Fake News Is Bad News
Hoaxes, Half-truths and the Nature of Today's Journalism

Edited by Ján Višňovský and Jana Radošinská

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Preface

To us, this book, *Fake News Is Bad News – Hoaxes, Half-truths and the Nature of Today's Journalism*, is unique for multiple reasons. First, its challenging main purpose—to offer an interdisciplinary body of scholarly knowledge on fake news, disinformation and propaganda in relation to today's journalism, social development, political situation and cultural affairs happening all around the world—has become even more difficult to fulfill over the last twelve months, which can be defined as 'the year the Earth stood still' (let us hope that it is actually appropriate to use this widely known popular culture reference). Second, COVID-19 has made us much more careful, a bit more empathetic and maybe even somewhat more pessimistic regarding today's journalism and its pitfalls. Third, while offering our feedback to the authors contributing to this publication, we found it quite interesting and maybe even intriguing to see that whenever we come from and whatever we want to discuss in relation to contemporary journalism, there is one focal point that unites us all: the essential idea of quality journalism, with everything it should provide, now confronted with the omnipresence of fake news, disinformation, conspiracies and other public communication deficiencies that may threaten the ways we live our lives, influence what we think or make us act in an inappropriate manner.

Regardless, even during the pandemic we still live in the era of the digital revolution, which is characterized by easy access to obtaining, processing and disseminating information on a global scale. These global digital spaces transformed the world of communication years ago. The given shift in our understanding of what we should be informed about, when and how, manifests itself not only within mature liberal democracies, which grant their citizens and the media constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech and rights associated with obtaining information, but also within developing countries with different types of political establishments. Moreover, many media producers, especially journalists and persons claiming to be journalists, abuse their crucial mission and, instead, foster a set of serious communication flaws that, in fact, threaten basic human rights and freedoms, weaken them or make their development impossible.

The publication is focused on the ways fake news, disinformation, misinformation and hateful statements are spread across society, predominantly via the online environment. It offers an interdisciplinary body of scholarly knowledge on fake news, disinformation and propaganda in relation to today's journalism, social development, political situation and cultural affairs. The book is divided into two sections that outline the thematic differences between the individual chapters. The first section, which over eight chapters offers a collection of interdisciplinary reflections on understanding fake news and disinformation, includes theoretical as well as empirical knowledge. The second section, consisting of five chapters, focuses on the regional and local contexts of the issue in question.

As our introductory chapter outlines the discussed topics in light of the contemporary trends in journalism, its aim is to identify which aspects of journalistic practice have changed lately, and why. The main line of thought follows global as well as national

(in our case Slovakian) problems of journalism and media communication that will have to be addressed thoroughly and with respect to the global pandemic; a situation similar to those previous generations had to face repeatedly, but which has never been experienced by most people living today. The COVID-19 outbreak has created a new, rather hostile communication environment; even the most skilled and experienced media professionals have never encountered anything like it.

Another communication situation no one was truly prepared for is discussed by Thomas Froehlich. Donald Trump's era had its notable communication specifics, which took by surprise not only journalists, reporters, political scientists and media analysts but also PR specialists and media scholars. The author explains how misinformation/disinformation campaigns reshape the political 'arena', and why they offer remarkable opportunities to politically engaged individuals, who do not communicate as state officials should and do not want to be called politicians in the first place. Froehlich's interdisciplinary view on the topic examines the ways in which disinformation and misinformation spread across the media environment, confusing their recipients and thus distorting social communication at global, national, regional and local levels.

It is obvious that pieces of disinformation and the fake news would not be so appealing and convincing if they were not elaborated in detail and then presented so casually and confidently. Nowadays, we are encountering a rather dangerous phenomenon; audiences, as well as media professionals themselves, are sometimes unable to spot the (often subtle) remaining differences between real news and fake news. The questions of how is that possible and what can we do about it are addressed by Zuzana Kvetanová, Anna Kačincová Predmerská and Magdaléna Švecová. The authors offer their own empirical study on selected Slovak news portals to demonstrate how the methods of debunking fake news and misinformation should be used in a solid or rather functional manner.

While acknowledging the serious society-wide consequences of inauthentic media images of the world around us, Eleonora Shestakova warns that the small, seemingly unimportant things we tend to overlook are just as crucial. The author's study focuses on the concept of 'lightweight and simplified truth', uncovering the subtle and inconspicuous ways fake news and disinformation, calculative and potentially dangerous distortions of reality, manipulate our moods, emotions and lives.

In contrast, Elena Danescu brings a detailed insight into a time of digital disruption' driven by digital media. The author works with the basic assumption that our perceptions of the words 'democracy', 'freedom' and 'truth' are changing significantly. One of the focal purposes of the study is to discuss legislation frameworks associated with freedom of information and freedom of expression by referring to international initiatives and strategic documents. Explaining why digital media can be seen as a driving force of both technological progress and the emergence of a democratic society, Danescu's line of thought aims to underline new challenges media professionals and lawmakers will have to tackle and opportunities that may emerge in the near future, despite the contemporary situation.

Centering attention on the term 'fake news' and seeing it as a phenomenon disvaluing the journalistic practice, Sulaiman A. Osho offers his reflection on ideological constructs of news. As the author suggests, fake news rejects and contradicts all existing news values and therefore it is not supposed to be called 'news' at all.

Fake news is thus characterized as a total negation of both journalism values and news values, which reaches far beyond the 'disinformation scene' and influences today's journalism as a whole.

The next chapter outlines the categories, causes and consequences of fake news. Dumebi Otulugbu considers both global communication trends and the ways fake news is perceived in Nigeria, adding a set of regional or rather national contexts. The author also discusses how the largest Internet companies deal with the related issues, concluding that there is so much more that needs to be done to if not improve, than at least stabilize the contemporary situation.

Discussing one of the most interesting phenomena of digital communication, so-called Internet memes, Jon-Chao Hong, Ming-Yueh Hwang and Kai-Hsin Tai focus on functional food messages. Their chapter offers both a thorough reflection on online behavior patterns in relation to value expectation and an empirical inquiry. As the authors suggest, the ways in which people create, replicate and share memes about functional food is heavily influenced by their individual personality traits.

As noted above, the second section of the publication includes five chapters. Although the individual chapters are thematically diverse, they partly share one ultimate goal – the necessity of underlining the fact that fake news, disinformation and other related communication phenomena manifest themselves within local and regional frameworks as well, posing multiple threats to economically developing countries and young democracies.

Philip Effiom Ephraim's chapter places emphasis on the fact that in the twenty-first century, the radio may not be the most commercially interesting mass medium, but radio communication still preserves its unique features. The author establishes a complex scholarly discussion on how radio can be useful when public health information needs to be spread quickly and efficiently. As the chapter warns that the dissemination of disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic within Nigerian society has become a serious problem, radio is identified as a potentially key means of providing the public with quality information, warnings and advice associated with current safety measures.

Stating that news sources in Venezuela are steadily narrowing, Andres Cañizalez, León Hernández and Luisa Torrealba outline key challenges faced by the Venezuelan media environment. The chapter proceeds from the general theoretical framework of fake news and disinformation to the current political situation in the country, which is unsteady and marked by restricting regulatory mechanisms applied to the sphere of media production. According to the authors, ethics-based journalism relying on fact-checked information may be the only real answer left; general trust in what we read, see or hear needs to be rebuilt carefully.

Another serious regional problem, this time associated with pieces of fake news and the phenomenon of post-truth politics, is addressed by Robert Nanche Billa. The topic in question gains even more relevance and severity when connected to a specific situation or event, in this case to crimes against humanity committed during the 2020 Ngarbuh Massacre. The author's analysis of media coverage on the massacre is divided into multiple segments, as his intention is to outline how this event was perceived and commented on by state officials, human rights organizations, religious authorities and social media discourses.

The penultimate chapter of the publication is focused on fake news and disinformation concerning xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa. Its author, Umejei Emeka, is particularly interested in xenophobia (and expressions of violence associated with it). The text identifies social media as a key driving force of the rise of disinformation with serious consequences. The theoretical framework is followed by the author's own empirical inquiry into motivations of those who have shared misinformation and disinformation on xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa via social networking sites.

Reacting to the COVID-19 'infodemic' in relation to Indian media and their thematic agendas, Kinshuk Pathak argues that since the outbreak of COVID-19 at the end of 2019, we have witnessed, thus far, an unseen amount of misleading information, rumors, fake news, conspiracies and disinformation. The author's aim is to identify parallels and differences between contents of selected news websites of Indian news channels via desktop analysis. As noted, addressing this 'infodemic' is a difficult challenge; it seems it is next to impossible to combat fake news and, at the same time, convince media audiences to seek authentic information instead.

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Section 1

Theoretical and Empirical Outlines of Understanding Fake News and Disinformation

Introductory Chapter: Journalism Facing Both Pandemic and 'Infodemic'

Ján Višňovský and Jana Radošinská

1. Introduction

The 21st century once used to be seen as an era when journalism would have to face many new challenges related to digital communication environments; for example, decrease in readership and circulation of the 'traditional press', or digitalisation that would be both user-friendly and progressive. Nevertheless, the third Millennium was also supposed to build a brave new world filled with knowledge, unlimited opportunities and novel, previously unimaginable ways of processing information. As we believe, these anticipations, however accurate and realistic they seemed to appear two decades ago, now need to confront reality. It does not mean that we are hesitant to acknowledge that journalism has, indeed, progressed; we only underline the fact that this confrontation may be important and exciting in terms of academic inquiry, but not entirely pleasant to experience in practice.

While talking about what is new in journalism and how we are supposed to reflect on it, a few years ago we used to discuss a plethora of important topics. Most of these issues are still relevant and anything but resolved. Today, media-disseminated news and opinions outline how we perceive public authorities and international organisations more than ever [1]. There is also so much left to say about how media outlets and individual journalists cover serious social problems such as racial disparities, manifestations of intolerance, or causes of social misrecognition [2]. Technological aspects are equally important as well, since we are not far from the moment when automatised software will be able to replace at least some people working as journalists. The issue of robot journalism is thus becoming increasingly important to address [3, 4]. Moreover, value-based conflicts between different civilisation frameworks have only grown stronger. As noted by Lipovetsky, we are now able to be informed about anything; even the most remote parts of the world may be a part of the global scene. This "airport cosmopolitism" outlines the everyday experience of the globalised world, which is shaped by ecological threats, swift spread of infectious diseases, market mechanisms, spiralling financial crises, migration waves, acts of international terrorism, world events that ignore any boundaries between nation states and continents, and so on [5]. Let us remind ourselves that Lipovetsky wrote this in 2010, i.e., more than a decade ago. Since then, we have learned to accept these phenomena or, at least, we have acknowledged their existence and seriousness. What has made all the difference is the worldwide spread of the highly infectious disease known as COVID-19 (or the novel coronavirus). Our introductory chapter thus aims to explore the new contexts brought by the pandemic, but without forgetting about the problems journalism has been facing over the last two or maybe three decades.

As 'traditional' journalistic expressions are largely preferred and accessed by middle-aged people and older generations of readers, today's journalism will have to find out how to attract young recipients and, what is even more important, how to fulfil their particular expectations [6]. We may say that anything the media inform us about can be seen as a story. In other words, all pieces of news and opinions are, more or less, driven by their narrative qualities. This is how media audiences establish their parasocial relationships with fictitious or 'everyday' heroes; and this is why we consider media stories to be so attractive and worthy of our attention. However, the moment when the COVID-19 pandemic became a global problem can be seen as a breaking point – suddenly, journalists and other media professionals realised it was necessary to seek new heroes and create new types of stories; all that while trying to process what was happening in a comprehensible manner. Of course, their not-so-professional counterparts, while still making their profit by spreading fake news and disinformation, started to explore the quickly worsening situation in accordance with their own agendas. As a result, a COVID-19 'infodemic' was born.

2. Journalism meeting COVID-19

If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us clearly that there is a fragile and very blurry boundary between what is systematic and sensible, and what is chaotic, socially pathological and nourished by human fear. Thus, the related 'infodemic' is, according to World Health Organisation (WHO), "too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviors that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response. An infodemic can intensify or lengthen outbreaks when people are unsure about what they need to do to protect their health and the health of people around them". As further noted by WHO, there are no other ways to eliminate this 'infodemic' but four key activities – listening to community concerns and questions; promoting understanding of risk and health expert advice; building resilience to misinformation; and engaging and empowering communities to take positive action [7]. In other words, what we need is to explore new ways to foster participatory culture [8, 9].

Besides taking lives and throwing our public authorities into turmoil, which is deepened by delayed reactions, repeated lockdowns and contradictory decisions, the pandemic has shown that it is not only our bodies and health systems that are vulnerable. Our minds and the values we stand for are in danger as well. Moreover, 'infodemic', this invisible threat, that infects our minds and leaves us both confused and stricken by panic, is often spread across the essential communication space we turn to when we are not exactly sure what is happening around us and how we are supposed to react – the sphere of journalism. Our communication system has been 'infected' by fake news, hoaxes and disinformation, which stand in our way, effectively disabling any attempts to return journalism to where it truly belongs – to the information exchanges saturated by relevant issues, essential public discussions and the idea of progress. Nowadays, it is not rare to encounter harmful social actors such as social media bots, hostile secret services and their intelligence officers, paid trolls, websites spreading fake news that is absolutely convincing and elaborated to the smallest detail, or conspiracy theorists, who intentionally distort other people's worldviews and challenge or openly contradict scientific knowledge. Feeding fake news to people, who may be, in their nature, very suspicious and cautious, and yet so inclined to believe various absurdities, these actors (ab)use online social media

services, once believed to be the greatest achievement in human communication, to actually rob journalism off the most precious, absolutely irreplaceable feature it possesses – people's trust.

In 2017, when Collins English Dictionary picked the term "fake news" as the word of the year, its editors primarily referred to public speeches and social media postings of the (now former) American President Donald Trump, who used this expression excessively, mainly to discredit or otherwise eliminate his political opponents and critics of his administration. Even though "fake news" was nothing new back then, Trump's tendency to label any critical or unfavourable reactions to his tweets as "fake news" certainly made its mark. The phrase started to resonate across all media industries and communication spheres. According to Collins English Dictionary, in 2017, the use of the phrase "fake news" in the media increased by more than 365% – compared to 2016 [10]. However, the situation has escalated since then. The processes of labelling news as 'fake' or, vice versa, insisting that fake news is actually up-to-date and genuine, have become inherent parts of the mainstream media discourse. It does not help that today's media culture is saturated by resourceful (real and fictitious alike) stories about corruption, medical misconducts and arrogance expressed by the rich and powerful. Narratives, which depict various forms of the end of the world and destruction of humanity, or anti-utopic visions of the future, have been excessively popular as well. The formal attributes of creating and presenting these stories are so realistic that media audiences sometimes see them as 'more real' than any objective facts [11]. It may be presumed that the given disorientation and anxiety of media recipients have only become more intense since spring 2020, when the media started to massively disseminate real as well as specious pieces of news on the COVID-19 global pandemic.

