

Joanna Dreżewska

The School of Banking and Management in Krakow

visvitaee.zzl@gmail.com

Kacper Stabryła-Tatko

The School of Banking and Management in Krakow

kacper.tatko@gmail.com

FAKE-NEWS ISSUE IN POLAND

Introduction

The emergence of fake news is considered one of the most famous problems of the 21st century. A special activity of fake-news authors could be seen, among others, at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's attack on Ukraine or the attack by the Hamas militants on Israel. This is the reason why strong action must be taken to recognize and combat false content.

The article presents the definition of false-news and its types, the components of fake-news together with the methods of how to recognize it and defend against it. Moreover, the issue is discussed of the boundary between the fight against false information and the use of censorship. The authors put forward a thesis that the issue of fake news is perceived by society as a serious threat posing a significant challenge. Additionally, research results are presented on the awareness of the existence of fake news.

1. Definition of fake-news and its types

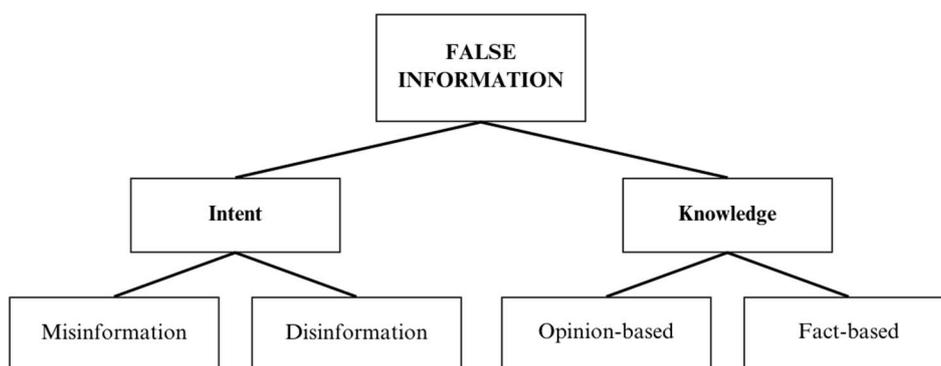
Since the concept of fake news became widespread, scientists have been trying to create a clear definition that could describe it. According to R.Gorwa, fake news includes entries, messages and information channels where the transmitted data turns out to be false or distorted¹. This definition was published in the Republic of Poland Service www.gov.pl and extended by the statement that this type of information is “intentionally misleading, shocking and controversial”². Thus, the definition concerns both the content of false messages and the intentions of their authors.

¹ R. Gorwa, *Computational Propaganda in Poland. False Amplifiers and the Digital Public Sphere*, University of Oxford, Oxford 2017, p. 6.

² *Rozpoznawanie nieprawdziwych informacji*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/baza-wiedzy/roznawanie-nieprawdziwych-informacji> (Accessed: 10.08.2023).

It should be emphasized that despite the commonness of this phenomenon, the concepts of fake news and disinformation should not be used interchangeably. While *fake news* refers mainly to messages that are falsified in an intentional and purposeful way, the term *disinformation* covers a much broader spectrum of concepts. Both terms refer to *false news*, *i.e.* to untrue content. The categorization of false messages on the Internet was made by S. Kumar and N. Shah³. The division is presented in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1. Categories of false information



Source: Authors' research based on: S. Kumar, N. Shah, *False information on Web and Social Media: A survey*, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1804.08559.pdf> (Accessed: 10.08.2023) in: K. Rosińska, *Fake-news. Geneza, istota, przeciwdziałanie*, Wydawnictwo PWN, Warszawa 2021, p. 18.

The researchers divided false information into two groups: by intent and by knowledge. The first group was divided into *misinformation* (unintentional) and *disinformation* (intentional). Misinformation is created in the process of distribution when false information is regarded to be true. This kind of information includes, for example, urban legends which gain temporary popularity from time to time. Disinformation deliberately misleads the recipient, which makes it simply a manipulation⁴.

The latter group includes messages based on knowledge resulting either from opinions or facts. The messages from the first subgroup aim at influencing the opinions of other people; for example websites offer openly and legally the opportunities to purchase a defined number of feedback, commentaries or even posts on social media or the Google search engine example.

³ S. Kumar, N. Shah, *False information on Web and Social Media: A survey*, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1804.08559.pdf> (Accessed: 10.08.2023).

⁴ K. Rosińska, *Fake-news. Geneza, istota, przeciwdziałanie*, Wydawnictwo PWN, Warszawa 2021, p. 105.

The other subgroup includes fact-based messages that use the information to manipulate. These are, among other things, incorrectly transferred true messages or rumors⁵.

