

## FAKE NEWS AND THE DIGITAL MEDIA. THE CHANGING BATTLE FOR PEOPLE'S HEARTS, MINDS AND ILLUSIONS

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**Abstract.** This keynote address at the Digital Media International Conference at the Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania, on May 2017 briefly discusses fake news and the nature of its effectiveness; then addresses the potential, theoretical negatives and reasons for them when fake news is disseminated by via digital media; and concludes with some remarks about the reshaping of the public sphere, an issue that is wide open for scholarly exploration.

**Keywords:** fake news, digital media, dissemination, public sphere

In the fall of 1938, one of the foremost American actors, writers and directors of his time, Orson Welles, used a communication technology introduced in the early 1920s to perform an adaptation of H.G. Well's science fiction novel, *The War of the Worlds*. Welles localized the novel by describing in a radio program a Martian invasion of New Jersey, creating fake news that caused nationwide hysteria. This was a case of literary license with the intent to entertain but not to deceive for any sort of gain or nefarious purposes, which was and is not the case in most other instances of fake news.

Propaganda, misinformation, disinformation and all manner of informational hoaxes have been present in recorded history from one end of the globe to the other, driven by political, economic, cultural, religious, military, nationalist and other ambitions. The speed and extent of dissemination of such fare was dependent on the available information technologies. Today's new

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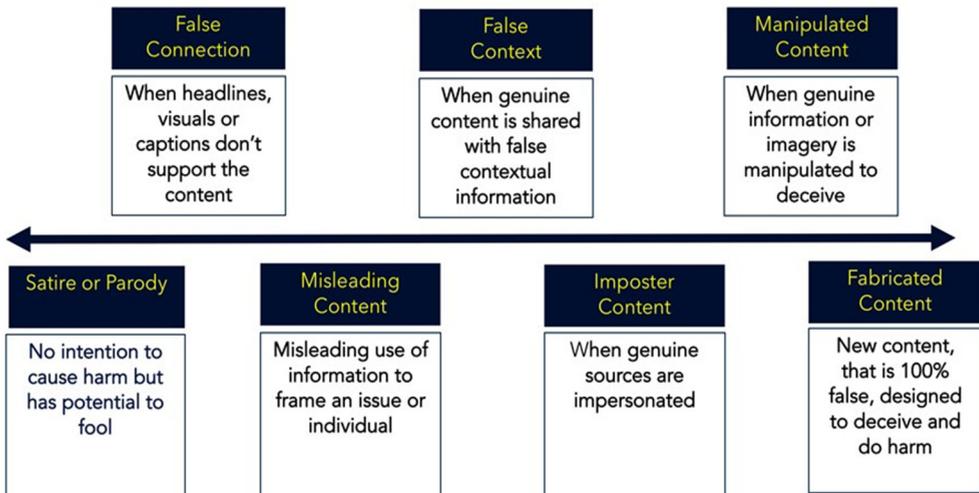
communication platforms introduced new dimensions that change the very nature of mass communication, of the public sphere, and of the potential impacts of fake news.

This article briefly discusses fake news and the nature of its effectiveness; then addresses the potential, theoretical negatives and reasons for them when fake news is disseminated by via digital media; and concludes with some remarks about the reshaping of the public sphere, an issue that is wide open for scholarly exploration.

### Fake news

There are seven identifiable types of fake news (see Graph I). The first six types were relatively common throughout the history of media and continue to be a feature of both traditional and digital media. Hoaxes, the seventh kind of fake news, are the standard fare of consciously organized communication warfare found during hot or cold wars. Their employment by totalitarian and authoritarian countries, usually through their own media and those of their surrogates, is standard practice.

Graph I - Seven Types of Fake News



**Source:** Claire Wardell, First Draft News, 16 February 2017.  
<https://firstdraftnews.com/fake-news-complicated/>

A. Not surprisingly, the most numerous and glaring examples of fake news originate with totalitarian dictatorships – like North Korea, for example; with autocracies – like Belarus; and theocracies – like the Iranian regime. During the communist era, Eastern European countries were quite proficient in continuously feedings their domestic and international audiences with fake news of all types and sizes.

