

“WHAT IS THE TRUTH?” THE PROBLEM OF FAKE NEWS

EMERENCIA KÉK¹

Abstract. The study examines the issues and problems associated with fake news, so common today. After defining the term, it discusses the role of the media in the creation and dissemination of fake news, and assesses it from an ethical and moral perspective, before considering what readers can do when they encounter fake news and how the state and EU legislation can regulate media content. The study concludes with a discussion of the content and teaching of three documents of the Catholic Church that examine the role of the media in the context of the truthfulness of information.

Keywords: truth, news, fake news, misinformation, media, communication, journalism, *Inter Mirifica*, World Communication Day

Introduction

“What is the truth?” – we may ask with Pilate (John 18,38) several times a day, when we hear or see different, often contradictory, reports about the same event on different media outlets, or when we have the feeling that something is wrong with a news item we read on the Internet.

Whose interest is it to mislead people with fake news and untruths? For what reason and for what purpose do they want to influence the masses? Why do so many people fall for them? Can we do something about the unsolicited pseudo-information that is being shared by our friends on social media portals? Who can we turn to for help in deciding whether the information we are receiving is true? Questions like these can arise in any of us (because no matter how much one tries to keep out of the news stream, it will catch up with us sooner or later), whether we are active on social media or not, as fake news can now be spread in the mainstream media, which can reach many and thus shape and (often want to) shape minds.

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- 1 Emerencia Kék is Assistant Professor of Bioethics and the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church at the Department of Moral Theology, Sapientia College of Theology of Religious Orders, Budapest. E-mail: kek.emerencia@sapientia.hu. ORCID 0009-0006-1379-7110.

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In this paper, I will first seek answers to these questions with the help of experts on the subject, and then briefly present the views of the Catholic Church on fake news. While it would be possible to go into more detail on the philosophical and dogmatic interpretation of truth and falsehood, as well as on the moral guidance on truth-telling in Scripture (which could be the subject of another paper), for reasons of space I will only discuss in some detail the content of the most important Catholic documents dealing with the media and fake news.

The emergence of fake news in history and the media

Fake news is not a new phenomenon in history, as in the past, there are many in the present, but I will mention just a few.

In the introduction to her study,² Petra Aczél refers to a news item depicted in a copper engraving published in 1671: a visit by King Louis XIV to the French Royal Academy of Sciences. This is a valuable representation of an important event, but the reality is different: the king did not visit the Academy until 10 years later, in 1681, in circumstances very different from those depicted in the copper engraving.

Perhaps the first ‘fake news’ to appear on the radio and cause mass hysteria was Orson Welles’ radio play based on the novel *The War of the Worlds*, broadcast on 30 October 1938 by CBS Radio. The news, announced as part of the Halloween broadcast, that Martians had landed on a New Jersey farm and begun their invasion of Earth caused widespread panic, with hundreds of thousands of people fleeing their homes, although the author stated at the beginning and end of the programme that the story was fictional. The panic did not result in any loss of life, but it took a few days for calm to be restored everywhere.³

When discussing the history of fake news in the media, several authors consider it important to mention year 2016, when the fake news phenomenon was elevated to campaign level in the USA during the 2016 elections.⁴ Just a few of the fake news stories that have taken off and reached hundreds of thousands of people

2 Petra ACZÉL, “Az álhír. Kommentár a jelenség értelmezéséhez”, *Századvég* 84 (2017) 5–26 (5).

3 M. Tamás TARJÁN, “Marslakók támadják meg az Egyesült Államokat”, *Rubicon*, <https://rubicon.hu/hu/kalendarium/1938-oktober-30-marslakok-tamadjak-az-egyesult-allamokat> [2025.05.15.]; Péter KREKÓ, *Tömegparanoia 2.0. Összeesküvés-elméletek, álhírek és dezinformáció*, Budapest: Athenaeum, 2021, 72–73; Diána Daniela KRIZBAI, “Álhírek és a biztonságunk”, *Hadtudomány* 29 (2019) 128–141 (131).

4 KRIZBAI, “Álhírek”, 132–133; ACZÉL, “Az álhír”, 10; KREKÓ, *Tömegparanoia*, 20–21.

on Facebook: the Pope backs Mr Trump, Hillary Clinton sold weapons to ISIS. Although during the campaign the fake news targeted Hillary Clinton, it was Trump, who won the presidential election, who later called CNN news and the New York Times ‘fake news’.⁵

We could go on and on about the many fake news stories and conspiracy theories that still attract crowds today (e.g. flat earth theory, reptilian theory, various health care delusions, etc. ⁶), but one thing is certain: with the ‘help’ of the internet and social networking sites, fake news and negative news spread faster today than before the internet, and are therefore capable of causing more damage than before.⁷

Definition and conceptual scope of fake news

News

First, it is important to clarify what is meant by ‘news’. In her study, Aczél lists a number of characteristics of the news: that which appears every day, that which the editor considers of interest to the public, timely, recent or recurring, ephemeral, “answers the who, what, when, where, why and how questions about a famous event”, a chronicle of events; “its character is dominated by the impersonality that comes from its realism.”⁸ From the point of view of its origins and its belonging to whom and to what, news is a social construction⁹, as a social media product it is an object, a commodity, a saleable, manipulable, realistic and objective form of communication, a man-made, relational form of communication.¹⁰ From the point of view of the individual, its components are the communicator, the object and the symbol, the latter being linked not only to the object but also to “the thought evoked by the object.”¹¹