There are three basic types of false information. According to the Republic of Poland Service the types are as follows: the information is completely untrue, the truthfulness of the information is questionable, the statements are manipulated⁶.

2. The structure of fake news

2.1. Creator/spreader

The creator of fake news and the person who spreads the news, often referred to as a spreader, are key elements of the fake news structure. K. Rosińska divides this group into two factors: a human and non-human element. The human factor includes groups of people who intentionally spread false content while the non-human factor is represented by all kinds of bots (i.e. programs that perform certain repetitive tasks⁷).

Internet Research Agency, which was founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin and operated in 2013- 2023 is an example of an organization that creates false news on a large scale. Initially, the Agency employed young people whose task was to promote Vladimir Putin's program during his presidential election. Then, the Agency started developing the so-called web brigades (also referred to as troll factories) whose activities were restricted to disseminating disinformation and influencing foreign public opinion⁸. In 2020, a journalist investigation proved the agency's interference in the 2016 presidential elections in US. According to the investigation, Russians conducted a disinformation campaign through Twitter (now Platform X)⁹. The investigators estimate that eight months before Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election, as many as 32 million US citizens may have encountered manipulated content. However, it should be pointed out that despite the narration of the liberal part of the

⁵ K. Rosińska, *Tematyka fake newsów światopoglądowych w polskojęzycznych mediach internetowych w okresie kampanii wyborczej w 2019 r.*, „Fides, Ratio el Patria. Studia Toruńskie” 2021, No. 15.

⁶ *Rozpoznawanie nieprawdziwych informacji*, op. cit. (Accessed: 8.10.2023).

⁷ *Bot – co to jest? Wyjaśniamy dobre i złe boty internetowe*, <https://nordvpn.com/pl/blog/bot-co-to-jest/> (Accessed: 6.10.2023).

⁸ *Rosyjscy „kontraktorzy” w służbie Kremla*, <https://warsawinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ROSYJSCY-„KONTRAKTORZY”-W-SŁUŻBIE-KREMLA-Warsaw-Institute.pdf> (Accessed: 3.09.2023).

⁹ M. Wojnowski, *Amerykańska demokracja jako cel rosyjskich służb specjalnych – część II*, „Raport Specjalny” Warsaw Institute, Warszawa 2021, p. 15.

American political scene, scientists question the direct impact of the Russian campaign in American voters' intentions¹⁰.

2.2. Victim vs. target

Another component of fake news that is crucial in its functioning is its victim. It should be emphasized that the victim is the main target of the false information creator. However, apart from the obvious role of being the recipient, the victim plays one more important role – it becomes a dissemination tool of disinformation. This is performed through popular social media platforms. This state of affairs is caused by, among other reasons, the inability to verify the credibility of the information provided.

An example of a post being massively reproduced and then shared is the one about the alleged hospitalization of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the day of the attack of the Hamas Palestinian organization on Israel. It appeared first a few hours after the militants crossed the state border and was submitted by the *@Jerusalem_Post* account on the X platform (previously Twitter). The government spokesman firmly denied the information about the Prime Minister's hospitalization and pointed out that the post had appeared on a website impersonating the editorial office of the Jerusalem Post¹¹. The post was opened by 500, 000 users within 3 hours of publication. This shows the spreading speed of information published on the Internet. On the same day, October 7, 2023, the *@Jerusalem_Post* account was blocked and deleted.

2.3. Social context

A significant role in the fake news operation is played by its social context. In mid 1970s, Tversky and D. Kahneman developed several principles that are referred to as judgement heuristics. One of them is the availability heuristic¹² according to which people evaluate the frequency of events by recalling selected examples. The more examples they can recall the more likely a given event will be and the greater emotions it will evolve. As a result, trivial and

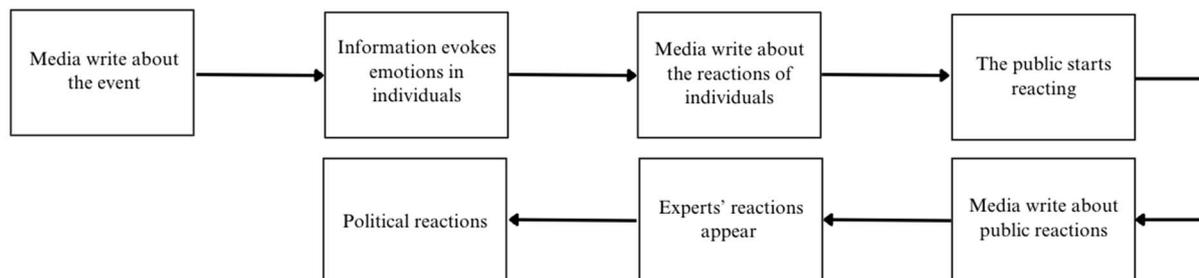
¹⁰ *Wybory w USA. Czy Rosja wpłynęła na wybór Trumpa?*, https://demagog.org.pl/analizy_i_raporty/wybory-w-usa-czy-rosja-wplynela-na-wybor-trumpa/ (Accessed: 6.10.2023).

