and the content of the messages was based on a combination of true and false information. These messages were sent in a sustained and persistent manner [2] [3] [4].

The term 'propaganda' has its roots in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is defined as any information that is manipulated or distorted with the intention of promoting a political or other cause. This manipulation or distortion is typically carried out by governments or media institutions with the aim of influencing public opinion in a way that is favourable to the propagandist [5] [6].

#### **4. What does fake news aim to achieve?**

The act of distorting the public's perception or creating a new trend with the intention of misinforming or creating confusion and destabilising the sense of collective or national security.

The adverse effects of fake news are predominantly experienced by citizens, who are an integral component of the concept of national security as both beneficiaries and as a value to be protected.

The visibility gained as a result of the circulation of messages (issuing, receiving, absorbing, distributing, quoting, redistributing) increases the potential danger to national security, particularly in the context of fostering mistrust in democratic systems. Furthermore, fake news messages tend to appeal to prejudices or exploit issues that are particularly sensitive to the population, such as ethnic tensions, racial, ethnic, or religious differences. This is done in order to divert attention from issues that are more relevant to the state and its citizens [7].

With today's technological capabilities, it is very easy to create, edit, publish and distribute content. National interests can be compromised by the power of fake news published with the aim of influencing a state's strategic decisions by exploiting mistrust or doubt [1].

It is possible for a variety of domestic and foreign actors to utilise mass online disinformation campaigns on a large scale with the intention of sowing mistrust and creating societal tensions, which could have serious consequences for our collective security. Furthermore, disinformation campaigns initiated by third countries can constitute a hybrid threat to internal security, including electoral processes, particularly when combined with cyber-attacks. For instance, Russian military doctrine explicitly recognises information warfare as one of its domains. Furthermore, the dissemination of disinformation can also impact political processes by distorting public opinion. Domestic and foreign actors may utilise disinformation to influence policy, public discourse and behaviour in areas such as climate change, migration, public security, health and finance. Additionally, misinformation can also contribute to the erosion of trust in science and empirical evidence.

#### **5. How fake news is used in war: hybrid war**

Fake news has become a powerful tool in modern conflicts, used to manipulate public opinion, destabilize adversaries, and influence the course of events on the battlefield. Here are some of the most common ways fake news:

Propaganda and disinformation are used in war:

1. Fabrication of an enemy image: Dissemination of false information regarding the enemy's intentions, capabilities, or cruelty can serve to justify one's own actions and mobilise the population for the war effort.
2. The sowing of discord among the enemy is achieved through the creation and dissemination of false rumours pertaining to political or social divisions within the enemy country. This can result in the undermining of national unity and the weakening of resistance.

3. **Manipulating international public opinion:** The dissemination of false information has the potential to influence international public opinion and garner political or economic support for one's own interests.

#### Psychological Operations:

1. **Demoralizing the enemy:** The dissemination of misinformation regarding significant losses, military setbacks, or internal issues has the potential to dispirit enemy forces and diminish civilian morale.
2. **Creating panic:** The dissemination of false information regarding the occurrence of chemical, biological, or nuclear attacks has the potential to incite panic and chaos among the civilian population.
3. **Influencing strategic decisions:** The dissemination of inaccurate information regarding the disposition of enemy forces has the potential to mislead military commanders and exert undue influence on strategic decision-making.

#### Censorship and control of information:

1. **Blocking access to truthful information:** In an effort to control the narrative and maintain power, authoritarian regimes may resort to censoring the media and blocking internet access, thereby limiting the population's ability to access information about the conflict.
2. **Promoting alternative narratives:** The creation and promotion of alternative narratives can serve to justify the actions of the regime and distort the reality of the situation.

#### Amplifying social divisions:

1. **Exploiting fear and hatred:** The dissemination of misinformation can be employed to exacerbate existing anxieties and prejudices, thereby intensifying social polarisation and fostering further social divisions.
2. **Preventing dialogue and peaceful resolution of conflicts:** The proliferation of fake news can create an atmosphere of distrust and hostility, impeding constructive dialogue and negotiation, and prolonging the conflict.

## **6. Fake news and COVID-19**

COVID-19 (Corona Virus Disease, 19 indicates the year the first case was reported) is a disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 that began in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The outbreak is thought to have started in a seafood market, and some articles claim it was created in a laboratory in Wuhan. The most common symptoms of the virus are fever, cough and tiredness. In most people, this virus presents with mild forms of symptoms, with an 80% recovery rate without the need for hospitalisation. People at high risk of developing health problems with SARS-Cov-2 are the elderly, people with heart or lung problems, diabetes or cancer. The symptoms of the virus are similar to those of seasonal flu. The psychological impact on all people is of crucial importance because of the very rapid transmission of the virus, the quarantine period, the possibility of losing loved ones, mistrust of others, infected people who do not follow the rules, guilt, anxiety, pessimism and paranoia.

A fake news during the pandemic period is represented by the fact that G5 would be the cause of the COVID-19 virus or even exacerbate the disease (Ahmed, Videl-Allabal, Downing, Segui, 2020). Ahmed and his collaborators conducted a study analysing the spread of this fake news and misinformation on the social network Twitter. They analysed this phenomenon for one week and found that out of 233 messages distributed, 34.8% of the messages belonged to people who believed in this phenomenon. The remaining 65.2% of the messages came from people who did not believe in the conspiracy theory but spread the message. This clearly shows the rapid spread of false information

without prior investigation. The person who wrote this message intended to spread misinformation. The consistency of this rumour is extreme, as some people have set fire to 5G masts/towers and even a hospital phone tower in the UK [5].

