

FAKE NEWS RELATED TO THE CORONAVIRUS. CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to analyze fake news related to coronavirus and assign selected examples to the categories of fake news presented in the literature. Various types of fake news disseminated in the Internet in Polish language were analyzed. The study is preceded by a discussion on the origin, specificity, types, and available classifications of fake news obtained from the available literature. On the basis of the analysis, it can be concluded that many fake news items appeared in the media discussion on the threat of coronavirus, differing in terms of sources, form, and content. Their diversity is reflected in the numerousness of fake news categories, distinguished by the creators of the classifications of this phenomenon.

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In a common understanding, *fake news* is untrue information created in the Internet environment. This approach does not exclude that other media (e.g. television) may also be the source of fake news. Soll argues that the appearance of fake news is not closely related to the access to new technologies. According to him, it is pure information that is secondary to the fake news.¹ In *Collins English Dictionary*, fake news is described as “false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting”.² The editors of this dictionary chose *fake news* as 2017’s word of the year, arguing that the term was ubiquitous and its use grew, especially in the world of politics.³ In European Parliament’ brochure from 2017 relating to this topic, one can read that fake news are deliberately fabricated stories posing as journalism with the aim of manipulating readers”.⁴ “Untrue, false news, most often disseminated by tabloids in order to cause sensation or defame someone”⁵ – this, in turn, is the definition of *fake news* found in PWN Polish Language Dictionary. There are many definitions of this concept in academic publications dealing with the phenomenon of fake news. Allcott and Gentzkow consider fake news to be the information that is not true, but is presented as true in the news reports or on social media.⁶ According to another academic view, fake news is a distortion or an overinterpretation of a piece of information, or the use of a piece of information to cause disinformation, to make a prank, to mislead recipients, or simply to commit a

¹ Cf. J. Soll, *The long and brutal history of fake news*, “Politico Magazine”, 18 December 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/fake-news-history-long-violent-214535> (accessed: 24.03.2020).

² *Fake news*, [in:] *Collins Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/fake-news> (accessed: 22.09.2020).

³ *Word of the Year*, [in:] *Collins Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/woty> (accessed: 20.08.2020).

⁴ European Parliament, “*Fake news*” and the EU’s response, “At a glance”, April 2017, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2017/599384/EPRS_ATA%282017%29599384_EN.pdf (accessed: 20.08.2020).

⁵ *Fake news*, [in:] *Słownik języka polskiego PWN*, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/fake%20news.html> (accessed: 16.09.2020).

⁶ H. Allcott, M. Gentzkow, *Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election*, “Journal of Economic Perspectives”, Spring 2017, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 211–236, DOI 10.1257/jep.31.2.211.

fraud.⁷ It is also worth emphasizing that in the analyses of the definition of fake news, there are references to the degree of the falsity of information. According to this approach, fake news may be, for example, completely untrue, or contain part of the truth or half-truth.⁸

Spreading fake news is not only the domain of the present day, although the current technological possibilities and the media environment give them the possibility of exerting a strong influence on the public opinion. There are views according to which lying is evolutionarily conditioned. “We can cheat, which gives us an evolutionary advantage over animals or enemies. We are limited not only by morality, but most of all by close relationships with people who would see through our lies. Today, however, we live in much larger communities where we are surrounded by strangers who cannot recognize the fraud. On the Internet, we are so disconnected from each other that we do not even use real names, but pseudonyms. All these factors contribute to the natural tendency of humans to cheat, and at the same time deprive them of traditional inhibitions”.⁹ However, today’s information technologies and communication environment play a key role in the creation and dissemination of fake news. Today, every individual Internet user or organization has the tools to spread their own message. This is the reality of Web 2.0 environment. Starting with the considerations made by Jung, Web 2.0 era should be perceived as a stage in the development of the Internet understood as a shift from the “read-only” network to the active participation phase, whose users manage the content they generate.¹⁰ The concept of *total communication*, in which the user creates and modifies reality, matches the area of Web 2.0. Each Internet user using a computer, tablet, or smartphone can freely navigate the world of free tools and platforms to communicate in the global village and to shape reality, also by means of fake news. As a result, as Tarkowski emphasizes, “in one space,

⁷ M. Woźniak-Zapór, *Fake news – niebezpieczeństwo w mediach*, “Bezpieczeństwo. Teoria i praktyka”, 2017, no. 4, p. 100.