It is only natural that the moment the world was struck by the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, social and media discourses started to acknowledge that this unprecedented pandemic walks hand-in-hand with the 'infodemic' built upon disinformation, hoaxes, dangerous half-truths and propaganda. At present, there can be no doubt that the pandemic caused by the coronavirus is the first large media pandemic of the 21st century, which has been, to a large extent, determined by the media themselves. As outlined by Deuze, "it is perhaps also not surprising, from this point of view, that most of the debates and discussions about the pandemic do not just concern the virus and its impact, but focus especially on the roles of expert information provision, news coverage, government communications, and social media. It is clear that the coronavirus pandemic is a mediatized event as much as it is a virus that infects millions of people around the world" [12].

As expected, one of the first inauthentic pieces of news on COVID-19 was spread via social networking sites. The message claimed that wearing personal protection equipment, such as masks and respirators, slows down our reflexes and cripples our senses due to constantly inhaling one's own exhaled carbon dioxide. Another case can be classified as a conspiracy theory, since the information claimed that the novel coronavirus had been created artificially and purposefully, in Chinese laboratories. Reacting to this rapidly spreading allegation, the United States of America blamed China for creating COVID-19, while, in turn, Russians and Iranians blamed the U.S. Moreover, a number of hoaxes could be identified – for instance, those saying that COVID-19 is spread via 5G networks and can be 'eliminated' by drinking alcoholic beverages; or those claiming that testing for COVID, also called swabbing, as the sample is collected by inserting a swab into a person's nasopharyngeal cavity, is, in fact, a hidden method of infecting (in another version, damaging) the tested person's brain; or those insisting that coronavirus does not exist at all [13]. There are hundreds of different pieces of disinformation and hoaxes related to COVID-19. Their influence is quite obvious if we consider how many people question the ways,

in which vaccines preventing the disease were created, tested and/or approved for emergency use. In Slovakia, the Ministry of Health established its information-based portal *www.slovenskoproticovidu.sk* very late, in January 2021. The portal's main purpose is to inform the general public about vaccination, its benefits and also possible side effects. The website also introduces publicly known personalities who have decided to participate in Slovakian information campaign related to vaccination, which is titled 'Vaccine Is Freedom' [14]. The presence of various celebrities with good personal reputation, as well as Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová, is starting to strengthen the campaign's initially low reach.

Social media, especially social networking sites, are not only exceptionally efficient tools for spreading disinformation and hoaxes, but also the necessary precondition of their further dissemination across all aspects of social life [15]. Generally, the level of critical thinking and the willingness to verify information from multiple sources are relatively low, making the recipient inclined to trust and disseminate disinformation and conspiracies – whether consciously or unconsciously [16]. According to the survey *Globsec Voices of Central and Eastern Europe* conducted in June 2020, 56% of Slovak citizens believe that disinformation and conspiracy theories are, in fact, genuine news. Slovakia thus reached the worst percentage of all surveyed countries, taking the last place after Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary [17]. During the pandemic, people's interest in online and television news has increased significantly; on the other hand, weaknesses of media organisations have been revealed concurrently. These include incompetence and unprofessionalism in relation to informing about medical topics due to the absence of qualified reporters that would be interested specifically in this area. Moreover, many 'mainstream' media outlets have decided to take the easiest and least demanding route towards increasing their readership; by publishing disinformation and hoaxes, which is now reflected in the above-mentioned decline in the credibility of news as such. According to Digital News Report 2020, published by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, only 28% of respondents living in Slovakia deem news trustworthy, while the trust level fell by 5% compared to 2019 [18]. And this trend was not visible only in case of Slovakia, but also in other European countries.

3. Fighting disinformation and hoaxes

The first step we need to take in order to eliminate disinformation and other kinds of distorted or fraudulent images of reality is acknowledging that this is a systemic problem. That is why the related issues are addressed by multiple international organisations. The European Commission and its executive bodies, as well as the Member States, are obviously aware of the need to combat disinformation and hoaxes. The European Commission stated that "the coronavirus pandemic has been accompanied by a massive wave of false and misleading information, attempts by foreign actors to influence domestic debates in the EU, breeding on the fertile ground of people's most basic anxieties and the rapidly changing news cycle. Misleading healthcare information, dangerous hoaxes with false claims conspiracy theories and consumer fraud endanger public health" [19]. In recent years, the European Union institutions have developed several strategic documents that have defined the basic outlines of anti-disinformation activities at the European level, including the documents 'Tackling Online Disinformation: A European Approach' and 'Action Plan against Disinformation'. These are framework documents that have identified specific steps that need to be taken to preserve democratic values in Europe. At the same time, they serve as a starting point for the subsequent creation of strategic documents that would specify how to deal with disinformation, in

particular 'The European Democracy Action Plan' and 'The Digital Services Act' [19]. In its joint statement presented on 26th March 2020, The Council of the European Union claimed that "the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes an unprecedented challenge for Europe and the whole world. It requires urgent, decisive, and comprehensive action at the EU, national, regional and local levels. We will do everything that is necessary to protect our citizens and overcome the crisis, while preserving our European values and way of life". The declaration contains 22 different statements. The fourth statement declares: "We will resolutely counter disinformation with transparent, timely and fact-based communication on what we are doing and thus reinforce the resilience of our societies" [20]. Considering the facts mentioned above, we may confirm that the European Union has taken the outlined problems quite seriously. However, finding solutions to the identified issues is a long-term process that will be very hard to go through with successfully.

There is no doubt that modern technologies, which are able to help us with debunking disinformation shared across the Internet, are amongst the most efficient tools for progressive elimination of fake news and disinformation. The European Research Council (ERC) and the Horizon 2020 research strategy recognise several actions, which are supposed to lead us towards better understanding of disinformation circulating online. However, the most difficult challenge to tackle is to develop new, more efficient tools for content verification. The ERC projects Comprop and Botfind thus aim to find out how automated systems for spreading and targeting propaganda impact public discourse in Europe. Another ERC project, Debunker, reflects on the problem of misperceptions around societal issues within the European population and possible strategies to reduce their impact. Moreover, the Horizon 2020 project Invid focuses on developing tools to verify audio-visual content. As it seems, these tools are essential, considering that technologies able to tamper with video and create deepfakes are increasingly easy to access and use. Another Horizon 2020 project, Fandango, seeks solutions that should help 'traditional' media to detect false narratives, that are spread online, more easily [21].

In case of Slovak Republic, a few months ago the government pushed 'The Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic', according to which Slovakia's strategic security interests need to include the readiness of the state and society to respond to hybrid threats (such as disinformation) effectively and in a coordinated manner. Maintaining a functioning cybernetic, information and communication security system is a priority. The strategy thus responds to the general need to address global as well as local security challenges and threats. We may identify a growing number and wider scope of subversive and coercive activities of various actors using disinformation and propaganda in order to disrupt or manipulate decision-making mechanisms within the state, influence public opinion in their favour and destabilise the political situation. The document also acknowledges that the general public is exposed to an increasing amount of disinformation and conspiracy theories that can and will endanger human health, disrupt the cohesion of society or provoke public violence and social unrest. Probably the most significant hybrid activity is manifested by the targeted dissemination of propaganda and disinformation attacking the country's democratic establishment and Slovakia's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the EU. That is why it is absolutely necessary to cope with early identification and evaluation of disinformation, and then respond to it by implementing systemic measures. There is no other way to do so than through the development of critical thinking [22]. Given the used terminology and the manner, in which the document reflects on possible risks emerging within the global communication system, this field of interest reaches far beyond the boundaries of media production and journalistic profession.

In April 2020, the analytical department of the Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic published an analysis titled 'Infodemic. Disinformation and COVID-19'. The analysis openly admits the information space of the Slovak Republic is prone to the spread of disinformation, conspiracies and fake news [23]. Most of these pathological communication phenomena aim to question the Euro-Atlantic orientation of Slovakia, challenge the European Union's ability to function at all levels and portray various countries, that are ideologically and politically incompatible with the U.S. and its allies, as 'victims' of the evil West. These communication processes are driven by so-called alternative media as well as by some politicians.

4. Conclusion: rebuilding trust in journalism

Even though our notes on 'infodemic journalism' born in the time of the pandemic are by no means comprehensive and absolute, we believe that we have outlined what needs to change, and why. As remarked by Martinisi and Lugo-Ocando, we might even assert that this 'infodemic' has quickly developed into what they call 'datademic'. Struck by the pandemic, countries all around the world are competing with each other, in an unhealthy manner, on "who has the lower number of deaths and whose ideological and power model is the best to face such a pandemic" [24]. Moreover, today's journalism often depresses people instead of enriching their lives. This loss of trust in the media is further stimulated and deepened by the recipients' perceptions of media bias and the opinion and value polarisation of society. Most audience members tend to relate only to media organisations that disseminate information consistent with their own beliefs; other sources of information providing different views of the same problems are automatically ignored. According to Bell, it is therefore a shocking paradox that the Internet, once considered a miraculous technological tool that can break down the barriers between people, that is able to carry an unprecedented amount of information accessible in a few seconds, does not actually connect people. Instead, digital media drive us to our own corners. In Bell's words which, in the context of the above-mentioned statements, do not seem to be exaggerated at all, one of the most fundamental problems of journalism is its current internal organisation in relation to the recipients: "We have a broken media industry because we have broken the confidence of our audience." [25]. To put it differently, it feels unpleasant to admit that media outlets, both online and offline, unknowingly or willingly, adopt the practices perfected by conspiracy media just because it is economically convenient; just because that is what some of their audiences expect.

The outlined parallels between the COVID-19 pandemic and the 'infodemic' tell us that the only true 'cure' is, in both cases, a systemic, long-term strategic plan that would be easy enough to follow and, what is even more important, accepted by media professionals and their audiences alike. This may sound like a *cliché*, but we need to be careful and patient. These problems are so complex, so deeply rooted, that we are simply unable to cover them (let alone, *solve* them) by populist measures, guerrilla marketing strategies or easy action plans. The good news is that the current political situation suggests the pandemic does not 'suit' populists, who have emerged and risen to power in good times, thanks to catchy phrases, strategically flawless online campaigns or the ability to 'ride on the waves' of common people's emotions.

Despite everything, journalism still preserves its capability of being more than just a watchdog of societal progress, more than just a mirror of the late modern society, in which we can clearly see our cynicism, value emptiness and little to no

empathy, lack of solidarity with the weakest and the most vulnerable. Journalism needs to rebuild its position of a socially and culturally progressive driving force that offers objective and complex information, competent opinions and comprehensible, yet professionally processed analyses. All these pillars need to withstand the pressure of diverse external factors. One of them is the cacophony of critical voices. They mostly belong to media audiences, who are familiar with all technical and technological principles of multiplatform communication, but rarely interested in reconsidering their rigid worldviews. Nevertheless, we believe now is the right time to seek a new way to confront the relentless economic imperatives of the media industry, the pressures of various interest groups, and the essential need to offer quality, adequately processed information and opinions. Based on what we already know about the pandemic and its tragic consequences, perhaps it is not too bold to claim that what journalists publish, and how it is processed, may change much of what we will experience in the near future. The last years have shown that multi-platform journalism might be as progressive as it gets, technologically superior and easy to access, but also vulnerable when it comes to wider social controversies that mistake politics for popularity contests, science for a matter of individual opinion, or truth for something to deny, refuse or distort.

Acknowledgements

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A Disinformation-Misinformation Ecology: The Case of Trump

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Abstract

This paper lays out many of the factors that make disinformation or misinformation campaigns of Trump successful. By all rational standards, he is unfit for office, a compulsive liar, incompetent, arrogant, ignorant, mean, petty, and narcissistic. Yet his approval rating tends to remain at 40%. Why do rational assessments of his presidency fail to have any traction? This paper looks at the conflation of knowledge and beliefs in partisan minds, how beliefs lead to self-deception and social self-deception and how they reinforce one another. It then looks at psychological factors, conscious and unconscious, that predispose partisans to pursue partisan sources of information and reject non-partisan sources. It then explains how these factors sustain the variety and motivations of Trump supporters' commitment to Trump. The role of cognitive authorities like *Fox News* and right-wing social media sites are examined to show how the power of these media sources escalates and reinforces partisan views and the rejection of other cognitive authorities. These cognitive authorities also use emotional triggers to inflame Trump supporters, keeping them addicted by feeding their anger, resentment, or self-righteousness. The paper concludes by discussing the dynamics of the Trump disinformation-misinformation ecology, creating an Age of Inflamed Grievances.

Keywords: Trumpism, disinformation, cognitive authority, *Fox News*, social media, propaganda, inflamed grievances, psychology of disinformation, Donald Trump, media, self-deception, social self-deception

1. Introduction

This paper investigates how disinformation-misinformation campaigns, particularly in the political arena, succeed and why they are so hard to challenge, defeat, or deflect. In order to address this topic, the research here draws on many fields: information studies, psychology, philosophy, communication studies, and media studies, among others. The examples studied here are the disinformation campaigns that made Donald Trump the United States president, sustain his continuation in office, and promote his reelection.

Disinformation occurs when the originator of the information intends to deceive. Misinformation need not involve intent; it is merely false. The problem is that in many cases it is not clear whether it is one or the other because of an ambiguous context or questions as to whether misinformation is being used in the service of disinformation (e.g., fake cures for the coronavirus). The use of the hyphenated terms underscores their interaction for this paper. By any measure, much of the rhetoric supporting Donald Trump is disinformation. By any moral

or political standard, he is unfit for office, a compulsive liar, incompetent, arrogant, corrupt, ignorant, criminal, mean, petty, and narcissistic. Trump and his enablers, the Republican Party, his administration, his news channels and media, and his supporters are responsible for the deaths of thousands of Americans due to incompetent management of the coronavirus pandemic, the collapse of American democratic norms and the rule of law, and the cruel treatment of immigrants, just to name some of the most prominent failures. In an academic paper, the author is typically enjoined from making such an assessment, but rational people, scientists, political leaders, psychologists, and experts of many shades (many from the president's own party) concur with this evaluation. Trustworthy, evidence-based sources establish broad consensus among all but Republican officials and the president's electoral base. For example, there are articles that discuss Trump's character and authoritarian tendencies [1, 2], his continuous lying [3], his unaccomplished promises [4, 5], his impeachment (almost all Democrats and some Republicans believed that he was guilty), and his use of the Federal government to cover his crimes [6], to name a few.