5 KRIZBAI, “Álhírek”, 132-133.

6 KREKÓ, *Tömegparanoia*, 20–21.

7 KRIZBAI, “Álhírek”, 140.

8 ACZÉL, “Az álhír”, 7 (tr. EK).

9 MÓNika ANDOK, *A hírek története*, Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2013, 18.

10 ACZÉL, “Az álhír”, 8.

11 ACZÉL, “Az álhír”, 8 (tr. EK).

In order to interpret the news correctly, it is important to choose the communication concept in which to embed the news. The transactional direction perceives communication as a transmission of signals and information, the other direction perceives it as an act of participation and sharing, broadly speaking as a rite of passage involving both the communicator and the receiver. In the latter, it is not the novelty or the deviant content element that is important, but that which can strengthen the community and serve the “need to experience”. Here, objectivity does not imply detachment, but rather that the author remains unmarked, allowing the symbols to speak for him.¹² Aczél thus defines:

news is a form of communication whose connection to reality can only be grasped in conjunction with human thought (interpretation, associations), whose communication and reception are motivated by a participatory function, by the need to participate and experience, in which the authorlessness is not impersonal but a manifestation of the forces of the world, and in which novelty does not alienate but connects us to the events of the world.¹³

Fake news and its co-concepts

In year 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries named *post-truth* the word of the year.¹⁴ This term denotes an era in which factuality is eclipsed, with emotions and subjective beliefs playing a greater role. Although the term existed in the first decade of the second millennium, its use in public discourse increased dramatically in 2016 with the EU referendum in England and the US presidential election.¹⁵

According to Péter Krekó, a researcher of fake news and conspiracy theories in Western, developed societies, the collective head-washing that is now taking place in the West is now voluntary: the fake news industry is flourishing, through which people deceive themselves, lie to themselves. Everyone can have their own opinion, but also their own fact – “in the magical world of post-truth, the distinction between fact and opinion is blurred, and there can be several mutually exclusive ‘facts’ about the same

12 ACZÉL, “Az álhír”, 8.

13 ACZÉL, “Az álhír”, 9.

14 Oxford Languages, Word of the Year 2016, <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/> [2025.05.19.]; Gábor Barnabás HORVÁTH, “Torzuló valóság a viturális térben. Az álhírek és veszélyei,” *Tudásmenedzsment* 21 (2020) 260–268 (263).

15 Oxford Languages, Word of the Year 2016, <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/> [2025.05.20.]; KREKÓ, *Tömegparanoia*, 19–20.

phenomenon.”¹⁶ This post-truth era is made up of pseudo-news. Kreko defines the term as “information disseminated in public forums that is created with the intent to deceive.”¹⁷ The lie is institutionalised: whoever creates the fake news knows that what he/she writes/says is not true. The one who transmits and spreads it is either a propagandist or an ardent believer – Kreko says that the latter are in the majority.¹⁸

The word ‘fake news’ itself is not a scholarly term (a terminus technicus), but rather a political concept embedded in a conceptual framework of worldviews and views, a term used in public life and in the media.¹⁹ According to Aczél, there are also difficulties in the naming of the term, since both German and French have difficulties in translating it (it has been preserved as Anglicism), while the Hungarian language has adopted it unnoticed as ‘pseudo-news’.²⁰

In their study, Norman Vasu and his co-authors classify pseudo-news as an information-conveying concept into five categories. (1) Disinformation, i.e. false information, which is lies and rumours deliberately spread to weaken national security, (2) misinformation, which is lies or rumours propagated from the political side, with an interpretation of the facts based on ideological bias, (3) misinformation disseminated without political purpose or other malicious intent, (4) entertainment in the form of parody, satire or other apparently humorous pieces of falsehood, and finally (5) lies disseminated for financial gain form separate groups.²¹

Perhaps a slightly more detailed allocation of this, according to the subject of the information, is the Zimdars allocation. The system²² developed by Melissa Zimdars, which has since been widely used and sharply criticised, sets out 11 categories for labelling and typing online fake news. It distinguishes between fake news, mockery satire, propagandistic disinformation, gossip, conspiracy theory, news from oppressive states, hate speech, clickbait hyperbole, politically biased news, news that needs further scrutiny and credible news.

16 KREKÓ, *Tömegparanoia*, 21 (tr. EK).

17 KREKÓ, *Tömegparanoia*, 21 (tr. EK).

18 KREKÓ, *Tömegparanoia*, 21.

19 ACZÉL, “Az álhír”, 10.

20 ACZÉL, “Az álhír”, 10.

21 Norman VASU *et al.*, “Fake News: National Security in the Post-truth Era”, *Policy Report*, January 2018, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies and Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 5, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/PR180313_Fake-News_WEB.pdf [2025.05.19.]

22 New Jersey State Library, https://libguides.njstatelib.org/facts/fake_news [2022.09.05.].

In exploring the world of fake news, it is also worth mentioning other concepts closely related to fake news as a concept, which are presented by Ágnes Veszelszki based on the thought process of Theresa Heyd. The first broad conceptual category is the scope of Internet fraud, which has two subcategories according to its specific purpose. The first is for profit: this includes phishing and spam, the second is for entertainment: this includes hoaxes, urban legends and clickbait, the real purpose of which is to increase online reach by sharing and thus generate advertising revenue. The second major conceptual category is propaganda, which is nowadays mostly associated with political leaders and governments. This influence and manipulation through the use of media always has a purpose and is always linked to content. It is important to add that the aim is also to increase online revenues by raising awareness. The third major conceptual category is news parody, which is not necessarily misleading, but rather entertaining. In its language, it imitates news media, and its essence is style imitation.²³

The above shows that the conceptual scope and categorisation of fake news is very broad, with even experts disagreeing on the exact definition of fake news. We must therefore agree with Aczél, who argues that the scientific study of fake news is still incomplete, that its interpretation is biased and controversial sometimes and that its use is inconsistent.²⁴

Misinformation, i.e. the mechanisms of misinformation

An important point to note is that the English language distinguishes between intentional disinformation and unintentional misinformation, as in many cases the media present misinformation that is based on a misconception. This is the basis for the categorisation of misinformation according to the so-called intentionality of dissemination.²⁵ The difficulty is to distinguish between them, since we do not know, on the one hand, the purpose for which the author of the news created it and, on the other hand, the extent to which the person who shared the fake news was aware of its truth or falsity, especially in the fast-moving online world.²⁶

23 Ágnes VESZELSZKI, “Az álhírek extra- és intralingvális jellemzői”, *Századvég* 84 (2017) 51–82 (54–58).