Media in democratic countries are also known to spread politically driven hoaxes from time to time, causing untold harm. Such was the case in the U.S. in December 2016 when, after learning on the Internet that a pizzeria in Washington, D.C. was the center of a child sex ring, supposedly linked to then Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton, a man fired a semi-automatic assault rifle inside the restaurant. It was an act, he claimed, meant to make a statement about the sex ring but also a political one against Clinton.

In other instances, hoaxes can launch an international incident, even a war. One of the most recent examples is the fake news on the website AWDnews that Pakistan was planning to send ground troops to Syria. It created additional fake news in the form of a supposed statement by Israel's Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman threatening the nuclear annihilation of Pakistan if it should dispatch those troops. The gullible Pakistani Defense Minister, Khawaja Muhammad Asif, did not recognize any of this as fake news and, in response, threatened Israel with nuclear weapons – for real.<sup>1</sup>

From the global perspective, by far the most prolific fake news, including outright hoaxes, originates from Russia, which uses “disinformation, incitement to violence and hate speech to destroy trust, sap morale, degrade the information space, erode public discourse and increase partisanship,” according to Lucas and Pomeranzev.<sup>2</sup>

They go on to point out that Russia's methods of information warfare differ from those used by the Soviet Union. The Kremlin's agenda is promoted more artfully today, aiming to “confuse, befuddle and distract...to erode

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Broomfield, “Pakistan issues nuclear warning to Israel in response to 'fake news' story. Israeli Ministry of Defense forced to point out initial story 'completely fictitious',” in *The Independent*, 25 December 2016.  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/pakistan-israel-nuclear-warning-fake-news-story-response-islamabad-syria-a7494961.html>

<sup>2</sup> Edward Lucas and Peter Pomeranzev, “Winning the Information War. Techniques and counter-strategies to Russian propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe.” A report by CEPA's Information Warfare Project in Partnership with the Legatum Institute. August 2016. [www.cepa.org](http://www.cepa.org)

public support for Euro-Atlantic values in order to increase its own relative power." Russia does so by exploiting "ethnic, linguistic, regional, social and historical tensions, and promotes anti-systemic causes, extending their reach and giving them a spurious appearance of legitimacy. "Targeting almost every corner of the world, Russia's disinformation and misinformation is not meant to "convince or persuade, but rather to undermine. Instead of agitating audiences into action, it seeks to keep them hooked and distracted, passive and paranoid."

We do not yet have sufficient knowledge as to how effective all this is, certainly not in a cumulative, long-term way. For the moment, the Kremlin's fake news factory appears to have mixed effects in general. In certain instances, it has limited effects, even if its hoaxes appear to excite those who are fans of Putin's autocracy and his policies. Two recent examples:

1. The Russia Today (RT) news program - a Kremlin controlled network broadcasting in several languages - on 4 January 2017 claimed that NATO was "massively" reinforcing its eastern flank with 3,600 U.S. tanks. In truth, only 87 were deployed. It no doubt reinforced and attracted favorable attention from those who were already inclined to believe in such nonsense but there is no empirical data showing it had any other effect in or out of the region.

2. The "news" on 18 August 2016 that the U.S. "has started" transferring its nuclear weapons from Turkey's Incirlik Air Base to the Deveselu military base in Romania given the apparent breakdown of relations between Turkey and the U.S. Based on two anonymous sources, the story was featured on both the English and Romanian versions of EurActiv.com. It was quickly picked up by *Pravda*, that long-standing Russian stronghold of journalistic credibility, then by Sputnik news - a Russian government news agency, website and broadcaster established in 2014 - and then by RT, which disseminates subtle and not-so-subtle, pro-Russian, anti-Western, and anti-democracy messages, along with sundry tidbits of disinformation and propaganda in almost three dozen languages.

