



Misinformation ecosystems: A typology of fake news

Gabriel-Alexandru Toma¹
Adina-Gabriela Scripcariu²

Abstract

The paper proposes the concept of “misinformation ecosystems” to make sense of the contemporary fake news phenomenon. Misinformation ecosystems are interconnected chains of false or misleading reports that become real in their consequences. Misinformation ecosystems are discourse communities that emerged as side effects of affective and linguistic capitalism in contemporary society. Therefore, the performative character of mutually reinforcing false reports explains the social and political impact of fake news. By exploring the manifestation of fake news in Romania, the data analysis reveals a typology of deceptive content circulated in online environments. The typology includes five analytical categories of fake news that constitutes misinformation ecosystems: “recurrent occurrences”, “scapegoat offensives”, “pseudoscientific gaze”, “combo strikes”, and “humorous hijacks”. Empirical evidence supports measures against fake news that should address the social validation processes at the level of media or inter-media networks.

Keywords

Misinformation ecosystems; fake news; discourse community; performativity; linguistic capitalism;

¹ National School of Political Science and Public Administration & Association for Social Entrepreneurship “Plus One” (Social+1), gabriel.toma@socialplusunu.ro.

² Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest & Association for Social Entrepreneurship “Plus One” (Social+1), adina.scripcariu@socialplusunu.ro.

Fake news: A conceptual clarification

Fake news is one of the most important issue in contemporary media studies. Many voices affirm that fake news is responsible for the extremist movements that have recently emerged all around the globe (Fourney et al. 2017; Bastos and Mercea 2017). Nowadays, the phenomenon of fake news significantly shapes the institutions of modern democracy, thus representing an emerging problem on the international agenda.

The meaning of “fake news” has changed over time. Initially, the term was used to designate satires and the content available on news parody websites (Tandoc Jr., Lim, and Ling 2018; Russel 2015). In this context, fake news represented instruments of social critique and resources for civic and political education. As the digital media evolved and the number of alternative news website increased considerably, the concept of fake news received different meanings. Nowadays, the term is used to designate information which could not have been validated through objective assessment, but which is assumed as true by a specific public due to the way it is presented and to the emotions it arouses, out of which fear and anger have an essential role (Tandoc Jr., Lim, and Ling 2018; Tandoc et al. 2017).

Social sciences make a distinction between “fake news as satire” and “fake news as disinformation”. However, satires are often confused with real news stories, thus inadvertently becoming a disinformation instrument (Russel 2015). Moreover, a certain type of content can be ridiculed by a type of public but taken at face value by another. The distinction between satire and deceptive content or between humorous reports and false information is not as clear as we might assume: the same information receives different meanings from different people. Consequently, we consider that both meanings of the term (“fake news as satire” and “fake news as disinformation”) can be simultaneously applied to describe a complex reality which is shaped by media technologies. In addition to that, fake news might be considered a type of derogatory propaganda technique that destabilizes social order through information distortion.

Despite the fact that rumors or made-up stories have existed throughout history, the new digital technology has brought disinformation to a whole new level. The rapid circulation of information and the culture of instantaneity have blurred the boundaries between reality and falsehood (Introne et al. 2018). In a post-truth society, the criteria of objectivity are questioned, with information being used for its expressive value rather than its instrumental rationale (Rochlin 2017; Harsin 2015; Waisbord 2018). In this context, emotions are commodified and become more important than facts in making sense of reality (Bakir and McStay 2018; Kaplan 2014).

Research methodology: Grounded theory

The research is based on an inductive approach to the contemporary fake news phenomenon by following a data collection procedure which does not involve the formulation of hypotheses and other theoretical assumptions in advance. Therefore, the use of “grounded theory” as a methodological tool implies a transition from empirical

evidence to theory by using the collection of qualitative data as the starting point (Charmaz 2014). On these grounds, the aim of the research is to generate and illustrate analytical concepts that explain how the fake news phenomenon emerges and further evolve in contemporary world. The option for grounded theory allows us to explain how fake news is socially validated and legitimated in online environments.

