Introduction to the Definition and Classification of the Fake News

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ABSTRACT

The article presents the attempts to define fake news in the subject literature. **Scientific objective:** To present various definitional approaches, describe the specifics of fake news and characterize typology of phenomenon. **Research methods:** Analysis of the literature of the subject and online sources. **Results and conclusions:** Separation of the fake news components and its characteristics necessary to create a coherent definition. **Cognitive value:** Sorting the current state of knowledge about fake news.

KEYWORDS

fake news, false information, internet

When, in March 1894, Frederick Burr Opper published his graphic showing the state of the press at the time, he did not suppose that one of the slogans on the picture would become the most used word in the 21st century. The drawing entitled "The Fin de Siecle Newspaper Proprietor" presents the owner of a newspaper, probably Joseph Pulitzer, sitting in his office in a chair next to a safe from which money spills out. Around him, we can see reporters running to the editorial office with slogans that can be headlines. One of them is fake news (www.loc.gov).

The authors of the Collins Dictionary recognise fake news as the word of 2017, citing the criterion of a significant increase in its use (Word of 2017 officially chosen, 2017). For the same reason, in 2017 this word went to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (published since 1828). Also in 2018, the phenomenon of fake news aroused the interest of internet users, which is shown by Google's search engine statistics (www.trends.google.pl). The term, propagated in Donald Trump's election campaign in 2016, is becoming the most commonly used word in the United States and Switzerland (Mały Leksykon Postprawdy, nd). It is mentioned not only in the context of media bias or their lack of objectivity, but also in relation to politics, economy or even entertainment (Hegelich, 2016). There are voices that fake news control the media, and above all the Internet (Ziółkowska, 2018). The change in interest in the fake news phenomenon can be seen in the Google Scholar reports from the years 2003–2017. In this period, only 34 articles on false messages were published (Tandoc, Ling, Westlund, Duffy, Goh, & Zheng Wei, 2017). Thus, it is only in recent years that the frequency of publications on *fake news* has been growing. It is worth taking a look at this phenomenon.

The research goal of this article is to try to organise knowledge about fake news by presenting definitional approaches, features of *fake news* and their classification based on the available literature on the subject. The research method is to analyse literary sources about the fake news.

Definition and Characteristics of Fake News

The term "fake news" is a neologism and it is difficult to put it in a definitional framework. It means a media message that is neither truth nor a lie at the same time, that is based on disinformation, often containing real fragments (Gillin, 2017). It should not be equated with journalistic mistakes or publications based on unverified sources. Ireton and Posetti (2018) argue that the term fake news is an oxymoron, because the juxtaposition of the words "fake" and "news" undermines the credibility of information and contradicts the idea of journalism. According to the PWN Polish Language Dictionary fake news is "a manipulation of facts, it is readily used by journalists whose goal, when preparing a publication, is to get the most interest in the topic, not its compliance with reality" (www.sjp.pwn.pl). *Fake news* are designed to deliberately mislead the recipient, for example to obtain financial, political or propaganda benefits (Drzazga, 2017), introducing into the market distortions, falsehoods or overinterpretations (Lalik, 2017). Yuval Harari (2018) goes beyond the media and describes fake news as a conscious implementation of a lie in public (not just media) space. He combines fake news with advertising and claims that false information is often the foundation of business activities. He gives the example of the Coca-Cola company, which builds its brand on the combination of carbonated drink with youth, fitness and joy, while in fact drinking Coke contributes to the development of diabetes and heart disease. Elliot and Culver (1992) define fake news as an act of conveying messages not so much through a lie as by concealing information to lead someone to create a false belief in a given topic. McNair (2018) presents fake news as a phenomenon contributing to the emergence of political and social trends in 21st century societies. Another definition of fake news is that it is a message passed from the source, by a journalist, to the public and subjected to processing

by a media organisation. It is the result of intentional actions, which is the key when creating a fake news, because the creation of false content is often made consciously, in a specific purpose, determined by the sender (Gans, 2004). This view is also supported by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), who believe that fake news are "distorted signals unrelated to the truth". That is why they define them as informational "articles that are deliberately and verifiably false and may mislead readers". Aldwairi and Alwahedi (2018) argue that fake news as a phenomenon was created as part of a psychological war, which is based on the manipulation of public opinion in order to implement specific content. The definition of fake news as a tool of propaganda is also given by Barclay (2018), who claims that fake news are used consciously to create social attitudes.

