

**THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF POLITICAL STUDIES
AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
DOCTORAL SCHOOL IN COMMUNICATION SCIENCES**

**MANUFACTURING THE TRUTH
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION:
FAKE NEWS MADE IN ROMANIA**

– abstract –

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor in Communication Sciences

Bucharest

2022

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MANUFACTURING THE TRUTH
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– *abstract* –

Until recently, and at least at a theoretical level, things were simple: a journalist used to create a story either for the purpose of informing or entertaining the public. From the journalist, through traditional channels such as newspaper, radio or television, the news went from the journalist to the citizen. With the advent of the Internet – and, therefore, of new media – the journalist-citizen communication has been significantly changed both by the introduction of new communication channels to facilitate the flow of information between them (e-mail, websites, social platforms, etc.) and by the change of traditional way of transmission (from journalist to citizen).

This “liberalization” of information has not been translated only into benefits for those two parties: various *types of disinformation* – with potential risks for societies (especially for the democratic ones) – have been transformed and expanded throughout the information space. This reverse of the medal has also favored the consolidation/ rebranding of an already existing *offensive phenomenon* known to the public as ***fake news*** – content which, depending on its mission, claims either that something true is false or that something false is true.

A classic recipe with significant impact: a news story, usually unsigned, containing sensationalist/ alarmist headlines (sometimes in capital letters with exclamation marks) and short texts (with no indication of additional sources to back up the information presented; in cases where such sources exist, they are either invented or obscure) aims, through repeated exposure in key moments, to threaten democracies, undermine traditional journalism, deepen rifts in society, fuel conflicts (including armed conflicts), mislead, generate public panic, etc.

Even if the dissemination of such news may be unintended, *the creation is always intended*. The creators of fake news are also – as the intentions – quite diverse: from journalists, who have chosen to deviate from the fundamental mission of their profession (lured by easy and quick financial gain) to public figures, terrorist organizations, useful idiots, trolls, or bots.

The ***motivation*** behind the choice of the topic was based on the intention to analyze the fake news phenomenon in the Romanian society. The work comes as a novelty in the field, even more it presents this phenomenon during the 2019 presidential elections.

In this academic endeavor, I pursued several ***objectives***:

Objective no. 1: to get an overview of the editorial activity of four media sources (who published more, when there was an influx of news, who was written about and in what context) and the information published by them.

Objective no. 2: to identify if there were cases of fake news published on those four online sources during the period of the presidential election.

Objective no. 3: to determine who were the politicians targeted by fake news (if Objective no. 2 is confirmed).

Objective no. 4: to identify the “ingredients” of the fake news (made in RO) recipe (the last two objectives being valid, only in case of confirmation of Objective no. 2).

In this research, I did not choose to analyze press sources known for their practice of creating and disseminating hardcore fake news. Instead, I selected four press sources that are among the mainstream media in Romania. The purpose was to identify whether the existence of fake news is felt in this environment and if so, to determine to what extent the phenomenon affects this type of media in our country.

Based on the objectives, I developed three ***research questions***:

Research Question 1: What is the proportion (statistical weight) of online news that contains at least one fake element?

Research Question 2: To what extent are the political news stories biased?

Research Question 3: What are the dominant fake elements in online news?

Content analysis was the research method chosen and the *corpus analysis* was made of news published in the political category, between the 10th and the 24th of November 2019, by four Romanian online media sources (for balance in vision, analysis, and interpretation I chose two quality press sources and two tabloids) in the context of the presidential elections. The reference interval was chosen to include the day of the first round of elections (November 10th), the period between the two rounds of elections (from the 11th to the 23rd of November) and the day of the second round of elections (November 24th). The *unit of analysis* was represented by the press article, and the corpus analysis was made up of 2,444 press articles (1,951 from quality sources and 493 from tabloids).

The *structure* of the thesis consists of six sections: introduction, three theoretical chapters, one chapter dedicated to empirical research and one chapter reserved for conclusions.

The first theoretical chapter – *Media and the effects of mass communication* – reviews the levels of agenda-setting and covers the concept in the new media era, where the advent of the Internet has significantly changed the communication environment.