The research is based on observational data on the Romanian media landscape; thus, the results might have some local specificities. The observational data used in the analysis might be classified in three categories: (1) informational content—news articles, news reports, blog posts, Facebook and Twitter posts on public pages and groups; (2) multimedia content—pictures, photos, videos, audio interviews; (3) media consumption feedback—comments and reactions from audience; and (4) relational content—the use of hyperlinks and tags to support the diffusion of information. By collecting data produced in real-world settings, the data analysis follows an emergent coding technique, with two criteria of relevance: ecological validity (the degree to which the findings accurately represent real-world settings) and parsimony (the use of the simplest perspective to make sense of a complex phenomenon).

Research results: A typology of fake news

The results of the exploratory research show “misinformation ecosystems” as significant drivers of the fake news phenomena in the online world. The analysis indicates that false information could become real, given that people consider it real and act accordingly. Based on this consideration, the research depicts a typology of fake news that becomes real through a process of social validation and legitimation produced within “misinformation ecosystems”. The classification of fake news includes five categories metaphorically labelled as “recurrent occurrences”, “scapegoat offensives”, “pseudoscientific gaze”, “combo strikes”, and “humorous hijacks”. The examples are based on fake news circulated in Romanian social media, but they could find correspondence in multiple cultural contexts. The paper claims neither that the typology is exhaustive nor that the categories are mutually exclusive. The typology represents a result of a naturalistic explorative research which reveals that fake news might have real consequences when it becomes part of an intricate ecosystem in which reinforcing pieces of information on the same topic are circulated and socially validated.

The research shows that misinformation ecosystems represent frameworks in which communication processes take place. They are constituted by several components: (1) a set of fake news articles on the same topic, (2) communication channels or technologies to link different pieces of information, and (3) platforms to engage audiences and capture the reactions of the news consumers. The data analysis reveals misinformation ecosystems as discourse communities (Swales 1987) that have several characteristics, including the following:

- *Teleological character*: Misinformation ecosystems are powerful tools that serve the political, social or commercial aims of various interest groups that are active in contemporary society.

- *Systemic character*: Misinformation ecosystems are network structures that shape social reality by developing connections and associations between similar pieces of information.
- *Infrastructural character*: Misinformation ecosystems are digitally mediated products that are related to online architectures. Their form of social organization depends both on the technological affordances available for content creators to produce and distribute information and on the practices through which the public assimilates a message and gets involved in its production and further dissemination.
- *Discursive character*: Fake news conveys insights on how reality works. As a consequence, fake news defines both what is relevant in reality and how reality could be thought of. Misinformation ecosystems integrate specific vocabularies and rhetorical techniques that act as repertoires of interpretation.
- *Performative character*: Misinformation ecosystems represent the element that makes fake information become real in its consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1928; Austin 1962). As long as people assume certain things as being real, people act on the basis of their understanding and undertake actions with directly observable or quantifiable repercussions. Given that people live and participate in the reality of the misinformation ecosystems, the consequences of fake news are as real as those consequences that would have arisen if the news were true.
- *Autopoietic character*: Even though misinformation ecosystems are limited to specific social and temporal contexts, they are capable of self-maintenance and self-reproduction (Varela, Maturana, and Uribe 1981), as they are based on dynamic processes of information exchange, accumulation and transmission. Misinformation ecosystems are supported by the interactions developed around fake news stories. Fake news generates reactions that play significant roles in the creation and recreation of the digital worlds.

Recurrent occurrences

Definition

“Recurrent occurrences” is a type of fake news that reaches the public’s attention at regular intervals of time. This type of fake news becomes credible among susceptible categories of the population because it refers to situations or events that exploit the feeling of fear. “Recurrent occurrences” is a category of news that refers to false beliefs that can be correlated with observable situations. These situations are interpreted out of context, which leads to a sense of misunderstandings and collective confusion. News from this category are urban legends used by people to make sense of the world they live in. As part of the urban legend genre, this type of news is shrouded in mystery, so that people try to gain certainty by using imaginary correlations. News from this category has real-life consequences: people end up giving a certain definition to a situation due to wrong information and then act based on that definition. These acts are ridiculed by a part of the population due to the hilarious character of their consequences. Despite all this, the degree

of credibility of “recurrent occurrences” is big and it requires the intervention of authorities to debunk.