There was no truth to the story. Moving nuclear weapons cannot be done on the spur of the moment. Special storage facilities must be built, which the Deveselu base does not have, and the transfer process is not as easy as putting a kayak on a flight to some destination. Nevertheless, ever so helpful in discovering the truth and providing useful explanations, on the

same day the story appeared on its site, Sputnik news published an unsigned, brief “analysis” titled, “See the destructive effect in the event of an explosion of nuclear bombs at Deveselu.” It was meant to scare Romanians, divide them, and turn them against the government and NATO, or at least shake their confidence in both. The bulk of Romania’s media, which, as a generalization, has some serious professional deficits, did not believe the story, published denials from both Romanian and American authorities. The story did not agitate the majority of Romanians.

B. Let’s return to the other six type of fake news, which are, in fact, far more common – false connections, false context, manipulated content (which facts are chosen, how they are ordered, what sources are used, etc.), satire or parody (like Orson Welles, War of the Worlds), misleading content, and imposter content. These kinds of fake news were always and continue to be part of traditional journalism’s ecology and until 2016 when fake news was “discovered” was called biased, spin, lies and other pejoratives.

Whether found in traditional media or digital/social media this kind of journalism - together with its adjuncts, the op-ed pages and the “analysis” offered up by talk shows, panels and “experts” expressing their perspectives - is no less dis-informing or mis-informing than outright hoaxes. It is meant to exert a spell, to seduce in the name of an ideology, political, national, military, cultural or other goal. The sources of such fake news are the beliefs that “breed smaller and greater biases, malodorous or not, and require proselytizing and reinforcing, which demands narratives containing just the right selection of facts, organized and presented to fit a ‘perspective’.”<sup>3</sup>

Fake news has the potential to mobilize people. However, it mostly it reinforces existing attitudes, beliefs and values, which in itself can set the stage of good or bad behaviors, political and ideological choices, various hatreds, and so on. Of course, this may also lead individuals to militate for policies or actions that are ultimately deleterious to democracy, liberalism, and therefore truth, decency, and rationality.

Unfortunately for the authors of fake news, it does not always work. Witness, for example, Macron’s win in France despite the fake news that was

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Gross, “The Fake Newness of Fake News World faked out by phenomenon known oh so well in Eastern Europe!” May 3, 2017. <http://www.tol.org/client/article/26893-fake-newsmedia-eastern-europe-propaganda-russia.html>

supposed to have been spread about him.<sup>4</sup> Another example is last year's American presidential election when there was an abundance of fake news during the 2016 campaign, which continues to fuel controversy around the new White House administration. A study by economists Matthew Gentzkow (Stanford University) and Hunt Allcott (New York University) shows that fake news favored Donald Trump more so that it favored Hillary Clinton.<sup>5</sup> But Getzkow and Allcott found that ideology-informed "reporting" by the U.S. media, the myriads of small and large fake news, apparently had no noteworthy influence on the election's outcome. There may be a good reason for this.

Since the 1980s, Americans increasingly perceive the traditional media to be biased and untrustworthy, according to Pew Research Center surveys. Undoubtedly, most social media, blogs and other Internet-based outlets with their say-whatever-comes-to-mind, rumor and opinion-based information are making things worse. Let's remember that more than half of Americans get their news via digital/social media, thus exponentially increasing their chances of being exposed to even more fake news. Politically middle-of-the-road Americans were simply not fooled by fake news, regardless of its origins.

For instance, Russian hacking, meddling and whatever fake news for which it was responsible did not lose the election for Hillary Clinton. It did, however, appear to have some effects: it created a myth, it excited politicians and their partisan constituents, which in turn served them well in creating confusion and mistrust that some Americans were all too eager to embrace. It also led the media to "discover" there was such a thing as fake news and drove many outlets to embark on a search for ways to stop fake news, disingenuously and conveniently forgetting that they themselves disseminated news and information sculpted to fit a politico-ideological narrative, i.e. Lilliputian and Godzilla-size fake news, for decades before 2016.

