~ EDITORIAL ~

THE IMPERATIVE OF DIGITAL LITERACY IN COMBATING "FAKE NEWS" INFORMATION

Ina Raluca TOMESCU

Associate Professor, Ph.D., "Constantin Brâncuși" University of Târgu Jiu

In the digital era, where fake news is a major problem, digital literacy becomes essential. This is not limited to the use of technology but also involves critical skills in evaluating information. Our editorial draws attention to the need to develop these skills, both individually and collectively, in educational institutions, to effectively combat misinformation and the negative influence of false information.

The impact of fake news on our society is profound and multifaceted (Tandoc et. al., 2017). These false pieces of information are not just communication errors but are tools of misinformation that undermine trust in institutions and lead to societal segregation. Their effects extend beyond politics, affecting public health (Mărcău et. al., 2022a) and quality of life (Peptan et. al., 2023). Economically, fake news can influence markets, causing fluctuations based on rumors. The fight against this phenomenon requires more than just regulations (Lazer et. al., 2018). It demands effective digital and media literacy, involving collaboration between government, media, and technology. This collective effort is essential for maintaining a well-informed and healthy society (Mărcău et. al., 2023).

Recent studies show that fake news is not just simple false news (Preda, 2020), but represents a more complex phenomenon, involving the creation of an alternate reality that serves the interests of the issuer (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). These pieces of information can induce false perceptions on various issues, thereby confirming existing biases (Mărcău et. al., 2023). Additionally, analyses show that fake news is more prevalent when people seek simplistic explanations for the complex problems of society (Mărcău et. al., 2022b).

On the other hand, the study of information itself, as a fundamental element in communication and knowledge, has expanded from theory to science. Academic approaches emphasize that information should not be reduced to the meaning of the term or concept, but must be viewed as a complex concept, with multiple meanings and implications. This is crucial in the current global context, where information can be used as a force for resolving or escalating conflicts (Peptan, 2021).

Therefore, developing the skills to analyze information found in the public space becomes imperative (Peptan, 2020). This is not only to discern the message and its correct meaning but also to navigate through the sea of information and distinguish between what is real and what is fabricated. In

this complex landscape, the analysis of open source information and professional ethics in the intelligence field become more relevant than ever (Peptan, 2021b).

This context highlights the need to evaluate trust in information mediums, as well as the responsibilities involved in combating fake news and misinformation. In the digital age, every individual becomes an active consumer of information, and discernment and critical thinking are essential for navigating this informational universe (Peptan, 2021a, 2021b).

Beyond its internal impact, fake news has the power to strain international relations, causing distrust and misunderstandings between states (Tomescu, 2013). In the context of cybersecurity, the spread of this information through digital channels raises serious security concerns, paving the way for cyber attacks that can have severe consequences.

Moreover, the phenomenon cannot be overlooked in terms of national security and combating terrorism. Extremist and terrorist propaganda, often cloaked in the guise of fake news, contributes to radicalization and recruitment, amplifying risks to internal security (Tomescu, 2017).

As we conclude our analysis of the profound and multifaceted impact of fake news on our society, highlighted by recent research (Mărcău et al., 2022a; Peptan et al., 2023), it becomes clear that digital literacy is not just a luxury, but an urgent necessity. This complex phenomenon, which creates alternative realities and amplifies prejudices (Mărcău et al., 2023), requires a much more sophisticated approach than simply the ability to use technology.

Digital literacy means developing critical skills for evaluating information, a task that must be both individual and collective, involving educational institutions at all levels. The importance of this aspect is amplified by the prevalence of fake news in environments characterized by a low level of education (Mărcău et al., 2022b), suggesting that effective education can play a crucial role in combating misinformation.

Besides internal effects, fake news also affects international relations, creating tensions and misunderstandings between states (Tomescu, 2013), and has a direct impact on national security and the fight against terrorism (Tomescu, 2017). This context further underscores the need for comprehensive digital literacy, which includes not only discernment and critical thinking but also a deep understanding of how information is presented and distributed in the digital age.

In conclusion, the complex approach to fake news, from analyzing the source to understanding societal impact, urges us to recognize that digital literacy is key to a well-informed society, resilient to misinformation, and capable of navigating the challenges of the digital era (Ruchansky et. al., 2017). This is not just an individual responsibility but a collective commitment that requires coordinated efforts at the level of the entire society.