24 ACZÉL, “Az álhír”, 13.

25 VESZELSZKI, “Az álhírek extra- és intralingvális jellemzői”, 53.

26 KREKÓ, *Tömegparanoia*, 22.

Based on Wardle, Veszelszki also classifies fake news according to the way it is spread, distinguishing six types. These are (1) the use of a credible source in an inappropriate context, (2) fake sites that mimic original news sites and exploit their brand credibility, (3) fake news sites, (4) visual elements that spread false information, (5) manipulated content, (6) parody content.²⁷

But how does this fake news reach consumers? In their study, Katalin Fehér and Olivia Király ask, among other things, who exercises narrative control over fake news. They identify three phenomena that are dominant today and towards which a shift away from classical journalism and media practices can be observed with the emergence of new media. These not only make narrative control more widely available but also support the dynamics of pseudo-reporting.²⁸ The first phenomenon is so-called *churnalism*. The Collins Dictionary derives the word from a combination of the words 'churn (out)' and 'journalism', which refers to the use of unverified sources in online media.²⁹ These can often be pre-produced press releases, links that can be easily shared on social media. Another related phenomenon is *prosumerism*, also taken from the English words 'producer' and 'consumer', which means that "the media consumer is essentially the producer of media content."³⁰ For mainstream media, this is a real treasure trove: faster and more cost-effective distribution of content that is captured and immediately posted by internet or mobile users at the event location. Of course, in this case, the pace does not always allow for thorough verification of information, so this fake news is quickly spread by social media sharing as mainstream media content. (The social media response to this will be discussed later.) The third phenomenon is the so-called *filter bubble effect*, where data is emphasised. Pseudo-news consumption can be tracked and coded, resulting in media consumption patterns and user preferences that can be used to write reinforcement algorithms.³¹ Recommendations (e.g. ads, "You might also be interested in this") link users to "increasingly homogeneous sources ... eventually locking them into a filter bubble. (...) As a result, similar

27 VESZELSZKI, "Az álhírek extra- és intralingvális jellemzői", 53–54.

28 Katalin FEHÉR – Olivia KIRÁLY, "Álhíresülés – a hamis hírek dinamikája a médiában", *Századvég* 84 (2017) 39–48 (41).

29 "Churnalism", *Collins English Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/churnalism> [2025.05.22.]

30 FEHÉR – KIRÁLY, "Álhíresülés", 42.

31 Tibor KOLTAY, "A posztigazság kora és a könyvtárak", *Könyv és Nevelés* 20 (2018) 48–61 (50–51).

news or pseudo-news is associated with more similar news. The filter bubble thus allows a smaller and smaller field of vision of reality.”³²

Another question is why we accept fake news in the first place, how content that is not based on reality or only partially based on reality becomes credible and acceptable, and why it makes readers share it. As reasons for this, Fehér and Király identify two important phenomena in addition to sensationalism, astonishment and entertainment. The first is the so-called cognitive dissonance, known from social psychology, which occurs when “we notice that our attitudes, thoughts and actions do not fit together.”³³ To avoid this discomfort (e.g. certain news content is simply disturbing for some reason), a person unconsciously resorts to what is known as confirmation bias: he or she selects information according to his or her own values – gathering evidence that supports it, giving it greater weight, while discarding, twisting or ignoring the contradictory. This is why the filter bubble effect can be deepened: comfort-inducing news is not scrutinised, regardless of its veracity. The other phenomenon that explains the background to the reception of news content is the so-called *backfire effect*, “which occurs when the news consumer’s worldview is threatened by facts and new information confirms, rather than refutes, the previous, emotionally based belief.”³⁴

In conclusion, we can conclude with the authors that fake news is a complex and comprehensive phenomenon that, starting from the traditional media, “promotes the spread of false information deliberately”³⁵ due to the intertwining of mainstream media, new media and social media. This trend is reinforced not only by user-generated content journalism, but also by the filter bubble effect and the psychosocial phenomena described above.

Taking action against fake news

What a news reader can do

As Péter Krekó writes, human cognition is imperfect, yet it strives for certainty. We cling convulsively to the most unsubstantiated information, because the wrong

32 FEHÉR – KIRÁLY, “Álhíresülés”, 42; KOLTAY, “A posztigazság kora”, 50–51 (tr. EK).

33 FEHÉR – KIRÁLY, “Álhíresülés”, 43 (tr. EK).

34 FEHÉR – KIRÁLY, “Álhíresülés”, 43 (tr. EK).

35 FEHÉR – KIRÁLY, “Álhíresülés”, 44.

explanation is more reassuring than the unexplained. The world created by pseudo-news and conspiracy theories often serves our beliefs more effectively and is more attractive, exciting and comfortable than reality. Strong biases make us all impressionable and manipulable - even if not to the same degree.³⁶

So, just as it is not easy to fight against fake news, especially in today's mass media-influenced world, it is not easy to recognise it. Several studies³⁷ have found that people who consume media are very bad at distinguishing between legitimate, fake and paid online news.³⁸ As a result, several authors have put forward suggestions to filter out fake news with a high degree of certainty.