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<sup>4</sup> Tony Romm, "A 'fake news' crackdown could follow Macron's election win in France. The incoming French president could take aim at the role social media sites play in spreading misinformation," on Recode, May 7, 2017.  
<https://www.recode.net/2017/5/7/15573826/macron-france-election-win-fake-news-crackdown-social-media-misinformation>. Accessed 19 May 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," in *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Spring 2017, 31(2): 211-236.

Evgeny Morozov is quite right when he argues that democracy is NOT in any greater danger from fake news than it was before its discovery in 2016 amidst the chaos of Brexit, the U.S. presidential election, the Italian referendum and other political happenings in Europe and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Echoing the findings of Gentzkow and Allcott's study, he writes about political candidates in 2016 and 2017: "Apparently, all these earnest, honest and unfashionably rational grownups are losing elections because of a dangerous epidemic of fake news, internet memes and funny YouTube videos." This applies to the outcome of the recent French elections, mentioned earlier, with Macron defeating the candidates of both the traditional parties and Le Pen's nationalist grouping. And it may well apply to the German elections, despite Angela Merkel's stated fear of fake news.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to minimize the dangers of fake news and Russian fake news in particular. After all, Russia has intensified its information warfare and its fake news is more abundant, sophisticated, integrated into a larger politico-military strategy, and widespread than any seen emanating from any other country in any other historical era. Digital media amplifies the danger of fake news in general and Russian fake news in particular. There are indeed justifiable arguments that the digital media are releasing even more fake news than the traditional media and that it is propagated more widely given the very specific characteristics of the former. These specific characteristics pose the greater threat to democracy and liberalism from the point of view of communicative effectiveness.

### **Social media and the nature of media effects**

The digital media we are discussing here are those allowing individuals to build personal web pages such as blogs, podcasts and wikis and to enter small or large "virtual" communities to connect with friends and strangers

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<sup>6</sup> Evgeny Morozov, "Moral panic over fake news hides the real enemy – the digital giants," in *The Guardian*, 7 January 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com> Accessed 7 May 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, "'Fake news' threatens Germany's election, too, says Merkel," in *The Washington Post*. November 23, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/23/fake-news-threatens-germanys-election-too-says-merkel/?utm\\_term=.b08cee7b6b42](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/23/fake-news-threatens-germanys-election-too-says-merkel/?utm_term=.b08cee7b6b42). Accessed 19 May 2017.

with shared interests - Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Google, LinkedIn, Reddit, and Pinterest, among others.<sup>8</sup> Audiences for news and information are now hyper atomized, way beyond their tie-in to existing traditional media, constituting billions of one-person audiences that often concurrently double as disseminators of such fare.

Digital media allow for connectivity and interaction that encourages the contribution of personal news and information, together with the forwarding of select traditional media fare and opinions in a two-way conversation. Such conversations thrive on feedback from others, whether they are inside the variously sized groups or "communities," or outside them. Digital/social media's attributes more specifically include participation, openness, conversation, community, and connectedness.<sup>9</sup> As a generalization, they also create communities of mutual support to a much greater degree than the traditional media do. And, these are more immediate and intimate.

On the positive side, they offer an opportunity for their users to act as fact-checkers, identifying real bias and inaccurate facts disseminated by the traditional media. On the negative side, they create echo chambers that potentially heighten the reinforcement of beliefs and attitudes. Even more significantly, digital media generally depend on swift algorithms to sort what is disseminated, instead of on editing done by trained editors.

It is these distinct characteristics of digital media that are of interest to us. Before we address these characteristics, we must mention that there is one important attribute that the traditional and digital media have in common: the fact that both form or offer the possibility of forming communities at the macro-level. The traditional media's macro communities are of various sizes and have local and regional audiences; a few will have national audiences. Whereas digital media do the same but their macro communities are infinite in their sizes and, additionally, they transcend the local-regional-national and are also global in their make-up.