Example

One example of fake news of this type is the “Black Ambulance” phenomenon. The “Black Ambulance” is a recurring urban legend that is circulated as factual information on social media platforms. The information is based on the assumption that black ambulances hover around Romanian cities and kidnap children to steal their organs or blood. The information claims authenticity by listing the names of some victims who are either never seen again or are found dead with their organs removed¹. As discussions and arguments get started in the comments, internet users share their experiences and beliefs on the topic by trying to warn others and raise awareness about the danger of black ambulances. The internet users link to news sites or YouTube testimonials relating to the legend, and rumors spread across media platforms².

Even though the existence of black ambulances has never been documented, people believed that black ambulances are real and their beliefs had real consequences. Based on false beliefs about black ambulances, two people have been actually attacked. The victims were confused with dangerous drivers due to the aspect of their car that resembled a black ambulance. For example, a paramedic got into a conflict with a few inhabitants of an apartment house. The paramedic answered an emergency call, but the unusual dark blue color of the ambulance stirred fear in some onlookers who confronted the driver, and the police had to be called³. As a result, the ambulance was repainted white to avoid further incidents. Moreover, a woman involved in a campaign to encourage reading was attacked because she was categorized as the driver of the fearful “black ambulance”⁴. She modified her car to look like an ambulance, with the phrase “literature ambulance” written on it. However, the unusual aspect of the vehicle raised suspicions in a few people who violently attacked the woman by mistaking her as the driver of the “black ambulance”. The attackers described their action as a civic intervention against the danger of human trafficking and the attack was motivated by people’s beliefs in the veracity of the urban legend.

While news channels often report declarations from medics or police officers who show that the rumors are not true, the way the legacy media structure their reports can often lead to more fear and mistrust in the viewers. In the case of one television channel, scary music, worrying declarations and narrations and other similar techniques went against the reassuring words of the authorities. In another case, a news channel used the title: “We have the proof! The Black Ambulance exists!”⁵. The title remained unchanged for the duration of the news report even after the presenter admitted that the legend is not true and a police spokesman denied the existence of incidents in which kids were found dead with their organs harvested or taken by ambulances.

Due to recurring incidents and the ensuing panic, the authorities tried multiple times to debunk the legend. The Minister of Internal Affairs and the Romanian Police denied on Facebook the existence of ambulances that kidnap kids⁶. The Romanian Police

also posted on social media an official statement that children with missing organs had never been found in Romania⁷. But despite the constant attempts of authorities to demystify the information about black ambulances, the legend does not show any signs of disappearance from the public sphere.

Scapegoat offensive

Definition

“Scapegoat offensive” is a type of fake news that works as a tentative explanation for broader socio-economic problems. The news becomes included into a contest of public accountability, used by various social actors to gain political capital by favoring civic disengagement and by introducing a misleading focus of attention among actual and future voters. Specifically, this type of news is a means to acquire political influence by discrediting a public person with influence and political power in an attempt to make that person responsible for certain situations that affect society in a negative way. The person who is the subject of fake news becomes a villain; a personification of certain values contested by some groups but appreciated by others. “Scapegoat offensive” news is similar to conspiracy theories since both refer to a character with hidden plans who wishes to destroy a certain social order. This news becomes credible since it is based on a reality known on a wide scale, but which is deliberately exaggerated for political purposes. “Scapegoat offensive” news offers a simplified story about how society is organized. This story is easy to understand by people who have a weak civic culture and cannot be convinced by arguments related to the way political institutes function in a democratic society. Since scapegoating narratives are recognized as disinformation attempts, news from this category is followed by ironic reactions towards people who believe it. And yet, ironic reactions offer the opportunity to victimize believers and raise the degree of credibility of the information. The fact that people’s attention is directed to an imaginary cause of socio-economical breakdown has strong consequences on developing a strategy to correctly identify real causes of social problems and elaborate solutions to effectively meet public needs.

Example

The conspiracy theories related to George Soros might be interpreted as a misinformation ecosystem that follows the “scapegoat offensive” logic. There are many interrelated pieces of information that make George Soros responsible whenever something goes wrong in Romania. This kind of information is pushed mainly by the Social Democratic Party and their partisan media in order to gain political capital and influence voters’ opinion.