The QAnon conspiracy theory is perhaps the most extreme disinformation campaign supporting Donald Trump's reelection. The theory claims that Democrats, all of Hollywood, and other liberal elites are involved in the sex-trafficking of children and murder of children to extend the life of the elites, who have found a way to brew the fountain of youth from the blood of innocents. Trump is the Messiah who fights the so-called "deep state" (a clandestine network entrenched inside the government, bureaucracy, intelligence agencies, and other governmental entities, who secretly manipulate government and government policy). He alone can be trusted. All of his opponents, Democrats and Republicans, are complicit in years of wrongdoing. Redemption will come with a military takeover and mass arrests of the guilty parties. According to the theory, Donald Trump is defending the country from these elites and non-Christians (America is a Christian nation) from this deep-state conspiracy. The director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Anthony Fauci, is a deep state plant, and hydroxychloroquine, which the president hyped as a treatment and preventative of COVID-19, a claim that scientists have debunked, is the key to addressing the pandemic [7]. When Trump made an error in one of his tweets, by typing 'covfefe' instead of 'coverage,' his fans thought it was a secret Arabic message [8]. One researcher believes that the codes that QAnon sees in Trump's tweets are just random typing [9]. Anyone capable of critical thought would realize that such notions are riddled with inconsistencies and unrealistic and impossible goals. Yet a Republican candidate for Congress, Margorie Greene, who espouses the conspiracy theories, won her primary and, given the gerrymandering of her district, is likely to become a member of Congress [10]. There is evidence that adherents of QAnon theory are rapidly increasing around the world [11].

How did we arrive at this state of affairs, where the most outrageous notions are not only entertained but flaunted in the public sphere? Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" [12], 514a-520d, (and "Metaphor of the Line" [12], 509d-511e) come to mind. In it, Socrates describes prisoners who have lived in a dark cave since birth, never seeing the light of day. They are physically constrained in such a way that they cannot look to either side or behind them. Behind them is a fire, and behind the fire is a low wall. Various objects are lifted into the air, manipulated by another group of people who are out of sight behind the wall. The fire casts shadows of the objects across the wall facing the prisoners. The prisoners watch the sequences that the shadows play out and play games predicting the sequences and sounds that reverberate in the cave. When they refer to one of the shadows as a "cup, "for example, they do not actually see a cup, but rather the shadow of a cup, confusing its shadowy

appearance with actual reality. The prisoners are coached (by someone like a Socrates) to leave the cave because they believe that their imaginary reality is true reality, and any alternate reality must be false. Trump's supporters seem to reside in a cave of disinformation, and even if they are challenged to move to the outside (by someone like a Socrates), they want to return and mock those who left, insisting that their fake world is the only true one. Their cognitive state is that of imagining (in Greek, eikasia), a state in which what they believe is reality, and contrary views are "fake news." In Plato's view, this state is inferior to that of belief or opinion where perception reflects the actual sensible world.

Why do we have such willing contemporary cave-dwellers? Why are disinformation campaigns successful? The evidence against them is available at our fingertips on the internet, if we search to find reliable resources. Yet just as accessible is the content for defenders, rationalizers, and promoters of lies. How can people not only swallow an outrageous version of reality but also endorse it, propagate it, and refuse to acknowledge any intervening evidence, no matter its source, its credibility, or wide acceptance, and find evidence for their claims in the most tenuous of biased sources?

In order to develop a complete picture of this disinformation-misinformation ecology, the next sections review previous research and publications that will provide a foundation for this paper's exploration of the success of disinformation in Trump's America [13–15].

2. Knowledge, beliefs and second-hand knowledge

Any discussion of disinformation must acknowledge the distinction between knowledge and beliefs, between what we can know for sure, either based on direct experience or solid research, and beliefs, which may be turned into truth, shown to be false, or are matters of individual preferences [16]. Because we do not and cannot have knowledge about everything, we often rely on secondhand knowledge that we acquire from others to help us navigate life, such as advice from parents, teachers, and experienced persons about what sources to use to solve a problem or how to sort out political opinions. This secondhand knowledge is derived from persons that we come to regard as cognitive authorities. A cognitive authority is a person, organization, media source, group, or leader whose information one takes as secondhand knowledge based on that entity's credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise. Persons and news institutions can act as cognitive authorities. The opinions cognitive authorities espouse can be true, false, or a matter of taste: true, if verifiable; false, if falsifiable or unverifiable; or a matter of taste, if based on one's tastes or preferences, being neither true nor false. Secondhand knowledge that is derived from cognitive authority, thus, for the advice seekers, is an opinion, and certainty varies based on the degree to which they trust their cognitive authorities. This trust grows as the secondhand knowledge is confirmed. It converts from pure opinion to knowledge as the holder gains experience with the topic and with the trustworthiness of the cognitive authority. One can have high certainty about their cognitive authorities, and yet it may be misplaced if the "knowledge" they pass on is not founded on reason, evidence, logic, or facts, or does not cohere with what one knows about the issue at hand.

Consumers of information sources may tend to assume that their opinions are knowledge when they are, at best, secondhand knowledge or, at worst, false opinion(s). For example, consumers of partisan news coverage may believe the claimed authority of the source indicates they have received knowledge and may thus act or talk in such a way that purports what they hear or see is deemed

knowledge. Unfortunately, such "knowledge" is unstable if the consumers cannot provide a rationale for what they believe. Many people are mistaken about whether they have knowledge at all and may believe that opinion or disinformation is knowledge. Sources the hearer takes for cognitive authorities can be mistaken or deceitful. At the same time, life would be impossible if we could not act on information we were unable to verify. We proceed in our lives with lots of secondhand knowledge, relying on others, whose advice most often is justified but sometimes is not. To make this difficult issue more manageable, we trust in cognitive authorities.

Deception by cognitive authorities can take various forms. Drawing on Chisholm and Feehan's "The Intent to Deceive" [17] (1977, pp. 144–145), Don Fallis's "The Varieties of Disinformation" (2014) [18] describes four major types. The first two are achieved by positive deception (causing a false belief). They include (1) creating a new false belief (e.g., Trump claims that absentee balloting is prone to electoral fraud) and (2) maintaining an existing false belief (e.g., if Joe Biden becomes president, he would take away all guns from citizens). The other two use negative deception. They are (1) causing the loss of a true belief (e.g., that mail-in or absentee ballot voting is a reliable way to vote) and (2) preventing the acquisition of a true belief (e.g., preventing accurate information about the COVID-19 pandemic; ([18], p. 140). (For a more detailed explanation, see [13–15].)

3. Self-deception, social self-deception and collective self-deception

Deception is most effective when it fosters self-deception. Sartre observed that bad faith is believing what you do not believe: holding or living a contradiction at one and the same time [16]. He describes a mode of living inauthentically, where people may deceive themselves into thinking that they do not have the freedom to make choices for fear of their potential consequences, e.g., that they would have to be responsible for themselves. The psychological position of "willful ignorance" may be related to this condition, knowing something to be true but consciously choosing ignorance, e.g., choosing to believe that the Confederate statues are not symbols of racism.

Self-deception may be a way to embrace forms of ignorance or false information, including lies, paltering, fake news, or doxing. Self-deception makes it possible to maintain our beliefs in the face of contravening evidence. Von Hippel and Trivers [19] describes five varieties of self-deception: (a) biased information search (i.e., only consulting sources that validate our biases or a priori beliefs); (b) biased interpretation (i.e., ignoring parts of a story that do not fit our views); (c) misremembering (e.g., as some Trump supporters who voted for and approved of Barack Obama have come to rationalize Trump's depiction of him as incompetent); (d) rationalization (i.e., making our arguments fit our biases, such as accepting that immigrants are largely criminals because Trump says so); and (e) convincing oneself that a lie is true (e.g., that Barack Obama had spied on the Trump campaign in 2016).

Self-deception is a socializing and socialized strategy. We convince ourselves of our false beliefs in the process of persuading others, and if and when they are convinced it confirms and sustains our false beliefs. Roy Dings [20], pp. 17–18, points out that this social self-deception may be "situating" or "persuasive." The first, "situating," includes the positive, in which we seek likeminded people with whom to associate, and the second is the negative, in which we avoid people who disagree with our views. The second, "persuasive," includes the positive, trying to convince people to adopt our views, and negative, withholding information that would deter a person from such adoptions [20], pp. 17–18. These strategies are common

among political supporters of various stripes, but appear to be particularly common among Trump supporters, who reject any talking points except those in their disinformation ecosystem. Social, or reciprocal, self-deception leads to collective self-deception where a whole group feeds and is fed self-deception. The individual, the group, and the collective dialectically reinforce each other. For example, Trump supporters who are not necessarily homogeneous in how or why they arrived in support of Trump (as we will see later) embrace the common end—that Trumps represents their anger, resentments, a source of power, economic advantage, self-righteousness, or their cause, whatever it may be. (For a more detailed explanation, see [16]).

4. Psychological dimensions

There are psychological factors and motivations that set and enforce self-deception [16]. The elements may be conscious or unconscious. Conscious self-deception strategies include willful ignorance mentioned above or the avoidance of information. Willful ignorance is different from self-deception because willful ignorance is always intentional, whereas self-deception is not: the willfully ignorant can recognize that they are ignorant, whereas the self-deceived are typically not fully aware that they are self-deceived [21], p. 521. Willful ignorance (being more conscious) is, therefore, more culpable than self-deception. Information avoidance is not thought to be the same as willful ignorance and may not be the same as self-deception. According to Lynch [22], information avoidance is "any behavior intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information" [22], p. 341. Reasons for information avoidance include the information may demand a change in one's beliefs, an undesired action, or the information itself, or the decision to learn information may cause unpleasant emotions or diminish pleasant emotions [22], p. 342. Information avoidance can be a strategy for abiding and remaining in a disinformation or misinformation ecology.

Part of the problem of dealing with persons imbued with espousing or promoting fake news is that if one tries to approach them rationally with evidence, facts, and logic, one will fail (though there are many cases, as we will note later, in which what they may count as evidence, facts, or logic do not fit orthodox norms). In addition to the relatively conscious factors listed above, there are unconscious ones as well. There are many psychological factors at play that enable the success of various forms of self-deception, where rational arguments do not work.

We may be prone to think that what we pay attention to is neutral, as if no bias dictates how we bestow our attention. We are predisposed to hear, see, absorb, and interpret particular things that fit with our biases. In phenomenological terms, our unconscious biases might be understood as a "pre-understanding." Key concepts that flesh out this notion are gullibility and cognitive bias.

J.P. Forgas and R.F. Baumeister [23] summarize the growing literature on the social psychology of gullibility, going back as far as 1947. They define gullibility as "a failure of social intelligence in which a person is easily tricked or manipulated into an ill-advised course of action" [23], p. 2. Gullibility occurs when "an individual's beliefs are manifestly inconsistent with facts and reality, or [they] are at variance with social norms about reality" [23], p. 2. The psychological foundation of gullibility "appears to be the universal human capacity for trust – to accept second-hand information we receive from others as a proxy for reality" [23], p. 5.

They identify six psychological mechanisms of gullibility: (1) The search for patterns and meaning: because human beings want to make sense of reality, they

often find patterns and causation where there is none. This may partially explain how conspiracy theories emerge [23], p. 8. (2) Acceptance bias: "the near-universal tendency for human beings to accept rather than reject information" [23], p. 9. (3) The power of heuristics: "Human beings are more prone to believe interesting, captivating stories and narratives that are salient and easy to imagine" [23], p. 9. The narrative that Trump was a successful businessman may be compelling in this manner. (4) Overbelief in the self: we are prone to "self-serving biases and distortions" [23], p. 10. Thus Trump voters may have difficulty believing they made a mistake about his leadership. (5) Social mechanisms of gullibility: "all symbolic knowledge is socially constructed and shared. Comparing our views and ideas with the views and ideas of others is the way all symbolic reality is constructed" [23], p. 10. It is easy to see how Trump supporters, their personal relationships, their media (cable news and social media), their political and social groups and associations, their party, and their congressional representatives construct a narrative of Trump's leadership and effectiveness that dialogically reinforces each aspect through their disinformation ecosystem. (6) Epistemological failures to monitor and correct. Human beings fail to monitor and evaluate incoming information correctly in terms of their logical merits [23], p. 11. Because Trump's supporters are bathed in emotions such as anger and resentment, any logical analysis fails or critical self-reflection fails. If there is any reasoning at all, it is a "motivated reasoning" built on pregiven conclusions, a rationalization to serve one's biases. We will look the issue of motivated reasoning in more detail later. Cognitive biases are another important psychological dimension of human beings, but our focus will be that of the predispositions of Trump supporters.

Cherry [24] defines cognitive bias as "a systematic error in thinking that occurs when people are processing and interpreting information in the world around them." The vast research on cognitive bias has identified several aspects that foster disinformation campaigns, some of which are particularly salient in the political domain. When people exhibit cognitive bias, they take particular, flawed mental shortcuts regularly. Wikipedia lists more than 200 types of cognitive bias, many with variant names [25]. In order to make such a large list manageable, Benson [26] proposes four clusters of biases based on whether they involve (1) too much information, (2) not enough meaning, (3) the need to act fast, or (4) confusion about what we should remember. Given the cacophony of available information streams in contemporary society, the first cluster has a high incidence. In the face of too much information, people typically allow their cognitive biases to dictate their thinking, opinions, and actions when they must make quick assessments. Obviously, this strategy is true of all people, anywhere on the political spectrum from left to right, but the focus of the research here are those who lean to the ultra-right. Other factors that invoke cognitive biases include a person's emotions or motivations, the limits on the mind's ability to process information, and social pressures [24]. All of these causes seem to be relevant to such groups as Trump supporters, who make errors in judgment about actual facts, who often are engaged in anger and resentment about current events, who are seduced by the social pressures coming from their ingroup (social self-deception and collective self-deception), and who have less flexibility in processing information than Democrats. Among Trump's voters, age may also be a factor, as in the 2016 election older voters heavily broke for Trump because aging can increase cognitive bias due to lost cognitive flexibility [24].

Thirteen pertinent cognitive biases have particular relevance for disinformation adherents: (1) the availability heuristic, (2) attentional bias, (3) illusory truth, (4) affect bias, (5) negativity bias, (6) anchoring, (7) confirmation bias, (8) the bandwagon effect, (9) stereotyping, (10) ingroup bias, (11) projection bias, (12)

the Dunning-Kruger effect, and (13) the self-serving bias. The explanation of these factors with examples from the Trump administration should not obscure the fact that all persons, of any political stripe, are vulnerable to them.