For the ordinary news consumer, the October 2020 SANS Security Awareness newsletter³⁹ recommends checking the reliability of news. To do this, it is important to examine a few aspects of the news and the reader. From the news side, it is important to consider the source (a blog is less reliable than a reputable scientific journal), to check the credibility of the references cited in the article, whether different sources are reporting the same news, whether the author is a professional, whether the article is recent or recounts an older story, who has posted comments and what kind of comments (generated or from paid commenters), and whether the news is funded and if so, by whom. For their part, it is important for readers to determine whether or not they themselves are biased about the subject of the article (it is common to read articles that support their own opinion or view, and to exclude news that contains other opinions), and to be wary of reposting - if unsure about the credibility of the news, think twice about sharing it with others. The author concludes that fake news can shape an individual's opinion and influence his decisions, so it is important to take the time to do these steps to "make sure you can make informed decisions based on facts."⁴⁰

There is already a non-profit online platform that educates schoolchildren and their teachers on how to detect fake news.⁴¹ As social platforms have been sharply

36 KREKÓ, *Tömegparanoia*, 12.

37 ACZÉL, "Az álhír", 18-20; FEHÉR – KIRÁLY, "Álhíresülés", 45.

38 KRIZBAI, "Álhírek", 137.

39 Jason JORDAAN, "Fake News", OUCH! Newsletter, October 7, 2020, SANS Security Awareness, SANS Institute, <https://www.sans.org/newsletters/ouch/fake-news/> [2025.05.22.]

40 JORDAAN, "Fake News", *ibid.*

41 *Checkology – The News Literacy Project*, <https://get.checkology.org> [2025.05.22.] – See Zsuzsanna SZVETELSZKY, "Közösségi kételyek", *Századvég* 84 (2017) 27–39 (35).

criticised for the spread of fake news⁴², two of the biggest global players, Google and Facebook, have also taken up the fight against fake news by launching several projects to help filter out untrue and unsubstantiated content for users.⁴³ Google has “made it possible for other sites and fact-checking organisations to flag an article if they believe its truth is disputed or incorrect, using the Fact Check tag.”⁴⁴ This technique has also been adopted by editorial offices, organisations and other independent sources. Facebook has set out ten tips for exposing fake news: 1, be sceptic about headlines; 2, look at the URL; 3, check the source; 4, be aware of unusual format; 5, check the photos accompanying the news story, as well as 6, dates and 7, evidence; 8, check other reports; 9, wonder if the story is a joke and finally 10, think critically about the stories you read before sharing.⁴⁵

Veszelszki has researched the extra- and intralingual characteristics of fake news and has compiled a 14-point list of tips for recognising fake news, based on the results of his own research and the guides for recognising fake news. He stresses the importance of checking the URL of the news and the reliability of the source (site) and draws attention to the critical treatment of sensationalist headlines, unusual formatting and images accompanying news, as well as the linguistic quality and stylistic features of the text. It is essential to check the author and date of publication, to consider the evidence and whether there is further reporting on the subject, and whether the news itself is a joke and the story is deliberately misleading. He also mentions news reader bias and encourages readers to seek expert advice if they are unsure about the reliability of the news. While very amateur attempts that resemble news portals are easier to spot, it is important to check with sites that use more sophisticated deception techniques and contain better quality news content.⁴⁶

In the case of scientific articles published on the internet, András Holl suggests that readers should check the metadata of the articles to verify their reliability. It is common to refer to one original article, often the source is also hyperlinked and the names of the researchers who produced the research are also given. Holl

42 VESZELSZKI, “Az álhírek extra- és intralingvális jellemzői”, 52–54.

43 SZVETELSZKY, “Közösségi kételyek”, 35.

44 FEHÉR – KIRÁLY, “Álhíresülés”, 46 (tr. EK).

45 KRIZBAI, “Álhírek”, 137–138, following James CARSON – Michael COGLEY, “Fake News: What Exactly Is It – And How Can You Spot It?”, *The Telegraph* (07.01.2021), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/0/fake-news-exactly-donald-trump-rise/> [2025.05.23]

46 VESZELSZKI, “Az álhírek extra- és intralingvális jellemzői”, 74.

proposes a ‘weak’ version and a ‘strong’ version using more sophisticated web technologies, both based on a kind of chain of trust:

that news is trustworthy that has a trustworthy origin (original article, author, backing institution) and that has undergone trustworthy transformations (second and third publication), in this case also based on the trustworthiness of the second or third media, the contributing journalist or editor.⁴⁷

In the ‘weak’ version, the technology that helps to establish the trustworthiness of the data (dedicated browser add-ons) only gives the reader an indication of whether the required meta-information is included in the article, while the ‘strong’ version attempts to build a chain of trust to some reliable starting point using semantic web technologies. The main shortcoming of the proposed technologies for identifying fake news, the author sees, is that “they assume that the news consumer is willing to take the opportunity, willing to accept external help to decide the trustworthiness of the news.”⁴⁸ This verification requires active reader interest, since the easy spread of fake news can be explained by three factors: sloppiness of processing, personal bias and whether the news was shared by a friend.⁴⁹

Tibor Koltay takes stock of what needs to be done in the fight against fake news from the perspective of library staff, who can support users in dealing with issues of expertise. He interprets some points of the infographic⁵⁰ on the IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) website. The phrase “reading between the lines” can not only refer to the exaggeration of a title, but it is also important to infer the underlying and hidden from the spoken, i.e. “looking behind the words”. It is very important to examine the impact of one’s own views on one’s judgement, as a serious problem is that “misinformation reinforces people’s preconceived attitudes, beliefs and values.”⁵¹ It is also important to make sure that

47 András HOLL, “Az interneten megjelenő tudományos hírek megbízhatóságának kérdéséről – technikai lehetőségek a megbízhatóság megállapítására és jelzésére”, *Tudományos és Műszaki Tájékoztatás* 66 (2019) 509–514 (510), <http://real.mtak.hu/101577/1/12372-39250-1-PB.pdf> [2025.05.23.]. (Tr. E.K.)

48 HOLL, “Az interneten megjelenő tudományos hírek megbízhatóságának kérdéséről”, 513.

49 KREKÓ, *Tömegparanoia*, 74.

50 International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, “How to Spot Fake News”, <https://repository.ifla.org/items/c5dbfa34-7d00-47ac-8057-0183a5056438> [2025.05.23.]