Liviu Dragnea, the former leader of the Social Democratic Party, described George Soros as guilty whenever something went wrong in the country. Liviu Dragnea presented George Soros as the enemy of the country, accusing him of malicious plans against Romania. Liviu Dragnea declared that George Soros made some powerful allies that work against him and the Social Democratic Party in order to take control of the country⁸. The

manipulated actors mentioned by Liviu Dragnea are politicians from opposing parties, news channels that discredit him and his party, the justice system that is investigating him and other members of his political party, and the intelligence services. Liviu Dragnea even hinted that former members of his own party, such as Victor Ponta (with whom he had a conflict) are working for George Soros. In Liviu Dragnea's own words, "Everything comes from George Soros. All this evil" and "I will keep attacking him until the country is free from the influence of this destructive man"⁹.

In the middle of a new wave of protests, Liviu Dragnea took it further, suddenly declaring that someone tried to assassinate him a year ago, hinting that the said person might be George Soros. He did not mention any names, but said that "a world-wide famous man" ordered his killing. When asked if he meant George Soros, he replied, "I'm not thinking of Soros, Soros is thinking of me", claiming that he did not know for sure if George Soros is involved¹⁰. A few days later, and after enough criticism, he specified that George Soros had nothing to do with the attempt on his life.

Liviu Dragnea's declaration is not the only attempt of accusing George Soros of harmful behaviors against the Social Democratic Party and its members. Gabriela Firea, member of the party and the mayor of Bucharest, reinterpreted a situation in her favor by relying on George Soros conspiracy theories. She accused "Soros' NGOs" of trying to "lynch" her for standing up to them¹¹. The declaration came after a political meeting she attended was infiltrated by a few citizens who became violent after being stopped by the police. Gabriela Firea said this was not a random altercation because the individuals were too well coordinated, which hinted that the intrusion was all planned in advance. She declared that she was the target of the attack because the group was vociferating and looking directly at her the whole time, and because she also received multiple threats from "Soros' NGOs" after cancelling some of their contracts.

Other party members have also brought George Soros up in discussion whenever someone disagreed with them, and a few news channels have acted as mouthpieces for the Social Democratic Party and have spread these theories to their audiences. For example, these news stations started the rumors that those who were protesting the justice reform laws that the Social Democratic Party was trying to push were paid by George Soros or his NGOs. They called the protests a coup, orchestrated by anti-democratic and foreign powers. In one news report, they said that each protester is paid RON 100, and they get bonuses if they bring children or dogs with them, RON 50 and 30, respectively, for each one they bring¹². In addition to this, a local mayor who is a member of the Social Democratic Party criticized the protesters saying that hardworking people are busy preparing for Christmas, not protesting in the streets.

Many other conspiracy theories that have George Soros as their subject have circulated around the media, and all of them accuse him of influencing Romanian politics through various actors that are either paid or loyal to him. George Soros is allegedly involved at all levels of Romanian politics, through bribing politicians, presidents (current President Klaus Iohannis included) and multiple others officials in various positions. George Soros has also been accused of founding an entire network of NGOs to influence political decisions. For example, one news report is aimed at discrediting everyone who disagrees

with the Social Democratic Party by linking them to George Soros through donations made to them by affiliated NGOs¹³. Among the enemies of the Social Democratic Party linked to George Soros were included public actors and institutions that disagree with the party, prosecutors and judges that have investigated party members or their allies, protesters against the government and influencers who have criticized the party on their Facebook pages.

Another conspiracy theory circulated by the Social Democratic Party suggests that George Soros took advantage of the fire at the Colectiv nightclub to cement his position in Romanian politics even further¹⁴. The tragedy led to massive anti-corruption protests that resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Victor Ponta, then a member of the Social Democratic Party. After Ponta stepped down, President Klaus Iohannis had a conference with his consultants and representatives of multiple associations, groups and NGOs to elect a new prime minister, which resulted in the instauration of a temporary government and Dacian Cioloş receiving the position. Klaus Iohannis, Dacian Cioloş and a multitude of individuals from the new government and from the meeting were accused by the Social Democratic Party of being “Soros’ puppets” and of working together “to fulfil his orders”¹⁵.