⁸ *Raport: „Fake news z perspektywy polskich dziennikarzy”*, “Nowy Marketing”, 1 June 2017, <https://nowymarketing.pl/a/14160,raport-fake-news-z-perspektywy-polskich-dziennikarzy> (accessed: 15.09.2020), p. 7.

⁹ R. Keyes, *Kłamstwo, prawda, post-prawda. Ralph Keyes w rozmowie z Łukaszem Pawłowskim*, interviewed by Łukasz Pawłowski, “Kultura Liberalna”, 29 November 2016, no. 48 (412), <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2016/11/29/keyes-post-prawda-wywiad/> (accessed: 10.09.2020).

¹⁰ B. Jung, *Wokół mediów ery Web 2.0*, Warszawa 2010.

objective data, different interpretations of these data, and other narratives, completely unjustified or even false, function simultaneously on equal terms. Press releases are mixed with memes and hatred in one weird media mix. ... We can choose from any number of truths circulating in the web”.¹¹ If we were to approach the topic on the basis of economic concepts, we could say that we are dealing with “unlimited supply of information space” and “low barriers to the entry of false information into the market”.¹² Computer bots are behind some of the fake news. In Web 2.0 the so-called “filtering bubbles” are created, the nature of which is to address specific recipients of personalized messages selected by algorithms. The key is to rely on the recipient’s profile. The message, including fake news, inside such a bubble is amplified and confirmed by users as to its credibility.¹³

Along with the spread of fake news, there are more and more academic studies whose aim is to characterize and understand the phenomenon. The literature does not lack analyzes that make it possible to classify false messages and to specify their characteristic features. The following categorizations were used by the author to assign examples of fake news to specific categories described in the literature.

Wardle in his research focuses on materials on the Internet and lists seven types of fake news depending on the degree of disinformation¹⁴:

1. satire or parody – information provided in a playful context;
2. false connections – materials whose titles are not consistent with the rest of the content;
3. misleading content – reaching for real news in order to show a given entity in a particular light. This is content that misleads the recipient;
4. false context – messages based on real content but entered in a false context;
5. imposter content – materials created by entities that have impersonated the profiles of specific people, portals, institutions, or organizations;

¹¹ A. Tarkowski, *Jak żyć w świecie post-prawdy?*, “Kultura Liberalna”, 29 November 2016, no. 48 (412), <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2016/11/29/alek-tarkowski-post-prawda-facebook-internet> (accessed: 10.09.2020).

¹² Ł. Faciejew, *Nieprawda jako źródło zysku*, “Kultura Liberalna”, 29 November 2016, no. 48 (412), <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2016/11/29/faciejew-falyszwe-informacje-google-facebook-trump/> (accessed: 20.08.2020).

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ C. Wardle, *Fake news. It's complicated*, “First Draft”, 16 February 2017, <https://firstdraftnews.com/fake-newscomplicated> (accessed: 10.03.2020).

6. fabricated content – purely false content;
7. manipulated content – content aimed at deceiving the reader; messages in which initially true information has been manipulated.

Waszak took a different starting point in dividing fake news into categories. With regard to Public Dialog research, organized within a group of Polish journalists, he distinguished three categories of fake news:¹⁵

1. completely untrue – when the disseminated news is false, contradictory, or intentionally fabricated;
2. information whose truthfulness is disputable – giving a specific context to the facts or showing them in a selective manner in order to mislead readers;
3. manipulated quotes – taking sentences out of context, which leads to the change of the message;

The analysis of many examples of fake news by media expert Marek Palczewski resulted in distinguishing six types of news:¹⁶

1. fake news – false tabloid narratives;
2. fake news of a satirical nature (also included in Wardle's division);
3. fake news as disseminated lies that are created for political, propaganda or commercial purposes;
4. fake news based on news that is partially true and then manipulated;
5. real news referred to as fake news;
6. fake news used as a provocation.

The analysis of the above three classifications of the types of fake news reveals different views on the phenomenon. The classifications suggested by Wardle and Palczewski are more extensive as compared to Waszak's compilation, and thus they present more types of false news. The multitude of fake news classification models proves that there are many types of fake news and that their characterization goes beyond one schematic key.