¹¹ *Israel's Netanyahu discharged from hospital after doctors give all-clear*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/netanyahu-due-be-discharged-hospital-sunday-office-says-2023-07-16/> (Accessed: 8.10.2023).

¹² D. Kahneman, *Pułapki myślenia. O myśleniu szybkim i wolnym*, Media Rodzina, Poznań 2012, p. 79.

insignificant events seem very probable¹³. The model showing how the principle works is given in Diagram 2.

Diagram 2. Availability cascade



Source: Authors' research based on D. Kahneman, *Pułapki myślenia. O myśleniu szybkim i wolnym*, Media Rodzina, Poznań 2012, p. 79 in: K. Rosińska, *Fake-news. Geneza, istota, przeciwdziałanie*, Wydawnictwo PWN, Warszawa 2021, p. 105.

Evoking emotions plays the most important role in the entire process. The combination of traditional and social media is frequently the driving force. All kinds of media reports reinforce the effect of the availability heuristic, which in turn may result in the so-called media storm¹⁴. The situation becomes much more serious when the information provided is false and concerns issues that polarize the society. It is pointed out by K. Rosińska that „fake news concerning beatings, assassinations, violence and other brutal events [...] often trigger availability cascades, strengthening a sense of threat in societies and sometimes even initiating social unrest”¹⁵.

2.4. Contents of the text

The final element of the fake news structure is its contents. Information consists of two parts: physical and non-physical. Both components appear in every message. The elements of the physical content include¹⁶: the title, lead, actual content as well as enclosures/attachments

¹³ M. Kaźmierska-Zatoń, W. Zatoń, *Model kaskad informacyjnych w procesie podejmowania decyzji*, „Zeszyty naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Poznaniu”, 2012, No. 239.

¹⁴ K. Rosińska, *Fake-news...*, op.cit., p. 105.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 107.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 70.

and multimedia, while non-physical elements are, among others, the author's target, semantics and the subject matter.

The public can recognize false content on its own by, for example, the analysis of selected elements. Researchers point out that the presence of some elements may indicate that the message is fake. They include insecure URL, titles that start with a lowercase letter or a number, titles containing question or exclamation marks, the use of capital letters or missing title words in the text¹⁷.

3. How to recognize and protect against fake news

In recent years, many methods have been developed to combat fake news. As researchers emphasize, it is crucial to distinguish facts from opinions when recognizing fake information. In reality, only facts are verifiable as they contain specific and precise data. Moreover, the existing opinion about the author is important or, among other things, it is critical to verify the sources contained in the article. Moreover, one should check whether the presented content is up-to-date and compare it with, for example, other information portals.

Apart from the analysis of the mentioned above information elements, it is recommended to visit fact-checking websites. They are websites that provide professional analysis of the content presented in popular information portals. Fact-checking is a process aimed at confirming the authenticity of selected publications, speeches and films mainly through their in-depth analysis¹⁸.

Due to the spread of the problem of fake news around the world, the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) was established in 2015. IFCN is an association of fact-checking portals from around the world. Before a portal can join the network, it must meet such requirements as, for example: nonpartisanship, fairness and transparency of sources¹⁹. The

¹⁷ M. Aldawairi, A. Alwahedi, *Detection Fake News in Social Media Networks*, "Procedia Computer Science" 2018, No. 141.

¹⁸ *Fact-checking w Polsce niezwykle potrzebny. Więcej analizy, mniej emocji.* https://www.press.pl/tresc/76430,fact-checking-w-polsce-niezwykle-potrzebny_-wiecej-analizy_-mniej-emocji (Accessed: 8.10.2023)

¹⁹ Członkostwo w IFCN, <https://fakenews.pl/fundacja-przeciwdzialamy-dezinformacji/czlonkostwo-w-ifcn/> (Accessed: 8.10.2023).

IFCN members in Poland are²⁰: the Przeciwdziałamy Dezinformacji Foundation (fakenews.pl²¹), the Demagog Association (the demagog.org.pl²²) and Pravda (pravda.org.pl²³).

4. Boundary between the combat against disinformation and censorship

The phenomenon of fake news is a kind of hazard but the combat with it may become a convenient tool for regimes to introduce censorship.