Pseudoscientific gaze

Definition

Pseudoscientific gaze represents a type of fake news which contests a scientific discovery or a medical practice based on unreliable evidence. Unlike other fake news categories which are based on suppositions, in this case, a series of studies become the subject of public debates and end up shaping public opinion. The data these specific studies are based on are contested by the scientific community, but despite the scientists’ input, the fake news becomes very influential among the believing group. Online discussions start to pop up, with communities being created both by the supporters of pseudoscientific positions and by their contesters. Even when the online world makes it possible to identify these communities and the practices within them, the two groups rarely interact, and when they do, it is on a conflictual basis. At each group’s level, the definitions and motivations differ, so an argument brought by one side is irrelevant to the other. The propagation of fake news from the pseudoscientific gaze category has real consequences which manifest both at the individual and social levels: for example, some people refuse a health treatment or endanger public health, based on their pseudoscientific beliefs. In this case, the authorities feel obligated to act, but they are usually incapable of correctly handling the situation and tend to act undemocratically, sometimes by limiting civil liberties. Fake news of a “pseudoscientific gaze” type has developed due to distrust in different social institutions (e.g. the scientific community, the medical community and government, corporations), and combating the disinformation cannot be effective without raising trust in these institutions.

Example

Medical issues are feeding conspiracy theories around the world, such as those brought up by the anti-vaccination movement or the “anti-vaxxer movement” for short. The anti-vaxxer movement is a massive one, with members having a huge variety of beliefs and practices. The common element, as the name implies, is their distrust of vaccines, which are considered harmful or at best unnecessary. Anti-vaxxer theories considers that the natural medicine is superior to modern medicine. The proponents of anti-vaxxer argues that natural approaches to medical issues are all people need to live healthy lives. Meanwhile, anti-vaxxers believe that vaccines have a wide range of harmful effects, including genetic mutations, cancer, autism and infertility. Aside from all this, they say the diseases we vaccinate against are not that dangerous, so that vaccination is useless and irresponsible.

According to the advocates of the anti-vaccination movement, vaccines are pushed so heavily on the population because big companies and national authorities reap great benefits from mass-vaccination. According to anti-vaxxers lay theories, the elites work together to brainwash people into believing that they cannot survive without vaccines and other modern treatments. Accordingly, pharmaceutical companies profit massively from selling vaccines and other types of medicine, while the government uses the chemicals to sicken, sterilize and depopulate the groups of people that might be a threat to their domination. The anti-vaxxer movement is often tied to multiple other conspiracy theories, such as those related to the Illuminati and the New World Order.

In Romania, the anti-vaxx movement get spread mainly through the Internet – blogs dedicated to healthy living and lifestyle, websites that teach “the truth” about the hidden side of the world, and social media communities¹⁶. The articles are written in a way that is specifically meant to raise fear. The titles intend to lure users in by raising questions and by making people want to find out more. Generally, the discourse is based on questions, exclamation marks, or scary words such as “the crime of vaccination”, “the biggest aggression against the human being”, “the criminal campaign”, “the truth they don’t want you to know” or “top reasons to not vaccinate your kids”.

The pics scattered throughout the articles are generally either stock photos or scary looking photoshopped pictures. The pictures depict crying or scared kids and women, skull and crossbones bottles filled with unknown and colorful substances, mysterious gloved hands, up-close needles, and vaccines presented as a viper’s fangs. Moreover, the content includes references to authoritarian states (e.g. armed soldiers, policemen and surveillance cameras) and allusions to other conspiracy theories (e.g. Freemason symbols or polluted skies filled with chemtrails).

Another technique used in these articles is appealing to authority. This includes letters from university professors to the president detailing the dangers of vaccines, quotes and links to doctors or other medical industry workers that are against vaccines, and news from other countries where doubts have arisen about the need for vaccines. Other common elements are links to official documents, blogs, news articles, news reports or sites that support or can be twisted to support their theories, videos about the

conspiracy, and very long articles filled with debatable information and an abundance of questions.

The online and legacy media have reacted to the sudden popularity of the movement by using the heated debate for visibility benefits¹⁷. Some media channels were interviewing nurses or doctors who tried to combat the phenomenon and explain how vaccines work, downplaying the dangers. Other media channels tried to discredit anti-vaxxers by citing studies showing that the critics of vaccination want to feel unique and are keen to acquire special knowledge, or that they are unusually afraid of needles. Still, other media sources try to present both sides of the argument. However, the entire situation ends up by making the anti-vaccination theories more believable. The comment sections on news articles are generally filled up with anti-vaxxers reactions. The authors of these comments try to defend their beliefs, while encouraging others to join the fight against vaccines.

