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Improving Media Education as a Way to Combat Fake News

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Abstract

The research has demonstrated that there are different types of false information that is distributed in the media and social networks. The author of the article shows that some false information can create panic and spread to destabilize the situation in the country. Therefore, it is necessary to fight them. The study shows the role of media education as way to counter fake news. It has been found that fake news can be disguised as true information. This makes it difficult to resist them.

Also the author explains why journalists themselves can spread fake messages and it is not always possible to distinguish them from the true even using artificial intelligence. The study showed that the audience needs to improve their media education. At the same time, readers expect the media to help to verify information. The author analyzes the experience of mass media and social networks in improving media literacy. Based on this, the article offers recommendations for media outlets that see the problem of fake news and plan to fight it by educating readers in critical thinking. Also the author explains the role of media reputation as a key indicator for evaluating the authenticity of news material.

Keywords: media education, media literacy, critical thinking, fake news, journalism, disinformation.

1. Introduction

News has become more accessible to the audience thanks to the emergence of new digital platforms and channels for distributing information. At the same time, misinformation and hoaxes called “fake news” have become more common. This trend reduces public confidence in journalism and affects public sentiment in general.

The spread of disinformation and misinformation is facilitated through the use social networks and social messaging. In the same time unreliable and unverified information was distributed before the Internet age. Hoaxing is an integral part of artistic creation, sometimes PR activity and advertising. However, journalism involves fact-checking. Journalists need to check information.

The fact is the basis of a journalistic work. In this case, the fact must be objective and reliable. However, a journalist can work with so-called “*facts-statements*” (Kozlov, 2018). They are used when information about certain facts cannot be confirmed, but journalist can explain his data source.

So journalists can spread fake messages themselves. Or can be used by detractors to spread misinformation. In other cases journalists should be engaged in fact checking (Graves, 2016).

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Fake messages can be purposefully distributed on the Internet for various purposes: entertainment, advertising (traffic growth), political (for example, black PR), nationalistic (discrimination of certain groups of people) and so on.

The threat from fake news has at least two aspects.

1. Fake news as a tool of information confrontation.

Thanks to social media, everybody can spread highly realistic messages, including photo and video editing. This significantly expands the ability to influence personal and social consciousness.

2. Fakes in terrorist and extremist activities.

Terrorist and extremist organizations seek to spread information that will provoke a serious response from the desired target audience. This may include footage of military shootings of civilians, severe torture of persons accused of involvement in terrorism or extremism, humiliating operations against religious objects, etc. The purpose of such fakes is to incite hatred and provoke mass riots, and to create a sense of fear (Shapovalova, Bykadorova, 2017).

The most vulnerable targets are adolescents and young people, as well as people with increased vulnerability and impressionability.

One of the methods of fighting the spread of fake news is to increase media education. Russian researchers also use the term "*media competence*", which defines the essence of an individual's ability to use, critically analyze, evaluate media texts, and analyze complex processes of media functioning in society (Fedorov, 2007).

2. Materials and methods

The aim of the study was to identify real practices in the field of media education that help reduce the impact of disinformation on the Internet. The research used the method of review of scientific and reference literature, comparison and synthesis. A survey method was used to understand the need to teach the audience not to trust fake news.

The review of scientific sources allowed us to form a classification of fake news. The comparison method allowed us to create a list of steps to improve media literacy in order to combat inaccurate information on the Internet.

3. Discussion

The term *fake news* (also known as junk news) appeared in the media space only in 2005–2006 (Farsetta, Price, 2006). Before that, researchers talked about the concept of disinformation (Fetzer, 2004; Schifferes, 2014).

According to Fallis, disinformation is a kind of information "that is likely to create false beliefs". Disinformation is not created by chance (Fallis, 2015: 405-406).

In 2018, the Collins English Dictionary selected "fake" as the top word of 2017. Fakes news has become an object of interest for researchers. Nowadays the concept of fake news continues to be debatable.

One group of researchers focuses on the fact that the source of fake news should be either journalists or pseudo-journalists. *Fake news* is a journalistic message published in the media that includes unreliable and unverified information that does not correspond to real facts and empirical reality (Brewer, 2013). *Fake news* is "generated by outlets that masquerade as actual media sites but promulgate false or misleading accounts designed to deceive the public" (Abang, Okon, 2018: 142).