The availability heuristic is a mental shortcut that relies on immediate examples that come to the mind of a person when assessing a particular topic, idea, or decision. It relies on placing greater value on information that comes to mind quickly, based on the assumption that it must be important and more trustworthy than countervailing information. A person's judgments weigh their assessments based on more recent information, meaning new opinions rely on the latest news [27]. A senior writer at *Wired*, Emily Dreyfuss [28], claims that Trump is a master facilitator of the availability heuristic. He starts with the straw man fallacy, a logical fallacy in which one exaggerates the position of one's opponent and then attacks it. A classic example is Ronald Reagan's use of the notion of a "welfare queen," a Black woman who exploits the welfare system. Linda Taylor who, in fact, did exploit the welfare system, became the straw man for Reagan, and her story exploited the availability heuristic because it was memorable. However, her case was extremely uncommon, and abuse of the welfare system was and remains rare. Trump's story of Mexican rapists reflects the same strategy with the same impact on his supporters, who come to believe that immigrants have a high level of criminality in spite of strong evidence to the contrary. Salient images stick in the minds of his supporters and come to mind readily.

Second, attentional bias refers to how the direction of attention affects a person's perception. Engaging this bias, one pays attention to some things while simultaneously ignoring others. For example, a Trump supporter might focus on Trump's deployment of federal troops to quell "riots," giving no attention to the fact that so-called riots are mostly peaceful protests against police brutality, and thus believe his claim to be the law-and-order president. Trump often invokes this bias through ad hominem attacks: "sleepy Joe," "crooked Hillary," or characterizations of attacks on him, "witch hunt" or "hoax," so that his listeners revert to the stories he invents to apply such memes.

The illusory truth effect is a bias that occurs when repetition creates bias. This bias mimics the positive feeling we get when we hear information that we know is true in the service of information that may be false but that we have heard before. The Republican party has long been a master of repetition in the sense that it creates discipline such that all Republican officials repeat variants of the same message, such as that trickle-down economics lessen poverty. When Trump reports that he has managed an excellent response to the coronavirus, Republicans as well as *Fox News*, white evangelicals, and like-minded leaders are prepared to repeat the message that hundreds of thousands of deaths represent a good outcome because it could have been worse.

Fourth, the affect heuristic, reflects the tendency to rely on emotions in our initial decisions regarding some action, event, or information. Rather than reflecting on the long-term consequences of a decision, we rely on our emotional state. Business ethics expert, Chris MacDonald, attributes Trump's 2016 election victory primarily to affect bias:

> *The net result of this built-in human mental trait is that rather than letting our beliefs about the world tell us how to feel, we tend to let our emotions tell us what to believe. Afraid of crime? Then you'll tend to see the world as violent (even if violent crime is at its lowest point in a generation or more). Worried about your job? Then you'll believe that unemployment is up (even if it's at a 10-year low). Trump capitalized on this by telling Americans things they felt were true. And feeling is much more compelling than listening to eggheads spout statistics on television [29].*

As he faces another election, Trump claims that he promotes law and order even as racial strife and police brutality erupt, and he speaks approvingly of murderous vigilantes. He inflames emotions such as anger, resentment, and racial hatred to justify the falsehood.

Negativity bias occurs when persons have a greater recall of unpleasant memories than pleasant ones. Even when adverse events and positive events are of the same scale, we feel the negative ones more strongly. Trump and GOP members used this during his first presidential campaign by focusing on Hillary Clinton's involvement with Benghazi. In his reelection attempt, he hoped fearing crime and the destruction of property would outweigh the memory of watching George Floyd die at the hands of police.

Anchoring is the bias in which one relies heavily on one trait or characteristic (the anchor), usually the first piece of information one hears on a particular topic. When the coronavirus began in earnest, Trump asserted that it was not a serious problem and that it was not more dangerous than the common flu. That initial piece of advice stuck in people's minds and made them doubt the seriousness of the pandemic and to continue to court the idea it was a hoax.

Confirmation bias involves interpreting information that supports our existing beliefs, even when presented with conflicting evidence. Trump supporters hold all sorts of improbable beliefs because they concord with their preexisting beliefs: e.g., that Trump is a great president; was successful in curbing the coronavirus, its infection, and death rate; cares about poor people; is draining the Washington swamp; is a great businessman; that his tax cuts helped all Americans; and that he has a great plan for healthcare, all of which are false.

The bandwagon effect is the bias in which we support opinions as and when they become popular. We tend to adopt certain behaviors or beliefs because many other people do the same. Trump's constant use of rallies throughout his presidency exploits this effect. Social media can have the same effect, as seen in the popularization of QAnon theories.

Stereotyping is the bias when we expect a member of a group to have certain beliefs or characteristics because of their group membership. Trump relies on racist stereotypes by calling Black Americans dirty and lacking in intelligence and by suggesting women of color in Congress go back to their countries.

Ingroup bias is the tendency for a person to give preferential treatment to those they perceive as members of their own group. Thus if Trump supporters see Trump as good for the working class, they may support him even if they recognize his harms to people of color. Political scientist Jeffrey Friedman argues that Trump's harsh policies on immigration stem more from nationalism (ingroup favoritism) rather than xenophobia [30]. Trump supporters tend to make the claim that he always has their backs, although the actuality may something else, e.g. attacking Obamacare and Social Security.

Projection bias occurs when we believe that our current preferences and values will remain the same in the future, which can lead to short-sighted errors. Many Trump supporters, especially poor ones, believe that the current values will remain the same in the future, failing to remember when they had the same view when they voted Obama into office. Many members of minorities voted for Trump, and they projected that their feelings about him would have remained the same throughout his presidency. One suspects that Trump's actions during his first term may have dissuaded many of those who originally voted for him, illustrating their original projection bias.

The Dunning-Kruger effect is the tendency to overestimate one's abilities. Trump himself clearly suffers from this effect, given his confidence that he "alone" can solve all the nation's problems. Many of Trump supporters suffer from this same effect. They overestimate their capabilities in assessing his character and

achievements. They are uncritical of their being uncritical and lack the skills and acumen to make a realistic assessment of their own abilities, let alone that of the president.

The final bias, self-serving bias, occurs when one claims responsibility for one's successes while blaming failures on external factors. Trump seems to have made a lifestyle from this bias. His rewards are due to his "very stable genius," but his bankruptcies were due to others' failures. Any promise he has not kept is due to the Democrats' resistance, Congress's unwillingness to do his bidding, or unfortunate circumstances (e.g., the coronavirus coming to the U.S. during his presidency), and so on.

We shall see shortly how these biases play into how disinformation campaigns succeed. To see how they play in Trump supporters, we can look at the psychological studies specifically devoted to them.

4.1 Psychological studies of Trump supporters

When reviewing their psychological aspects, it is clear that there is an overlap among studies on willful ignorance, information avoidance, gullibility, and cognitive bias, and that these definitions are approaches to the same issues from different perspectives [16]. To provide details, there are specific studies of Trump supporters. In his paper, "Social Psychological Perspectives on Trump Supporters," psychologist Thomas Pettigrew [31] identifies factors reflecting five major social psychological phenomena that account for the bulk of Trump supporters' devotion: tolerance for authoritarianism, a preference for associating with socially dominant groups (social dominance orientation, SDO), prejudice, low intergroup contact (i.e., little familiarity with groups other than themselves), and relative deprivation (i.e., feeling that others are much better off than they are). While acknowledging political factors may be at work as well as other psychological factors, he argues that these five dimensions are particularly relevant.

Pettigrew finds that many Trump supporters are attracted to authoritarian figures. Authoritarianism is characterized by such traits as "deference to authority, aggression toward outgroups, a rigidly hierarchical view of the world, and resistance to new experience" [31], p. 108. Authoritarians see the world as dangerous, and fear guides their response to it. While social psychologists debate whether authoritarianism is a personality construct or a political ideology, Pettigrew argues that "there is no necessary conflict between these two perspectives." That is, it usually starts as a personality orientation, which then leads to an engagement with right-wing political ideology. Trump's rhetoric stokes fear, which leads his supporters to consider him to be an authority on matters of American security, leading them to support him in his efforts to secure the borders against outgroups, including through family separation policy and a border wall between the United States and Mexico. His deployment of federal troops on peaceful protesters in Portland, Oregon, and tear gassing of protesters in Washington, DC, reflects his authoritarianism.

In a related study of right-wing politicians who are high on the authoritarian scale, psychologists Alyssa H. Sinclair, Matthew L. Stanley, and Paul Seli found that they fail to update their belief system when confronted with new information and they are motivated to preserve their entrenched beliefs. They concluded high right-wing authoritarians have "a relatively closed-minded cognitive style that negatively influences belief updating" [32]. Donald Trump's self-deception seems to clearly conform to that of other authoritarian leaders.

Returning to Pettigrew, he defines SDO as "an individual's preference for the societal hierarchy of groups and domination over lower-status groups" [31], p. 108.

People who want to maintain the current social hierarchy have an SDO. They believe members of other groups are inferior to members of their own. People with strong SDO are "typically dominant, driven, tough-minded, disagreeable, and relatively uncaring seekers of power" [31], p. 108. Trump's assertions that he alone can solve the nation's problems and that those who oppose him are "losers" (including media critical of him as well as Democratic officials) reflects a belief that they are inferior to members of his group, which include *Fox News* and loyal Republicans. Trump's claim that some white nationalists are "very fine people" because they support his presidency reflects lauding of the ingroup. Trump's supporters embrace of authoritarianism and SDO also make them more likely to accept outright lying by commission or omission or by paltering a part of the morally acceptable behavior of politicians [33]. For most rational persons, Trump's excessive and blatant lying is enough to disqualify him from a repeat term in the White House, but his behavior does not matter to his supporters. According to the Washington Post, which has kept track of his lies and misleading statements, he exceeded the 20,000 mark as of July 3, 2020 (440 days in office), averaging 45 per day [3].

Pettigrew's third factor points out that Trump supporters are anti-outgroup, which is manifest in their support for anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy. In the 2016 election, Trump launched rhetorical attacks on immigrants, Mexicans, and Muslims. His actions in office have reinforced that stance: bans on entrants to the country from certain Muslim countries, harsh restrictions for asylum seekers, and the separation of children from their parents at the border as a measure to discourage immigration. Support for Trump correlates positively with a standard scale of modern racism, which Trump has fully articulated in his attacks on Democrats of color in Congress and by having his supporters at his rallies chant "send her back" about Congresswomen Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Ayanna S. Pressley of Massachusetts, and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, making references to their ethnic origins [34]. Calling COVID-19 "kung-flu" and the "China virus" reflect the same tendencies [35].

Pettigrew [31], p. 108, also observes that there is growing evidence that Trump's white supporters have little contact with groups other than their own. They have less experience with minorities such as Muslims, Mexicans, or even Black Americans, than other Americans. Low intergroup contact makes it easier to dismiss members of other groups as foreign, un-American, and/or inferior. Ignorance of others allows one to self-enforce negative stereotypes, as in Trump's references to immigrants as "animals" [36]. It also supports the tolerance of brutal methods of quelling protests that seek to dismantle racism as well as callousness about the impact of unrest on people in cities, as Trump supporters are disproportionately rural.

Pettigrew's fifth factor, relative deprivation, may be the most powerful and troubling problem to enable Trump's rise. While Trump's supporters are not disproportionately economically disadvantaged—they are disproportionately employed full time and unlikely to live in districts that depend on manufacturing—they perceive themselves as deprived. Trump supporters felt that other members of society were better off than they were and that their expectation of where they would be in life had been severely limited. They were heavily motivated by a sense of loss of status through a sense that American global dominance is in decline and that white people were losing status and dominance domestically [37].

Hours of *Fox News* and right-wing social media sites denigrating "welfare queens" and welfare programs, the more frequent appearance of minorities and mixed and gay marriages in the media, and the media's depiction of what an ordinary American home is supposed to be like strengthen the sense of deprivation. Trump offered supporters an opportunity to reverse the trend. They feel that they are victims of the forces of politics, corporations, education, and

demographic shifts, and the president's focus on those themes makes them feel empowered.

Emotion, not critical thought, drives the behavior of Trump supporters. The disinformation campaigns that support Trump appear to be based on cognitive biases, as is evidenced by many Trump supporters screaming at any opposition to him as "fake news," or calling police for imagined intrusions on their rights by Black people. Anti-Trumpers are called "lib-tards" (combining 'liberal' with the slur "retard").

5. Types of Trump supporters

Creating an ad hoc taxonomy, we can establish four different groups reflect distinctive or related motivations for supporting Trump:

1. Economic and power profiteers or exploiters. These are senators, House members, cabinet members, other politicians, and friends and associates of Trump, who are driven by an appetite for power and for profit. The appetite for power usually includes the promotion of right-wing political ideology to retain governing power. Initially, many Republicans deplored both the character and the nomination of Trump to the presidency, but after he amassed power and popularity, they changed their orientation to loyalists. Many Republican officials have shown more loyalty to Trump than to traditional conservative values, such as limited government and constraining the national debt; they also have ignored their duty to represent all of their constituents, by refusing to hold town halls with their constituents and voting as a block on party lines. As Michael Tanner [38] of the libertarian thinktank Cato Institute wrote, Trump is the "profligate president," yet they continue to support him. Trump's ability to rally his base against a Republican who fails to support him, making a candidate vulnerable to a primary challenge from the right, incentivizes such support. Likewise, some of Trump's supporters may fear exposure (e.g., for illegal or immoral activities), given rampant corruption in the Trump organization. As well, Trump has delivered on many conservative agenda items, such as appointing federal judges and crippling government agencies and public goods (like the post office). *Fox News* has profited from supporting Trump. Not only do they support and gain power from supporting a right-wing ideology, they make nearly 2 billion dollars a year [39], p. 20.

2. White evangelical Christians, Christian Dominionists, and other religious supporters. These people believe or have come to believe through their religious leaders and problematic interpretations of the Bible or religious traditions that Trump's ascendancy is a direct consequence of God's will. Their objective is to overturn the legal grounds for abortion, to have conservative judges appointed in the courts, to have "religious freedom," and to make the United States a Christian nation.