Like most conspiracy theories, anti-vaxxer propaganda gets spread mainly through social media. On Facebook, multiple groups are created to unveil “the truth” about vaccines. Their members promote sites that debunk the usefulness of vaccines, raise funds for different campaigns (e.g. billboards warning against the dangers of immunization) and spread news articles or videos that support other conspiracy theories. On those groups, people post scary pictures with babies and different type of diseases one can contact from vaccination, and share screenshots of people telling their stories. The commenters generally write their opinions and experiences, express their anger and disbelief in authorities and formal medicine, show their fear for the future of their children, and complain about those who criticize them. Personal discourse on Facebook follow the same pattern as the collective discourse encountered on dedicated groups.

The growth in the popularity of the anti-vaxxer movement has led to an increase in the number of parents refusing to vaccinate their kids and, as a result, it generated an increase in the incidents of cases of childhood illnesses and other preventable diseases. The authorities are still debating how to tackle the problem. One proposed law that would have forced the parents to vaccinate their kids was debated and caused panic among the anti-vaxxers and is still mentioned in articles written by them even after the project was abandoned. Through the summer of 2018, the health minister worked on a door-to-door campaign in the poorer areas of Romania to educate parents about the benefits of vaccination and to convince them to immunize their kids.

Combo strikes

Definition

The “combo strikes” type include fake news that presents situations characterized by uncertainty and unreliable assumptions. Despite a sense of confusion associated with the news, information of this kind becomes credible mainly because media present it as being real and include it on the public agenda. This type of news refers to a topic that is presented as a threat to a vulnerable group, and the attempts of bringing the topic to public attention

are assumed as methods to support a social cause. The particularity of this type of news is that a strong mediatization can have negative consequences. “Combo strikes” news refers to an inexistent or barely existent phenomenon. However, the countermeasures against the phenomenon and the popularization of the topic through mass media make the phenomenon become real.

Example

The “Blue Whale” phenomenon gives rise to a misinformation ecosystem from the category of “combo strikes”. The “Blue Whale” is described as a game that spread on social media around the world and originated on the Russian site VK. It gained traction in Romania in 2017. The game supposedly attracted teenagers and led to widespread panic among parents. The game worked as a challenge, with players receiving a task to complete each day. The end goal of the game was the player’s suicide. To complete the challenge, the players had to come in contact with a dedicated group and be appointed an administrator who will give players some tasks, guide players throughout the game and address any hesitation players might have had. According to the rules, the players received 50 tasks to complete, one each day, all meant to inflict mental and physical harm. The players were asked to wake up at four in the morning and watch horror movies, climb on the roof of a tall building and sit with their legs over the ledge, or physically cut and stab themselves with sharp objects to prepare them for the final step. The challenge preyed specifically on vulnerable teenagers with family or emotional problems who would use the game to gain a feeling of belonging and accomplishment. If players regretted their decision and tried to give up during the game, the administrator would start to blackmail or threaten the players, their family or their friends to force players to continue with the challenge.

The news reports show that the game started and propagated on social media, quickly spreading from community to community, even before being picked up by news outlets. On the Romanian Facebook, multiple pages and users are named “the blue whale”. Most user accounts related to the phenomenon have only a handful of posts, generally pictures, with very few likes or shares and almost no comments. They seem to be from the point of view of someone playing the game.

However, there are more pages related to the challenge that try to combat the phenomenon, displaying titles such as “Stop the Blue Whale”¹⁸ or “Anti Blue Whale”¹⁹. The Facebook pages mostly contain shocking photos that are either photoshopped or unrelated to the game, pictures that have encouraging messages (e.g. “Life is important; do not play the Blue Whale”) or screenshots from accounts of users playing the game, usually related to self-harming activities. The comments on these pages express astonishment that someone could play such a game (“How can you kill yourself because of a game?!”), mock the whole situation (“More should play the game so there can be fewer stupid people in Romania”), or request additional details (“How many people are playing the game?”).

The game stirred the media into frenzy, as news channels reported over and over with increasing urgency the dangers and consequences of the game, linking every teen-

related tragedy to the suicidal challenge without any substantial proof. During the entire panic, most of the news reports relied on rumors, unverified facts and suppositions, all muddying the waters even more and increasing the fear of the audience²⁰. Some titles were addressed directly to parents, using exclamation marks and capital letters, and some gave the game scary nicknames, such as “death’s game”. In press, multiple incidents were associated with the game: a girl that fell from the roof of an apartment house, five kids found passed out in a school, three minors found hanged, and many others²¹.

