

The Importance of Combating Fake News and Its Impact in the Digital Age

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Abstract

In an era of massive digitization and technologization, information represents the quintessence of success on all levels and in all fields. With a major power and influence in achieving success, disinformation, however, gains in the last period of time more followers who, through different methods and means, manage to manipulate and control different social categories in order to achieve the intended goal. There is currently a risk that a piece of information (fake news) will cause harm and damage not only at the individual level but also at the macro level, destabilizing order and national security. As we will show in this article, with the help of artificial intelligence, with the help of each individual, among cooperation at the international level and among an education appropriate to the century in which we live, we can hope to counteract and diminish this phenomenon that it can also have geopolitical consequences and more.

Index terms: fake news, digitization, misinformation, vulnerabilities, cooperation, integrated solutions

1. Introduction to the phenomenon of Fake News

Although the name disinformation has existed throughout history, the term "fake news" has become much more well-known in the last decade, with the explosion of social media platforms. These technologies enable the rapid and widespread dissemination of information, including false information, often without verification or true context.

As always, in order to be able to describe a phenomenon, we must first start from the definition of the term Fake news, a term that represents those false or misleading information presented as legitimate news. They are intentionally created to mislead or manipulate public opinion, often for financial, political or ideological purposes.

Fake news can manifest itself in various forms, such as sensational headlines, completely fabricated articles, conspiracy theories or distorted interpretations of real events.

In order to be able to answer the question "Why is fake news dangerous" we need to bring to attention some well-founded reasons, such as the erosion of public trust, social and political polarization, the impact on elections and democracy, the spread of disinformation in public health crises and last but not least the economic challenges.

In the following, we will try to briefly exemplify each individual reason in order to create an overview of the phenomenon itself.

Thus, Fake news can destabilize the public's trust in traditional mass media on the one hand and in democratic institutions on the other. Once trust is damaged, people become more susceptible to misinformation and less likely to believe accurate information.¹

All this misinformation contributes, without exception, to the polarization of society by fueling divisions and tensions between different social and political groups. They often promote a different view of reality, reinforcing prejudices and exacerbating conflicts.²

Moreover, they can influence the results of the elections by disseminating false information about the candidates or the policies led by them, thus creating massive disinformation that can affect the citizens' elections.

Not long ago, during the COVID-19 pandemic, fake news led to the propagation of conspiracy theories and mass misinformation about vaccines and public health measures. This had, without any doubt, a direct impact on public behavior, putting lives and public health at risk.³

And in the field of international relations, fake news can spread disinformation that affects the perceptions of some states about other nations. In some cases, governments or non-state actors use fake news as part of information warfare to destabilize other countries or to influence public opinion in the context of international conflicts.

Last but not least, also in the economic field, Fake news can have a significant impact, destabilizing the financial markets or affecting the reputation of companies.

2. The origin and evolution of Fake News

The origin and evolution of fake news has been talked about over time, this phenomenon not being a new one. Their roots can be traced deep into history. We can also find such an example during the Roman Empire when the emperor Octavian Augustus used disinformation campaigns to discredit his political rival, Mark Antony.

Moreover, in the 19th century, the tabloid presses frequently used fake or exaggerated news to attract readers and increase sales. One such example is "The Great Moon Hoax" of 1835, when a New York newspaper published false articles about the discovery of life on the moon, which led to a massive increase in the newspaper's circulation.⁴

With the advent of the Internet and social media, this phenomenon has grown in scale and become more sophisticated and easier to spread. The Internet has allowed the creators of fake news to reach the global audience much more quickly and safely, including a much lower cost. Thus, with the help of social networks, they have reached the spread of fake news much faster due to their algorithmic structure, which prioritizes content that generates engagement, even if the news is false or misleading.

Regarding the role of digital platforms and modern technology, it has played an extremely important role in amplifying the phenomenon of fake news given that the algorithms of social media platforms are designed to maximize the time users spend on the platform, often promoting sensational content or controversial, which frequently includes fake news. The use of bots and fake accounts also contributes to the quick spread of misinformation.

¹ Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), pp. 211-236.

² Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making*. Council of Europe report.

³ Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), pp. 1146-1151.

⁴ <https://aeon.co/videos/bat-people-on-the-moon-what-a-famed-1835-hoax-reveals-about-misinformation-today> accessed on 20.05.2024.

3. Measures to combat Fake News by law enforcement and public safety authorities

Public order and safety authorities, through specialized structures of course, play an extraordinarily important role in combating the fake news phenomenon, through a series of measures that include monitoring, regulation and law enforcement. Combating disinformation is essential to maintaining public order, national security and the protection of citizens.

