

FAKE NEWS – A NEW WEAPON IN AN OLD WAR

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Abstract:

Fake news is a recent phenomenon that, together with the speed of mass communication nowadays, has an enormous potential of harming individuals and social groups. The term “fake news” is not easily defined, since it is not always clear what it means. People used it to label everything from news stories reporting false facts, to news reporting facts they disagree with.

Fake news, this recent phenomenon whose impact on daily life is inevitable and much bigger than it looks at a first glance. Be it propagated consciously or not, this reality is yet to be addressed at a sufficient scale to be minimized, mitigated or kept under control and then eventually, dismissed. Its range is non-discriminatory as it affects a wide array of domains, from politics and military operations, to high-life and common people’s lives. It can influence political environment of a state since it can impact elections up to the point that can change the public choice of a countries’ leadership or significantly diminish the trust in one public person or another, reduce the amount of resources invested in a military operation etc. However, people have become more and more aware of the quality and veridity of the news they are consuming and more and better tools and mechanisms to check the facts versus opinions are emerging. Nevertheless, society needs to have these instruments clearly defined, regulated and supported up to the point that the fake news phenomenon becomes marginal and limited.

Key words: fake news, negative effects, manipulation, mitigation

Fake news, should we care about it? Should it matter?

Media today may be facing a very serious crisis involving the foundations of journalism itself which is trust, but not the trust in individual news pieces or publication, trust in the entire idea of news mass media. Therefore, fake news has become one of the hottest topic nowadays even if, it is nothing new. (News)Story telling (real or imaginary) has been around for centuries, people have

made up stories in order to make themselves appear in a better light or to discredit their enemies and opponents. It has been used as a means of benefiting from a situation for thousands of years and we can mention here the example of two of Caesar's most prominent supporters: Mark Antony, his loyal confidant and general, and Octavian, Caesar's adopted son and successor. Octavian's strong, but fabricated story helped him defeat Mark Antony [1].

Nowadays we see that only the methods, the instruments have changed, but not the purpose. The Americans and British have had *Yellow journalism* (term which was coined by Erwin Wardman, editor of the New York Press [2]) since the end of the 19th century. "Yellow journalism, or the yellow press, is a type of journalism that presents little or no legitimate well-researched news and instead uses eye-catching headlines to sell more newspapers. Techniques may include exaggerations of news events, scandal-mongering or sensationalism. By extension, the term *yellow journalism* is used today as a pejorative to decry any journalism that treats news in an unprofessional or unethical fashion" [2]. In October 2016 the term *Fake News* became one of the most frequent syntagm used in the everyday speech with reference to the US presidential election and to the actions taken in the media in order to acclaim or to discredit the presidential campaign candidates. The elected president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, made use and benefited from this mediatic trend.

Now, let us see how we could define in a few words this matter of concern, a simple definition could be: **Fake News is artificially and intentionally created or misrepresented pieces of news**, with the focus on the term *intentionally*, term that highlights the intent of misleading the reader into believing unreliable, untrue information, therefore, whenever reading and analyzing the news the reader has to pay attention not only to the *story*, but *also* to the *intent*.

Another way to define fake news is "propaganda", even "false propaganda" or as H. Allcott describes it in a recent research paper by academics at Stanford University and New York University, it is "news stories that have no factual basis but are presented as news" [3]. Unfortunately, fake news is often published on websites that may appear credible thus, making it difficult for the inexperienced public to perceive the reality and intention behind the lines. The media environment is increasingly chaotic, and filled with several versions of the same story thus, making it unclear what is true and what not and consequently, offering a lot of manoeuvre space for manipulation. Hannah Arendt said in an interview in 1974: "*If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer. [...] And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not*

only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please." [4].

Manipulation is used to make the victim doubt their own senses and it is easier to manipulate a person who is misinformed than someone who knows the truth. Manipulation is a very powerful instrument in the hands of those who have or want to obtain the power and what easier means of doing it than through media, especially online media with the focus on social media. Online media has the perfect characteristics that make it an efficient instrument: high speed of propagation, large coverage and reduced publication expenses.

A possible taxonomy of fake news

Hereinafter, we shall try to classify fake news into several categories according to its content and purpose, without pretending to develop an exhaustive list. This taxonomy does not include pamphlets or satirical news since this type of news does not intend to mislead and profit from the readers believing the stories even if, satirical news frequently use real events and people as subject of their satire.

Fake news can be:

- 100% false stories - On 5 November 2016, the Denver Guardian web site published an article positing that an FBI agent investigating Hillary Clinton's use of a private e-mail server killed himself after murdering his wife [5], the complete inaccuracy of the story was demonstrated by the www.snopes.com site [see Annex 1];
- Imprecise and fractionated stories – stories trying to stir emotions towards one particular entity involved in the narrative by presenting only parts of the information and blowing them out of proportion;
- Pure propaganda stories - Russia made public a false report of a rape by German soldiers in Lithuania with the purpose of undermining support for NATO's new eastern force [6];
- Stories built upon data misuse: misinterpreting scientific research studies and providing some eye catching information that is taken out of context and does not apply to the reading public e.g. "The amazing effects of soda upon health";
- Slanted stories – in September 2016 The Telegraph published an article "1 in 5 CEOs (chief executive officers) are Psychopaths, Study Finds" [7] which is not accurate in the information presented since the study was made on senior professionals in the U.S., more exactly supply chain managers and not CEOs [8].

