

# DOCTORAL THESIS

## **The influence of fake news in contemporary society: causes, effects, and strategies for combating it**

### – Summary –

Major technological advances, such as the increased power of electronic components, the development of very large storage capacities, high-speed information transfer, and the digitization of images, sounds, and data, have led to the emergence of new media and communication services (Harjuniemi, 2022). In the hyper-technologized post-truth era, the new social ecosystem is characterized by the blurring of boundaries between reality and virtuality, between human, machine, and nature; the shift from information scarcity to information abundance; and the transition from the primacy of entities (whether human or artificial) to the primacy of interactions (Ferretti, 2023; Floridi, 2014). The power to shape public opinion now lies with the most popular, active, or pliable individuals with online social media accounts, to the detriment of experts, who may be ridiculed when the information they convey to the public does not align with the interests of those in power or the prejudices of uninformed individuals (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). The phenomenon of fake news, through its implications for contemporary human society, sparks heated debates and sustained efforts to combat it. Multiple studies (Baptista & Gradim, 2022; Jones-Jang, Mortensen, et al., 2021) confirm the strong impact, particularly in the online environment, that the phenomenon of fake news has on the functioning of democracy, political governance, economic relations, and public welfare.

In the context of Romanian society, the 2020s align with the global trend of diversifying media sources and types of content. Public communication in Romania is characterized by a high degree of fragmentation, with traditional mass media and new media competing for public attention through rapidly evolving forms of content. The development of new artificial intelligence technologies in recent years opens up new directions for media content production and consumption. Amid these characteristics of social communication in the Romanian space, the risks posed by fake news are more prominent than ever. The challenges in regulating the accuracy of information circulating in the public sphere may lead to communication pathologies subsumed

under the phenomenon of fake news. Among the most severe effects of this phenomenon are the decline in trust in media institutions and the political system, disengagement from political and civic life, ideological polarization that can lead to the marginalization of minority opinions, and anti-system discourse.

Supported by the specialized literature presented in the theoretical sections, the general objective of this paper was to investigate the perception, the extent of dissemination, the effects, and the most effective strategies for combating the fake news phenomenon, from the perspective of communication experts and citizens. The operationalization of the paper's general objective was achieved by branching the empirical research into two directions. On the one hand, a qualitative investigation was conducted into the perceptions of communication experts regarding the establishment of meanings for the concepts associated with the term fake news, the identification of the main causes and effects, as well as the most effective ways to combat it. On the other hand, the second research branch involved a quantitative investigation to understand the factors influencing people's perceptions of the incidence of fake news and the effects these perceptions have on attitudes and behaviors.

The research consists of both a theoretical and an empirical section. Chapter 1 of the paper discusses the fake news phenomenon in the context of the digital age, providing an overview of definitions and typologies of this phenomenon. The specialized literature emphasizes that fake news is not a recent problem, but technological evolution has amplified its dissemination and impact. The current media landscape, especially the digital environment, facilitates the spread of false information, affecting democracy and governance. The chapter also presents a brief history of fake news, highlighting its stages of evolution, from the pre-print era to the digital age, and explores the main typologies of fake news, analyzing how these are created and distributed with the aim of manipulating public opinion.

Chapter 2 of the paper focuses on the effects of the fake news phenomenon, analyzing its consequences from multiple perspectives. A series of psychological, social, technological, and cultural variables are explored, which determine individuals' vulnerability to fake news, including factors such as cognitive biases, selective exposure, and the influence of digital algorithms. The chapter also examines polarization and radicalization, the anxiety, distrust, and confusion that fake news can induce, both at the individual and societal levels. The political and economic effects

presented highlight the impact of fake news on trust in public and political institutions, electoral participation, and public health.

The third chapter of the paper focuses on strategies for preventing and combating the fake news phenomenon. It emphasizes the importance of media and digital education in developing critical thinking and discernment among the public, which are essential for recognizing and avoiding misinformation. The chapter also discusses public information campaigns and national and international policies aimed at regulating and limiting the spread of fake news. Other measures include fact-checking initiatives and the development of technological tools, such as advanced algorithms, for the rapid detection of false content. Additionally, the chapter highlights the challenges in implementing these strategies, such as cultural resistance, ethical issues, and risks to freedom of expression.