The authorities of authoritarian countries may use the fight against disinformation as a pretext to restrict freedom of speech by imposing restrictions on media, particularly social media. This does not eliminate false news; however the freedom of speech may still suffer. According to scientists, blatantly false information is relatively easy to discredit²⁴ but a real problem that the Wall Street Journal presents on the basis of research is posed rather by political commentaries based on very weak premises than by fake news.

On November 16, 2022, the EU Digital Service Act (DSA) entered into force, under which very large online platforms (VLOPs) with over 45 million monthly active users – such as Tweeter and Instagram – will have to remove from their platforms illegal content, hate speech and the so-called disinformation²⁵. Otherwise, they face penalties up to six per cent of their annual global revenues²⁶. Larger platforms will have to ensure the compliance with the contents of DSA till summer 2023, while smaller ones will be obliged to follow the Act's provisions from 2024. DSA will not only be the first one to execute the regulations on the Internet content but it will also become a global, not only European, standard.

This gives the EU extraordinary powers. DSA regulations will be supervised by the Commission itself rather than by an independent regulatory body. What is more, DSA includes a *crisis management mechanism* thanks to which the Commission is able to manage the way the platforms react to events. The potential to abuse this mechanism is disturbing as it gives the EU enormous censorship powers. In summary, the European Commission empowered itself to

²⁰ *Verified signatories of the IFCN code of principles*, <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/signatories> (Accessed: 7.10.2023).

²¹ <https://fakenews.pl/fundacja-przeciwdzialamy-dezinformacji/> (Accessed: 7.10.2023).

²² <https://demagog.org.pl> (Accessed: 7.10.2023).

²³ <https://pravda.org.pl> (Accessed: 7.10.2023).

²⁴ M. Szuldrzyński, *Czy fake news doprowadzi do powrotu cenzury?*, <https://www.rp.pl/plus-minus/art9975871-michal-szuldrzynski-czy-fake-news-doprowadzi-do-powrotu-cenzury> (Accessed: 8.10.2023).

²⁵ N. Lewis, *The EU's censorship regime is about to go global*, <https://www.spiked-online.com/2023/03/23/the-eus-censorship-regime-is-about-to-go-global/> (Accessed: 7.10.2023).

²⁶ L. Schaetzel, *Digital Services Act Could Prompt Penalties of 6% of Brand's Annual Revenue*, <https://www.thefashionlaw.com/digital-services-act-could-prompt-penalties-of-6-of-brands-annual-revenue/> (Accessed: 9.10.2023).

regulate content on the Internet and anything that is inconsistent with its policy may be considered false content.

5. Methodology and the results of the authors' survey

The subject of the research was to determine public awareness of the existence of false news and the threats it may pose. Three research questions were asked:

- what is the meaning of the concept of fake news,
- what topics are most often faked,
- will the problem of fake news get worse in Poland?

The survey was conducted in a group of 41 people. All respondents were over 18 years of age with the majority of people in the 18-26 age group. There were 28 females and 13 males. As many as 39 respondents declared having secondary or higher education. All of them declared using the Internet at least once a week.

The research method was an anonymous survey questionnaire conducted through Google Forms. Apart from methodological questions, the questionnaire included 21 questions concerning the use of the Internet and the topic of fake news.

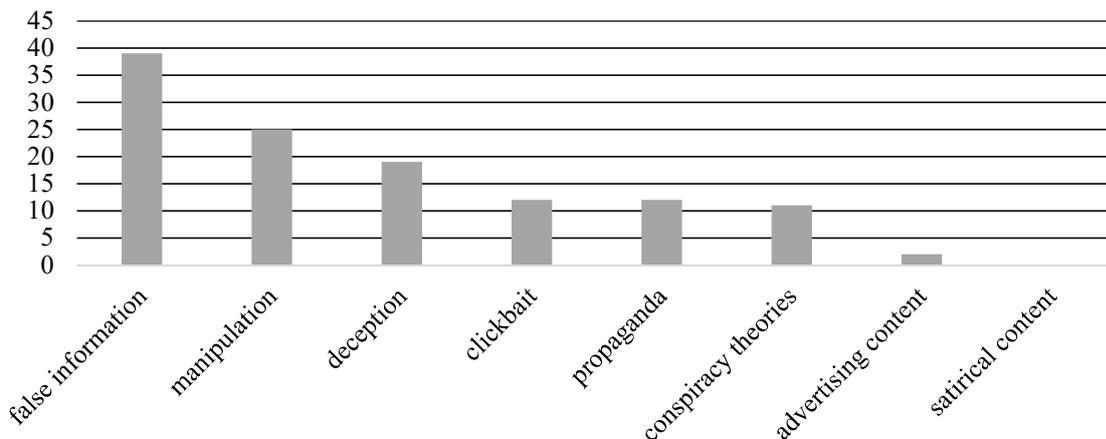
It can be concluded on the basis of the survey that the notion of fake news is most frequently identified as false information. Manipulation and deception were also popular connotations. About 30% respondents stated that fake news also included clickbaits, propaganda content and conspiracy theories, while almost 5% of them indicated that the term contained advertising content. No one identified fake news as satirical content. The results are given in Graph 1.