Fake news may have multiple facets, depending on the very purpose it has been created for. Some stories aim just to gather more clicks and, therefore, more money, using the so-called *clickbait*, described by *Merriam Webster Dictionary* as "something (such as a headline) designed to

make readers want to click on a hyperlink especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest” [9]. This particular type of *fake news* uses parts of the actual event and distorts it so that the sensation it conveys would entice the audience to “click for more details”.

Other, however, have more mischievous purposes aiming to shape, reshape or change the public opinion so that a specific person or organization would benefit or be discredited. And these are the most important, especially in politics or the military context as they can significantly debilitate the public support for one politician or another or for the missions organised by the military organizations or alliances, thus diminishing resources and the implication invested in developing and supporting the respective activities. The example we shall consider below presents Russia’s involvement in actions meant to undermine the support for NATO's new eastern force. The North Atlantic Alliance’s growing concern since Russia's 2014 seizure of Ukraine's Crimea that Moscow could invade Poland or the Baltic States made it enforce its eastern flank with troops and equipment ready for a rapid response force of up to 40,000 personnel, actions which provoked a lot of anxiety in Russia. Consequently, Moscow started an insidious war of manipulation and disinformation saying that the Alliance build-up threatens the stability of central Europe. The allegations were aiming at diminishing the population’s trust and acceptance towards the Alliance by releasing false stories in the media like the article (based on an email sent to the speaker of Lithuania’s Parliament and the media from that country, email which was sent from an unidentifiable source and later deactivated), presenting the horrible behavior of the German soldiers in Lithuania where the troops were stationed. Soon after the story had been released to the media, it was demonstrated that Russia was behind the false report [6]. After this press attack European intelligence agencies reported that Moscow is also seeking to destabilize governments and influence elections with cyber attacks and fake news in the European state. There were rumors saying that Russia had also been involved in the French presidential campaign, but in this case, as well as in any other cases, Russia denied its involvement in the events.

As the title of the article says, *fake news* is just a new type of weapon in an old war, the discredit and manipulation war or, in more modern terms, *the information warfare*. The “Gerasimov’s Doctrine” (Valery Gherasimov is a Russian general who seems to have influenced the Russian military strategy), presents the information warfare as consisting of a blending of electronic, cyber and psychological warfare under the same line of effort [10]. This type of war, among other actions, transmits to the population a wide range of messages carefully tailored so that they will stir various feelings and attitudes from confusion to disloyalty to NATO values, thus leading to lack of support for NATO actions and even creating anti North-Atlantic Alliance attitudes. As a result, the support for the military actions of the public in a particular context will

be consistently diminished and additional efforts are required from the military personnel assigned to deal with these cases.

In another words, this concept represents the method through which military actions are targeted and undermined without firing a single shot. This new technique exploits the weaknesses of the nations, in general, and of the armed forces in particular, making the fight against this phenomenon imperative. It can influence the life of a person by building or destroying its private or public life, it can influence the future of an entire country or region when it interferes in the political or military life.

The battle against fake news

Fighting this “war” should not affect the freedom of speech but unfortunately, this could be one of the side effects of this endeavour. This situation should highlight the necessity of real and trustworthy media organizations and should also help develop means of educating the public on this matter. Therefore, developing a strategy against this insidious adversary should be based upon:

- a quick reaction to address the situation, presenting it as it really is/was/happened;
- avoiding to enter in a discussion with trolls (a person/entity who tries to stir people on the internet by starting arguments or controversial situations) using as this would only feed them to continue with the spread of the *fake news*, now that they have official answers to their claims;
- a consistent reaction as soon as more details are available, no matter what the outcome of the internal investigation (if the facts were false, the result should presented and the main purpose of the mission restated whereas, if the facts were deemed true, a thorough investigation should be launched and the incident condemned).

In 2016, NATO established the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga, Latvia aiming at countering adverse propaganda and raising public awareness towards NATO’s activities. The increase in number and importance of social networking sites, the speed at which information travels online, the dissolution of borders and cancelations of distances in the virtual world in and beyond NATO nations territory, directly affects the public perception of NATO actions. Since that perception is important and it can affect the success of NATO operations and policies, NATO developed a strategy based on “various channels, including the traditional media, internet-based media and public engagement, to build awareness, understanding, and support for its decisions and operations” [11]. It is obvious that Moscow is clever enough to use an indirect approach and it is very have to trace the story back to it. The story appears in Moscow, then it is placed on a Lithuanian website by hackers and then picked up by Latvian and Estonian outlets. Not

only does this method erase the Russian origins of the story, but it offers credibility to fake allegations so, the work is not easy, but it must be done.