    In the 2016 election, 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump, in spite of his record of adultery, divorces, bizarre work ethic ("deals" and bankruptcies), broken promises, lies, racism, and allegations of sexual assault [40]. Many evangelicals rationalize their behavior by likening Trump to Persia's King Cyrus II (the Great) from the Book of Isaiah, who lived between 590 and 529 B.C.E. Though not a Jew, Cyrus was seen as an instrument appointed by God, a heroic pagan ruler who freed the Jews from captivity in Babylonia. Though pagan, he was ethical and allowed his conquered lands to retain their traditions, including those of the Jews, and he led the Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple

and restore the city. His religious supporters argue that Trump, like Cyrus, is a powerful figure who is not a believer yet is an instrument being used by God to serve God's master plan, a strong leader fighting on the side of the righteous. However, Isaiah's depiction shows Cyrus as an ethical leader who did not foster divisiveness, hatred, false accounts, or challenges to civil authorities or institutions to maintain his authority. These religious supporters exercise "motivated reasoning," a rationalization of their dubious interpretation of a Bible story in relating it to Trump, feeding their individual, social, and collective self-deception, which reinforces each other and are sustained and promoted by their religious leadership. The effect is undermining American democracy [41].

Dominionism is centered on the removal of the idea of the separation of church and state from the Constitution. There is a hard version, which advocates that the Constitution and current form of government must be overthrown and must be replaced by a government based on Biblical law as articulated in the five books of Moses (i.e., Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), ironically in the same way they fear that Sharia law will dominate the land should Muslims come to power in the United States. While this version has few adherents, many Christian fundamentalist denominations embrace a softer version, which calls for merging the church and the state, restoring to Christians control over all political and cultural institutions, such that the United States will be an overtly Christian government [42]. The viewpoint is promoted, based on the idea that Christians are currently being persecuted for their beliefs, particularly in the attacks on their refusal to provide goods and services for LGBTQ+ people in the marketplace, which they claim violates their "freedom of religion." They interpret freedom of religion to mean the ability of merchandisers in the public sphere to discriminate against persons or institutions that run contrary to their religious beliefs. It also is invoked when children in public schools are said not to be allowed to pray, by which they typically mean Christian prayer. In fact, they are allowed to pray as long they do not disrupt others and initiate the prayers themselves.

There is even a strain of conservative Catholics who support Trump, as evidenced in the book The Catholic Case for Trump by Austin Ruse [43]. Ruse's argument largely relies on claims that Trump is pro-life, but it conveniently ignores what he has actually done, such as putting children in cages, attacking environmental rights, attacking LGBTQ+ protections, and engaging in the most corrupt practices in government. Even Pope Francis has called Trump out on his anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, and his hypocritical pro-life stance [44]. The only area where Trump supports the Catholic viewpoint is his appointment of anti-abortion judges.

3. Media supporters such as *Fox News*, One America News (OAN), Sinclair Broadcasting (193 local broadcasting stations who all promote pro-Trump messages and anti-other-media messages). These organizations are essentially propaganda media for Trump [39]. Their motivation is power, greed, pro-right ideology, and the need to retain power. In most cases, this group's membership insects with the first category, profiteers and power-driven ideologues. But because of their distinctive and major role in the disinformation-misinformation ecology, they deserve their own category. We have not only broadcast and cable media but right-wing social media as well, such as Breitbart, Truthfeed, Infowars, Gateway Pundit, and Zero Hedge. These are abetted by foreign governments, such as Russia, Iran, and China, who see the Trump presidency as good for their countries' power on the world stage. Clickbait entrepreneurs, who also belong in the category of profiteers, see profit alone, but they do it

through social media. NBC News documented a case in which a Macedonian teenager earned $60,000 in six months through clicks from Trump supporters [45]. Conservatives are more susceptible to clickbait than liberals [46].

4. The true believers, sometimes called "the cult of personality," colloquially referred to as Trump's base. Their motivations include resentment, greed, prejudice or racism, feelings of relative deprivation (that they fall short of what others have accrued in life), anger, vindictiveness, self-righteousness, and negative polarization. In negative polarization, voters side with a given candidate primarily from a distaste for the candidate's opponent [47, 48]. In a study of both Trump and Hillary Clinton supporters, K. Jasko et al. [49] found that one's individual sense of personal significance predicts hostility to the preferred candidate's opponents.

Cognitive neuroscientist Bobby Azarian [50] summarizes four factors that support true belief in what he calls the "unwavering" support of Trump. The first is the Dunning Kruger effect (the cognitive bias mentioned above): it implies that Trump's supporters are misinformed but also lack the capabilities to become aware that they are misinformed. The second is hypersensitivity to threat, which is common among conservatives. As Azarian [50] writes, "As long as Trump continues his fear mongering by constantly portraying Muslims and Mexican immigrants as imminent dangers, many conservative brains will involuntarily light up like light bulbs being controlled by a switch. Fear keeps his followers energized and focused on safety." That threat was the major threat before his election. Right before the 2020 election, it has shifted to create fear against protestors retaliating against police brutality of Black Americans in major cities. The third factor, terror management theory, suggests that reminders of one's own death stoke incite a strong defense of the ingroup and aggression toward others. Azarian writes, "By constantly emphasizing existential threat, Trump creates a psychological condition that makes the brain respond positively rather than negatively to bigoted statements and divisive rhetoric." The fourth is high attentional engagement. Azarian cites a study [51] of participants engaged in political ads that shows that Trump keeps viewers engaged more and for longer periods and that they were more emotionally aroused than those watching Hillary Clinton ads. This pattern held for both Clinton and Trump voters. Azarian attributes this to Trump's experience as a reality TV star:

> *Essentially, the loyalty of Trump supporters may in part be explained by America's addiction with entertainment and reality TV. To some, it does not matter what Trump actually says because he's so amusing to watch. With Donald, you are always left wondering what outrageous thing he is going to say or do next. He keeps us on the edge of our seat, and for that reason, some Trump supporters will forgive anything he says. They are happy as long as they are kept entertained [50].*

Azarian observes: "As a cognitive neuroscientist, it grieves me to say that there may be nothing we can do. The overwhelming majority of these people may be beyond reach, at least in the short term. The best we can do is to motivate everyone else to get out to the voting booths" [50]. This observation holds true for the 2020 election as well.

As a consequence of their loyalty, one of the sad aspects of the Trump presidency is that he enabled his supporters to unleash their anger, rage, and explicit prejudice by echoing his.

6. Trump supporters and conservatism

Trump supporters tend to label themselves as conservative, but they are not referring to things like fiscal responsibility. Under the Trump administration, the deficit soared, even before the economic demands of the pandemic. Government is somewhat limited, and badly executed under Trump, supporting a long-standing Republican belief that government is corrupt and wasteful by being corrupt and wasteful [52], except for the following instances (not all due to Trump but often the result of a conservative agenda) of intrusion: (1) into hiring or providing medical treatments of military transgender individuals (Trump instituted a ban on transgender individuals in the military in 2019) or other forms of discrimination against LGQBT+ individuals; (2) into the right to have an abortion (in their defense, anti-abortionists claim that fetuses are individuals and have the right to life); (3) into the protection of companies with a particular religious viewpoint from having to serve all customers in the public sphere (e.g., the right of a cake baker to refuse to make a wedding cake for a gay couple Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission); and (4) into exemptions to the Affordable Care Act (In Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. Hobby Lobby Stores argued that because its store was founded on specific religious principles, it should be excluded from the demands of the Affordable Care Act, which mandates that companies provide access to contraception and the morning-after pill). While the latter two can be seen as an attempt for less government intrusion, they invite government intrusion to enforce them. Typically hostile to foreign powers' intrusion into American politics, conservatives have turned a blind eye when Trump cozies up to dictators like Putin, ignores the concerns of U.S. intelligence agencies about Russian intrusion into U.S. elections, and takes no action against Russia for its bounties for the deaths of American soldiers in Afghanistan. According to Wikipedia, conservatism in the United States

> is a political and social philosophy characterized by respect for American traditions, republicanism, support for Christian values, moral universalism, pro-business, opposition to trade unions, strong national defense, free trade, anti-communism, pro-individualism, advocacy of American exceptionalism, and a defense of Western culture from the perceived threats posed by communism, socialism, and moral relativism [53].

Current challenges to that vision from Trump and the GOP include: respect for American traditions has enshrined racism and white privilege; support for Christian values has come to mean a certain problematic version of Christianity (e.g., one that sees no problem with putting children in cages), and hostility to such genuine Christian values, such as helping the poor and needy, or hostility to the values of other religions, humanism, or atheism; moral universalism tends to reject the cultural differences of a pluralistic society; republicanism is devoted to oligarchy and moving to fascism, a non-representative form of government run by a single branch of government (the executive). The Republican party and the Justice Department have failed to implement any checks and balances on Trump and his administration. The supposedly pro-business policies promote a capitalist ideology on all institutions in civil society, which by its nature ignores or exploits the poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised (e.g., providing farm-labor immigrants with poor wages and work conditions). Much to the chagrin of many American farmers, Republicans have soured on free trade [54]. Instead of anti-communism (granted that Russia is strictly not communist anymore but totalitarian, but still an enemy of the United States in the traditional conservative view), Trump welcomes Putin and wants to put him in the G7, and Republican Senators Johnson and Grassley have become conduits of

Russian propaganda for the reelection of Trump [55]. According to a Gallup poll, having a favorable view of Putin has more than doubled, from 12–32%, between 2015 and 2017 among Republicans [54]; in 2014, only 9% of Republicans though that Russia was a friend or ally, but in 2018, 23% did [54]. The party is no longer pro-individualism for anyone but primarily white, able-bodied, straight males. Public goods are derided, e.g., healthcare coverage for all or wearing a mask during the coronavirus pandemic. Trump has twisted American exceptionalism such that, instead of seeking to be a moral leader in the world, America depends on its military dominance. As for the defense of Western culture from the perceived threats by communism, socialism, and moral relativism, Trump proclaimed in his reelection campaign that the election of his opposition will lead to all three, but he ignores the worst threat to America, whose source is him and his administration: creeping fascism, corruption, and the failure to adhere to the Constitution and the rule of law. Looking at the evolution or dissolution of conservatism, is there much left to conserve? Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute, the conservative thinktank, asserted that Trump's presidency is marred with failure in conservative matters [5].

7. Cognitive authorities

If Trump and his supporters do not listen to bonafide authorities in conservative circles, what authorities do they heed? [16]. We must understand something of the character of cognitive authorities to see what enables their emotional response to Trump. If disinformation and misinformation depend on self-deception, social self-deception, and collective self-deception; if adherents engage in psychological methods to facilitate that self-deception by making themselves willfully ignorant or avoiding information contrary to their beliefs; if they are gullible, and fall prey to various cognitive biases that enforce their beliefs, cognitive authorities are a major factor in allowing all of these mechanisms to come together. A cognitive authority is a source one turns to when one lacks experience, education, knowledge, time, or inclination to acquire direct information. A cognitive authority is a person, organization, media source, group, or leader whose information one takes as secondhand knowledge based on that entity's credibility, trustworthiness, and reliability. In his book on the subject, *Second-hand knowledge: An inquiry into cognitive authority*, information specialist Patrick Wilson [56] argues that cognitive authority is related to credibility, competence, and trustworthiness. In her article on the subject, Rieh [57] points out that trustworthiness is not equivalent to credibility because expertise is also required.

> *Rather than having one clear definition, credibility has been defined along with dozens of other related concepts such as believability, trustworthiness, fairness, accuracy, trustfulness, factuality, completeness, precision, freedom from bias, objectivity, depth, and informativeness. Most credibility researchers agree that credibility assessment results from simultaneously evaluating multiple dimensions. Among these, two key dimensions are identified: trustworthiness and expertise. Trustworthiness is a core dimension in credibility assessment that captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source. The perception that a source is fair, unbiased, and truthful contributes to the trustworthiness of information. Trustworthiness is, however, not a synonym for credibility because people also must recognize expertise in order to deem information credible [57], p. 1337.*

Credibility involves both trustworthiness and expertise. And trustworthiness "captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source." Rieh adds that

"expertise is likewise an important factor given its close relationship to people's perceptions of a source's ability to provide information that is both accurate and valid" [57], p. 1337–1338. While the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* are generally considered to have center-left bias, they are thought to be credible: they are trustworthy because they check their facts, try to be complete as possible in their reporting, and publish corrections when they make a mistake. They have expertise in newspaper reporting, and their reporters are clear and consistent in their assessments. Opinions are appropriately flagged as such. Readers generally believe in the "perceived goodness and morality of" these sources because of their long history of accurate and fair reporting, following good journalistic norms and practices.

8. *Fox News*

Viewers of *Fox News* also believe that their source is credible; that is, its reporters and commentators are trustworthy and have expertise. They believe that the news reported is trustworthy, fair, objective (lacking in liberal bias), accurate, factual, complete, precise, in-depth, and informative. They assume that views articulated on *Fox News* are good and moral. *Fox News* claims that other national media are biased, and their viewers agree that they are the only genuine cognitive authorities [39, 58] (along with some other media, among which *Fox News* plays a dominant role). All others produce "fake news."

In reality, *Fox News* is a false cognitive authority. It produces almost exclusively misinformation and disinformation on a daily basis [59]. While they like to claim that their programming during the day is exclusively unbiased news, they omit facts that do not fit their preconceived narrative. For example, during the coronavirus epidemic they have been consistently omitting references to Trump's failures, his lack of a national plan, and his disregard of the pandemic preparation that existed under the Obama administration. All information that comes from newswires (e.g., Reuters, Associated Press [AP], and selected adverse content), scientists, experts, opposition politicians, and other national news networks that provide a contrary narrative are ignored, omitted, rejected, or challenged. One of their core techniques is paltering, taking parts of a story and making it a complete narrative. For example, when President Trump's tax records were revealed, showing that he paid only $750 each in the first two years of his presidency and none for the previous ten years because he claimed losses in his businesses. By rational standards it portrays what a poor businessman he is [60], and yet *Fox News* focused on how clever he was because he paid so little in taxes.

It would be helpful to understand the relationship of news consumers and their loyalty to sources because one can argue that source loyalty is a measure of its cognitive authority, that what they are reporting is a source of secondhand "knowledge" for them. The Pew Research Center did a survey on "The Modern News Consumer" in 2016 [61]. They found that, despite digital advances, most Americans still share news by word of mouth. Older Americans tend to use the same sources for news, and they prefer TV to other sources, such as print sources. Younger people are less enthusiastic about news, and most get their news online. Democrats are more trusting of national news media than Republicans. Liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans are more likely to get one-sided news from family and friends than news sources. Conservative Republicans are more likely than liberal Democrats to say that they are content to get one-sided news from family and friends [61].

Loyalty to a news source is a measure of consumers' sense of credibility and trustworthiness. The fact that Republicans are comfortable getting one-sided news

and the fact that most news consumers still share news by word of mouth features reinforce certain aspects of the disinformation ecology that *Fox News* generates, sustains, and inflames. Just as other news consumers spread the word to relatives and friends, so too do *Fox News* consumers, but it may be tinged with more emotional content.