Due to the large definitional spread, the two-way approach to fake news seems right. The narrow definition makes fake news possible to be checked by verifying the facts and detecting their origin. It also helps to identify fake news sources and, consequently, to delete it. The broad definition includes deliberate attempts to disinform and distort messages to promote ideology, confuse recipients, and polarize the society. This happens through deliberate filtering of information or shortening of published content for commercial purposes. This is a definition based on the economic model of information markets (Martens, Aquiar, Gomez-Herrera, & Mueller-Langer, 2018).

Fake news are not a lie, because they contain a true part, but often distorted or devoid of context (Gilin, 2017). Dentich (2014) calls it "an alleged fact", which is either completely false (and then it is not a fact), or is only partially true. It lacks a context or additional information that could make it credible. Confidence of recipients to fake news arises due to the fact that it was published in the media, in other words, it was prepared by professionals and sufficiently verified at source (Talarek, 2012). The media, according to Keyes (2017), play an important role in spreading untruth. They put drama over compliance with facts, creating a fertile ground for fake news. Fake news resemble "yellow journalism" that evokes informational chaos that misleads the recipients. This happens not only through the content itself, but also the attention-grabbing headlines - sensational and exaggerated in their form (Ellis, 2017), suggestive and often imprecise language (Simons, nd), as well as through images, which additionally empower the information in the recipients' memory (Gu, Kropotov, & Yarochkin, 2017). Fake news differ from satire, as the viewer or the listener knows that the content transmitted to him is not true, but only a free interpretation of events, and its intention is only entertainment. Especially that the form of fake news strongly reminds the true message, and its authors often impersonate independent institutions (Ellis, 2017). Journalists who produce fake news in most situations take a message about the real event and falsify it, adding imaginary protagonists or fragments of events. The quintessence of the news fake is not a lie, only half truth. This phenomenon is dangerous as it misuses the recipients' trust in the media. It distorts the perception of people tracking a given topic on news channels. Especially when the main source of information are web portals in which the verification process and content control is often subjected to time pressure and is associated with inadequate verification of facts (Fabryka fałsz..., 2017). This results in a "strange media mix" that is a mixture of facts, opinions, interpretations and narratives, among which it is extremely easy to hide fake news (Iwasiński, 2018). Fulgoni and Lipsman (2017) call fake news a form of "digital pollution" that makes it difficult for recipients to filter information. According to Jeffries (2019), fake news are like a gossip that everyone is happy to distribute, even though he is not sure if it is true. The mere fact that enough people pass it on is enough to start believing it. Just like a gossip, fake news can contain a detailed description of the event, including quotes, references to participants of events and witnesses, and can present both a closer and a broader context. In this sense, fake news are a manipulated message that has been specially processed.

In terms of the structure of fake news, it is identical to the structure of a real message, it can also consist of sentences identical in terms of grammar (Palczewski, 2017).

The speed of propagation of the fake news and their range is what distinguishes them from the classic news, also being information from the "last moment" (Salevsky & Müller, 2011, p.19). Fake news go faster, farther and wider than real ones. This is due to the fact that they arouse the interest of the recipients by referring to their feelings, interests or preferences (Albright, 2017). Then the recipient eagerly shares them with others, distributes them and passes them on. In view of the speed of the information system that the online sphere has become, the recipient can quickly satisfy his curiosity, without having to check whether the information he has received is true. He does not have to make an effort to verify facts, assimilates them or rejects them without deeper consideration, and also passes on to subsequent users without any thought, which is important in the fake news distribution process (Marketing & Media Summit, 2017). On the other hand, the recipient is not only a passive consumer of the media offer, but has become an active consumer and therefore participates in the content distribution process (Kreft, 2013). Especially teenagers and young people who use the Internet more often than other age groups may contribute to the spreading of the so-called alternative facts (Łódzki, 2017). Companies such as Facebook or Google have introduced various tools in their platforms to help detect false messages. However, both companies are still developing algorithms to provide information that the recipient wants to receive, regardless of its accuracy (Pangrazio, 2018). The social media are not always responsible for the spread of fake news, as they also spread through traditional media. Providing false information in a traditional newspaper or television strengthens it many times and it is distributed with reference to this source (Lipiński, 2018).