¹⁵ M. Waszak, *Postprawda i fake news czy weryfikacja treści i źródeł informacji?*, "Refleksje", Autumn–Spring 2017, no. 16, pp. 173–188, DOI 10.14746/r.2017.2.13; Public Dialog, *Raport: Fake news z perspektywy polskich dziennikarzy. Wyniki badań*, "Public Dialog", 2017, http://publicdialog.home.pl/www_logotomia/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Raport_Badanie-fake-news-23-05-2017.pdf (accessed: 10.09.2020).

¹⁶ M. Palczewski, *Świat fake newsa. Siły sprawcze i konsekwencje*, [in:] *Bezpieczeństwo informacyjne w dobie postprawdy*, T.W. Grabowski, M. Lakomy, K. Oświecimski (eds), Kraków 2018, pp. 155–156.

FIG. 1. A FAKE NEWS ITEM CONTAINING ADVICE ON ELIMINATING THE VIRUS BY “CLEANING THE THROAT WITH WARM WATER AND SALT OR VINEGAR”



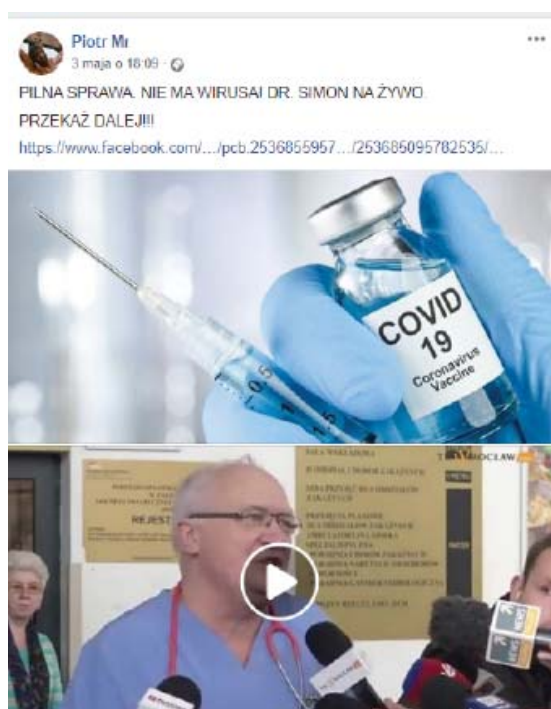
Source: *Warto wiedzieć...* [illustration], “Facebook”, 18 April 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1326442564411070&set=a.258304717891532&type=3&theater> (accessed: 11.08.2020).

During coronavirus pandemic, there have been numerous tips on social media about how to avoid contracting the coronavirus. One such graphic advice, shown in Fig. 1, concerned “eliminating” the virus by cleaning the throat with warm water and salt or vinegar. The last sentence is symptomatic, as it encourages the dissemination of this information.¹⁷ The illustration presented in Fig. 1 was shared over 1,500 times. This is an example of fake news (fabricated content), disseminated on social media by users in a chain letter manner. The graphic does not contain a reference to its source. How-

¹⁷ The last sentence of the Polish inscription on the illustration in Fig. 1 reads: “Share this information with everybody and save lives” (editor’s note; translation: editor).

ever, “Pacjent.gov.pl”, a web portal run by the Polish Ministry of Health and the Polish National Health Fund dealt with this false advice.¹⁸ One can read there that “drinking the right amount of water (about 2 liters a day) is healthy, and the nasal and throat mucosae function better when they are moistened, so it is worth maintaining adequate humidity in the rooms and ventilating them. But neither of these protects against coronavirus infection”.¹⁹

FIG. 2. AN EXAMPLE OF FAKE NEWS CREATED ON THE BASIS OF PARTLY TRUE INFORMATION WHICH IS THEN MANIPULATED



Source: *PILNA SPRAWA. NIE MA WIRUSA! DR. SIMON NA ŻYWO. PRZEKAŻ DALEJ!!!* [illustration], “Facebook”, 3 May 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/piotr.mrotek.127/posts/253245639159814> (accessed: 20.08.2020).