As for the *agenda-setting levels*, this chapter presents a) the first level of agenda-setting and the analysis of media effects, the first research conducted in the field and all studies undertaken on the agenda-setting effect, respectively the various attempts to define it; b) the second level, priming and framing effects with definitions, promoters, and manners of manifestation; c) the third level with associated networks, mind mapping, networked agenda-setting model, etc.

Also, the same chapter presents agenda-setting in the *new media era*, where the advent of the Internet has significantly changed the communication environment by introducing new communication channels which brought not only advantages (interactivity, connectivity, variety, spontaneity, dual role, free access, active participation, low cost, unlimited time and space, feedback, etc.) but also challenges (a continuous and stressful flow of information, sources lacking credibility, the trap of filter-bubbles, ideological polarization, etc.).

Moreover, *the two media – old and new* – not only differ on many levels (a) homogeneity vs. heterogeneity; b) centralization vs. decentralization; c) local vs. global; d) limited vs. unlimited; e) passive vs. active), but they also have inevitably highlighted the generation gap represented by the difference that exists between individuals born before the launch of the new media and individuals born after this technological boom. The difference between the two generations does not represent a surprise, what is striking is the phenomenon that emerges here: the individuals of the first generation tend to borrow, more or less consciously, from the behavior of the individuals of the new generation. In other words, it is often children who teach their parents (or other adults) how to use and benefit from the advantages of new media. By far, new media has the greatest influence on young people.

The second theoretical chapter – Breaking (fake) news: an alternative... truth? – identifies, highlights, and describes *the phenomenon of fake news*.

Here, a) key moments in the history of this phenomenon are reviewed (up to 2022); b) the distinction between fake news and false news is highlighted and a series of definitions are presented to illustrate what fake news means and what fake news entails (what are the classic “ingredients” that make up such a “successful” recipe); c) the creators of fake news are listed (from journalists, public figures, terrorist organizations, useful idiots to trolls and bots) and the reasons for creating fake news are highlighted (from pure passion to financial gain and political influence); d) a number of host environments (such as websites or social platforms) that allow the creation, existence and dissemination of fake content is mentioned; e) a number of actors (from policy makers to media trusts, IT companies and citizens) are indicated; their combined efforts can and should contribute significantly to reducing this offensive phenomenon; f) other components (deepfake, disinformation, etc.) are listed; together with fake news, they make up a giant industry that is constantly growing and threatening (especially) democratic societies.

New media offers a different perspective on how news can be covered: a subject can become public knowledge even without the mediation of a journalist. Today, just a click away, any news consumer (who has access to the Internet) can create his own news content – *he can turn from consumer to producer at any time* – or he can intervene and express directly on the content produced by others via the facilities that the online environment provides. This same consumer, through the freedom of expression guaranteed by the online environment, can make judgments,

become visible in his virtual circle of relations, influence other individuals, and finally become a real opinion shaper for his peers. This new title gives him the “power” to guide his followers, to choose when to mislead them, when to trick them, when to influence their decisions. By way of example, such an opinion shaper – and others like him – can determine people to protest for a particular purpose or to vote for a particular candidate.

The advantages of new media, including free expression without any filter, have a downside: “the amplification of various types of disinformation”, which poses a potential risk to democracy, national security, and society (HLEG, 2018, p. 10).

Today, the traditional role with which the fourth estate has been invested is overshadowed by an increasingly offensive phenomenon: fake news. A phenomenon that, since its beginning, has highlighted the fact that terms such as “truth”, “accordance” or “accuracy” allow for modifications or interpretations (Voicu, 2018). A phenomenon seen as “a fundamental shift in political and public attitudes towards what journalism and news are and how facts and information can be obtained in a digitized world” (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, p. 97). Faced with such a phenomenon, the journalist has a double mission: to report the facts as accurately as possible and to engage in a 2.0 process to filter and sort the information.

The shrinking number of advertising spaces, the shrinking number of newspapers or their effective move to the online environment, the limitation and, by extension, the loss of jobs in the field contribute, day by day, to the degradation of journalism and the reduction of the possibilities to verify, certify and filter correctly the information that reaches the citizens. All this, cumulatively, allows the expansion of this harmful phenomenon called fake news (Pritchard, 2017).

