FAKE NEWS, TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION SECURITY

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Abstract: The article reviews one of the most topical issues in 2017 – fake news. It clarifies the semantic difference between “fake” and “false news”. The main reasons for the increasing rate of spreading of fake news – the ubiquitous use of telecommunication tools and the human factor – are explored. Pragmatic practices are pin-pointed to detect fake news and verify its (in)authenticity, thus ensuring the information security of a person and society.

Keywords: fake news, false news, telecommunication tools, information security, European Commission

ITHEA Keywords: Knowledge-based Society, Socio-informatics, Communication Systems, Computer-communication networks

Introduction

Fake news is a phenomenon with a rich history, but without a pronounced frequency of use of the expression itself in past centuries. In the last year, fake news has received its "revival" – there is hardly a newscast that does not include commentary on it in various discourses: political, journalistic, international, commercial, etc. Based on disinformation and a tricky intertwining of truth with fabricated lies, it compromises political rivals, ideological doctrines, international relations between states and alliances, leaves its “fingerprints” on economic and commercial relations and market positions as well as on interpersonal relationships.

The term "fake news" has gone through a long, a few centuries old way. Having its peaks and dips, today the construct leads the frequency of use ratings. The Harper Collins publishers, which run annual rankings of the most commonly used words for a particular year, ranked fake news as the word of the year 2017 – its use has risen by 365% compared to 2016, partly owing to its frequent occurrence in statements by the US President Donald Trump [Hunt, 2017].

This serves as grounds for examining the facts that gave rise to the expression, its development over the centuries and its current state – its nature, appearance in different discourses, reasons for escalation of its use, range and velocity of dissemination, as well as something very important – prevention and methods for recognizing fake and real news.
Related work

Chronologically, the essence of the phenomenon dates back almost twenty-one centuries, and the very term, implicitly combining disinformation, intrigue, and truth, intertwined with a different dose of falsehood – fake news – is about three centuries old. As already mentioned, the construct gets its "new life" a year ago, when Collins publishers, nominating it as the word of the year, defined it as "False, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting" [Hunt, 2017]. Counterfeit news and its malicious influence in everyday life are increasingly being commented on by self-respecting media. It is also in the sight of researchers, but one year's time is not enough time for scientific publications to appear as massively as the frequency of use the construct has enjoyed during that time. Here we would first like to note Eve MacDonald's work „The fake news that sealed the fate of Antony and Cleopatra“. The author regards the topic from a historical point of view drawing a parallel between the phenomenon “propaganda” as the ancient Romans used to name that occurrence, and the one we term “fake news” nowadays [MacDonald, 2017]. Bulgarian professor Kalina Lukova in her paper “The fake news and the media mystification effect” introduces Hunts' view on fake news as "a form of mystification or news entirely invented to mislead the audience". She highlights her author's view on uses, historical and contemporary context, media effect and some methods of discern of the notion. She gives some popular examples in the social media and points at some means of fighting against fake news, trolls and clickbait [Lukova, 2017]. The author of the present paper has issued a couple of papers on the topic – one of them deals with the genesis and essence of fake news ("Fake News – Genesis, Nature, Development") – its origin, genre deviations and its evolution has been traced back to present day [Ilieva, 2018a]. The other one treats fake news as a threat to information security [Ilieva, 2018b]. There is one in particular – “Fake News as a Tool of Hybrid Wars” – which exceeds the frames of treating the matter from historical, etymological, modern, political, genre etc. aspects – it deals with the common genesis of fake news and hybrid wars as well as asymmetric threats – applying disinformation in all its types, tricky, to an unrecognizable intertwining of truth with lie, as well as the ubiquitous application of the time-tested propaganda tool. Fake news is pointed to be one of the tools of hybrid wars. The article draws parallels between the two phenomena and distinguishes their similarities and differences [Ilieva, 2018c]. Linking fake news to security – information, national, cyber, etc. – turned to be one of the topical themes of the International Scientific Conference entitled "Asymmetric Threats, Hybrid Wars and Their Influence on National Security" [NBU, 2018]
Task and challenges

To reveal the semantic difference between the constructs “fake news” and “false news”.

To submit useful practices to identify the phenomena and ways to combat fake news.

Expose

For the unambiguous understanding of the essence of the regarded construct, it is necessary to make an important particularization: namely the English language, where the expression originated, makes a distinction between “fake” and “false”: 

- **Fake** – 1. Adj. Not genuine; imitation or counterfeit; 2. Noun. A thing that is not genuine; a forgery or sham; 2.1. A person who falsely claims to be something [Oxford]
- **False** – Adj. 1. Not according with truth or fact; incorrect; 1.1. Not according with rules or law. 2. Made to imitate something in order to deceive. 3. Illusory; not actually so; 4. Disloyal; unfaithful. [Oxford].