A study Pew undertook in the fall of 2019 gives a more up-to-date understanding of *Fox News* viewers. It concluded:

1. Around four-in-ten Americans trust *Fox News*. Nearly the same share distrust it.

2. Republicans [(2/3) and Republican-leaning independents (65%)] trust *Fox News* more than any other outlet. Democrats distrust it more than any other outlet.

3. On an ideological scale, the average *Fox News* consumer is to the right of the average U.S. adult, but not as far to the right as the audiences of some other outlets [Such as Rush Limbaugh and Alex Jones.]

4. People who cite *Fox News* as their main source of political news are older and more likely to be white than U.S. adults overall.

   a. Americans ages 65 and older account for around four-in-ten of those who say their main source is *Fox News* (37%), compared with 21% of all adults.

   b. Around nine-in-ten who turn to *Fox News* (87%) identify their race and ethnicity as non-Hispanic white, compared with 65% of all adults.

5. Those who name *Fox News* as their main source of political news stand out from the general public in their views on key issues and people, including President Donald Trump [62].

The survey also indicated that on a scale of warmth, just a quarter of U.S. adults gave Trump a rating between 76 and 100 (100 being the warmest). So, despite his general apparent lack of warmth, he still receives high approval ratings [62]. On the other hand, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi got a very cold rating (between 0 and 24) by those who used *Fox News* as their main source of political news [62].

People who get their news from outlets other than *Fox News* generally said, even as early as March 2020, that Trump was not responding to the COVID-19 pandemic well, but 63% of *Fox News* viewers said that Trump was doing an "excellent job" responding to the outbreak [62]. *Fox News* viewership was more predictive than party affiliation; as Pew noted, "*Fox News* regulars were considerably more likely than Republicans overall to describe Trump's handling of the outbreak as excellent (63% vs. 47%)" [62]. These observations serve to show the extent of the power of *Fox News* to influence its consumers.

Their viewers rejection of every other major news source, pandemic experts, medical institutions, scientists, and critical thinking individuals is remarkable. *Fox News* viewers see it as a cognitive authority with all the apparent trappings of such an authority: credibility, trustworthiness, expertise, and so on. Yet PolitiFact (https://www.politifact.com/), which is devoted to evaluating the truth value of political utterances, estimates that of the statements "made on air by Fox, *Fox News* and Fox Business personalities and their pundit guests: 10% are true, 12% mostly true, 19% half-true, 21% mostly false, 29% false and 9% pants-on-fire false" [63]. In other words, 78% of the statements on the air

are dubious at best. (A limitation of this assessment is that PolitiFact does not provide a time range for these data).

When we speak of *Fox News* as one entity, we must clarify what we mean by the collective notion of *Fox News* (an overall assessment that comes to mind when we think about *Fox News*). *Fox News* is composed of regular hosts like Steve Doocey and Brian Kilmeade and pundits like Sean Hannity, Jeanne Pirro, and Tucker Carlson, who are more overt in stoking the flames of grievances and resentments. While there are some rational observers in *Fox News*, like Chris Wallace, the overall policy is to defend Trump and praise an unrestrained capitalism and get-rich-entrepreneurs. While Steve Doocey does not fan the flames of grievance as does Tucker Carlson or Sean Hannity, their silence on the many outrages of Trump reflect an overall view of biased support of the president and right-wing ideology.

Fox News is essentially an apologist for a right-wing ideology (with a belief in unrestrained capitalism and an evolving notion of conservatism noted above), the Republican party, and President Trump and his administration. *Fox News* almost never criticizes the president, his actions or that of his administration, and they put a positive spin on all of his actions, even his failure to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. Rather than exposing him as an incompetent leader with no national plan, they pretend that he did the best that he could with an unfortunate pandemic. They echo his misinformation and denigrate the experts whom he has disagreed. They joined him in regarding the pandemic as an economic crisis and a culture war rather than a public health emergency. They not only challenged sound medical advice but denigrated those who disagreed with them. Trump spends a lot of time watching *Fox News* (it constitutes a major part of his "Executive Time"; [39], p. 23). He listens to *Fox News* pundits such as Sean Hannity, Lou Dobbs, Tucker Carlson, Laura Ingraham, Glenn Beck, or Jeanine Pirro on their programs, does exclusive interviews with them, and talks to them privately and frequently takes advice from them. These pundits are so influential that he has made tweets, policy decisions, or taken other executive actions (e.g., pardons) based on his interactions with them. He threatened North Korea because a segment on *Fox News* addressed Kim Jong-Un's nuclear capability [39], p. 23. Many of his presidential pardons occurred because of *Fox News*, and many of the errors of fact in his tweets or briefings were directly due to poor or manufactured reporting on *Fox News* [39], p. 23–24. Other fictions that Fox New created and which Trump embraced, according to reporter Brian Stelter's book on the Trump Administration, *Hoax: Donald Trump, Fox News and The Dangerous Distortion of Truth* [39], included that a caravan of criminals and terrorists was marching north to invade America [39], p. 210; that a DNC staffer, Seth Rich, was murdered for leaking emails [39], p. 150; that it was Ukraine, not Russia, that interfered in the election (originated on a Sean Hannity show, [39], p. 24, and that the coronavirus was only as dangerous as the seasonal flu [39] p. 295.

A survey of some of the narratives the Fox pundits have "reported" show how *Fox News* systematically has portrayed misleading or false narratives about the president and his success as a leader or has denigrated his opponents. Lou Dobbs headlined and effused in his praise of Trump's being nominated for a "Noble" (an error for "Nobel" in the *Fox News* chyron [64] that is indicative of common carelessness in *Fox News*' attention to details) Peace Prize. What Dobbs did not mention was that anyone can be nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize and that the nominator was a far-right Norwegian who frequently took anti-immigration and anti-Islamic positions [65]. It is another instance of paltering that is too common of *Fox News*. When 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse shot and killed two peaceful protestors in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Tucker Carlson defended his actions claiming that his "killings had to maintain order when no one else would." He neglected to explain the context of the murders, the background of the assailant (a high school dropout who identified

with white supremacists), the posture of the police in ignoring his behavior when protestors shouted that he had killed two protestors, and that despite some property damage, 95% of the protesters are peaceful [66]. On July 21, 2020, Sean Hannity asserted, "The Trump administration has had 'zero unfulfilled equipment and supply requests from state governors.'" Larry Hogan, the Republican governor of Maryland, referring to phone call he had with 48 governors, disputed the claim [67]. With regard to "the real COVID record," Laura Ingraham claimed on August 3, 2020, "The constant belittling of the administration's efforts, it's deeply unfair and it's almost entirely political." She further asserted that the "the biggest lie peddled by the left" was that the "the president doesn't take the pandemic seriously" [68]. Granted that she did not know at the time that Trump lied about his knowledge of the potential severity of the coronavirus [69], it is the consensus of medical experts, epidemiologists, and public health experts that his response was not only lacking, by providing no federal leadership, but incompetent and deceitful [70]. These are the kinds of stories that *Fox News* viewers are being told, day in and day out.

Beyond these examples, a report in the *Los Angeles Times* found that on the rare occasions when Trump gets upset with *Fox News*, he sometimes calls its right-wing competitor OAN during his briefings instead of Fox. Because of Trump's demand for absolute loyalty, it is a not-so-covert signal for Fox to realign their commitment [71]. When a *Fox News* security correspondent, Jennifer Griffin, supported *The Atlantic's report* [72] that Trump called soldiers "suckers" and "losers," he demanded that she be fired [73]. In this case, *Fox News* did not comply.

Contrary to good journalistic practice, *Fox News* is inconsistent. As Eric Zorn's report in the *Chicago Tribune*, "The Foolish Inconsistency of the *Fox News* Propaganda Machine" [74] notes, it is not unusual for *Fox News* to make a claim one day and make an opposite claim the next day, often echoing the conflicting views of Donald Trump. Good news sources like the *Washington Post* will admit errors and retract them when they occur. *Fox News* virtually never makes such acknowledgements. They seem to expect that their viewers will not remember any inconsistencies, and indeed all signs indicate they are right to expect it, especially because a variety of their cognitive biases come into play.

Apart from their need to be a major player in influencing Republican and conservative opinion, another of the major motives for *Fox News*'s propaganda machine is making money. *Fox News* makes nearly $2 billion a year, and they can make high demands for advertising and fees. They enjoy making money from Trump's loyal supporters [39], p. 20. Inciting viewers to feed their biases keeps the money tree growing. Yet despite this huge benefit and despite the public appearance that *Fox News* is 100% behind Trump, not all staff and commentators support him. Behind his back, they make fun of him and acknowledge shock at the illegal suggestions of some of his tweets or comments (such as suggesting to his supporters to vote twice [75]). Stelter [39] says that one of the *Fox News* stars told him, "Trump is like Fox's Frankenstein. They helped make him and he's out of control" [39], p. 314. Sean Hannity, arguably the most influential commentator on *Fox News*, called Trump "batshit crazy" [39], p. 10, in private.

Regardless of topic, *Fox News* commentators are supposed to stoke rage and push the emotional buttons of their viewers. Tobin Smith, a former *Fox News* commentator, suggests that their programming fosters an addictive and resentment-based process to:

1. Understand the elderly white conservative viewer's pre-tribal mindset, which is a compilation of their resentments, indignations, cultural values, religious values, political values, racial perspectives, regional outlooks, and worldviews.

2. Scare or outrage the crap out of viewers by boring down on a recently exposed tribal nerve like a psychic dentist with a drill, presenting hearsay or an innately

scary image of non-white/non-Christian foreigners, immigrants, or terrorists doing horrible things.

3. Produce each seven-minute rigged outcome opinion-debate segment around the carefully selected partisan hearsay such that the "fair and balanced" debate is massively rigged for the conservative pundits on the program to. . .

4. Deliver the climactic and righteous rhetorical victory for the partisan right-wing viewer to trigger the jolt of dopamine and serotonin that the addict anticipated and knew was coming [58], pp. 485–486.

In other words, Smith argues that *Fox News* programming fosters an addictive process, based in addictive anger and resentment, that is played and replayed over and over again, and validated by a chosen-in-bad-faith, restrictive environment (i.e., their filter bubble) in which *Fox News* viewers live and dwell (i.e., peers, friends, political associates, religious affiliates, social media sources, etc., that reinforce their confirmation biases). Undoubtedly, left-wing news adherents experience a similar addiction that is also based in anger and resentment. The source of their bias may be anger and a concern for the truth and a belief in professional standards for reporting in the political sphere, not to mention that their views may be sourced in and verifiable in evidence, facts, or long-standing Supreme Court rulings like Roe v. Wade. This is frequently not the case in *Fox News*: rather than offering and verifying facts they create genuine fake news to reinforce their narrative. According to Eric Wemple, the influence of *Fox News* cannot be underestimated:

> There's simply no outlet that dominates any other part of the political spectrum in the way Fox News dominates the right. With that dominance, Fox News has done great damage. It's not as if Fox News's influence extends to only however many millions may be viewing in prime time. There's what experts call a "media ecosystem" out there, where people take nonsense uttered on Fox News, then share it on Twitter, on Facebook, with their neighbor. Nonsense has a high pass around rate [76].

The dominance of *Fox News* recalls the dominance of government-controlled news in authoritarian countries, from the Third Reich to modern-day Russia and China. In other countries control is through some government-run propaganda agency, but in Trump's world, the enslavement to one's biases is self-imposed by fostering addiction and inflating biases or resentments. *Fox News* viewers have no desire to escape it (nor right-wing social media sites), as its system of self-reinforcing self-deception—individual, social, and collective—is more robust than past generators of propaganda could ever conceive. Tobin Smith, refers to the consumption of *Fox News* as addiction to "tribal identity porn," based on cultural and political resentments that "trigger feelings of hate, anger and outrage—the addictive trifecta of tribal partisan pornography" [58], p. 459.

While we have been using an addiction metaphor, following Tobin Smith, Devon Price makes the point that *Fox News* viewers and embracers of other right-wing media are not being passively manipulated, but cooperate in their own transformations.

> The truth is, our Republican and right-leaning relatives are active parties in their own transformations. They chose to drink from the well of misinformation and hate on a regular basis. They decided to shut out critical discussion. They carried their viewpoints to the polls. They made our world a worse place. And we have a responsibility to take them to task for it [77].

In such a way, they are addicted but the source of their original addiction was a willingness to fall prey to their biases and self-deception, allowing it to be fostered into social and collective self-deception, which in turn reinforce their original self-deception.

Fox News claims to base its stories on evidence and facts. At best, when they actually use facts, their interpretation of these facts is often distorted, manipulated, misleading, or missing. It claims to the trustworthy—it is only trustworthy in that it reinforces and stokes bias. It claims to have journalistic integrity. It is not journalistic integrity when you make the narrative about the facts or the omission of facts fit your political bias or when you originate a narrative based on a conspiracy theory of a radical right-wing social media site [78], p. 14. It claims to have expertise, but its expertise is sophistry, because they are interested in political power and influence and economic rewards. The repetition of Fox's messages through social media and other personal interactions reinforces and socializes the self-deception. Fox relies for its authority on a self-reinforcing dialectical process where each part reinforces the other and rejects discordant information. The result is Fox's robust approval rating at 43% and a steady 63% among Republicans and Republican leaning independents [62].

To summarize how *Fox News* becomes, maintains, perpetuates, and builds its reputation of a cognitive authority:

It starts with a maelstrom of grievances, resentments, a sense of invisibility or a lack of importance in its viewers, where the wider culture often challenges many of their core values.

Fox News then tells those viewers what they want to hear, consciously or unconsciously, which are claims that support and fulfill their biases and real, instilled, or professed ideology. For example, they may think of themselves as conservatives, without having much depth about its meaning. *Fox News* will then shape and enlarge that image with anti-liberal, anti-labor, pro-sham-patriotic, pro-business, pro-average-joe narratives (as inconsistent as these narratives might be).

These messages are myths, tropes, and narratives often detailed during the shows of their various pundits. They include persistent myths about Antifa conspiracies, fast fixes, or lies about the coronavirus epidemic or the extraordinary leadership of Trump. They echo the view that God rewards those who work hard and other variations of the Protestant work ethic or prosperity gospel (and that social structure plays no role in economic stability or success, including the stigmatization of poverty). Jesus was white, capitalism is God's way, and Christians are being persecuted. At the same time, Fox claims that immigrants are taking jobs and jobs are being exported abroad. It presents white privilege as the natural way of things and racism as a thing of the past. Kneeling during the national anthem is an insult to the flag or the country. It satirizes the mass media as pushing values that are un-American. It claims Jews have assumed positions of power and money they do not deserve, and that restrictions on gun ownership are an assault on basic human rights and the Constitution. It mirrors and accentuates the lies on radical right-wing websites, such as Breitbart [78], p. 14. The emotional triggers that it fosters are legion, not to say they are true, only that they work.