51 KOLTAY, *A posztigazság kora*, 57.

someone has already checked the text, looked at it, and to look for the original source of the information rather than the alleged source, and to see what others have written about the source, author or publisher of the news.⁵²

Professional ethical judgement: A Hungarian perspective

The need to uncover the truth in the media is, as in the past, closely linked to the freedom of the press and freedom of expression. The latter two are recognised as rights⁵³, the former should be met as an ethical requirement by the communicator. The main issue is the extent to which the following circumstances are taken into account in this relationship: the credibility of the communicator, the control of the channels and resources necessary for the effective dissemination of the communication, and the knowledge and attitudes of the receiving community. All these can make a particular communication or news item more convincing, whether its content is true or false.⁵⁴

52 KOLTAY, A posztigazság kora”, 57.

53 *Constitution of Hungary: Magyarország alaptörvénye* (2011.04.25.) art. IX., <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A1100425.ATV&searchUrl=/gyorskereso?keyword%3Ds%25C3%25B3%25C3%25A1sszabads%25C3%25A1g> [2025.05.24.], 2010. évi CIV. törvény a sajtószabadságról és a médiatartalmak alapvető szabályairól [Act CIV of 2010 on freedom of the press and the basic rules governing media content], <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A1000104.TV&searchUrl=/gyorskereso?keyword%3Dsajt%25C3%25B3szabads%25C3%25A1g> [2025.05.24.], a 1993. évi XXXI. törvény az emberi jogok és az alapvető szabadságok védelméről szóló, Rómában, 1950. november 4-én kelt Egyezmény és az ahhoz tartozó nyolc kiegészítő jegyzőkönyv kihirdetéséről [Act XXXI of 1993 on the promulgation of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, signed in Rome on 4 November 1950, and its eight additional protocols], <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=99300031.TV&searchUrl=/gyorskereso?keyword%3Ds%25C3%25B3%25C3%25A1sszabads%25C3%25A1g> [2025.05.24.]

54 Gábor POLYÁK, “Szabad-e hazudni? Közpolitikai eszközök az álhírek és a dezinformációk visszaszorítására”, in *Milyen média milyen társadalomnak? Konferenciakötet, a Károlyi József Alapítvány szervezésében*, Fehérvác, 2018. április 27–28., 91–105 (91). https://www.academia.edu/38372642/Szabad_e_hazudni_K%C3%B6zpolitikai_eszk%C3%B6z%C3%B6k_az_%C3%A1lh%C3%ADrek_%C3%A9s_a_

The ethos and professional rules of journalism as a profession have always been closely linked to the desire to find out the truth, even when the journalist has expressed his or her opinion in a subjective genre. Uncovering previously unknown facts and reporting them as news “contributes significantly to the media’s democratic functions, namely to controlling power (*watchdog power*) and to debate public issues in an argumentative manner.”⁵⁵

The journalistic profession’s own approach to seeking and reporting the truth is set out in the journalists’ codes of ethics that summarise the rules of the profession. The basic standards set out in these codes of ethics define the way journalism is perceived by society and journalists have no discretion in how these standards are observed. In the following, we will briefly review the Hungarian regulations - of course, similar standards are also formulated by professional circles in other countries.⁵⁶

With regard to fake news and untrue information, Article 4 of the Hungarian Journalists’ Code of Ethics⁵⁷ (Truthful reporting and conscientiousness) states that journalists and editors must not “intentionally or negligently make untrue statements in any form of publication (written, broadcast, online), and must verify facts and data with due care and diligence” (4.1.), and it is an ethical offence to “obstruct the truth or make it difficult for colleagues to ascertain the truth” (4.2.). The Code of Ethics naturally sets out the ethical decisions that can be taken against untruthful statements (cf. Article 10).

It is important to note that the contents of the Code of Ethics are binding for members of the National Association of Hungarian Journalists (MŰOSZ), but – and this is particularly important in the world of online media, where everyone is free to express their opinion - the Association recommends in the Introduction that all citizens outside its membership should apply the Code and follow its standards (cf. Introduction). With regard to fake news and untrue information, Article 4 of the Hungarian Journalists’ Code of Ethics (Truthful Reporting and Conscientiousness) states that journalists and editors must not “intentionally or

dezinform%C3%A1ci%C3%B3_visszaszor%C3%ADt%C3%A1s%C3%A1ra [2025.05.25.].

55 POLYÁK, “Szabad-e hazudni?”, 92 (tr. EK).

56 POLYÁK, “Szabad-e hazudni?”, 93.

57 Magyar Újságírók Országos Szövetsége, *Újságírói etikai kódex* [Hungarian National Association of Journalists, *Ethical Code of Journalism*], <https://muosz.hu/kodexek/ujsgairoi-etikai-kodex/> [2025.05.25.] (Tr. EK).

negligently make untrue statements in any form of publication (written, broadcast, online), and must verify facts and data with due care and diligence” (4.1.), and it is an ethical offence to “obstruct the truth or make it difficult for staff to ascertain the truth” (4.2.). The Code of Ethics naturally sets out the ethical decisions that can be taken against untruthful statements (cf. Article 10).

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European Union regulatory proposals

In January 2018, the European Union set up a High level Group on fake news and online disinformation,⁵⁹ which outlined a complex public policy and self-regulatory regime against⁶⁰ disinformation.⁶¹ In the report,⁶² the experts identified five priority themes. The first is ensuring transparency, covering both the entire digital value chain (real/unreal information, understanding the news flow of online news dissemination, the motivations and funding background of news publishers) and the ownership of the media and the sponsorship of content, and the distribution of content (paid users, algorithms developed for this purpose), thirdly, the source of news (quality news and algorithms of social platforms) and fourthly, fact-checking activities. It also proposed the creation of European research centres to implement transparency measures.⁶³

58 *Ethical Code of Journalism*.

59 *Final report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation*, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation> [2022.09.05.]

60 POLYÁK, “Szabad-e hazudni?”, 98.

61 KRIZBAI, “Álhírek”, 138–139.

62 *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation. Report of the Independent High Level Group on Fake News and Disinformation*, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6ef4df8b-4cea-11e8-be1d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en> [2025.05.25.]