Fake news in terms of popularity and involvement in their distribution of recipients reach better results than real messages (Visentin, Pizzi, & Pichierri, 2019). False information about politics or social issues can spread by as much as 70% faster compared to real content, as shown by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Fake news have a viral character – they quickly put themselves in most media, filling them up. For example: a real tweet from August 2015, informing that Donald Trump flew from California to New York for treatment, was shared about 1,400 times, while a fake tweet from March 2016, in which Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz allegedly called voters to vote for a Democrat was shared around 16,000 times (Zimmer & Marelli, 2018). This can result in the formation of organised "ecosystems" that produce and distribute fake news (BBC News Report, nd) The mechanism that is then triggered is very simple: the more publications are created on a given topic, the more people are interested in it; the more people are interested, the more willingly the media deal with the topic, and the recipients communicate it through social platforms. Information in a short time is already found in most media in a given region or country. This phenomenon contributes to the effect known as the filter bubble (Pariser, 2011). It is one of the consequences of functioning in the multitude of received content and relies on the tendency to select information confirming previous assumptions or hypotheses. Searching for messages on a given topic, the recipient more willingly stops at those that are consistent with his line of thought, while at the same time rejecting those that suggest a different position (Ronson, 2015). He unifies his beliefs and reduces the ability to be critical (Szpunar, 2014). If in the field of interest of the media recipient there are some fake news, the untruths of which he is not aware of, the recipient will consider it as a fact soon enough. He will be strengthened in this belief by the number of materials and articles that he has read or viewed on this topic, even if he is a recipient of traditional media. If he is also a social media user, he will continue to distribute the fake news. Because his friends probably are dominated by people with similar views and beliefs, the repetition of the same content will be multiplied, which gives the impression that

everyone around is talking about the same, and in the same manner. This phenomenon was called the echo chamber (Peretti, 2001).

Components and Types of Fake News

Dissemination of false information usually has a specific purpose: to trigger intended attitudes, behaviours or reactions. In order to achieve this, fake news must have an interesting form and be perpetuated in the memory of recipients (Woźniak-Zapór, 2017). It is based on three components forming the so-called fake news triangle. These are: tools or services, social platforms and motivation. The first one in the form of tools or services is used to manipulate and disseminate fake content on social media platforms. In order to be able to do this, it is necessary to promote them among portal users, that's why followers or, for example, online surveys are used here. One could use marketing tools, such as advertising or sponsored texts, but they would require compliance with the law, enabling them to be verified. It would be enough for commercial purposes, but it could be too expensive to spread fake news. In addition, based on the anonymity of the authors, they can spread much faster online, thus eliminating the risk of falsehood detection. The second element of fake news are social platforms that enable the use of these tools. People spend so much time here that they not only communicate with other users, but also track the current events. In order to achieve their goals, the platforms refer to the recipient's psychological mechanisms, confirming their hierarchy of needs and even prejudices. Very often, the so-called bots are used – IT systems that detect and analyse the user in terms of his activity in the network and matching it to the appropriate target group. Bots can take the form of an application that, following the activities of Internet users, encourages them to read or watch various content (including fake news), without dividing it to real and fake, by displaying posts, photos or entries of other social media users. The last component of fake news is motivation. One should keep in mind that fake news are a tool, and not the objective. The goal is financial or political profit or intensification of propaganda, deepening social divisions and information chaos. And although one can guess, fake news are never directly articulated, because they are based on manipulative mechanisms. Flashy newspaper headlines, tabloid announcements of news sites or article descriptions on online portals attract the attention, regardless of what content the news presents. What matters here are "clicks", viewership, sales and influence on the recipient, because regardless of the motivation, those who have the most impact on reality win (Gu, Kropotov, & Yarochkin, 2017). This is also accompanied by the crisis of contemporary journalism, which is considered one of the factors helping fake news to arise and live in the media space. More frequent media bias or excessive desire to provoke may contribute to blurring the boundaries between truth and false (Podlecki, 2017).