In contrast, however, the digital media communities vary in size to an infinitely greater degree and are continuously shifting as people join and

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<sup>8</sup> Wikis are websites that allow people to add content and edit information on them, e.g. Wikipedia.

<sup>9</sup> Angel Tesorero, "The Characteristics of Social Media." 13 April 2013.  
<http://homeofservice.com/blogs/21/the-characteristics-of-social-media/#.WRIJZrWSOKs>  
Accessed 9 May 2017.

leave them contingent on the individual urges to join a conversation, post something from the traditional media or their own views on a topic, event or idea. They do so one-time or multiple times, and are involved short or long-term creating a liquid communication world is, arguably, part and parcel of the “liquid modernity” that has individuals living fragmented lives, with institutions and social forms constantly changing and providing little in terms of frames of reference and long-term plans.<sup>10</sup> In short, what the digital media offer that traditional media do not is that they create communities at the micro-level of the individual, for the individual.

The audiences of both traditional and digital media share some attributes, specifically their inclination to select the media outlet that aligns with their preconceived beliefs and attitudes, in line with Joseph T. Klapper’s selective exposure theory that historically refers to individuals’ tendency to favor information that reinforces their pre-existing views while avoiding information that is contrary.<sup>11</sup> As the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget noted in his selection exposure theory, when a mismatch occurs, individuals find it “inherently dissatisfying” and so they seek out information that is based on their beliefs, perspectives, and attitudes.<sup>12</sup>

These are, of course, salient characteristics of the effects and influences both in traditional and digital media.

That said, the digital media’s specific attributes inevitably bring us to the issue of both direct and indirect media effects or influences, and the potential increased dangers of fake news.

A. Traditional media’s effects and influences are predominantly limited and indirect. They are so because they are predicated on a view dominated by the context of the audience members’ social relationships and culture. Specifically, the degree of effects and influences depend on the interpersonal influences of opinion leaders with whom audience members identify, with family members, friends, neighbors and co-workers. Traditional media are suppliers of the topics of discussion and consideration, but not the direct authorities for opinion and attitude-formation in most instances and, therefore, not the direct arbiters of people’s decision making.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Zygmund Bauman, *Liquid Modernity. Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Polity, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph T. Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication*. Free Press, 1960.

<sup>12</sup> See William Hart, et al., "Feeling validated versus being correct: A meta-analysis of selective exposure to information." *Psychological Bulletin*, 2009, **135** (4): 555-588.

<sup>13</sup> This is reflected in the two-step flow of communication theory.

Research has identified some other characteristics of social/digital media that are not shared with traditional media, thus affecting the nature of direct or indirect effects and influences. Among them are the following:

The new media (a) disseminate information and news to a (theoretically) infinite number of individuals, (b) customize this fare, (c) allow individuals in the audience to voice dissent, immediately and publicly, i.e. to those who access the same outlets, and (d) the new media have audiences that do not rank as high in civic responsibility as those of the traditional media.<sup>14</sup>

B. Arguments that the media in general have direct and significant effects on how audiences consider any given topic are predicated on an approach that considers first and foremost what the media do and how they do it - as opposed to considering audience perspectives or behaviors upon which the indirect media effects approaches do. Denis McQuail best articulates the notion of a powerful and direct media influence when he writes, "...the way media select, process and shape content for their own purposes can have a strong influence on how it is received and interpreted and thus on longer-terms consequences."<sup>15</sup> Agenda setting and framing theories dominated - and still do - in this theorizing about media effects and influences, and by their very nature reinforcing the theory that audiences select the media that feed their preconceived beliefs and attitudes. That is, if the agenda setting and framing of news stories are in accordance with the audiences' beliefs and attitudes it may/will have a direct effect and strong influence. Furthermore, both agenda setting and framing presuppose that the media play a gatekeeping function, which the traditional media more or less do but the digital media do not. Digital media may well engage in a form of gatekeeping given that the "discovery" of fake news last year is driving some like Facebook and Google to attempt to engage in identifying what is and what is not fake news.

