MISINFORMATION WITH FAKE NEWS

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__Abstract:__ The last presidential elections in the United States of America (2016) have brought to the international public opinion' s attention the phenomenon of "fake news". Though it isn't a new phenomenon, the spread of fake information for manipulating and misinforming the masses has existed in all historical periods. This time the phenomenon was noticed because of the number of fake news and, especially because of their impact, starting the discussion whether the victory of Donald Trump happened because of fake news and raising the question whether this phenomenon is a danger to democracy. An important reaction came also from the part of technology companies, of tech giants, Google and Facebook especially, which want the implementation of the phenomenon. Misinformation with public speech under the form of fake news brings to discussion the responsibility in the online space, but also the protection of people against this phenomenon.

__Key-words:__ misinformation, online manipulation, fake news, freedom of expression, democracy

About the fake news and their role in influencing the public opinion it has often been spoken and especially after the end of the election campaign for the presidency of the United States of America in 2016. It has been discussed more than ever, though the phenomenon isn't new. The spreading of fake information for manipulating the masses has been seen in all historical periods, especially in the modern era, when the technical means of communication have evolved too much and their impact has reached increasing values. The phenomenon of fake news has, however, seen an unprecedented scale so far during US presidential elections last year. Invented news, in an unprecedented volume, posted on certain sites and social networks, and then taken over by the traditional media, has come to occupy an important place on the public agenda of the electoral campaign and even dominate it at some point. A part of the American voters was vulnerable to the content of false news, psychologically contaminated, being prone to misinformation and manipulation in that form. This is where the US public space has been discussed, not just about the possibility of influencing the vote of American citizens through false news. It went even further, some commentators and opinion leaders, after the election period stadet, that Donald Trump's victory was due to the exploitation of the invented news! At the same time, media and overseas voices raised the issue of the danger of false information to American democracy and to democracy in general. The disappointing truth, sensationalism, capitalizing the primal emotions and impulses of citizens (fear,

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anger, attachment, preferences, etc.), the lack of any information or control filters, and, worse, the speed of contagion of large masses of people, have been considered elements that distort the meaning and content of the democratic exercise. Exposed to such attractive, but misleading news, citizens eventually come to believe and consequently make decisions in society, including voting, influenced by their content. And from here to the perversion of democratic life there is only a small step! Faced with this undesirable situation, politicians, the media, and the tech industry reacted, launching numerous warnings about this threat, and more importantly, they came up with a series of solutions to limit the effects of this phenomenon, if not to eliminate it.

A study by Stanford University, entitled "Social Media and the Fake News in the 2016 Election" (Adevărul.ro, February 4, 2017) shows that Donald Trump benefited most from false news in the election campaign. Thus, for the Republican candidate Donald Trump, the authors of this study identified no less than 115 fake news, distributed 30.3 million times. The pro-Hillary Clinton news stood at 41 fake news, distributed 7.6 million times. It is noticeable that the pro-Trump news was almost three times as numerous as that of candidate Clinton.

Of all the news favouring Donald Trump and made Hillary Clinton most disadvantaged was the one about the pizzeria in Washington DC, which was the facade of a pedophile network that was run precisely by Hillary Clinton! So big was the impact of this news that the day after its publication a man opened the fire in that pizzeria without harming anyone. Asked why he had done that, the man told the police that he wanted to save the abused children.

The site "Ending the Fed" spread the largest number of fake news during the presidential campaign in the United States, news that helped Donald Trump (stiritvr.ro, November 22, 2016). It is to be observed that the owner of the site is an American citizen of Romanian origins, 24 years of age, Ovidiu Drobota. His site isn't a regular one, in terms of audience, that can be compared with the one of other important media institutions. "Ending the Fed" has 3.3 million unique visitors per month, and the Los Angeles Times website has 3.6 million unique visitors. Of the false news posted on Ovidiu Drobotă's site, that Pope Francisc supports Trump, that journalist Megyn Kelly was fired from Fox News because she would secretly support Hillary Clinton, that the Clinton Foundation gave millions of dollars to the FBI head, that Clinton sells weapons to the Islamic State, and more are worth mentioning because of their inventiveness. The motivation that Ovidiu Drobotă presented to the journalists who contacted him as the basis for his false posting is interesting. Ovidiu Drobotă said that his site is a propaganda site and that it is no different from what the big news agencies do. However, after the electoral period, he reported that he regrets having broadcast fake news, which he then deleted from the Internet after he found out that it was not true.