63 *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*, 22–25.

Secondly, the experts mention the strengthening of media and information literacy, i.e. media awareness. This should be done in two areas: education and non-education. In the field of education, there is a need to reassess and amend education policy, i.e. to include the necessary competences in the curricula, to include this factor in the evaluation criteria of the education system and to train teachers. Outside school education, all age groups should have the opportunity to acquire media and information literacy. The experts recommend coordinating the activities of the various organisations involved and developing an evaluation system for training programmes.⁶⁴

The third set of proposed measures includes the development of tools to filter out disinformation in order to empower users and journalists, while encouraging a positive attitude towards technological progress. In addition to the development of programmes to enable users to monitor more effectively, it is also important to develop tools for journalists to automatically check the reliability of information, while training journalists and supporting innovative projects are also essential.⁶⁵

The report also stresses the crucial importance of preserving the diversity and sustainability of the European news ecosystem. This requires the EU to support quality journalism and related research and development, while member states must respect editorial freedom and independence and support innovative solutions from their own resources.⁶⁶

Last but not least, the report recommends the adoption of a European code of conduct, which would require monitoring and evaluation of resolution mechanisms. The proposal also outlines the process for the adoption and implementation of the code. This code would set out voluntary standards for all stakeholders (media companies, monitoring bodies, digital platform operators, advertising industry), including advertising principles for social platform operators, making sponsored content recognisable, ensuring transparency and accountability in the handling of personal data, cooperation with fact-checking bodies, ensuring access to fact-checking services, etc.⁶⁷

At present, this public policy toolbox, which goes beyond legislation, is still to be developed, but it will certainly be determined in the future whether appropriate

64 *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*, 25–27.

65 *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*, 27–28.

66 *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*, 29–30.

67 *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*, 31–34.

restructuring of the media and education systems can provide sufficient public policy help to counter the threats posed by fake news and disinformation.⁶⁸

Security aspects

Not only educating society to conscientious media consumption, stricter professional regulation of news providers (without infringing freedom of expression, of course) and the specialisation of fake news would serve to combat fake news and misinformation. Since fake news can also affect the sense of security of a country's population⁶⁹ and thus its security policy, as not all of it is created for political, diplomatic or military reasons, it can even become a tool of hybrid warfare. In her study, Diána Daniella Krizbai highlights that there is also work to be done on the security policy side: it would be advisable to provide law enforcement and armed forces personnel and services with more specialised and practice-oriented training than before in recognising fake news and raising the fight against fake news to a higher security policy level.⁷⁰ To quote Kreko, he also considers this necessary because

today's fake news industry, at least in the West, thrives without war, dictatorship or censorship. (Of course, many in the media and politics are interested in creating a “sense” of war: making the economic crisis look like the end of the world, the arrival of refugees like a civilizational struggle between continents, terrorism like a daily death threat to all, the crown virus like the destruction of the human race. In the western half of the world, we cannot speak of a classical, top-down, institutional brainwashing. People brainwash themselves with fake news - and the tabloid and fake news media and populist politicians are just the soap for this. And social media is the sink.⁷¹

Church statements on media's 'truth'

The Catholic Church has made a number of strong statements on the media and communications since Vatican II. Thanks to technological progress, the proliferation

68 POLYÁK, “Szabad-e hazudni?”, 101.

69 KRIZBAI, “Álhírek”, 131.

70 KRIZBAI, “Álhírek”, 139–140.

71 KREKÓ, *Tömegparanoia*, 20 (tr. EK).

of broadcast media has brought news, programmes and cinematographic works to almost everyone in the world, and it is part of the universal mission of the Church to give guidance to her members and to all people of good will.

A new feature of 1963 was the fact that journalists were invited to be present at Vatican II's meetings, thus making the proceedings of the Council open to the world through the press. This further confirmed the Vatican II's aim of opening the Church to the world.

While several papal messages on World Communications Day mention truth in general, the following is a closer look at the first document of the Catholic Church on mass media and communication, as well as two Church statements that explicitly call attention to the role of truth in the media.

Decree on the Means of Social Communication (1963)

Already in 1960, Pope John XXIII, in preparation for the Council, had entrusted the Secretariat for the Supervision of Publications and Entertainment with the task of drafting a document on the mass media (the Secretariat was later merged into the Commission for Lay Apostolate). The draft, which had been rejected the first time, was discussed again in 1963 and, although there were many objections to it, the order of the Council made it impossible to reopen the debate, so on the 4th December 1963 Pope Paul VI promulgated the *Decree on the Media of Social Communications, Inter Mirifica*.⁷² In what follows, I review its most important ideas in relation to the issue of untrue statements.

The document states at the outset that the Church has the task of teaching on the main issues related to the new media and their use, for the advancement of the whole human community. It does so because these means not only contribute to the recreation and cultivation of the people and to the spreading of the kingdom of God but can also do harm if misused (IM 2). Proper use requires that those who use them “know the principles of the moral order and apply them faithfully in this domain” (IM 4), and must also consider the subject matter, the circumstances and the impact of each means.

72 *Decree on the Media of Social Communications Inter mirifica*, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19631204_inter-mirifica_en.html.

An important issue in mass media is that of information, the acquisition and transmission of news. Information is useful and indispensable, and rapid disclosure provides fuller and more continuous knowledge, so society has a right to information about all that is in the public domain (cf. IM 5). “The proper exercise of this right demands, however, that the news itself that is communicated should always be true and complete, within the bounds of justice and charity. In addition, the manner in which the news is communicated should be proper and decent.” (IM 5) All members of the society have an essential role in the formation of a correct public opinion, and on the part of the recipients, personal, free and, very importantly, moral choice according to the law has a powerful role to play (cf. IM 8–9).