The definitions given by the online Oxford Dictionary show the semantic difference between the lexemes fake and false: the semantic specialization of the first one is connected with “counterfeit, forgery, bogus”, the semantic specialization of the latter is “incorrect, inexact, unfaithful (for a translation or interpretation)” (although in one only of the explained meanings it is close as a synonym to deceive). The difference in the semantic specialization can be seen in the translation into Bulgarian as well: fake – “фалшифицирам, подправям, фалшификация, имитация, фалшификатор и др.”, false – “лъжлив, неверен, погрешен, неточен, неправилен, незаконен, фалшив” (there is a hint of falsifying but just in the last meaning in the list) [SA Dictionary]. So, talking about fake news we implicitly have to understand news which is deliberately substituted or it represent "distorted" facts, an intentional and very subtle intertwining of truth and lie – up to the unrecognizability of the primary source – driven by mercenary motives: earning money, gaining influence, discrediting a competitor – in political, international, professional circles, in business, in interpersonal relationships. False news has nothing to do with counterfeit. If one happens to come across such news, one should get the idea that a journalist or author of a publication didn’t prepare themselves well, mistook facts, names and dates, or while interpreting some information, provided incorrect data (for example, because of forgetting specific facts at that particular moment). Informational failures as the above mentioned are regarded as false news. They are involuntary, not deliberate, undesired by their authors, who in most cases profoundly regret for the inaccuracy that they have provided to the audience or readers; in the worst case, it is a case of informational faux pas due to professional bad faith - the relevant data to be pre-screened and checked on different channels.
The sharp increase in the production of fake news is largely due to the modern telecommunication tools, but not only. A study by a team from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology shows that fake news is spreading rapidly mainly because of the specific preferences of the users of the different telecommunication devices. According to the researchers, there is a 70% chance that a piece of fake news will be multiplied in telecoms compared to real news. [Dnevnik 2018]. The phenomenon of fake news is in the focus of the European Commission aiming to design solutions to combat its spread. The Commission is estimating the great role of telecommunications for the intentional circulation of disinformation. “The phenomenon has a bigger impact than ever before as it is easier for anyone to post and share any news or information online. Social media and online platforms play an important role in speeding up the spread of such news and they enable a global reach without much effort from the author.” As the European Commission President Juncker mentioned in his mission letter to the Commissioner for the Digital Economy and Society Mariya Gabriel, the Commission needs to look into the challenges the online platforms create for democracies as regards the spreading of fake information and initiate a reflection on what would be needed at the EU level to protect European citizens [EC, 2017].

In reply to this mission letter, the Commissioner M. Gabriel pointed out that “Creating fake news with manipulative purposes is a symptom of a disease that we can just call an "information illness". “It affects us because it takes advantage of our vulnerability. It is vital not just to find a medicine but to seek a vaccine against fake news. This is a way to protect our democratic values and achievements” [Gabriel, 2017]. What is important in the context of turning fake news into „information illness“ for society, is to take preventive measures for the information security of a person and society (which is necessary for any “medical diagnosis”) – as equipment for living. Each individual and society as a whole have to make a contribution towards identifying fake from real news and stopping the extraordinary rapid spread of the first one: on average real news takes about 6 times longer than fake news to reach 1500 people (as ascertained by the Massachusetts research team). The following lines present some ideas how to encounter the phenomenon:

- We must pay attention to the outward layout of such news - typographic means such as large fonts and solid letters, sometimes even colorful, non-traditional spot for punctuation (three dots, question marks and exclamation marks), provocative pictures – they all are an indication that the relevant news is with great probability fake;
- We must check whether the material is submitted with the author’s name or is anonymous;
- We need to check if there is a date above / below the post. (Fake news is often not dated, so the reader will find it more difficult to navigate in the chronology of events, and there is another possibility - such material to comment on events that have never happened);
We need to look at whether the proposed text does not remind us much of a "machine" translation from a foreign language, or whether its text seems to be "rough" and has many mistakes of any kind. (Contemporary journalists have a good command not of only one foreign language: if the considered text was written by a conscientious journalist of respected media, it would not seem to be generated by automated machine translation. The fact that there was no time to edit the text for style and grammar, certainly includes an implication for the unverified authenticity of the material.);

We must pay attention to whether the journalist refers to well-referenced sources – originators, experts, scientists, researchers, etc. (The absence of such citations is a sign that the author of such text writes to fill up several pages and get some fee to present its "interesting" interpretation that is not "backed up" by real facts, or simply executes somebody else's order for manipulative purposes.);

We should pay attention to whether the site we read is reliable (but not unrecognizable, unknown), whether it is a site of a political party, for example, whether it is a blog or a site with a humorous and satirical focus. In all the cases listed (as well as in the case of an anonymous author mentioned above), the probability that news may well be fake is not negligible at all;

We must bother to note if there is a suspicious amount of spelling or punctuation errors in the text (the "fake" journalists’ only concern is the "eye-catching, lurid" title, the unmistakable text is not a matter of primary worry to them - it would only delay them with extra reading and corrections);

We must check whether and how news is reflected in other self-respecting and esteemed by readers websites. (If we do not find it there or it is not exactly the same like we read it first, we can reasonably doubt its credibility and look for confirmation/refutation on another channel of information.);

If, despite the critical and "alert" reading of the material and the checks made on other sites, we are still not convinced of its authenticity, we should also refer to some of the serious mass media that offer their reporters the opportunity to check information and send their conclusion about the authenticity of information to our mail address (For example, news can be checked on the Fact Check website – A Project of The Annenberg Public Policy Center or on the site of Nova TV) [Fact Check, Nova TV]
Conclusion

As mature individuals in today's digital age, we need to equip ourselves with adequate mechanisms for recognising the skilfully intertwined truth and lie in news, to develop a sense of fake subtext, possible reasons of its occurrence, so as to gain an intelligent insight into events and facts. This article is a step forward in this regard, it offers practical advice on recognising the phenomena discussed, improving the information security of the individual / society.

Further work

The further work on the subject is intended to deepen the elucidation of the manipulation technology, the unethical practices associated with it, to explore the set of causes that allow a vast mass of enlightened people to become subject to manipulation. We intend to make provision for analysing the relation between fake news and manipulation as a further weapon of influence, expanding the study of the relationship “fake news – counteraction to it – information security”.

Bibliography


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