¹⁸ *Koronawirus – co o nim wiemy*, “Pacjent.gov.pl”, 6 March 2020, <https://pacjent.gov.pl/archiwum-aktualnosci/koronawirus-co-o-nim-wiemy> (accessed: 19.07.2020).

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

The graphic shown in Fig. 2 presents a post from Facebook containing an alleged opinion by Professor Krzysztof Simon, regional consultant for infectious diseases in Lower Silesia, Poland, with a caption saying: “URGENT. THERE IS NO VIRUS! DR. SIMON LIVE. PASS IT ON !!!”.²⁰ This post has been shared 7,000 times by the social media platform users since the beginning of May 2020. The doctor’s statement did indicate that there was no coronavirus in Poland, but it dates back to 31 January 2020, when no case of infection was found in Poland. The publication of an excerpt from this statement in May 2020, when the number of infected people in Poland was regularly increasing, is a manipulation. The post is therefore an example of fake news, created on the basis of partly true information which is then manipulated. It is also possible to characterize this item as fake news used to provoke, by hitting a doctor’s reputation.

FIG. 3. PHOTO OF A TRAIN CAR WITH AN INSCRIPTION “COVID-19”



Source: *It got deleted. I'm reposting it. Interesting isn't it????* [illustration], “Facebook”, 14.03.2020, <https://perma.cc/7WW2-HQF6>, (accessed: 14.03.2020).

²⁰ Own translation.

FIG.4. ORIGINAL PHOTO OF A TRAIN CAR WHICH ALLEGEDLY BORE AN INSCRIPTION “COVID-19”



Source: *HO TrinityRail 31K Crude Oil Tank Car, GATX(Half Ladder) Unnumbered*, “Scaletrains.com”, n.d., <https://www.scaletrains.com/product/ho-trinityrail-31k-crude-oil-tank-car-gatxhalf-ladder-unnumbered/> (accessed: 15.03.2020).

At the beginning of March 2020, a photo of a train car with an inscription “Covid-19” (Fig. 3) became popular on Facebook platform. Portal users who shared the post often added in the comments that the car was transporting a disease caused by the coronavirus. The photo also showed the name of the company that owned the wagon: GATX. The case was investigated by AFP Fact Check, an agency dealing with unmasking fake news. The agency asked GATX company for comment and in response they received a real photo of a tank-wagon with a different inscription in place of the alleged “Covid-19” (Fig. 4). The company emphasized that the photo disseminated on social media was fake. The company’s response also included a comment that an inscription “Covid-19”, due to its structure, could never be registered and found on the wagons since it did not meet the accepted requirements.²¹ This fake news item is an example of manipulated content, aimed at deceiving the recipient. In this case, Internet users are misled by a manipulated photograph.

²¹ *Nie, ten wagon nie przewozi choroby COVID-19*, “Demagog”, 7 April 2020, https://demagog.org.pl/analizy_i_raporty/nie-ten-wagon-nie-przewozi-choroby-covid-19/ (accessed: 14.08.2020).

FIG. 5. HEADLINE SUGGESTING THAT THE HEAD OF THE POLISH GOVERNMENT HAD NO DOUBTS ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF THE CORONAVIRUS EPIDEMIC IN POLAND; EXAMPLE OF FALSE CONNECTIONS



Source: B. Pałędzki, *Premier nie zostawia wątpliwości: Epidemia koronawirusa w Polsce*, “wLocie.pl”, 3 February 2020, https://wlocie.pl/wiadomosci/epidemia-koronawirusa-w-polsce-morawiecki/?fbclid=IwAR1C7sTlZRttRHOU7IdAvj_oa36Jf0fOM-37NOFVcf36qr_dvULNLmnKwTKw (accessed: 20.08.2020).