One engages in "motivated reasoning," especially when the topic at hand is something that we care about. It is the effect of emotions that we associate with a given topic at a primal level. It is not really reasoning but rationalization, making our arguments fit a pre-determined end. Not only does it involve a confirmation bias but also a "disconfirmation bias" "in which we expend disproportionate energy trying to debunk or refute views and arguments that we find uncongenial" [79]. When they grab onto what appears to be scientific evidence that supports their bias, they pounce on it. Mooney asserts: "Scientific evidence is highly susceptible to

misinterpretation. Giving ideologues scientific data that's relevant to their beliefs is like unleashing them in the motivated reasoning equivalent of a candy store" [79]. Mooney anticipated much of the conflicting and inaccurate positions that Trump supporters took in dealing with the coronavirus. Such narratives support their self-deception and their social self-deception.

These arguments from motivated reasoning or memes, myth, tropes, and narratives are reinforced and repeated throughout the disinformation-misinformation ecosystem to the point of addiction, where viewers' self-deception dialectically reinforces and is reinforced by the social and collective self-deception of others and selective events in the disinformation-misinformation ecosystem. This disinformation-misinformation ecosystem is a filter bubble or "propaganda feedback loop" [78], p. 33. Morrison [80] suggests that right-wing media keep over a quarter of Americans siloed in this "propaganda feedback loop."

Fox provokes fear, moral outrage, and self-righteousness. Megan Garber of *The Atlantic* observes:

> *Fox has two pronouns, you and they, and one tone: indignation. (You are under attack; they are the attackers.) Its grammar is grievance. Its effect is totalizing. Over time, if you watch enough Fox & Friends or The Five or Tucker Carlson or Sean Hannity or Laura Ingraham, you will come to understand, as a matter of synaptic impulse, that immigrants are invading and the mob is coming and the news is lying and Trump alone can fix it. [81]*

Because of this relentless moral outrage, viewers are prone to believe irrational or unfounded claims or assertions, and to regard all other venues as fake news. This moral outrage is reflected in the actions of the viewers, which are then taken into the market place, such as the refusal to wear masks for the coronavirus pandemic or to call the police on any Black person they think is threatening them.

Misinformation and the authorization and propagation of misinformation causes mortal damage, including the thousands of deaths by the coronavirus. Public intellectual Eugene Jarecki's Trump Death Clock (https://trumpdeathclock.com/) in New York City's Times Square, calculates that Trump's incompetence, mismanagement, and misinformation has caused 60% of American deaths from COVID-19, some 115,419 as of September 13, 2020.

Fox News plays a major role as a cognitive authority in the disinformation-misinformation ecology. It is not that it is the only one—there is OAN, Sinclair Broadcasting, and radio programs (like InfoWars) that play the same role, but to a lesser degree. The focus of this paper is on right-wing sources and the powerful influence of *Fox News* and similar cognitive authorities. One might object that the same approach is characteristic of the left-wing media. But that claim is built on the idea of false equivalences, that the left-wing and right-wing have different opinions but that these opinions are of equal weight. This is not the case. Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts published *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, which shows quite the opposite. By doing a rigorous analysis of online stories, tweets, and Facebook-shares data points, the authors conclude that "something very different was happening in right-wing media than in centrist, center-left and left-wing media" [78], p. 14. They observe that.

> *the behavior of the right-wing media ecosystem represents a radicalization of roughly a third of the American media system. We use the term "radicalization" advisedly in two senses. First, to speak of "polarization" is to assume symmetry. No fact emerges more clearly from our analysis of how four million political*

> *stories were linked, tweeted, and shared over a three-year period than that there is no symmetry in the architecture and dynamics of communications within the right-wing media ecosystem and outside of it. Second, throughout this period we have observed repeated public humiliation and vicious disinformation campaigns mounted by the leading sites in this sphere against individuals who were the core pillars of Republican identity a mere decade earlier [78], p. 14.*

While it seems exaggerated to say simply that liberals want facts and conservatives want their biases reinforced, and that liberals embrace journalism; while conservatives believe propaganda, Benkler et al. believe that the research they performed generally indicated that this was the case. With the more measured but still emphatic words, "the right-wing media ecosystem differs categorically from the rest of the media environment" and has been much more susceptible to "disinformation, lies and half-truths." As for *Fox News*'s role in this, "We found *Fox News* accrediting and amplifying the excesses of the radical sites" [78], p. 14.

Even in regular assessments such as who has scientific expertise, *Fox News* seems to help shape what kind of rational assessments are to be endorsed and which are not. Law School Professor Dan Kahan and colleagues did a study on "Cultural Cognition of Scientific Consensus" [82]. They looked at how an individual's deepseated moral values and their beliefs about how society should be ordered shaped how they assessed scientific expertise or what they thought was legitimate scientific consensus. Based on their cultural values, they divided the subjects into two pairs of categories: "individualists" and "communitarians," and "hierarchical" and "egalitarian." Hierarchical individualists are somewhat similar to conservative Republicans, and egalitarian communitarians are somewhat similar to liberal Democrats. Each subject was told that a close friend was undecided about the risks associated with "climate change, geologic isolation of nuclear waste and concealed weapon laws" [82], p.10. They were shown a picture of a fictional expert on each of the subjects at hand, and each expert had a Ph.D. in the pertinent field and now worked at a university other that the one from which they received their Ph.D. Each subject was given a passage from each author's book, "the position of which was on the risk in question—whether the risk was high or low, well-founded or speculative—was randomly manipulated" [82] p. 10. They each had a story that represented low risk and another that represented high risk. The subject was then asked the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement: "I believe the author is a trustworthy and knowledgeable expert on ['global warming,' 'nuclear power,' or 'gun control.']" [82], p. 10. One would have suspected that the nature of the credentials would be persuasive. This was not the case.

> *The goal of the study was to examine a distinctive explanation for the failure of members of the public to form beliefs consistent with apparent scientific consensus on climate change and other issues of risk. We hypothesized that scientific opinion fails to quiet societal dispute on such issues not because members of the public are unwilling to defer to experts but because culturally diverse persons tend to form opposing perceptions of what experts believe. Individuals systematically overestimate the degree of scientific support for positions they are culturally predisposed to accept as a result of a cultural availability effect that influences how readily they can recall instances of expert endorsement of those positions. [82], p. 27.*

They found two forms of evidence to support their hypothesis:

> *The first was the existence of a strong correlation between individuals' cultural values and their perceptions of scientific consensus on risks known to divide persons*

of opposing worldviews. Subjects holding hierarchical and individualistic outlooks, on the one hand, and ones holding egalitarian and communitarian outlooks, on the other, significantly disagreed about the state of expert opinion on climate change, nuclear waste disposal, and handgun regulation [82], p. 27.

The second finding identified a mechanism that could explain this effect. When asked to evaluate whether an individual of elite academic credentials, including membership in the NAS, was a "knowledgeable and trustworthy expert," subjects' answers proved conditional on the fit between the position the putative expert was depicted as adopting (on climate change, on nuclear waste disposal, or on handgun regulation) and the position associated with the subjects' cultural outlooks [82], p. 27.

The study suggests that what different individuals regard as scientific consensus depends on their cultural values. So *Fox News* viewers may be primed in what they regard as a rational consensus about how to deal with the coronavirus pandemic, such that they could buy into Trump's actions and assessments. But are they the source of such "rational" assessments or the effect? Or are they another element in the dialectical reinforcement of elements of the misinformation or disinformation ecology?

Another major influence in the disinformation-misinformation ecology is social media.

9. Social media

The problem with the internet is that is a self-serve "information" bank. For many Trump supporters, right-wing social media (e.g., Breitbart, Truthfeed, Infowars, Gateway Pundit, Zero Hedge) is a self-serve disinformation or misinformation bank. Right-wing ideologues, foreign agents, and clickbait entrepreneurs produce a deluge of disinformation of memes and narratives to solicit (at a minimum) and inflame (at a maximum) the disinformation seeker at these sites. Self-serve engagement is mediated by cognitive bias, confirmation bias, and steerage to selective sources. Generally, there are little restrictions on the kind of content that is made available.

Beyond specific right-wing media sources, as political commentator and professor Robert Reich argued in the Guardian, Facebook and Twitter are alarmingly influential. As he wrote:

> *The reason 45% of Americans rely on Facebook for news and Trump's tweets reach 66 million is because these platforms are near monopolies, dominating the information marketplace. No TV network, cable giant or newspaper even comes close. Fox News' viewership rarely exceeds 3 million. The New York Times has 4.7 million subscribers.*
>
> *Facebook and Twitter aren't just participants in the information marketplace. They're quickly becoming the information marketplace [83].*

Reich does not reference the source of his data, but given his expertise and academic credentials, one would assume that they were reliable. However, the Pew Research Center survey provided a more conservative estimate. They did an analysis of their surveys from October 2019 through June 2020. It indicated that only 18% of U.S. adults get their political news through social media (versus 25% that use news websites or apps, 16% that use Cable TV, 16% that use local TV, 13% that use Network TV, and 8% that use the radio). They found that users of social media are less likely than other news consumers to follow major news stories closely, such as information about the coronavirus pandemic, and that they are less knowledgeable

about these topics. The largest group of social media users, 48%, are under 30, while 40% are between 30 and 49. Compared to the U.S. population generally, they are less likely to be white, have lower levels of education, have lower political knowledge than other groups, and were more likely to have heard a conspiracy theory that the pandemic was planned. Social media users were far less likely to be already following the election very closely in the study period; only 8% were, which is a quarter or less of the proportion of cable TV watchers (37%) and print media consumers (33%) [84].

The Pew Research Report did not indicate what it includes in social media. Beyond Facebook and Twitter, there is YouTube, WeChat, Instagram, Weibo, Twitter, Tumblr, and LinkedIn, the internet offers Telegram, Reddit, Baidu Tieba, LinkedIn, LINE, Snapchat, and Pinterest. Many of these are hotbeds of misinformation and disinformation. According to Wikipedia, social media sites share the following properties: they are interactive Internet-based applications; they run on user-generated content (e.g., posts, texts, videos, photos); users have profiles that give some information about them; and they facilitate interactions between members and/or groups [85].

One of the most problematic aspects of social media are the number of hate groups and the far-right partisans that use it to attract followers and disseminate their propaganda. Facebook, Twitter, Spotify, PayPal, GoDaddy, YouTube, and others have suspended users connected to the far-right after the Unite the Right rally. Those suspended argued that the action attacked their free speech rights and used coded messages to get around any problem of censorship. A report of "Hate in America," a project produced by the Carnegie-Knight News21 initiative, did a study of far-right users of Facebook, Twitter, Gab, VK, and others during a two-week period in June 2018. They tracked more than 3 million followers and compiled more than 2500 posts from these platforms that threatened harm against Black Americans, Latinos, Jews, and LGBTQ+ people. These posts got over a half-million likes and were shared 200,000 times. This evidence shows the strength and breadth of these groups, who gain power by assembling a collective voice, despite some restrictions by some platforms [86].

Perhaps the major problem with social media is the fact that anyone can use or create or propagate social media to disseminate clear lies and falsehoods on the internet in the name of intellectual freedom or freedom of expression. Mark Zuckerberg perhaps best exemplified this in a speech at Georgetown University where he argued that Facebook should be unfettered in intellectual freedom, including political advertisements of outright lies (e.g., pro-Trump reelection campaign advertisements that include lies about his opponents). He takes the view that the marketplace will work it out—the lies will be discovered, eventually rejected or ignored. He bases his argument, as do other free speech advocates, on the First Amendment.

Harvard legal expert Yochai Benkler argues that Zuckerburg's interpretation of the First Amendment as preventing his company from suppressing false or dangerous speech is erroneous. He argues that the First Amendment is only about government involvement in speech; it does not apply to private speech or private parties, of which Twitter and Facebook are examples [80]. Evidence also shows that untruths are not sorting themselves out in the disinformation-misinformation marketplace. Disinformation spreads unchecked by corrections across the internet. *Fox News*, for example, echoes Trump's and his supporters' talking points, which are often patently false. Correspondingly, in social media sites like 8chan, white supremacists will defend their right to be racist and espouse hate rhetoric. In fact, bad actors use Facebook not to make rational statements but to inflame partisans. Joanna Hoffman, who was once Steve Jobs's closest advisor, criticized the leadership

at Facebook and other social media, saying that their laissez-faire attitude and failure to monitor content was "destroying the very fabric of democracy, destroying the very fabric of human relationships and peddling in an addictive drug called anger" [87].

Also, it is simply wrong to believe that Facebook as a whole is balanced or neutral and has no particular bias. The *Economist* did a study on Facebook using CrowdTangle, a Facebook tool that tracks how web material is shared across social media. They discovered that in August 2020 the two most popular sites were *Fox News* and Breitbart measured by user engagements—shares, views, comments, and other activities. They concluded that

> *whatever Facebook's intentions, the social-networking site has more of a political slant than Mr. Zuckerberg lets on. Using CrowdTangle, we compiled a list of the media outlets that received the most Facebook engagement in August. We then examined the top 35 for which data on their political biases were available from Ad Fontes Media, a media-watchdog organization. All told, these sites received an average of 8.7 m engagements in August. Fox News topped the list with 56.4 m interactions in the month; MSNBC, a rival cable-news network, received just 9.7 m [88].*

Despite Zuckerburg's claims, Facebook is not a neutral information playground and skews to the right. And so, the belief that individuals are capable of sorting out the truth for themselves in such an environment is problematic to say the least. For example, in 1987 the Reagan administration revoked the *Fairness Doctrine* of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which since 1949 had required broadcast license holders to present both sides of issues of public importance in a manner that was honest, equitable, and balanced. In eliminating it, FCC decision makers claimed that it "restricts the journalistic freedom of broadcasters … [and] actually inhibits the presentation of controversial issues of public importance to the detriment of the public and the degradation of the editorial prerogative of broadcast journalists" (FCC Fairness Doctrine). NBCUniversal lauded the decision, saying, "Today we reaffirm our faith in the American people. Our faith in their ability to distinguish between fact and fiction without any help from government" ([89], footnote 18 of Wikipedia entry). The emergence of right-wing media closely followed on the decision; the Rush Limbaugh Show premiered in 1988.

Obviously, it is nice to think that the truth will always win out. But in the Age of Disinformation, this approach seems too simplistic. Thus, we must ask, is there a limit to free expression when that expression leads to harmful acts toward demonized populations; the destruction of trust in political, governmental and media institutions; the loss of expertise; and the denigration of science and evidence?