Along with the intensification of the fake news phenomenon, research is developing to understand and explain them. The research results make it possible to classify fake news, which allows to distinguish the types characteristic of this phenomenon.

For example, Wardle (2017), giving the types of fake news based on the content criterion, distinguishes:

1. Satire or parody. It can do harm only potentially, not intentionally. The recipient knows (he was informed about it) that he is reading or watching entertaining content, so he does not expect information, just fun.

2. False connection. It consists in using a headline, image or signature incompatible with the content. The recipient is attracted to the topic by using words or images that trigger curiosity, which encourage him to get acquainted with the content, although this concerns a different phenomenon than the one announced in the headline.

3. Misleading content. It is based on the use of information to persuade something to the subject or person. The recipient knows that he reads the real message, because he can verify it in other sources, but it is presented not with the intention of providing knowledge but as a provocation to experience specific feelings or emotions.

4. False context. It consists in presenting real information in a false context. The recipient is aware that the information is true, but he does not realise that the context has been changed.

5. Imposter content. Based on impersonation for real sources of information. The recipient is convinced that he is reading (watching) content from a reliable source, because, for example, of a confusingly similar graphic design.

6. Manipulated content. Manipulating information or image to deceive the recipient. The recipient receives information prepared in such a way that he is not aware of its misuse.

7. Fabricated content. It consists in completely falsified content. The recipient does not know that he is absorbing the untrue information.

In turn, Palczewski (2017) distinguishes the following categories of fake news:

1. Made-up, untrue stories. Designed consciously, but so that the recipient knows that they are untrue.

2. News produced for propaganda, political or commercial purposes, being a deliberate lie. Completely fabricated to mislead the recipients or trigger their specific reactions or decisions, e.g. political ones.

3. Fake news based on partially real information, but manipulated. Created by adding a fabricated fact to history already existing in the public sphere, or to just created stories that contain mostly real information, but an additional component turns them into fake messages.

4. Satirical false information.

5. False messages considered fake news by individuals or institutions because of their content, negative for those people or institutions.

The last type of fake news is noteworthy, as they are particularly dangerous, because it is difficult to question their authenticity. This becomes possible only in the case of multi-aspect comparative studies of the event itself, using appropriate observation and seeking its sources or by compiling (triangulation) all events, available descriptions of a given event published by the media, with particular emphasis on media deemed trustworthy.

Edson, Tandoc, Zheng Wei and Ling (2017) conducted an analysis of academic articles using the term "fake news" to identify different ways to define the term. It allowed to distinguish six types of fake news:

1. Satire. Refers to information programs that usually use humour or exaggeration to present news updates to recipients. These programs usually focus on current events and often use the style of TV news.

2. Parody. It has many features of satire, because both are based on humour as a way of attracting the audience. It also uses a presentation format that mimics the main news media. Instead of giving direct comments about current events, the parody depends on the absurdity of the issues and emphasises them, creating completely fictional news.

3. Fabrication. This applies to articles that have no factual basis, but are published in the style of newspaper articles in order to create an impression of truthfulness. Unlike parody, there is no hidden agreement between the author and the reader that the message is false. The author's intention is often reversed and is intended to mislead the recipient.

4. Photographic manipulation. Manipulation of real images or films to create a false narrative. The category describes visual messages. The effects of this type of manipulation can range from simple to complex. Simple adjustments can include increasing colour saturation or removing

smaller elements. More invasive changes may include removing or placing a person in an image.

5. Advertising. Used to describe advertising materials in the form of authentic messages, as well as to refer to press releases published as news. Created with an emphasis on financial profit.