The empirical research of the paper was conducted to investigate the perceptions and effects of the fake news phenomenon in Romania. The chapter is structured along two lines of scientific investigation: qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative approach explores the perspectives of Romanian communication experts on the concept of fake news, its causes, effects, and proposed solutions for combating it. Fifteen interviews were conducted with experts from various fields, such as journalism and academia, which highlighted the importance of media education and the accountability of institutions. The quantitative approach focuses on identifying the factors that influence public perception (N=733) regarding the incidence of fake news and how this perception affects trust in the media and electoral behaviors. The main conclusions of the research will be presented, starting with those derived from the qualitative approach and continuing with those from the quantitative one, in the following paragraphs.

The first conclusion from the qualitative investigation refers to the difficulty of defining the term "fake news," as a range of information distortions, such as false news, out-of-context information, humorous content, and manipulation of photo-video materials, are often assimilated under this term. Aspects categorized within the thematic register of fake news, such as misinformation, manipulation, and propaganda, indicate a conceptual expansion beyond the simplicity of the true-false dichotomy. With the development of scientific knowledge on the subject of fake news, there is a tendency to replace the term with more precise expressions, such as misinformation or information disorder, reflecting the dynamism of the phenomenon as new manifestations are identified. The circulation of content associated with the phenomenon is linked

to declining journalistic standards and the escalation of hyper-partisan discourse, which, along with individuals' difficulty in identifying and selecting authentic content, leads to the uncontrolled spread of fake news.

A second conclusion, based on the qualitative investigation, identifies geopolitical conflicts, political polarization, climate change, EU policies, and health crises (including the COVID-19 pandemic) as the main causes of the emergence of the fake news phenomenon. One of the most recently noted manifestations of this phenomenon is the use of informational warfare to reinforce widespread informational confusion and destabilize public opinion, with the ongoing conflict in the neighboring country being a clear example. Similar to the pandemic period, this example also featured a wide range of conspiracy narratives that, among other things, contributed to the erosion of trust in public institutions, a frequent effect referred to in terms of information disorder. Political interests to gain capital, often through defamation of opponents, or economic motives, through monetizing traffic on online social platforms and converting it into advertising revenue, are also underlying causes of the production of content associated with fake news. The concept of the attention economy aptly describes such practices. Finally, algorithmic recommendation systems operating in social media contribute significantly to the proliferation of fake news by leveraging emotionally charged content to foster polarization and widespread misinformation.

A third conclusion provided by the qualitative data analysis addresses the perceived effects of fake news, which can range from threats to public health (such as misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic), through the erosion of trust in institutions with medical responsibilities, to excessive polarization of public opinion, with negative consequences for establishing a constructive social dialogue between groups with differing views. The circulation of narratives about vaccines and the COVID-19 pandemic (infodemic), in general, was a relevant example for identifying individual effects such as confusion, panic, and skepticism toward science, suggesting serious threats to individuals' mental and physical well-being. Similarly, xenophobic narratives about refugees from Ukraine due to the ongoing war may intensify extremist ideologies, which can undermine social cohesion and the stability of democratically organized societies.

The conclusions derived from the qualitative investigation of the data suggest educational opportunities, particularly media education, systemic interventions (the message-channel-receiver reaction triangle), the promotion of credible sources, and technology-based support tools (digital

tools that facilitate information verification) as the most effective measures in the fight against misinformation. Media education should focus on fostering critical thinking and enhancing individuals' ability to discern between high-truth-value content and problematic content. Public information campaigns, whose legitimacy can be strengthened by involving specialists from various fields, can also play an important role in supporting efforts to combat fake news, increasing the perceived integrity and credibility of information.

Next, the conclusions related to the quantitative research aspects will be presented. A higher consumption of news from mainstream media does not reduce the perceived incidence of fake news but rather amplifies it. This suggests that, rather than diminishing the perception of the fake news phenomenon, mainstream media may play a significant role in raising public awareness of this risk. Similarly, as users consume more news from social media, their perception of the prevalence of fake news increases, reflecting the impact these digital platforms have on public awareness of the risks associated with fake news.

Individuals with a high level of political interest are more aware of the fake news phenomenon, most likely due to frequent exposure to political debates and news, where references to fake news are more common. Thus, active engagement in the political sphere appears to contribute to increased awareness of the risks of fake news, making those interested in politics more likely to recognize the implications of this phenomenon. Right-wing political orientation does not significantly influence the perception of fake news incidence, suggesting that this perception is not ideologically driven but rather influenced by other factors such as education level or exposure to diverse media sources. Similarly, religiosity does not significantly impact the perceived incidence of the fake news phenomenon, as this perception is more likely shaped by factors such as access to media education or other socio-demographic variables.