In this step, *a distinction between false news and fake news is necessary*: while the first term – false news – represents inaccurate, apparently harmless information, generated (mostly) with the intention of increasing the audience/ web traffic/ financial gain through the number of clicks, the second term – fake news – represents the product of a strategy (of an individual, a company, a state, etc.), which aims to manipulate the population in the medium and long term in order to achieve a desired goal.

The phenomenon of fake news *undermines trust in the media and is seen as a threat to democracy*. The impact of fake news on society can lead to feelings of confusion/ panic among the population, segregation of society, fueling social or even armed conflict (Sadiku et al., 2018).

In studying the phenomenon of fake news, Wardle (2017) identified three aspects: a) **disinformation** (fake information that is deliberately created and disseminated through media channels with the clear intention to harm/ deceive); it aims to manipulate and decontextualize information to achieve a specific goal (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018); b) **misinformation** (that flawed, inaccurate content that is (un)intentionally disseminated and does not (necessarily) aim to harm (Vraga & Bode, 2020); c) **malinformation** (the transfer of authentic information from the private to the public domain with the aim to harm) (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

A fake news story includes: a) sensational or shocking headlines – containing negative words, often written with capital letters and exclamation marks – referring either to a person known to the public or to an important event with (often negative) effects on citizens and which, by their construction, encourage the reader to access the news, even though its information content does not correspond to the facts set out in the headline; b) invented information, interpretations of real information in such a way as to create panic, uncertainty, etc. and correspond to the intended purpose.

Fake news “should be understood as an imitation”, given that it reproduces the content of classic news (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, p. 100) and ends up containing similar elements: headline, text, and image (Horne & Adali, 2017).

As for their *structure*, fake news is shorter (in terms of word count) and less informative than classic news, uses accessible and personal language, and may contain longer headlines that illustrate the main idea of the article (Horne & Adali, 2017). Their content is “strongly influenced by internal news agendas” (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, p. 104).

In a classic “recipe”, news stories are presented bombastically, are summarily written, are unsigned (and if there is one author, it is either a pen name or an assumed story under the generic name “The Newsroom”), do not present any additional data or information, and do not provide other sources through which the veracity of the published content can be verified (when they exist, the sources are some obscure ones).

While the dissemination of fake news may be unintentional, its creation is always deliberate (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Fake news is created for a variety of **reasons**: from pure passion and simple entertainment to financial gain, or political influence. Some individuals are so attracted to an idea, a person, an organization, etc. that it impairs their judgement and turns them into

creators and even promoters of fake news. Such individuals “can be blinded by their own beliefs” and come to perceive fake content as correct and useful to disseminate.

The *creators* of fake content are diverse – from journalists to trolls and bots. In theory, anyone who has an account on (at least) one social network can create and/ or promote fake content. I used “and/ or” for three reasons: a) some of the actors only have the role of *instigators* – they create fake content –, b) some actors only have the role of *promoters* – they promote fake content –, c) some actors have a *dual role* – they are responsible for both creating and promoting fake content.

Classic hosts for such news are those *websites*, which “are developed and, exclusively, dedicated to the propagation of fake news” (Vargo et al., 2017, p. 2031). Such websites usually do not have a long lifespan because their administrators do not seek to invest in their long-term image/ reputation, but rather aim to maximize their revenue in a short time (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Many of these sites bear names similar to those of major news agencies and are interlinked with social networks, search engines and mainstream press, which ensures maximum visibility to them.

On the other hand, the dynamic nature of *social networks*, which offer any individual, regardless of training or intention, the dual role of consumer and creator of information, also makes them useful tools for disseminating fake content.

The third theoretical chapter – 'Tis the season to be fooled: election season – presents the case of one of the most attractive events in society – ***elections*** – when campaigns of disinformation and manipulation can be launched in the public. The election period – whether in democratic or totalitarian states – is that moment when tools and strategies are intensively used to achieve some clear purposes.

The “art” of involving in the electoral processes of other states (especially of the democratic ones) is an old practice which, over time, has undergone various transformations in terms of resources, tools, technology, strategies. In this regard, several cases of fake news involvement in presidential elections in countries such as the Republic of Moldova, France, the Czech Republic, South Korea, Mexico, Brazil, Ukraine, and the United States have been presented.