One month after the election, former White House candidate Hillary Clinton delivered a speech at the American Congress in which she spoke of the danger of false news (Digi24.ro, December 9, 2016, Gandul.info, December 9, 2016). "An outbreak of false, malicious news and false propaganda has flooded social networks in the past year. It is clear that so-called false news has consequences in the real world. It's not about politics or partisanship. Life threatened", said Hillary Clinton. The danger must be addressed quickly, Clinton said "it is imperative that private and public sector leaders protect democracy and the innocent."

From the point of view of many American citizens, Hillary Clinton was right to be upsed about the misinformation and manipulation she was subjected to through false news. In their view, last year's presidential election was deeply marked by the invented news, social media releases, against the democratic candidate, destroying her public image. This might explain the surprising way in which Hillary Clinton lost this election to Republican Donald Trump.

After being favored by fake news manipulation during the election period, Donald Trump, who became president of the United States of America, continued to use so-called "alternative facts". And this, starting immediately after the inauguration ceremony. The presidential administration has argued, despite evidence, that the highest number of citizens in US history attended the ceremony, many more than the number of those present at Barack Obama's inauguration. The presidential spokesman, in line with his press statement, has considered the press a liar that had sent the wrong information information. In fact, Donald Trump will do the same any time a news item does not fit, naming it without any hesitation item false! This was the case, for example, after the first meeting of the US president with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Although the meeting was not successful due to more delicate subjects (especially the one regarding the contribution of Germany and other NATO member states to the Alliance budget), a fact highlighted in the media but also observed in Donald Trump's non-verbal behavior. Twenty-four hours after, President Trump posted a message on Twitter (Adevărul.ro, March 20, 2017) in which he stressed that "despite what you heard in FALSE NEWS, we had a WONDERFUL MEETING with Angela Merkel".

There has been much talk during the election campaign in the United States about Russia's interference with President Vladimir Putin personally in these elections. In the American media, many news stories were reported in which Russia was accused of attempting to influence the outcome of the US elections through a campaign of propaganda and cyber attacks on campaigning candidate Hillary Clinton. Against this background, it was also claimed that behind the fake news would be all Kremlin people through their US agents, and that Russian hackers broke the accounts of Clinton's former campaign director, John Podesta, and of the Democratic Party. After they got into the mail, hackers handed them over to WikiLeaks. Everything to help Donald Trump and minimize Clinton's chances of winning the election. These conclusions can be found in a CIA report, although presented unofficially, as well as confirmed by the FBI. However, in the US public space, there was no clear evidence of Moscow's influence on the presidential election. On the other hand, the Russians only came up with denial of this possible intervention. Dmitry Peskov, one of President Putin's spokesmen, said the United States "must stop talking about it, or bring evidence." The president elect, Donald Trump, in turn claims that his victory in the election was fair (ziare.com, December 10 and 17, 2016).

The Russian presidential elections in France (protv.ro, February 14, 2017) was also mentioned with the involvement of Russia through fake news and cyber attacks. The target of the invented news was the future president Emmanuel Macron, and the cyber attacks his campaign team. Macron would have been attacked by false news spread by Russia Today and Sputnik, media institutions controlled by the Russian state because he is a pro-European, who wants a strong and united Europe to play a more prominent role in international relations. One piece of news of the Russian propaganda was included in an interview by Sputnik in early February 2017, in which a conservative fraternal MP

accused Macron, a former banker, of being an agent of the "great American banking system". The news was also taken over by Russia Today. Of course, this time, Kremlin's recollection was not recognition of the interference in the electoral process, characterizing these allegations as part of an "anti-Putin hysterical campaign."

False news is not produced and broadcast only during electoral times in major states. It is also aimed at political-military events, such as the deployment of military forces, the military exercises and maneuvers of countries or political-military alliances. In these cases, the main goal pursued is to misinform public opinion about these events so as to create a strong current of opinion against the deployment of these forces and applications. A convincing example in this direction is the news that a Lithuanian was raped by German troops deployed in the Baltic state as part of a multinational NATO battalion (ziare.com, February 18, 20170). The news came from an email sent to the Lithuanian Parliamentary and Law Enforcement Party chairman, who said that men who spoke German, in uniform, raped a minor near the barracks in the center of the country. An investigation ordered immediately after this information showed that everything had been a lie, fact confirmed by the commander of the NATO Military Committee, the Czech general Petr Pavel.