With this exceedingly brief overview of the two main schools of thought about media effects and influences, we can now finally assess the details of why there is a potentially greater danger in fake news being distributed through digital media than through traditional ones. The following four points should be considered in this regard:

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<sup>14</sup> See for example, Jed D. Brensinger, Rebecca Gullan and Janis Chakars, "The News Media and New Media: The Internet's Effect on Civic Engagement," in *Media Psychology Review*, 2014, vol. 8:1. <http://mprcenter.org/review/news-media-new-media-internets-effect-civic-engagement/>. Accessed 19 May 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. Sage Publications, 2010, pg. 458.

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1. Both the empirically observed limited/indirect and the significant/direct media effects theories have in common the fact that people will choose media that reflect their already entrenched beliefs, attitudes and values. This provides fake news with only qualified, that is, restricted ability to effectively recruit new adherents to a specific set of beliefs, attitudes and values that are not already held by individuals. Qualified and restricted does not, of course, mean that there is no chance to do so. Yet, the digital media does not heighten their reinforcing quality.

2. Digital media puts a premium on what causes the traditional media's effects to be indirect and limited: the importance to opinion and attitude-formation, and ultimately decision making, of family members, friends, neighbors and co-workers. This is the decisive, central power of digital media to have direct/significant effects and influences. One reinforcing example for this conclusion is a recent study by the American Press Institute that shows that Americans ignore the source of a given assertion, i.e. the media outlet, and instead rely much more on the trustworthiness of the person sharing the news and information.<sup>16</sup>

3. The fact that digital media are not the gatekeepers that traditional media are, meaning that fringe groups and individuals have direct access to audiences, to proselytize and recruit, again directly and indirectly via those interpersonal networks that potentially have this media have direct effects and influences.

4. Lastly, unlike with the traditional media, the nature of agenda setting and framing is now also in the hands of individuals and not under the control of owners, publishers, editors and directors, as it is with the traditional media. The digital media are not the gatekeepers of old. They and the individuals who formulate and disseminate news and information follow no particular criteria for the selection of this information and news

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<sup>16</sup> American Press Institute, "Who shared it?": How Americans decide what news to trust on social media." March 20, 2017.  
<https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/trust-social-media/>. Accessed May 12, 2017.

released into the world other than their own interests and biases. They follow no journalistic standards in judging the veracity of the information, its source, and so on; they may or may not fact-check.

## Conclusion

The nature and processes of the effects of new media are far more complex than those of the traditional mass media and are only now beginning to be studied. What we know to date is that, both at the micro and macro level, audiences select their new media platforms and the nature of their participation according to their existing beliefs and attitudes just like they do with traditional media. Only more so given the refinement and multiplication of choices, whether political, social, cultural, and so on. There are two traits the digital media do not share with their traditional cousins: (1) as already pointed out, the establishment of echo chambers to a greater extent than the latter do, and (2) the enhancement of interpersonal communication; changing, therefore, the nature and interpretation of the agenda setting and framing of the news and information that is disseminated.

The wholesale alterations in the media world and, therefore, in its relationship with audiences, and the addition of different and substantially increased forms of fake news are contributing to an entirely different kind of public sphere. The traditional bourgeoisie public sphere is gone. It was engineered by among other societal elements – such as coffee houses, bars, libraries, etc. – by the traditional media, who were beholden to political parties, corporate interests, the state, or families that controlled them. Today, individuals and technology companies are the most important curators of information and news. Their engineering of the public sphere is quite different than that of the traditional media and merits concerted study.

For now, fake news and the digital media, separately and in concert, are our most pressing problems. They threaten liberal democracy, a non-ideological ideology already suffering from decades of attack from both the Left and the Right.

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