An article published on “wLocie.pl” portal at the beginning of February 2020 features a headline suggesting that the head of the Polish government had no doubts about the existence of the coronavirus epidemic in Poland.²² This is an example of false connections (which Wardle included in his classification of fake news); a material in which the title is not consistent with the rest of the content. Although the article contains quotes from a conference attended by the head of the Polish government, the message is not consistent with what the heading suggests. During the conference, there was no information about the appearance of coronavirus in Poland (at that time, the Ministry of Health had not reported any case of coronavirus infection in Poland – author’s note), contrary to what the headline suggested. For example, Minister of Health Łukasz Szumowski said: “At the moment, although this epidemic has not been present in Poland yet, the Polish state has reached such a stage that we have two reference lab-

²²The Polish-language headline in Fig. 5 reads: “Prime Minister leaves no doubt: Coronavirus epidemic in Poland” (editor’s note; translation: editor).

oratories, fully capable of diagnosing the presence or absence of the virus. The Polish state and the Polish health service are now ready for the possible emergence of the virus”.²³

At the end of March 2020, “Super Express” daily published an article on its website titled *Deadly hantavirus is coming. Will it be worse than coronavirus?*.²⁴ The lead included the following information: “Unbelievable! We have not recovered from the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus raging since December, and another virus taking its toll has just arrived! This time it’s called hantavirus. The first death due to infection has just been reported in China”.²⁵ Similar reports appeared in many other portals, not only in Poland. The article suggested that the hantavirus was a new threat. This is false information, as the virus was discovered decades ago. The first case of infection dates back to 1953. During the Korean War, three thousand American soldiers fell ill, several hundred of whom died. The case was reported in “The New York Times” ten years ago.²⁶ The virus was precisely characterized by institutions dealing with medicine, such as the American Center for Disease Control and Prevention. According to them, the source of infections is rodents, and the majority of the most common diseases caused by this virus cannot be contracted from another human.²⁷ This is by no means a virus that, as the tabloid suggests, appeared alongside the coronavirus and poses a serious new threat. Apparently, “Super Express” journalists, facing the extensive public discussion on coronavirus, decided to create a topic aimed at arousing anxiety among the audience. This is an example of the “false narrative of tabloids”, a category listed in Palczewski’s compilation.

²³ *Konferencja premiera, ministra zdrowia i szefa MON. Morawiecki zapewnia: Polacy w obliczu epidemii w Chinach są bezpieczni*, “wPolityce.pl”, 2 February 2020, <https://wpolityce.pl/spoleczenstwo/485214-konferencja-ws-koronawirusa-premier-polacy-sa-bezpieczni> (accessed: 14.08.2020).

²⁴ *Nadciaga śmiertelny hantawirus. Będzie gorszy od koronawirusa?*, “Super Express”, 24 March 2020, <https://www.se.pl/wiadomosci/swiat/nadciaga-smiercionosny-hantawirus-będzie-gorszy-od-koronawirusa-aa-qjZw-2oa5-QPXM.html> (accessed: 14.07.2020), own translation.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, own translation.

²⁶ *Outbreak Of Hanta Is Unusual*, “The New York Times”, 17 July 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/17/science/outbreak-of-hanta-is-unusual.html> (accessed: 14.08.2020).

²⁷ *Hantavirus*, “Centers for Disease Control and Prevention”, <https://www.cdc.gov/hantavirus/index.html> (accessed: 10.09.2020).

The above analysis leads to several conclusions. Firstly, the wide media and social debate about the coronavirus threat has been accompanied by the emergence of many fake news aimed, in many cases, at misleading or building fear.

Secondly, fake news come in various forms, such as manipulated photos or false texts. The author of the article has provided an example of a graphic with false advice, a manipulated photo of a train with a false inscription, or a fake news item created on partly true information, which was then manipulated. He also cites an example of material where the title is inconsistent with the rest of the text, as well as an item of fake news published on a tabloid's internet platform.

The third conclusion that can be drawn from the above analysis is that social media platforms are extensively used to disseminate fake news. The specificity of Web 2.0 media, in which every Internet user can become an author of the message, allowed for duplicating false content not only through fake portals or online platforms related to traditional media, but also by private users. It is private users that have played a leading role in spreading fake news about the corona virus, especially on Facebook platform.

Yet another conclusion is that fake news classification models available in the literature are helpful in unmasking, understanding, and sorting out fake news. The author chose three classifications often found in the literature. The diversity of fake news related to the coronavirus, as well as that of fake news classification models, made it impossible to assign the cited examples to one of the selected models. On the one hand, it proves the variety of fake news as well as the creators' creativity. On the other hand, it may indicate the lack of a complete classification model encompassing all most common types of fake news. The article can therefore be an encouragement or a starting point for in-depth research into fake news categories. After the analysis of more extensive material, an attempt can be made to create a new, broader model to organize the types of fake news.

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