Romania was not bypassed by false news. Two days before the legislative elections last year, Romania TV broadcast the statements of an Anonymous hacker stating that George Soros has set up the tragedy at *Colectiv* (paginademedia.ro, December 9, 2016). The episode of Ordinance 13 followed, amending and supplementing the Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code, during which misinformation through false news came to light. Under the conditions of extensive street demonstrations in Bucharest and throughout the country, in some reports there was talk of street conflicts, even by a coup, wanting to create the impression that Romania is on the brink of dismemberment. News was released during those days that protesters were paid to go out in the street. At Romania TV, on January 22nd, 2017, in prime time, images were constantly titling messages that "Iohannis is forcing a coup d'etat" and "trying to destabilize the country", it was said that "there is information" that adults had received 100 lei, children 50 lei and ... dogs 30 lei. Another piece of news that disturbed the Romanian business environment was that of multinationals in Romania who had forced their employees to participate in the protests from Victoria Square.

The phenomenon of false news in our country has been the subject of analyzes and comments in the international press. The French weekly "L'Express", for example, wrote in one of its articles about the content and the way of spreading the invented news from Romania, but also about the aims pursued by this misinformation and manipulations. The French author believes that the false news feeds Eurosceptic speeches and draws the attention, like other Western journalists, to the fact that Romania is a target of Russian propaganda (Adevărul, April 4, 2017).

False news can be considered a form of misinformation. In the well-known "Misinformation Treaty" (Volkoff, 1999, p. 17), Vladimir Volkoff defines misinformation as a technique that allows "general information to be misrepresented to third parties, causing them to commit collective acts or to publish despicable judgments."

Disinformation necessarily leads to forgeries and lies. Perhaps at some point they can publish false documents, spread rumors and slanderous insinuations, but also start to use falsehood, and so, false news. Henri-Pierre Cathala, in the "Epic of Disinformation" (Cathala, 1991, p. 168), signaled the valences of "absolute lie" in the process of

disinformation and manipulation of the masses, "often effective because of its enormity that can seduce paradoxical spirits". What can a less informed and believing man say when he finds that, for example, Pope Francis supports Trump in the elections or that in Victorian Square in Bucharest dogs get 30 lei for a demonstration day !?

Unlike other types of misinformation, misleading news is distinguished by:

- the environment in which communication takes place. False news is a phenomenon of the hypermedia civilization of today, the informational revolution. People are daily subjected to a news and information assault in which, in most cases, they are powerless because of the limitations of mental information processing mechanisms. Not having enough time to process and assimilate information, as a result of accelerating the rhythm of life, they get ready, no longer subjecting themselves to the critical exercise. Overexposure to news and information has, therefore, created favorable conditions for manifesting misinformation processes and actions when it is desired;

- the use of new media (the Internet and social media) in their propagation. The online environment is an easy-to-use environment for people of all ages and professions from all corners of the planet where the speed of information flow is practically instantaneous but at the same time compared to traditional environments, information is less controlled or not controlled at all. It is an unregulated environment in which freedom of expression is sovereign;

- combining the communication interests of those who disinform with the commercial ones of the new media owners (social networking sites and pages) as well as the owners of traditional media. False news brings big sales for advertising and media products in a short and very easy time. An invented news story can bring money from online advertising by increasing the number of visitors on a site or by exploding the number of clicks on a social page. By taking it from a TV station, false news can lead to an increase in audiences, and that means all the money.

Extending the conclusions of Vladimir Volkoff's analysis of the general elements of misinformation (Volkoff, 1999, p. 25) to misinformation through false news, one can assume that the latter also implies three elements:

- deliberate manipulation of public opinion

- misappropriated means (falsified message and misappropriation of the means of communication from their main purpose of objective, true and fair information;

- political goals pursued, internal and / or external (disparagement of politicians or political candidates, impairment of political and media institutions, vulnerability of political-military coalitions, etc.).

The controversy over the fake news propagated in the campaign before the British recession in the European Union (Brexit) and its influence on the outcome of the US presidential election has led to a British Parliament inquiry into this communication phenomenon (hotNews.ro, January 31, 2017). Damian Collins, chair of the Committee on Culture, the Media and Sport, stressed that "the growing phenomenon of false news is a threat to democracy and undermines confidence in the media in general". The directions of the investigation were: the sources of false news, the motivation of those who spread them, and their way of using it in the wake of elections or important political debates. The Commission has defined false news as "the growing phenomenon of widespread dissemination through social media and the Internet and the acceptance of facts of uncertain origin or accuracy as facts." Large technology companies have a responsibility to fight the phenomenon of fake news, and consumers must be given tools to help them

assess the origin and truth of the news they read online, "the members of the parliamentary inquiry commission said.