The perception of exposure to fake news does not significantly influence the level of trust in mainstream media, suggesting that other factors, such as alternative information sources, play a more important role in shaping trust in these sources. On the other hand, as users become aware of the presence of fake news on social media, their trust in these digital platforms decreases. Regarding public and political institutions, the perception of exposure to fake news does not significantly influence trust levels in these institutions, indicating that trust is influenced by more relevant factors such as performance and transparency of these institutions. The perceived incidence of fake news does not correlate with trust in politicians, suggesting that as citizens are

more exposed to fake news, their trust in politicians decreases. This amplifies skepticism and distrust toward the political class, having long-term effects on public perception. Moreover, exposure to fake news increases political cynicism. Citizens exposed to this type of content become more cynical toward the political system, reducing civic engagement and trust in democracy. However, the perception of exposure to fake news does not affect the intention to vote. This suggests that the decision to vote is more influenced by political interests and trust in democratic institutions than by the perception of the fake news phenomenon.

Regarding countermeasures, respondents consider most of the proposed methods for combating fake news to be effective, placing particular emphasis on public information campaigns and media education. The public values solutions that promote awareness and the development of critical thinking, viewing them as the most effective tools in the fight against misinformation. Although technical measures and media regulations are also regarded as effective, solutions related to self-assessment of media knowledge and information verification are perceived as less effective. Comparative analyses show that, overall, there are no significant differences between men and women in terms of the perceived effectiveness of solutions to combat fake news, except for the use of technical solutions, which men tend to find more useful. This difference may be explained by men's greater familiarity with technology or a higher predisposition to use technical tools. For other solutions, such as information campaigns or media regulation measures, both genders have similar perceptions of their effectiveness.

Regarding age as a socio-demographic variable, seniors (60+) tend to perceive information campaigns and technical solutions, such as plugins and toolkits, as less effective than younger groups, which may reflect reduced familiarity with technology or skepticism toward awareness campaigns. For other proposed solutions, such as media regulations and self-assessment of media knowledge, no significant differences were observed across age groups, indicating relatively uniform perceptions across generations. Additionally, individuals with a higher level of education tend to perceive these solutions, particularly public information campaigns, technical solutions, and scientific research, as more effective than those with a lower level of education. This suggests that education plays an important role in developing critical thinking skills and openness to technological and regulatory solutions aimed at combating fake news.

In the context of the intensification of the fake news phenomenon, there is increasing mobilization across various sectors of society, including academics, journalists, political actors,

and public institutions, to combat this issue. Joint efforts to reduce the impact of fake news aim both at educating the public and familiarizing them with the dangers posed by fake news, as well as implementing appropriate countermeasures applicable at both the institutional and individual levels. Thus, it is imperative to develop national communication strategies for combating this phenomenon that are not only broadly applicable but also tailored to the specifics of various fields of activity. Such a strategy should include awareness campaigns, media education, clear regulations, and technological solutions aimed at identifying and reducing the spread of fake news. Implementing these measures is essential to ensure the correct information of citizens and the protection of the integrity of democratic institutions.

Based on the conclusions of this research, a series of future development directions for the current study are proposed. One interesting direction could be the analysis of the effectiveness of programs and legislation to combat fake news that have been adopted in other regions. Such a direction could take into account the national context, in terms of cultural and political identity, and could attempt to harmonize the countermeasures with national specificities. Another possible direction is an in-depth analysis of public attitudes toward fact-checking tools currently in use. Such research could identify vulnerabilities in the design and public dissemination of these tools and suggest concrete measures to improve their use by the population.

One of the original elements proposed by this work is the combination of qualitative and quantitative investigations. This approach allowed, on the one hand, the investigation of communication experts' perceptions, alongside the statistical exploration of the general public's perceptions. Moreover, the study provided interesting conclusions regarding hyper-partisanship in the context of fake news, highlighting the risks associated with this type of content and its impact on polarization and communication in the Romanian public space. Despite previous studies showing that a high consumption of mainstream media can reduce the perceived incidence of fake news, the findings of this research indicate the opposite. Similarly, although religiosity was seen as a factor consistently influencing the perceived incidence of fake news, the conclusions of this study indicate that religiosity is a weak determinant of this type of perception. The findings also suggest no significant relationship between political ideology and the perceived incidence of fake news. It should be noted that the lack of a representative sample in the investigation may have influenced the research results, and expanding the sample could suggest different nuances.

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