Authorities can deploy advanced digital surveillance systems to monitor online content and detect fake news in real time that has the potential to cause panic or destabilize public order. These artificial intelligence (AI) technologies can analyze large volumes of data to identify patterns and sources of misinformation.⁵ This way the Police and other law enforcement agencies can work with social platforms to quickly flag problematic content and request its removal.

Another essential aspect of combating fake news is educating the public, meaning that public order and safety authorities can launch information campaigns in order to raise citizens' awareness of the risks associated with fake news, but also to provide them with tools to recognize disinformation.

Of course, these campaigns can include the distribution of informative materials, the organization of interactive workshops as well as the use of traditional and digital technology to reach a large audience. The aim is to improve citizens' media literacy and reduce their vulnerability to misinformation.⁶

Furthermore, the authorities are encouraged to work more closely with schools and universities to integrate media education into the school/university curriculum, thereby training younger generations to identify and reject false information.

In some cases, however, spreading fake news can constitute a crime, especially if it endangers public order or national security. In this case, the Police can investigate and sanction individuals or groups who intentionally create and distribute fake news with the aim of manipulating public opinion or destabilizing social order. These actions may include arrests, fines and other legal measures.⁷

There are of course also countries that have passed specific laws that criminalize the creation and spread of fake news, especially in the context of elections, pandemics or other crises. Law enforcement authorities must enforce these laws and work with other institutions to protect informational integrity.⁸

Regarding international collaboration to combat disinformation, public order authorities must find solutions to collaborate internationally to combat fake news. In this sense law enforcement agencies from different countries can share information, best practices and strategies to combat disinformation, helping each other identify and neutralize sources of fake news.

Moreover, by engaging in international initiatives, such as working groups within international organizations, it can increase the responsiveness of national authorities to the global phenomenon of disinformation.⁹

Thus, by undertaking such measures, society can be protected from the negative impact of fake news and thus a better, safer climate can be maintained. Effective collaboration between various entities and the use of technology are the keys to success in this battle.

⁵ Graves, L. (2018). Understanding the Promise and Limits of Automated Fact-Checking. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

⁶ Hobbs, R. (2017). Create to Learn: Introduction to Digital Literacy. Wiley.

⁷ Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), pp. 211-236.

⁸ Lazer, D. M. J., Baum, M. A., Grinberg, N., & others. (2018). The science of fake news. *Science*, 359(6380), pp. 1094-1096

⁹ Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making. Council of Europe report.

4. The impact of Fake News on society and public health

It is important to emphasize that Fake news can have a significant impact both on society and on public health, thus generating both short-term and long-term consequences, consequences that can affect social stability, public health and trust in institutions.

In terms of declining trust in institutions and the media, Fake news undermines public trust in traditional media and democratic institutions.

When false information is presented as truth and is widely spread, the public becomes confused and skeptical of any source of information, including credible sources.

This phenomenon can lead to a crisis of confidence in society, where citizens no longer know what to believe in, something that can certainly affect social cohesion and political stability.¹⁰

Moreover, Fake news contributes to social and political polarization by fueling divisions between different ideological, ethnic or religious groups.

They are often designed to create strong emotions such as fear, hatred or anger, emotions that lead to the radicalization of opinions and the strengthening of prejudices.

One such study of the social impact of misinformation and the mechanisms by which rumors and fake news spread is done very well by C.R. Sunstein in his work "On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, What Can Be Done. Princeton University Press".

As I mentioned before, Fake news can significantly affect the results of elections by manipulating the public about candidates and political issues. A disinformation campaign during an election race can distort public debate and prevent citizens from making informed choices. In the context of close elections, Fake news can be enough to tilt the balance in favor of one candidate or another, thus undermining the legitimacy of the democratic process.¹¹

Regarding the impact of fake news on public health, of course, it has a particularly dangerous role, especially during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Misinformation regarding the origins of the virus, the indicated treatments or the effectiveness of vaccines led to risky behaviors and positions, such as the refusal of some people to wear masks, the avoidance of vaccination or the use of scientifically unvalidated remedies.

But there are also effects on mental health, as misinformation can lead to anxiety, confusion and mistrust of official information, which can lead to stress and other mental health problems.

Another example from the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, refers to the fake news about the side effects of vaccines or about conspiracies related to the pandemic, news that amplified the feeling of insecurity and anxiety among the population.¹²

Such approaches to spread fake news can undermine the efforts of the authorities to manage the issue in a reasonable manner.