The issue of fake news has entered into the concerns of big technology companies. Apple Director, Tim Cook, appealed to tech companies and national governments (Digi24.ro, Feb. 11, 2017) to eradicate the misinformation through invented news. "We are crossing this period in which, unfortunately, the winners are those who invest time in getting as many clicks as possible without telling the truth. That somehow kills people's minds, "said the CEO of Apple Inc. Tim Cook argues that it is the duty of companies to create tools to curb the phenomenon of false news without violating freedom of expression or press freedom. In fact, Google and Facebook have announced that they will prohibit sites that publish invented news from using their ad platforms. But the question is how will this differentiation be made between true news sites and those susceptible to false information? The situation is complex, given that there are its publishing both true and false news in different proportions! However, to date, the two big tech giants have failed to develop a filter good enough for selecting false information. In other words, the industry currently faces technical and moral limitations in managing this phenomenon. In this context, it is worth mentioning the efforts of members of a start-up in Cluj who made an application for the discovery of false news, with the help of a grant, obtained in 2015 - a year before the presidential elections in the US - 50,000 of the euro received from Google. The "Trust Servista" application can identify the primary source of information as well as its credibility. Emil Şteţco, the founder of the Zetta Cloud start-up, explains how the application works ("România Liberă", March 10, 2017):" We use artificial intelligence algorithms and natural language processing algorithms to be able, as from an article, to get to the initial source of the information and, depending on all the meta-information we find during this search, we generate a <<trust score>>, that we call a confidence level for that information. Our search goes to the primary source even if the article or articles that our application analyzes do not contain any links. "

What can the reader, the simple citizen, make in front of the avalanche of false news? How can a false story be recognized and how can it be protected from its manipulative effects?

A false story seems too beautiful to be untrue. It is precisely made to appear truthful and thus to be accepted and transmitted further. It is news that tells what the audience wants to hear.

It should be said that sites with false news have always existed, including in Romania. And there are quite many! It is enough to remember those apocalyptic news sites about conspiracy and scenarios. It's interesting that a lot of the public does not think so! In fact, there have also been websites that help people identify online publications that are not secure (verificasursa.ro) or who analyze how fair the statements of Romanian politicians are (factual.ro). In the US one of the sites that removes false news is snopes.com, which has 30.2 million unique visitors per month!

At the individual level, protection against false news can be accomplished by several essential steps. First, we need to check where the news comes from. Is it a recognized institution or product or does it have a controversial reputation? Does the site provide contact information and editorial team information? Secondly, one must see who the author is, how credible he or she is. Last but not least, the title and content of the news should be analyzed. The title of any news speaks for itself about how true information can be in the material. News with a doubtful title should be read with greater care. Regarding

the information content, the evidence supporting the statements made, as well as the quoted sources must be sought. All these elements are related to the so-called personal filter of data and information interpretation, which has developed through its own experience and the manifestation of the critical spirit.

Censorship must be first and foremost the reader's, but they must also be educated to avoid invented news. Thus, journalists have an important role to play. Before the Citizens' Filter Act, the journalist filter intervenes. A professional journalist refuses to post false news, checks the sources, using sound media, and especially demonstrates responsibility for the reader. So, it's no coincidence that there is growing awareness of the responsibility that must be met in the online environment as well.

Psychologist Daniel David regards manipulation by false news as a psychological contamination and that the mental mechanism of man makes us vulnerable to this manipulation ("Adevărul", March 1, 2017). "People, Daniel David says, I think there are two steps in managing new information: 1. You get the information and you understand it; 2. You determine its value of truth. Studies suggest that things are different: when you understand the new information, you automatically think it is true. Very often there is no second stage, and then you come to believe that everything you understand is true". According to Daniel David, "we receive too much information at a time, and we cannot analyze it critically, as the cognitive resources of the mind are limited. We have the illusion that we have the control of our own mind and do not make the effort to analyze / control the information that we have allowed us to enter into the mind with the true information status. "

Although it is not a new phenomenon, misinformation and manipulation through false news is a "boom" nowadays, being an emerging aspect of the media and computer revolution that we live in. At present, there is no political, electoral or social event or process in which the impact of the invented news is not discussed. There has been talk of a possible influence on electoral processes in some countries and on the impact of democracy. However, on this impact, research is just beginning. False news, we do not want, it is another challenge facing man and the postmodern citizen.

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