The authorities reacted to the hysteria. Carmen Dan, the minister of internal affairs and Gabriela Firea, the mayor of Bucharest launched a campaign in which they visited different schools to warn students against the dangers of the game²². The politicians involved in the campaign and the media were heavily criticized by the police and psychologists for bringing unwarranted attention to a still relatively obscure Internet phenomenon and for spreading unconfirmed rumors. Parents noted how their children first learned about the game from the news and how they would not have even known about its existence if it were not for the news channels reporting about it constantly. Psychologists also stated that the authorities’ intervention would only increase the teenagers’ knowledge and interest in the game, making it seem like an alluring forbidden fruit²³.

The deaths associated with the challenge combined with hundreds of dead teenagers who were allegedly victims of the game in Russia and multiple others around the world forced the Romanian Police to start an investigation. A few months later, the authorities closed the investigation, deciding that none of the deaths reported by the Romanian media were related to the “Blue Whale” game²⁴. The hysteria brought by the game seems to have vanished now, mostly because no real-life tragedy has been linked to it. While the Internet currently hosts other potentially destructive challenges, none of them seem to have the viral nature that this one had.

Humorous hijacks

Definition

“Humorous hijacks” are misinformation campaigns hijacked from their initial purpose. News from this category is based on a series of fabricated evidence (pictures, videos or out-of-context statements) with the purpose of increasing the brand image of a public person. Despite this, a receptive and critical audience signals the misinformation attempt, which arouses ironic reactions regarding the situation. The news content refers to attempts of bringing fake information into the public space, being pejoratively presented both through digital and traditional media. The news generates public debates that are carried out in several stylistic registers. Within these debates, arguments of an ethical, political and social nature are presented. As a result of the magnitude of the phenomenon, the popularity of the public persons that are the focus of the news increases, but their popularity growth is generated rather by the ironic reactions and ridicule than by expected admiring reactions. Fake stories are spread on social media either for the benefit or the

amusement of their creators. Despite some of the stories being ridiculous and obviously fake, they might still be believed by a large and sometimes increasing number of people, and after becoming more known, they are very hard to successfully debunk.

Example

To illustrate the “humorous hijacks” type, we refer to a debunked fake story in relation to Gabriel Oprea, a Romanian politician. Gabriel Oprea posted a photo on his Facebook public account from Traian Băsescu’s presidential visit to the White House in 2011. The picture displayed Gabriel Oprea shaking hands with the then sitting President Barack Obama. Immediately, some users noticed that the photo looked off, as Gabriel Oprea’s arm was at an odd angle for a handshake²⁵. Other users accessed the presidential site to search for some pictures of the event and found the original photo, which featured the two presidents shaking hands, while Gabriel Oprea looked on while standing slightly behind them.

Facebook users immediately reacted to the discovery. Some users wrote long posts, giving background information about the purpose of the political meeting and the agenda. Other users reposted the original photo in comparison to Gabriel Oprea’s version, analyzing them and describing what was changed²⁶. Moreover, a few users theorized that since Gabriel Oprea was trying to start his own political party and make a successful comeback in Romanian politics, the photo was an “attempt to make himself look more important and capable than he really is”²⁷.

Most users were not at all impressed with Gabriel Oprea’s lie and with the poor image manipulation job and showed their amusement in their posts: “How stupid can you be to do something like this?”. Soon after the discovery, the jokes started, with headlines such as “Huge scandal in America! Obama photoshopped himself while shaking hands with Gabriel Oprea”. Some Internet users started doing their own manipulated images by putting Gabriel Oprea’s face in increasingly ridiculous situations²⁸ (e.g. a picture with everyone in the room being replaced with Gabriel Oprea’s face or with Liviu Dragnea being in Barack Obama’s place). Then, Gabriel Oprea was satirically made to appear in other circumstances: Gabriel Oprea was photoshopped as shaking hands with Donald Trump, Kim Jong-un, Adolf Hitler or Mona Lisa. Eventually, some photos did not even have to feature handshakes for him to be shoved into – he was photoshopped in a meeting with Angela Merkel, an astronaut or the Queen of England.