Another group focuses on specially prepared information in such kind of news. A. Gelfert analyses in an article the concept and nature of fake news. In definition he focuses on the deliberate creation of fakes (Gelfert, 2018). *Fake news* is an informational throw-in containing specially prepared information of a deliberately provocative and resonant nature. At the same time, the fake itself may contain both deliberately false and true (verifiable) information taken out of the context of a particular conversation, conversation or speech (West, 2017).

Other researchers (Lazer et al., 2018: 1094) define *fake news* to be "fabricated information that mimics *news* media content in form but not in organizational process or intent". Also researchers distinguish two types: misinformation resulting from the verification problems and disinformation for deceiving people.

The average user of global networks does not have enough media competence and is generally unable to recognize a fake. According to the research company Pew Research, one in four

stories shared by Americans on the social networks is unreliable (Barthel et al, 2016). The reason may be that there are different types of fake news.

Scientists at the London school of Economics and politics identify six types of fake news (Tambini et al, 2017):

1. Alleged foreign interference in local elections through fake news.
2. Distribution of fake news for profit, i.e. promotion based on marketing traffic.
3. Parody and satire.
4. Poor quality journalism. For example, some media portals specifically use shocking headlines and false facts to attract traffic.
5. News that has an ideology that differs from the popular one. Researchers have given an example of a press conference of Donald Trump where he claimed that the news is unreliable if the information did not match his picture of the world.
6. The news that question traditional authority and power relations. Attempts to present facts, or a different view of issues that is not based on generally recognized approaches, acquires the marker of fake news.

Each type of news can be divided into three groups (Sukhodolov, Bychkova, 2017).

1. False from start to finish. For example, news about chipping through vaccination against coronavirus. Another example of a fake is the news about COVID-19 as a product of the US military research.
2. Partially fake the news. On background of certain events, presented selectively, there is an outright fake. For example, the news that there are home rapid tests against the virus that can be purchased online. The truth is, there are express tests, but they can't be performed at home.
3. News that distorts the essence of a real event. These can be phrases, quotes, taken out of context, or selectively stated. This fake is the most difficult to deal with, even sophisticated people can fall for it.

Currently, there are different views on ways to combat the spread of disinformation.

On the one hand, researchers recommend increasing the overall level of media literacy (Carter, 2019; Klemans, Eggink, 2016; Mason et al., 2018) and teaching critical thinking skills (La Garde, Hudgins, 2018: 15). Researchers suggest that media literacy will become one of the tools to combat the spread of false information on the Internet (Tsao, 2019). Digital and media literacy education should be encouraged from early childhood. The focus should not only be on children but also on election officials, elderly citizens, and marginalized and minority groups.

M. Sullivan wrote that fake news is like *viruses*, but there is no instant vaccine for them. Readers catch the virus by coming into contact with it, but do not recover by simply coming into contact with corrective information. After all, a new fake may appear, and people “get sick” again (Sullivan, 2019: 1115).

On the other hand, there are studies on the possibility of technical regulation (restriction) of fake news (Jones-Jang, Joon, 2018; Leiser, 2017). Social networks as a main media resource in 21 century should introduce new rules to punish the deliberate dissemination of fake news.

For example, in 2017 Facebook formed and distributed as advertising ten steps guide for spotting fake news:

- Be sceptical of headlines;
- Look closely at the URL [web address];
- Investigate the source;
- Watch for unusual formatting;
- Consider the photos;
- Check the date;
- Check the evidence;
- Look at other reports;
- Is the story a joke?
- Some stories are intentionally false [satirical];
- Can these tips help the audience determine whether the news is true? (Facebook..., 2017).

Also Facebook has banned users from posting computer-generated, highly manipulated videos, known as deep fakes, seeking to stop the spread of a novel form of misinformation.

The problem is that if the audience reads the news where obvious lies are presented, people will have no doubt that this is misinformation. Modern media can use more than one manipulation techniques in one article. For example, researches identifies such techniques as appeal to authority,

exploitation of slogans, myths and stereotypes, misrepresentation, false alternative and others (Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2020).