## **7. The psychological implications of fake news**

The role of emotions in how people perceive and respond to fake news is a significant one. Emotional responses, such as fear, anger, or excitement, can render individuals more vulnerable to misinformation, as emotionally charged content often captures attention more effectively than neutral information. When individuals experience intense emotions, they may be inclined to rely less on critical thinking and more on intuitive responses, increasing the likelihood of accepting misinformation without verification. Furthermore, emotionally compelling narratives are frequently shared more extensively on social media, which further amplifies the dissemination and impact of misinformation. Recognizing the role of emotions in information processing is vital for effectively addressing the challenges posed by fake news [5].

The rapid dissemination of fake news is a phenomenon that is particularly prevalent in the political sphere, where it is often employed with the intention of influencing public opinion and behaviour. This phenomenon subsequently extends into other domains, including science, technology, celebrity culture and events related to natural disasters. In these contexts, misinformation can distort perceptions of essential topics and create confusion among the general public. Those who rely more on emotions than reason tend to perceive such messages as true, even when they are misleading [5].

A classification of errors associated with the phenomenon of fake news:

1. **The illusionary truth effect:** describes the tendency of individuals to view a statement as more credible with increased exposure, regardless of its truthfulness. The more frequently information is repeated, the higher its perceived credibility becomes, even if the information is false. This phenomenon arises from psychological mechanisms that blur the line between familiarity and truth, leading people to accept frequently encountered information as true simply because they have heard it often. The illusionary truth effect is frequently leveraged in the context of fake news, playing a significant role in the dissemination and entrenchment of disinformation [5].
2. **Partisan identity:** in the context of fake news, partisan identity refers to the influence that a person's political or ideological affiliation exerts on their perception and dissemination of false information. It has been demonstrated that this identity can impact memory, resulting in individuals recalling situations or false claims that did not actually occur. One pertinent experiment demonstrated that, among participants who were exposed to a series of both authentic and fictitious news stories, approximately half reported that a specific event had occurred, while 27% of participants indicated that they had observed the event on the news, despite its actual absence [5].

Partisan identity extends beyond the boundaries of consciousness and perception of reality. When coupled with ideological beliefs, this identity can lead an individual to eschew the verification of a fake news story, instead relying on their pre-existing beliefs. This dynamic contributes to the perpetuation of misinformation and impedes efforts to counter the impact of fake news in society [5].

## **8. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the phenomenon of fake news poses a significant challenge in today's society, requiring ongoing efforts to understand not only how it spreads but also how it evolves over time. Its effects are increasingly apparent and have the potential to profoundly influence various choices, including those related to politics, social interactions, and personal decisions.

Every day, people are inundated with a torrent of messages, and the reliability of online information sources is deteriorating, complicating the process of discernment even further. This issue is exacerbated by social media algorithms that tend to favor provocative and emotionally charged content, often at the expense of verified and trustworthy information.

The psychology behind fake news is intricate. Cognitive mechanisms, such as the illusionary truth effect and confirmation bias, make individuals more likely to accept false information as true. Consequently, distinguishing between fact and fiction is not always straightforward. Therefore, it is crucial to promote media literacy and critical thinking, enabling individuals to develop the skills needed to assess information sources and make informed decisions.

In essence, the resolution of the issue of fake news requires the collaboration of governments, media organisations, educational institutions and civil society. This must be done in order to foster a healthier information landscape that champions the truth and mitigates the effects of misinformation. It is incumbent upon each of us to play a pivotal role in this endeavour by assuming responsibility for the verification of information prior to its dissemination. In this way, we contribute to the development of a more informed society, better equipped to navigate the information challenges of our time.

## **References**

- [1]. S.R.I., "Fake News #awareness," 2020.
- [2]. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/RO/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0236>.
- [3]. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ruxandra-Buluc/publication/335727273\\_CULTURA\\_DE\\_SECURITATE\\_si\\_FENOMENUL\\_FAKE\\_NEWS/links/5d77dc83299bf1cb809807ff/CULTURA-DE-SECURITATE-si-FENOMENUL-FAKE-NEWS.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ruxandra-Buluc/publication/335727273_CULTURA_DE_SECURITATE_si_FENOMENUL_FAKE_NEWS/links/5d77dc83299bf1cb809807ff/CULTURA-DE-SECURITATE-si-FENOMENUL-FAKE-NEWS.pdf).
- [4]. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/dealing-with-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news>.
- [5]. B. Cristina Maria and M. Alexandra, "Fenomenul Fake News," Institutul European, Bucharest, 2022.
- [6]. Norbert Schwarz, Mariela E. Jaffé, Eryn J. Newman, Reiner Greifeneder, *Psihologia Fake News: Acceptarea, distribuirea și corectarea informațiilor false*, Trei SRL, 2021.
- [7]. B. Oprea, "Fake News și dezinformare online: recunoaște și verifică," Polirom, Bucharest, 2022.