6. Propaganda. Information that is created by a political entity to influence public opinion and gain support for a public figure, organisation or government.

Waszak (2017), citing the Public Dialog research conducted among Polish journalists, divides fake news into three categories:

1. Completely untrue. When information made public is untrue, contradictory or intentionally fabricated.

2. Disputably true information. When the recipient is misled by giving the right context to facts or presenting them in a selective manner.

3. Manipulated quotes. They concern changing the sense of a statement by cutting sentences out of context.

Conclusions

Fake news, rightly compared to a virus, have different faces, easily change their nature and spread with great speed in all types of media. Internet plays an important role here, thanks to which accessibility and flow of information have significantly increased. In the sheer volume of content, it is not difficult to smuggle fake news and make the recipient get caught in a web of manipulation. The creation of false messages is facilitated by journalistic rush and pursuit of news, lack of time, often thoughtlessness. Also information bubbles are important, in which users of social media platforms are active, concentrated in similar-minded groups. Platforms are a convenient space for creating and spreading fake news due to the lack of control mechanisms.

Analysing the literature of the subject, it can be noticed that defining fake news is not easy and one should look at this phenomenon in a broader context. The dynamics of the media world causes the perception of fake news to change. Although the explanation of the term fluctuates around the phrase "false messages", further clarification requires further research and analysis. There is no one definition, which would take into account the complexity of the phenomenon of fake news. The emerging new fake news mean that the term has become very spacious, encompassing different types of content, different motivations for producing and disseminating content, and various distribution methods. Researchers agree that fake news is a widely understood disinformation that is neither truth nor a lie. It is dominated by pictures or photos and a short, simple accompanying caption. There are often violent contents, pretending to be "at first hand", emotionally marked. Fake news give facts in such a way that the recipient cannot figure out where the verified information starts, and where it ends, based on the assumption that a partial truth authenticates the entire message. The boundary between real and false information fades when the news comes in which the facts are located, but they are distorted for the purpose that only the editorial office knows. That is why the aspect of intentionality is important, which may turn out to be a factor determining the definition of fake news. It is the intentions of the creators of the news that affect the final shape of the news, and therefore the one who prepares the message for publication is responsible for whether it will be true or not. Features that help describe fake news are at the same time features that distinguish it from the classic news and contribute to the growth of its quantity in the media space. These are: speed, range and popularity. Due to the interesting form and intriguing content, false messages spread faster and wider than the real ones. It is also more interesting, that is why the recipient is more willing to pass it on, participating in the distribution process.

In various publications you can find various classifications of fake news, distinguishing their types. Recognising them allows us to avoid the pitfalls of disinformation. Although the boundary between them is thin, they are, however, part of the information ecosystem in which the 21st century societies must live.

The phenomenon of fake news is the resultant of many factors: cultural, civilizational, economic and social. Often they are identified with the crisis of journalism and the relativization of the concept of truth, and the effects of its impact can be observed on the map of the geopolitical world. The attempt to organise knowledge about fake news presented in the article shows very clearly that this is a topic that causes terminological chaos in the public space, in the journalistic and scientific world. Gossips, manipulation or information war are threats that the media recipients must face every day. Fake news fit perfectly into this trend. The more indeterminate they are, the harder it is to capture them in a definitional framework, the easier it is to occupy the media space and achieve the goals set by their creators. That is why it is necessary to face the challenge of systematising both the term and the specificity of the phenomenon of fake news. Creating a coherent definition would help in identifying and attempting to eliminate this phenomenon. Is it possible to completely get rid of fake news? Probably not, because social platforms are constantly evolving: the number of their active users is increasing and there is more and more uncontrolled content. Traditional media, on the other hand, undergo a transformation, which was forced by the creation and spread of the Internet. Fake news are not a one-off phenomenon and if they have fertile ground, they will continue to spread. Limiting their impact would benefit both the media (increasing their credibility) and users who would not have to distinguish false content from the real one themselves. The years to come will show if this is possible...

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