Starting in 2023, the "Constantin Brâncuși" University of Târgu Jiu funded an internal grant aimed at investigating the impact of 'fake news' type information during recent crises in Romania. This study, titled The negative influences of 'fake news' type information on the population of Romania during recent crises, explores the challenges to individual and collective security in the current world, influenced by the presence of fake news. The work is structured in two parts: The first part: Security in the modern world. This section examines the concept of security and the importance of information in the context of security. It also addresses the issue of fake news and its impact on society. The second part: The impact of fake news in security issues. This part analyzes how fake news influences various security issues, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the military crisis in Ukraine, the economic contraction in Europe, and the seismic movements in Northern Oltenia. The study provides a deeper understanding of the impact of fake news in Romania and can contribute to the development of media education policies and strategies.

REFERENCES

Mărcău, F.-C., Purec, S., & Niculescu, G. (2022a). Study on the refusal of vaccination against COVID-19 in Romania. Vaccines, 10(2), 261. https://doi.org/10.3390/vaccines10020261

Ruchansky, N., Seo, S., & Liu, Y. (2017). CSI: A Hybrid Deep Model for Fake News Detection. In Proceedings of the 2017 ACM on Conference on Information and Knowledge Management (CIKM '17) (pp. 797-806). ACM. https://doi.org/10.1145/3132847.3132877

Peptan, C., Holt, A. G., Iana, S. A., Sfinteş, C., Iov, C. A., & Mărcău, F. C. (2023). Considerations of the impact of seismic strong ground motions in Northern Oltenia (Romania) on some indicators of sustainable development characterization of the region from a security perspective. Sustainability, 15(17), 12865.

Marcau, F. C., Peptan, C., Băleanu, V. D., Holt, A. G., Iana, S. A., & Gheorman, V. (2023). Analysis regarding the impact of 'fake news' on the quality of life of the population in a region affected by earthquake activity: The case of Romania-Northern Oltenia. Frontiers in Public Health, 11, 1244564.

Mărcău, F. C., Peptan, C., Nedelcuţă, R. M., Băleanu, V. D., Băleanu, A. R., & Niculescu, B. (2022b). Parental COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy for children in Romania: National survey. Vaccines, 10(4), 547. https://doi.org/10.3390/vaccines10040547

Marcau FC, Peptan C, Gorun HT, Baleanu VD and Gheorman V (2022), Analysis of the impact of the armed conflict in Ukraine on the population of Romania. Front. Public Health 10:964576. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2022.964576

Peptan, C. (2021a). A plea for intelligence analysis. Annals of the "Constantin Brancuşi" University of Târgu-Jiu, Letter and Social Science, 1/2021, 91-104. Retrieved from https://alss.utgjiu.ro/1-2021/

Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31(2), 211-236.

Peptan, C. (2020). Knowledge and security in modern society through intelligence. Annals of the "Constantin Brancusi" University of Târgu-Jiu, Letter and Social Science, 1/2020, 83-88. Retrieved from https://alss.utgjiu.ro/1-2020/

Tandoc Jr., E. C., Lim, Z. W., & Ling, R. (2018). Defining "Fake News". Digital Journalism, 6(2), 137-153. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143

Peptan, C. (2021b). Intelligence institutions, between transparency and secrecy. Astra Salvensis, 1/2021, 249-260. Retrieved from https://astrasalvensis.eu/2021-1/

Lazer, D. M. J., et al. (2018). The science of fake news. Science, 359, 1094-1096. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aao2998

Tomescu, I. C. (2013). Environmental security of the European Union, International Multidisciplinary Scientific GeoConference: SGEM, **Sofia** Vol. 2, : Surveying Geology & Mining Ecology Management (SGEM). (2013): 679-684.

Tomescu, I. C. (2017). Will terrorism advance new world order, Analele Universităţii "Constantin Brâncuşi" Tg-Jiu, seria Litere şi Ştiinţe Sociale, Supliment 1/2017, 81-88.

Preda, A. E. (2020). Policy brief: Fake news, dezinformare şi securitate naţională. Depăşirea efectelor negative ce pot apărea în societate în urma dezinformării generate de sharp power, Retrieved from: https://uefiscdi.gov.ro/news-policy-accelerator-hub-rezultatele-primei-editii