The moral responsibility of those who participate in any way in the creation and dissemination of communications is paramount. “It is quite evident what gravely important responsibilities they have in the present day when they are in a position to lead the human race to good or to evil by informing or arousing mankind.” (IM 11) This special task makes public authorities responsible on the basis of the principle of the common good, which cannot be contradicted by any economic, political or artistic considerations. In its duty to protect society, it has an important role to play in ensuring that nothing is done to cause serious harm to public morals and the progress of society (cf. IM 12).

In pastoral ministry, the mass media have an essential role to play and must be used responsibly by all members and organizations of the Church (pastors, bishops, faithful, and the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications and the new national commissions) to proclaim salvation. The Council takes the initiative to organise an annual day in every diocese in the world “on which the faithful are instructed in their responsibilities in this regard” (IM 18): to pray and give for the maintenance and development of this form of apostolate.

Although the conciliar decree does not explicitly mention the issue of fake news, its words calling for the observance of moral law and the principle of the common good indicate that in mass media, the truthfulness and truthfulness of information, on the one hand, and the responsibility that comes from shaping public opinion, on the other, are indispensable.

Letter of Pope Paul VI on the occasion of the 6th World Communications Day

Pope Paul VI's letter on the occasion of World Communications Day in 1972 focused on the role of social communications in the service of truth.⁷³

The honest and diligent search for the truth is the task of both the creators and the receivers of the news, so that "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth" is conveyed. Like scientific research, the delivery of information requires the communicator to carefully check the facts, verify the credibility, critically evaluate the source and make sure that nothing essential is left out or hidden – but the responsibility is much greater, as they must also draw important conclusions from the facts. In religious matters, the responsibility is even greater, since it concerns matters of the relationship between God and man and requires more than mere professional competence: in these cases, which are closely linked to the mystery of salvation, the noble dimension of the reporter's vocation and the apostolic dimension of his work come to the fore.

News consumers also have a great responsibility: in respecting and responsibly seeking the truth, they must not be passive and uncritical of media content, which ultimately violates their own personal dignity. The possession of personal dignity and intelligence implies the right to exercise personal judgement, which must be used whenever it is necessary to choose between the media's news dump. Most people are in daily contact with the mass media and depend on it for their lives (for information about world events, for entertainment) – precisely for this reason it is important to have a critical perspective, i.e. to be alert to deviations from the truth. While artistic freedom exists, it must be pointed out that it cannot be detached from the truth and exploitative.

The greatest truth for believers in Christ is Jesus Christ (cf. John 14,6), but He also shows the way for those who do not yet know it. His truth sets us free (cf. John 18,37; 8,31-36) and saves us from bondage (cf. Gal 5,1) - the means of mass communication are particularly suited to the divine Word continuing its redemptive work through them. Although the believer knows that events are not moved by blind fate, but by God himself, he knows, not yet fully seeing the whole

73 POPE PAUL VI, *Message of the Holy ather for the World Social Communications Day. Theme: The Media of Social Communications at the Service of Truth*, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19720421_vi-com-day.html [2025.06.01.]

body of the Word, that everything fits into God’s plan. A deeper insight into indisputable truth brings us close to the freedom we seek –

freedom from slavery either to human passion or intellectual prejudice; freedom from fear of failure and defeat; freedom from the dominance of power structures or pressure groups striving to impose on us their interpretations of life and events with little concern for what is true; freedom, finally, from that type of opportunism which will deliberately mask or confuse the truth to avoid a personal embarrassment, to cloak something disgraceful, or to make a financial gain.⁷⁴

Right thinking about the truth should also guide the use of the social communication. If one keeps in mind that God is the ultimate Truth and the source of all truth, and remains faithful to Christian moral teaching, these are also guarantees that one can remain faithful to the truth.

At the end of his letter, Paul VI declares that he acknowledges and encourages the efforts of priests, monks and lay people who, through the mass media, lead others to encounter the true light (cf. John 1,9). He concludes by expressing the hope that everyone: newsreaders, spokespersons, technicians, educators and all those who listen to them will take advantage of the opportunity offered by World Communications Day to reflect on and benefit from the ideas of this letter.

Throughout his letter, Pope Paul VI speaks of truth as something that carries with it a great responsibility to seek, to speak and to transmit. Although we do not explicitly encounter the concept of fake news or untrue information in this letter, the Pope points out that the publication and dissemination of falsehood as news is incompatible with human dignity, respect for other human beings and the dignity of the work of those working in the media.

Message of Pope Francis for the 52nd World Communications Day

The theme of Pope Francis’ message for 24 January 2018 is pseudo-news, entitled “The truth will set you free (John 8,32). Fake news and journalism for peace”.⁷⁵

74 POPE PAUL VI, *Message of the Holy ather for the World Social Communications Day*, 5.

75 *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for World Communications Day*, 24 January 2018, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20180124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html [2025.06.02.]

In the introduction to his letter, the Pope reflects on human communication as a fundamental way of experiencing community. As the image of his Creator, man is able to express and share with others what is true, good and beautiful, to speak about himself and the world, but he can also use this capacity in different ways because of his arrogant selfishness, as in the case of Cain and Abel or the story of the Tower of Babel (cf. Gen 4,1-16; 11,1-9). The sign of this misuse is the perversion of the truth, both at the individual and the community level. In God's plan, communication "becomes an effective expression of our responsible search for truth and our pursuit of goodness."⁷⁶ In today's accelerating communications environment, thanks to digital systems, the phenomenon of fake news has emerged, prompting Pope Francis to dedicate this letter to the theme of truth, as his predecessors from Pope Paul VI onwards have done.

Section 1 introduces the concept and phenomenon of 'fake news'. It states that, in a general sense, misinformation is the dissemination of fake news through online or traditional media, based on non-existent or distorted data, with the aim of deceiving or manipulating the reader, influencing political decisions or gaining economic advantage. They are effective because, on the one hand, they can resemble the truth and, on the other hand, they can exploit stereotypes and prejudices to capture people's attention, creating fear, contempt, anger and disappointment. They are helped to spread by social networks, which they use manipulatively to gain high ratings and cause harm.