It should be pointed out that all of the above replies are correct and accepted as false content. It is worth mentioning that they are increasingly more often used as equivalent terms and not just as subcategories of fake news²⁷. This approach aims to stop a common practice of covering all false information by this concept. This is due to the fact that many fake news creators used this term to discredit critics²⁸.

²⁷ *Infographic: Beyond Fake News – 10 types of Misleading News – Seventeen Languages*, <https://eavi.eu/beyond-fake-news-10-types-misleading-info/> (Accessed: 9.10.2023).

²⁸ *Jak rozpoznać propagandę i się przed nią bronić?*, <https://kampaniespoleczne.pl/jak-rozpoznawac-propagande-i-jak-sie-przed-nia-bronic/> (Accessed: 9.10.2023).

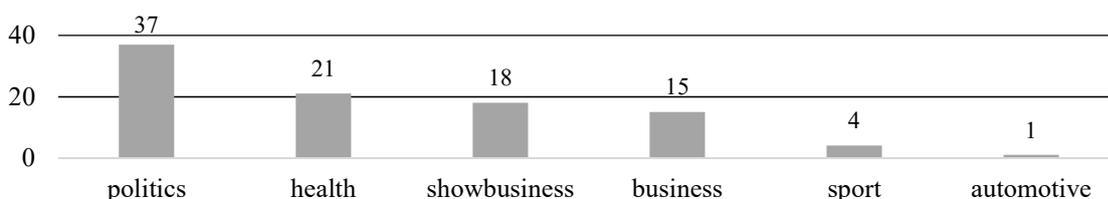
Graph 1. Defining the concept of fake news



Source: Authors' research.

As regards the question concerning three topics that are most frequently falsified, one topic took a significant lead. This was politics, which was indicated by 90% respondents. Half of them indicated health and as many as 44% pointed at showbusiness. Over 30% respondents indicated business and lifestyle. The lowest results were achieved by sports (10%) and automotive industry (3%). The results are presented in Graph 2.

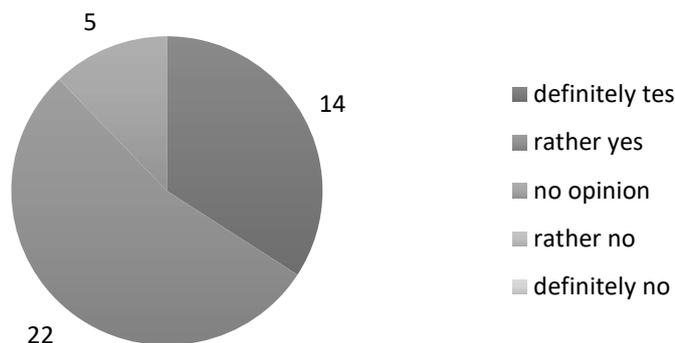
Graph 2. The most frequently falsified topics



Source: Authors' research.

The survey results clearly indicate that in the opinion of respondents the most frequently falsified topics are those directly related to the respondents and classified as the so-called hot topics.

Another question concerned the growth of the fake news problem in Poland. Importantly, none of the respondents replied negatively. Over 34% respondents indicated that the problem would definitely increase and over half of them stated that the problem was likely to aggravate. About 12% had no opinion on the issue. The results are given in Graph 3.

Graph 3. Fake news in the future

Source: Authors' research.

Conclusions

The research leads to the conclusion that fake news in Poland is a real threat that should be treated seriously. Moreover, the society defines it quite correctly while failing to notice the significance of the selected types of false messages (such as, for example, advertising or satirical content). The phenomenon of fake news is perceived by the majority as a serious problem which in extreme situations may pose a danger to democracy and country's independence.

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Abstract

The article presents the issue of fake news in Poland. It starts with the discussion of the definition of fake news (including the distinction between its types) and the elements of its structure. Then, methods of fighting disinformation are presented and attention is drawn to the issue of defining the boundary between censorship and blockage. Finally, research results are presented on the awareness of false information.



Key words

Fake news, false information, social influence, manipulation, disinformation, fact-checking, clickbait.