When a large part of the population does not strictly follow official recommendations due to misinformation, controlling the spread of disease and protecting public health becomes much more difficult.

Moreover, the rapid spread of fake news can create information overload, where accurate information is lost in the flood of misinformation, thereby reducing the effectiveness of public health messages.¹³

¹⁰ Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), pp. 211-236.

¹¹ Lazer, D. M. J., Baum, M. A., Grinberg, N., & others. (2018). The science of fake news. *Science*, 359(6380), pp. 1094-1096.

¹² Pennycook, G., McPhetres, J., Zhang, Y., & others. (2020). *Fighting COVID-19 misinformation on social media: Experimental evidence for a scalable accuracy-nudge intervention*. *Psychological Science*, 31(7), pp. 770-780.

¹³ Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., & Cook, J. (2017). Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the "Post-Truth" Era. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 6(4), pp. 353-369.

5. Conclusions and future perspectives in the fight against Fake News

It is true that as technology advances, it is expected that the phenomenon of Fake news will become even more complicated to combat.

As presented in a study on the impact of advanced technologies such as deepfakes on public perception and trust in news, in the future we will see an increasing use of artificial intelligence that will create fake content such as deepfake videos, auto-generated text and digitally altered images. These advanced technologies will make fake news much harder to spot and much more convincing.¹⁴

But as public platforms will improve the detection mechanisms of fake news, it is likely that its spread will move to private messaging platforms, where it is more difficult to monitor and combat, as well presented in the paper "The global organization of social media disinformation campaigns. *Journal of International Affairs*".¹⁵

This phenomenon of disinformation, however, will continue to be used as a strategic tool even in geopolitical conflicts, to influence international public opinion on the one hand, but also to destabilize rival countries.¹⁶

In the study "Winning the Information War: Techniques and Counter-strategies to Fake News in Russia and the West", we are presented with an exploration of how disinformation is used in geopolitical conflicts and how campaigns will become more sophisticated and coordinated.

A real challenge in this regard will be the tandem development of technologies to keep up with the evolution of Fake news. This will require continued and robust investment in artificial intelligence to detect disinformation. Furthermore, constant adaptation of the legal framework will be necessary to regulate new forms of disinformation and protect individual rights such as freedom of expression.

If we talk about combating disinformation, this will require a special approach for vulnerable communities that can be achieved through media education adapted to their needs but also through collaboration with local leaders to raise awareness.

Being a global problem, strengthening international cooperation in combating this phenomenon is essential and requires the sharing of information, the development of common strategies and the establishment of international standards.

But, of course not only the authorities play an essential role in combating disinformation. Each of us, at the individual level, has an important role in combating fake news.

As R. Hobbs presents us, in his work "Create to Learn: Introduction to Digital Literacy. Wiley" it is essential to check sources before sharing information, making sure it comes from credible and verified sources. This involves checking the author, the publication and the context in which the information was published.¹⁷

And critical thinking sometimes helps to objectively evaluate information as well as to recognize fake news. A more or less skeptical attitude towards sensational headlines as well as a careful analysis of the content are just a few essential aspects to prevent the spread of misinformation.

Last but not least, education is, if we can say so, the basis of our ability not to fall victim to Fake news. Through our participation in digital and media literacy courses and workshops we can improve our ability to identify and combat fake news. Continuing education in this area is crucial to keep up with new forms of disinformation.

¹⁴ Vaccari, C., & Chadwick, A. (2020). Deepfakes and disinformation: Exploring the impact of synthetic political video on deception, uncertainty, and trust in news. *Social Media + Society*, 6(1)

¹⁵ Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. N. (2019). The global organization of social media disinformation campaigns. *Journal of International Affairs*, 71(1.5), pp. 23-32

¹⁶ Lucas, E., & Pomerantsev, P. (2020). *Winning the Information War: Techniques and Counter-strategies to Fake News in Russia and the West*. Center for European Policy Analysis

¹⁷ Hobbs, R. (2017). *Create to Learn: Introduction to Digital Literacy*. Wiley.

Regarding collective responsibility in the information age, we can only reinforce the fact that each of us is obliged to contribute to the creation of a culture of correct information, in which the distribution of verified and true information is a social norm.

As good attitudes to follow, it is important to remember that whenever we come across fake news, we must report it to the respective platforms for their removal. This can be considered a form of social responsibility that can help reduce the impact of misinformation.

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