News based on slightly distorted information is the most difficult to verify. They require not just the development of media literacy, but constant monitoring of the media space and exposure of fakes.

However laws that prohibit the exchange of unverified news can be harmful to society. Researchers believe that people continue to spread rumors for the following reasons (Pennycook et al., 2020):

- desire to strengthen social ties;
- finding a way to deal with personal stress and a reduced sense of control over life;
- distrust of the authorities and official sources of information;
- the desire to find out if the other person thinks the news is true.

Researchers did not see a significant relationship between trust in fake news content and demographic characteristics such as gender, age, or even education (Starbird, 2019). At the same time, experiments have shown that outside of the stress factor, people with higher levels of scientific knowledge and higher levels of cognitive ability are better able to separate real news from fake news and are less likely to agree to distribute such information (Scheufele, Krause, 2019).

We should agree with McWhorter's opinion that the audience needs to rely on opinion leaders or groups of friends. Readers apply for fact-checking to those who know media structures and understand how media works, technologies for creating a media virus, etc (McWhorter, 2020).

4. Results

Surely increasing media literacy is a tool for fighting fake news. However, there is no single effective solution. False information can be carefully disguised.

A comparative study of the experience of specialists involved in the fight against fake news has shown that it is necessary to use a set of methods:

- information technology (creating a platform that would help with fact-checking);
- regulatory (creating responsibility for spreading false information in the space, for example, blocking an account in a social network);
- reputation for the media (sanctions from search engines and recommendation services for media caught spreading false messages);
- educational (courses to improve media literacy for those most prone to spread the misinformation and professional development of journalists).

Resources for journalists aimed at helping to verify facts play an important role in improving media literacy. In particular, this includes a non-profit project of the University of Pennsylvania – *FactCheck.org*, website *Politifact.com* and others. In Russia, *RIA Novosti* launched a new project related to exposing fake news about the coronavirus. In August 2020, Russia also announced the creation of a global project to combat disinformation.

In June 2020, the study surveyed 50 respondents from Rostov region who are not journalists, but actively use social networks and read news about coronavirus. The purpose of this survey is to determine the direction of media literacy development that is of interest. The survey confirmed the interest in fact-checking. 92 % of respondents are interested in ways to independently check news about coronavirus for accuracy. At the same time, 80 % have at least once tried to find the source of the news they are interested in on the Internet. 72 % believe that it is the media that should write more often how to distinguish true news from false. The brand of a reputable media outlet that verifies facts, as well as the intonation and number of links to other sources, can be a marker of the reliability of information.

The media should become a reference point for the audience and a source of information for self-education in the field of media literacy, the audience believes. The education of journalists is aimed at developing the ability to navigate the media field and critically evaluate information.

However, most of the mass audience does not use educational services of social networks for various reasons (Smeyukha, 2015: 105). So in particular, the audience should be trained by popular media to detect signs of possible information stuffing:

- excessive emotionality, the presence of evaluative vocabulary or aggression;
- sensationalism of the statement in the title and the absence of this information inside the text;
- lack of links to official sources or high-quality media, news agencies with a good reputation;

- information is only available in social networks, but “not googled” on the big Internet;
- a story about the event from only one side (there are no parties to the conflict and no mention that information was requested).

For the media, the way to increase media literacy can be tagging the stories – whether this fact is officially confirmed or requires additional evidence, comments, or additions. Even such labeling can nudge the audience to independently fact-check or contemplate that not all information published on the Internet is true.

Such concern for the audience will increase media literacy (critical thinking is developed) and works for the reputation of the publication. Reputation is considered a key indicator for evaluating the authenticity of news material published on it. Sites with a long history and high rating are often reliable sources, while the opposite may indicate an unreliable resource.

5. Conclusion

Research has shown that there is a problem of news verification. The reason is that fake news is not always an obvious lie, but often contains a grain of truth. For example, quotes taken out of context.

Therefore, it is necessary to form critical thinking in the audience through increasing media education. The media can play a big role in this. We need to talk more to readers (viewers) about the need to check information and give advice on how to do it.

Journalists need to give readers advice on how to distinguish fake news. In addition, if possible, they can create their own projects for verifying information and enter the marking of verified news.

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