It is difficult to expose the phenomenon of fake news, because other opinions and views cannot enter a closed digital system. The logic of misinformation means that instead of a constructive dialogue with other opinions, anyone can become a disseminator of one-sided and unfounded opinions. "The tragedy of disinformation is that it discredits the others, presenting them as enemies, to the point of demonizing them and fomenting conflict."⁷⁷ The falsification of the truth leads to the further spread of arrogance and hatred by intolerant and hypersensitive attitudes.

Section 2 deals with the recognition of fake news. It is everyone's responsibility to confront falsehoods, which is by no means an easy task. The educational initiative to teach how to read and evaluate the communicative environment, the institutional and legal steps to develop rules to curb the phenomenon, and the steps

⁷⁶ *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for World Communications Day*, Introduction.

⁷⁷ *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for World Communications Day* 1.

taken by technology and media companies to control the digital profiles of fake news spreaders are all laudable initiatives. But the key to exposing the mechanism of misinformation is deep and careful reflection. The Pope calls it ‘snake-tactics’: disguise yourself in order to be bitten, as you did with the first ‘fake news’, the Fall (cf. Gen 3,1-15): the method of the ‘Father of Lies’ (John 8,44) is disguise, an inconspicuous and dangerous seduction.

After explaining the history of the Fall in detail, the Pope says that desire plays a role. Falsehood often spreads like a virus, quickly and unchecked, not because of the logic of sharing, but because of the insatiable desire that awakens in man.

The economic and manipulative aims that feed disinformation are rooted in a thirst for power, a desire to possess and enjoy, which ultimately makes us victims of something much more tragic: the deceptive power of evil that moves from one lie to another in order to rob us of our interior freedom. That is why education for truth means teaching people how to discern, evaluate and understand our deepest desires and inclinations, lest we lose sight of what is good and yield to every temptation.⁷⁸

The title of the third paragraph of the letter is already known from the letter written by Pope Paul VI: “the truth will set you free” (John 8,32). Pope Francis quotes Dostoevsky to show that those who lie to themselves for a long time, who are constantly in contact with misleading language, have their inner world clouded and sink into disrespect for themselves and others. The most effective way to guard against this is to allow the truth to purify one’s self. In the Christian vision of the world, truth is not only about revealing reality, because it has to do with the whole of life. In Scripture, it is linked to support, to steadfastness, to trust, to rely on the truth so that one does not fall. The only true support in this sense is the living God himself, as Jesus said, “I am the truth” (John 14,6). “We discover and rediscover the truth when we experience it within ourselves in the loyalty and trustworthiness of the One who loves us. This alone can liberate us”.⁷⁹ (cf. John 8,32). Getting rid of falsehood and seeking connection is the basis for one’s words and actions to be true, authentic and trustworthy. It is necessary to balance what helps community and brings good, and what divides and creates conflict. Truth cannot be possessed as an impersonal, externally imposed thing, but only in the

78 *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for World Communications Day 2.*

79 *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for World Communications Day 3.*

free relationship between persons, in listening to each other. Truth must always be sought, for falsehood can creep into the statement of truth: one can build an unimpeachable argument on undeniable facts, but if it is used to hurt someone or to discredit someone in front of others,

however correct it may appear, it is not truthful. We can recognize the truth of statements from their fruits: whether they provoke quarrels, foment division, encourage resignation; or, on the other hand, they promote informed and mature reflection leading to constructive dialogue and fruitful results.⁸⁰

Section 4 focuses on the true news that is peace. The best antidotes to falsehood are people who renounce lust and help truth come to the fore by listening to others and daring to engage in honest dialogue, who are attracted to what is good and who use language responsibly. Responsibility leads out of the world of misinformation, so the importance of those who are responsible for information by virtue of their job - journalists, who are the guardians of the news - is enormous. In today's world, Pope Francis calls journalists a real mission, their primary task being to recognise that the human person is the most important. "Informing others means forming others; it means being in touch with people's lives. That is why ensuring the accuracy of sources and protecting communication are real means of promoting goodness, generating trust, and opening the way to communion and peace."⁸¹

At the end of his letter, the Pope invites everyone to promote *journalism for peace* that confronts falsehood, that does not hide anything; that is done by persons as a service to persons, especially those whose voices are not heard in the world; that reveals the true roots of conflicts so that solutions can be sought with good intentions; and that can offer alternative solutions to verbal violence and sensationalism. In closing, Pope Francis appeals to God, to Truth itself, so that all human beings may be instruments of peace towards their fellow human beings.⁸²

The letter is an important milestone in the teaching of the Church on communications. In a swift response to a phenomenon that is emerging in today's world, with its ever-accelerating flow of information and causing many problems, it points out that the root of the problem lies in man and urges all to dare to be

80 *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for World Communications Day 3.*

81 *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for World Communications Day 4.*

82 *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for World Communications Day 4.*

instruments of peace in search of the real truth, of Christ, even in a world where many people and in many ways seek to hold people in their power with false and misleading information.

Conclusion

Dealing with the phenomenon of fake news is not a simple task: it requires more than writing a few words of definition, drawing conclusions and finally establishing why lying is a crime.

The above points to the fact that we are dealing with a very complex phenomenon when trying to interpret fake news and disinformation, since their creation, causes, forms of appearance, spread, internal logic and mechanisms, recipients and effects can be extremely complex, as can the various levels and means of combating them. In this paper we have tried to present these, and also to show how the Catholic Church, after honestly facing the problem, can give encouragement and guidance to its members and to people of good will in the fight against the news-wrapped influence, manipulation and ultimately the dominating power that is imposed on them on a daily basis.

Throughout the writing of this study, I have been guided by the words of Father Paul Bolberitz, a Catholic professor who died a few years ago, in a philosophy class: “the one who has the information, has the power.” Indeed, He who has the Word, the Truth, has the power over the whole created world.

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