Gabriel Oprea’s posts and the controversy surrounding them attracted other politicians’ attention. For example, Traian Băsescu posted on Facebook his thoughts about the whole situation, humiliating Gabriel Oprea further. He mentioned how desperate Gabriel Oprea must have been to resort to such a tactic and added that Gabriel Oprea had built his whole life on fakes, so this incident should not have been a surprise (referring to the fact that Gabriel Oprea had plagiarized his doctoral thesis). At the end of the message, Traian Băsescu sarcastically pitied him and wished him good luck, giving more reason for jokes and amusement for the public²⁹.

As soon as the rumors that the picture was manipulated spread on social media, news outlets started to report on the event. Some of the news channels reported about the situation professionally, describing the incident, linking to Gabriel Oprea's post and him trying to defend his story in the comments, providing background information for the political context of the meeting, and showing the original and manipulated photos. One article even described the evidence that the photo had been tampered with in great detail. But others took a more mocking approach. They used screenshots with Facebook users' reactions in the comments of Gabriel Oprea's post, quoted the jokes Internet users had posted and showed the funny images that some more talented jokesters had created to make fun of the situation.

A reporter managed to interview Gabriel Oprea, who refused to admit that the photo was fake despite the evidence and doubled down on defending his story. Gabriel Oprea declared that he actually had shaken hands with Barack Obama, since the president would naturally shake hands with every person he was introduced to. Gabriel Oprea said that he did not know who sent him the photos, but he assumed it was the photographer³⁰. The longer he was questioned by the reporter, the more defensive and aggressive he became. The interview only added to the hilarity surrounding the fake picture, creating more jokes and manipulated images. The interview made the funny comments and remarks meaner and more sarcastic. In the end, Gabriel Oprea's adamant denial of any lie or photo tampering, plus the ridiculous story and the poor image manipulation job, made Gabriel Oprea's post very famous, albeit for different reasons than expected.

Conclusion

This work contributes towards understanding the fake news phenomenon and the mechanisms through which deceptive reports impact society. The results of the study illustrate that the networked structure of the fake news phenomenon is more important than its rhetoric or textual dimensions.

Once disseminated, information becomes performative and it actively participates in the reality building. Fake news has real consequences as long as people believe it and act as if the information were true. The fake news from the category of "recurrent occurrences" gave rise to real violent acts, while fake news from the category of "scapegoat offensive" actually increased the political power and influence of various parties. "Pseudoscientific gaze" is a type of news reports with factual consequences on individual and public health, "combo strikes" is able to translate an ambiguous topic into a highly relevant national issue, and the "humorous hijacks" could significantly damage the social reputation of a public person.

However, fake information cannot have real consequences solely based on the property of the textual or audio-visual content; for it to be credible, the information must go through a social validation process that depends on the socio-technical architectures of online environments. False information is capable of influencing human actions, as long as it is integrated within social practices and is distributed at the level of inter-media networks. False information can shape reality when connected to other mutually

reinforcing similar statements, thus creating a misinformation ecosystem as a discourse community in which linkability and feedback serve a performative and autopoietic function. In this way, fake news gains legitimacy, and the shared content becomes credible.

Fake news generates real consequences as long as it is supported by other reinforcing stories and reactions which form a sustainable misinformation ecosystem. For this reason, we argue that fact-checking platforms have a reduced impact in debunking fake news because they don't address the connections that cement the credibility of the information. Thus, we suggest that the measures against fake news should address misinformation ecosystems, but not separate pieces of information. Only by deconstructing and eliminating the reinforcing interrelations that feed the fake news phenomenon can we eliminate the associated social risks and reduce the threats that fake news poses to a democratic society.

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Gabriel-Alexandru Toma is a PhD Candidate in Political Sciences (National University of Political Studies and Public Administration) and co-founder of the Association for Social Entrepreneurship “Plus One” (Social+1). He coordinated the project “The social impact of fake news in the context of audio and video manipulation tools”. His research interests include social entrepreneurship, social innovation, cultural innovation, and digital technologies.

Adina-Gabriela Scripcariu completed her Master's degree in Anthropology and Community Development at the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest. She is collaborator of the Association for Social Entrepreneurship “Plus One” (Social+1) where she is involved in research activities and consultancy. Her research interests focus on digital media, social innovation and social entrepreneurship.