The European Union reacted sooner to this information war and took the first steps to counter the attacks and to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns, in March 2015 when the East StratCom Task was established. The European Council represented by the High Representative in cooperation with EU institutions and Member States developed an action plan on strategic communication. StratCom Task leads proactive strategic communications campaigns, explaining key EU policy areas in order to create a positive EU image, it also tries to develop the EU capacity to anticipate and deal with disinformation activities by external actors [12].

Concluding remarks

Fake news is a new reality the society needs to face and there should be made real efforts to develop ways to stop or at least reduce this phenomenon.

After a calm period society was caught by surprise by the *fake news* phenomenon and things started to become acute for media organisations that commenced to organise themselves to face the problem. In the first place, *Google*, *Facebook* and *Twitter* teamed up in order to fight against the *fake news* phenomenon by creating apps and add-ons that would spot the news and remove it from their platforms.

The result is not obvious yet, the public space still includes these types of news however, more and more media groups started a process of thorough checking and double checking of the information and its sources. With this in mind, it is worth mentioning here the move of the German Government to draft a law against *Social media* outlets fining them with up to EUR 50 million if they fail to remove *fake news* from their networks [13].

Having said that, the military organizations (in our case the North Atlantic Alliance) and the governments need to tackle this issue at all levels so that they can avoid the waste of resources involved in a mission or exercise on a territory not properly assessed or prepared from the *information war* perspective. Therefore, at strategic level, nations should:

- acknowledge the phenomenon and create specific structures to address it through research, monitoring, and drafting specific procedures;
- draft national strategies against this phenomenon and seek support for them across the entire political spectrum.

In order to reduce the impact of this news before or during the launch of a military operation or exercise, those in charge with addressing *the fake news* at operational and tactical level should:

- train specialists who shall work in the contingents deployed to missions;
- develop contingency plans for crises associated to *fake news* propagation;

- ensure a close contact between host nation and troop contributing nations so the facts are quickly verified and the media relations management is clarified;
- monitoring adversary *Social* and *Traditional media* outlets to identify *fake news* in their initial stages;
- draft key messages and lines to be used in relation with the media and the publics in case such crises emerge.

To conclude in a less pessimistic way, we should perceive this moment as a possibility of saving or improving journalism because it has forced the news organizations to invest in fact-checking and even double checking. Journalists who are terrified of being accused of creating and propagating fake news invest a lot on the research process that lies behind any good article fact that leads to better quality work and rebuilding the public trust in the media.

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Annex 1

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a Snopes.com article. The address bar shows the URL www.snopes.com/fbi-agent-murder-suicide/. The page features a dark sidebar on the left with navigation options: What's New, Hot 50, Fact Check, News, Video, Archive, About, FAQ, Contact, and Random. The main content area is white and contains the following sections:

- CLAIM:** An FBI agent investigating Hillary Clinton's use of a private e-mail server killed himself after murdering his wife.
- RATING:** A large red octagonal icon with a white 'X' and the word **FALSE** in red text.
- ORIGIN:** On 5 November 2016, the Denver Guardian web site published an article positing that an FBI agent investigating Hillary Clinton's use of a private e-mail server killed himself after murdering his wife:
 - Walkerville, MD — An FBI agent believed to be responsible for the latest email leaks "pertinent to the investigation" into Hillary Clinton's private email server while she was Secretary of State, was found dead in an apparent murder-suicide early Saturday morning, according to police.
 - Investigators believe FBI agent, Michael Brown, 45, shot and killed his 33-year-old wife, Susan Brown, late Friday night before setting the couple's home on fire and then turning the gun on himself. Brown was a 12 year veteran of the Washington D.C. Metropolitan Police Department before spending the last six years in the FBI.
- A concluding paragraph: "There was no truth to this story. The Denver Guardian is simply a fake news web site masquerading as the online arm of a (non-existent) big city newspaper. Like the [Baltimore Gazette](#), the Denver Guardian is nothing more than a hastily thrown together web site with a bunch of non-working links and a fake [street address](#), all created for the sole purpose of disseminating fabricated clickbait news stories."

On the right side of the page, there is a 'Member' virus' section, a 'Most Shared' section with a 'View All >' link, and a 'Report Advertisement' button. The 'Most Shared' section lists several items:

- Lowes' Coupon Scam** (Fact Check > Inbox Rebellion) with 10K shares.
- Was a Protester Throwing Explosives Into a Berkeley Crowd Before She Was Punched?** (Fact Check > Crime) with 7K shares.
- Did a 1950s TV Episode Feature a Character Named Trump Who Offered to Build a Protective Wall?** (Fact Check > Entertainment) with 43K shares.
- Did Jeff Sessions Say He's Amazed a Judge 'On an Island in the Pacific' Can Block Executive Orders?** (Fact Check > Politics) with 4K shares.
- Ted Nugent Dodged the Draft?** (Fact Check > Political News) with 15K shares.

At the bottom right, there is an advertisement for SIGNATUREBRASOV.ro, a New York Style Apartments, with a price of 29,900 €.