Any attempt or action aimed to influence citizens’ perception or choice of vote should be countered with concrete tools, resources, and strategies, designed, chosen, and implemented by

state political actors, organizations that own search engines or social platforms, NGOs, groups of individuals or simple citizens.

The fourth chapter – Empirical research – is divided into *four sections*: a) research design, which includes objectives and research questions, methodology and corpus analysis, types of data and scales of measurements, b) quantitative data analysis, which includes general information, actors, images, headlines, texts, sources of information and their representatives), c) qualitative analysis of fake news identified between November 10th-24th, d) interpretation of the results and e) research conclusions.

We have witnessed, on the one hand, *an atypical campaign* in terms of the lack of a common debate and, on the other, *a typical campaign* in terms of the existence of fake news that was created and promoted in the context of the presidential elections. However, unlike other cases (i.e., the presidential elections in Moldova or Bulgaria in 2016), in Romania, *fake news appeared sporadically and had a moderate impact on the population*. Moreover, as they appeared, they were also dismantled by various entities such as simple citizens, fact-checkers, media sources or even their victims.

Interference – or the “art” of involvement – in electoral processes (especially in democratic states) will not end soon. This practice will continue, unjustifiably, to influence the electoral behavior and decisions of citizens (especially those who are part of the undecided category). Its effects could be translated into doubt and decreasing trust in democratic processes and institutions and the national media.

The last chapter – Conclusions – illustrates the extent to which the proposed aims and objectives have been achieved, lessons learned and the way forward.

I started this paper with the definition of what a news story is and what a news story aims at. While we have established that, at least at a theoretical level, a news story seeks to satisfy the audience's needs for information and entertainment, we have stressed that a standard definition of what it means does not exist. And this is precisely because what is involved in writing or producing a news story fails to express exactly what it really is.

Also, I highlighted a key idea: *journalist gives news value to an event*. And together – the news and the journalist – they have become known, thanks to the traditional media: newspaper,

radio, and television. This universe – actors, channels, specific roles – has been significantly impacted by the advent of the Internet, which has not only changed communication with the insertion of new channels (emails, blogs, websites, social platforms), but has also brought people closer to technology and technology closer to people.

We have gone from classic news – a news story created to inform, entertain the recipient – to “modern” news – a news story created to deceive, disinform, manipulate, mislead, frighten the recipient. Such news is manufactured, exclusively, intentionally (it is not the result of a mistake), it is disseminated to citizens having bombastic, shocking, alarmist headlines but without additional evidence by which the claims can be validated.

Their reasons and creators are also increasingly diverse. Journalists, politicians, public figures, simple citizens are involved in this “business” in order to earn more money, gain visibility/fame, gain political influence, create or deepen rifts in society.

Disinformation, fake news or the fake industry, in part or as a whole, leaves its mark – to a lesser or greater extent – on society, security and democracy through: a) polarizing citizens; b) undermining electoral processes; c) shaping or deepening rifts in society; d) undermining the importance of public institutions, authorities or traditional media; e) promoting sources of information that present alternative truths; f) amplifying violence (by image and text) online via insults, harassment, etc.

On the other hand, we should treat the news (and by extension, the information consumption) *in the same way we treat the online products we want to buy*, “because the mind is shaped by what is read, just as the body is shaped by what is eaten” (Farmakis, 2019). In other words, when dealing with information, a citizen should pay attention to a few key issues: a) whether it is assumed by a known media source; b) whether it is assumed by a known journalist; c) whether it cites other credible sources; d) whether it relies on additional sources of information; e) whether it has impeccable grammar and punctuation; f) whether it uses real images, consistent with what it presents.

A watchful eye and a concrete action can be the answer to the fake industry and can help protect democracy, security, and society. Finally, *it remains critical – a priority for any democratic state – to educate the public* from at least three perspectives: a) *raising awareness*, b) *exercising the instinct to verify information/ news* (even more when it raises questions), and c) *building resilience* in the face of disinformation campaigns that are becoming more complex, more

aggressive, more toxic. In this respect, it remains necessary to organize courses or campaigns to make citizens more attentive to the information they read and more adept at detecting fake news and disinformation – confirming the authenticity of information before it is consumed and distributed further.

It is necessary and vital that the *triad* – authorities, the private sector and civil society – works to avoid cracks in that shield designed to protect against informational aggression.

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