What makes this sorting out even more difficult is the spread and speed of disinformation, and the inflammation of emotional triggers (memes, tropes). MIT researchers Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral [90] find in a study of rumor cascades from 2006 to 2017 that false information spreads more quickly and broadly than truthful information and that those on the right are more susceptible and more prone to disseminate false information than those on the left. They conclude:

> *Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information [90], p. 1146.*

Once acquired, false information is hard to dispel. Psychology Professor David Rapp's research on processing inaccurate information reveals that our brains quickly memorize information without remembering its source or validity. If we discover at a later time that the information was false, that realization does not override the initial impression [91], p. 282.

Cognitive issues of misremembering information complicate sorting false information. Such social media disinformation is spread by trolls, such as Russian operatives and Trump and right-wing supporters on the one side, and liberals and progressives on the other side (in addition to the clickbait entrepreneurs who solicit right-wingers [46]). The two sides are not equivalent. As we noted above, Facebook is more infused with right-wing activity [88].

YouTube in particular engages a rabbit hole phenomenon that increases right-wing radical viewership. When perusing YouTube videos for particular content, such as a specific conspiracy theory, the site's algorithm suggests more provocative videos to view, which in turn suggest even more provocative videos to view. The impact is to advance Google's profits, but with dire political consequences. Sociologist and information and library science professor Zeynep Tufekci declared YouTube to be "one of the most radicalizing instruments of the 21st century" because of these mechanisms [92]. According to the analysis of *New York Times* columnists Max Fisher and Amanda Taum, Brazil's ultra-right president Jair Bolsonaro owes his electoral success primarily to YouTube videos [93].

Before the internet, aggregating in groups to form hate speech collectives was more difficult. Physical proximity tended to be a constraint. With the advent of the internet and social media groups, it is easier for persons with radical ideas to find like-minded individuals, creating a forum with a loud voice, which in turn can convince others to join their cause. It creates a crowd effect that creates an appearance of a large audience for a particular theory or belief. The mass shooting directed at Latino people at an El Paso Walmart in August 2019 can be traced in part to the gunman's participation in 8chan, a social media group that permits anonymous postings. Slate magazine descried 8chan as "[a]n anonymous, meme-filled internet backwater…a place for white supremacists to indoctrinate others—particularly white men—into bigoted ideologies" [94]. Social media like 8chan not only aggregate a forum, but deceptively entice its followers to believe that they have a loud voice and that their group is larger than it really is, luring more members into the group.

While there are concerns for groups like 8chan, Facebook illustrates a broader problem of regulating speech on the internet, particularly hate speech or conspiracy theories. The problem with conspiracy theorists is that they view any attempt to correct their theories by appealing to contravening evidence as a verification and extension of the conspiracy theory itself, another sign of a cover up. Believers in QAnon have stretched any limits of credibility in the theories they espouse for which it can supply little or no evidence or which are virtually impossible (e.g., one cannot verify that Trump will be saving the world from a satanic cult of cannibals and pedophiles). Should their speech be curtailed? Is there a limit to free speech? The first amendment asserts that the "Congress shall make no law…abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." But Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes asserted in Schenck v. United States [95] argued that "the character of every act depends on the circumstances in which it is done." If a man falsely shouted fire in a theater and causes panic, he would not be protected on the basis of free speech. The "question in every case is whether the words are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent" [95].

Any person that creates panic in a theater by shouting fire should be censured if not jailed. The hate speech and conspiracy theories on the internet have gotten to the point where physical harm results. The attack on the El Paso Walmart was just one example; there has also been violence against Jews, Muslims, and members of the LGBTQ+ community because of the right-wing radical social media ecosystem. Other problematic speech of the right-wing media includes supporting Trump administration's imprisonment of immigrants and their children (leading to the spread of disease and death, not to mention psychological trauma); their applause of the killing of two peaceful protesters in Kenosha, Wisconsin, by a right-wing extremist; their lies about the growth of coronavirus infections and death; and so on. The support of false ideas and ideologies and the destruction of institutional norms and trust in expertise have created the equivalent of a stampede in a crowded theater. The loud, in-your-face refusal to wear masks as a civil liberties badge of honor in the war against the coronavirus in the United States not only denigrates the role of public health expertise but actively promotes the spread of the disease to the public, ignoring the rights and health of individuals who follow public health recommendations. The latter is not only a matter of yelling fire in a crowded theater but also fanning the flames. The foundation of a liberal democracy has been catapulted into chaos, where sources or institutions are politicized and not trusted (e.g., the intelligence community, the Justice Department), thereby attacking the very essence of democracy and democratic institutions.

To add to the mix, there is self-deception, social and collective. How do we cope with collective self-deception, where the truth is a contrived second-hand or false opinion, paraded as knowledge? The willingness of individuals to seek the actual truth appears to be extensively diminished, given that their cognitive authorities have all the "truth" and that only their venues have access to the "facts," and independent inquiry is fraught with seductive pitfalls designed to threaten to send one to hell, figuratively if not literally, based on one's religious persuasion (e.g., white evangelicals who believe that Trump was appointed by God and ministers who claim that a voter will be going to hell if they do not vote for him [96]). Even within orthodoxy, there are problematic results for questioning the powers that be: the corrupt Athenian government put Socrates to death for corrupting the youth by having them question the orthodoxy. In these days, "orthodoxy" (which comes from "right opinion" in Greek) is often a contrived constructed reality that one can call genuine fake news, validated through collective self-deception and false cognitive authorities.

Robert Reich [83] argues that two actions need to occur to bring rational control back to the internet. First, there should be some anti-trust action that would break up the large providers. He argues that they have a too broad and monolithic influence. Second, we must prevent such providers from pretending to be neutral providers of information for which they have no responsibility. Facebook and Twitter spread Trump's lies (among other untruths, distortions, paltering, doxing, fake news, and conspiracy theories), and the American public must be aware of this fact. He argues that democracy flourishes with truth and dies when disinformation and misinformation are allowed to run rampant. He sees the problem as disintermediation, by which he means that "sellers are linked directly to customers with no need for middlemen" [83]. Prior to the internet, newspapers and public broadcasting mediated information. They employed fact-checkers and editors, mostly constrained their bias, and adhered to journalistic norms. With the internet, mediation disappears, and information seekers are confronted with raw opinions, and what is available is influenced by money-making, biases, and agendas of all sorts, to which the information seekers may or may not be savvy. Reich says:

> *Intermediating between the powerful and the people was once mainly the job of publishers and journalists—hence the term "media."*
>
> *This role was understood to be so critical to democracy that the constitution enshrined it in the first amendment, guaranteeing freedom of the press....*
>
> *Zuckerberg and Dorsey insist they aren't publishers or journalists. They say Facebook and Twitter are just "platforms" that convey everything and anything— facts, lies, conspiracies, vendettas—with none of the public responsibilities that come with being part of the press.*
>
> *Rubbish. They cannot be the major carriers of the news on which most Americans rely while taking no responsibility for its content [83].*

Reich believes that there must be some control over internet content. While some social media platforms have some policies restricting some kinds of speech on the internet, such as far-right hate speech, false coronavirus information, and speech that incites violence [97], and no political ads on Facebook the week before the election, these restrictions are not sufficient to safeguard democracy.

10. The cult of Trump

Fox News and many right-wing social media sites have amplified the power and seductiveness of Trump and his demands for loyalty. They stoke grievances, anger, self-righteousness, social self-deception, and resentments. Prior to his election, Trump was a strong TV personality who claimed to be a successful businessman in spite of multiple bankruptcies. After the election, he wanted to project an image of a strong and popular leader, defending the interests of the small guy, the apparently ignored, the left behind, or the undervalued in American society; nursing the grudges of those who thought they did not get a fair shake in society, who thought their conservative values were being derided, and whose economic well-being was being trashed by outside forces, like immigrants and companies offshoring jobs. He demanded loyalty from all members of government and those who did not obey found themselves jobless. He marshaled the allegiance of the Republican Party, overcoming their clear doubts about his character and ability to run the government. But with the help of Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell and later a loyal Head of the Department of Justice, William Barr, he made them all of those who stayed in office loyal. Former critics like Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz not only to tolerate his incompetence, philandering, lying, projecting, self-aggrandizing, and demand for loyalty but also promote it. They refused to entertain the possibility of his guilt during his impeachment or turned any opposition to him into a culture war. Through him, the GOP was able to gain control of the federal government and to push their agenda, which slowly turned the GOP into Trump's party, for they abandoned many of the core values of the old Republican party, such as strong defense, balanced budgets, a low national debt, and so on. He became the face of the party, and those who were not loyal to him or did not fawn over him were pushed out of power. His TV persona and his ability to repeat the grievances, racism, and pettiness of his supporters turned him into a cult leader.

Sociologist Janja Lalich, who has studied cults extensively, suggests that members of "totalistic" cults—those that consider their ideology the one true path— share four key characteristics. They

> *1) espouse an all-encompassing belief system; 2) exhibit excessive devotion to the leader; 3) avoid criticism of the group and its leader; and 4) feel disdain for non-members [98].*

She believes that followers of Trump belong to a cult.

The far longer list that Joe Navarro, former FBI agent, produced *in Psychology Today* also fits the facts about Trump. Based on his 1912 study of nine dangerous cult leaders, he produced a list of 50 characteristics of cult leaders, many of which apply to Trump. Below finds a sample of 20. A dangerous cult leader:

1. *Has a grandiose idea of who he is and what he can achieve.*
2. *Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, or brilliance.*
3. *Demands blind, unquestioned obedience.*
4. *Requires excessive admiration from followers and outsiders.*
5. *Has a sense of entitlement—expecting to be treated as special at all times.*
6. *Is arrogant and haughty in his behavior or attitude.*
7. *Has an exaggerated sense of power entitlement that allows him to bend rules and break laws.*
8. *Is hypersensitive to how he is seen or perceived by others.*
9. *Publicly devalues others as being inferior, incapable, or not worthy.*
10. *Is frequently boastful of accomplishments.*
11. *Behaves as though people are objects to be used, manipulated, or exploited for personal gain.*
12. *When criticized, he tends to lash out not just with anger but with rage.*
13. *Anyone who criticizes or questions him is called an "enemy."*
14. *Has "magical" answers or solutions to problems.*
15. *Habitually puts down others as inferior; only he is superior.*
16. *Treats others with contempt and arrogance.*
17. *Is constantly assessing people to determine those who are a threat or those who revere him.*
18. *Hates to be embarrassed or fail publicly; when he does, he acts out with rage.*
19. *Doesn't seem to feel guilty for anything he has done wrong nor does he apologize for his actions.*
20. *Believes he possesses the answers and solutions to world problems ([99], reordered by author).*

In *The Cult of Trump* [1], leading cult expert Steven Hassan cites Trump's "air of 'only I can fix this,' his practice of sowing fear and confusion, his demand for absolute loyalty, his tendency to lie and create alternative 'facts' and realities, his shunning and belittling critics and ex-believers" [1], p. xii. Having been rescued from the Moonies himself, Hassan compares Trump to Sun Myung Moon as well as L. Ron Hubbard, David Koresh, Lyndon LaRouche, and Jim Jones. The only strategy that seems to work to remove a cult follower from someone like Moon is being deprogrammed, physically removing the cult member from the cult context and challenging their belief system, until they see the unreality of their cult existence. Hassan himself experienced such deprogramming and has become a consultant who helps people recover their loved ones from cults. There is unfortunately no way to deprogram the entire 40% of America that currently lives in Trump's cult, and deprogramming must be continuously enforced, which is impractical as well as illegal. The support for Trump is so broad and is local to a network of strong supporters and advocates that extends and is supported by a broader network that includes newspapers, cable news networks, and social media sites. Extraction from this cult is unlikely, even more so a prolonged removal from it, for the disinformation is so pervasive.

Amy Penn [100] argues that due to the cult-like nature of his presidency, Trump is conditioning his supporters to take up arms if he loses reelection. Bandy Lee, a psychiatrist who studied at Yale Medical School makes the same argument in a statement reported to a Salon reporter:

> *When Donald Trump suggests that the [corona]virus be taken as a "hoax," that people gather in churches or that people protest for their own sacrifice, he is actually testing people's loyalty to the "laws" of his mind over the laws of nature, or even impulse for survival. The more he abuses them, the greater their devotion grows, since the psychological cost of admitting their mistake is ever higher—and so it becomes easier to dig a well of unreality than to see the obvious truth [101].*

If Trump supporters are willing to have their grandparents sacrifice themselves for the economy [102], they should be more than willing to die for the rightful president in a rigged election. While Lee attributes the resistance of Trump supporters to facing reality to a refusal to admit their mistakes, I would argue this is too simple. It more likely has to do with the failure of their lives, their refusal to admit that they are the source of their own failures. It is their failure to make difficult choices and to accept responsibility for their own actions and their life. Trump gave them permission to publicly externalize their failures onto other people (like immigrants and the coastal elites) and external events (like poor border walls), to embrace their victimhood, just as Trump extols his. They are his cult followers and active agents for his deceit and disinformation.

In addition to the corruption of *Fox News* and pro-Trump social media sites, there are many agents and agencies who are working to get Trump accepted and reelected. They include Russian trolls using disinformation campaigns, far-right agents, white supremacists, white evangelicals, members of the Republican party (Senators, House Members), the Department of Justice, the Trump administration and its political appointees, and clickbait entrepreneurs. The common tactics that they use to deal with challenges to their position include projection (unconsciously taking unwanted events or consequences for which one is responsible and attributing them to someone else, e.g., Joe Biden is causing racial violence), denial (asserting that what is actually happening is not what is actually happening, e.g., Trump claimed that the coronavirus is just like seasonal flu, about which he lied [69]), false equivalence (all opinions are equal, ones founded on opinions have the same value as those based on facts or evidence, e.g., the impeachment trial of Trump was a Democratic hoax), name-calling (also called an ad hominem logical fallacy, using names to try to tar the character of one's opponent in an effort to destroy the legitimacy of their arguments, e.g., Crooked Hillary), whataboutism (instead of focusing on the claim against them at hand, they bring up an unrelated matter on one's opponent, e.g., when one observed that Melania Trump uses unofficial email in conducting business, the argument is shifted to Hillary Clinton's use of unofficial email), and gaslighting (a tactic in which a person tries to gain more power by making a person question their own reality, e.g., Trump's calling the Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election "fake news" after intelligence agencies had established it beyond doubt). Whataboutism seems to be a favorite with his supporters. When they are confronted with evidence they do not like, they latch onto a narrative that ostensibly tars his opponent.

What makes Trump as a cult figure both problematic and perhaps also attractive to his cult is that he has a disturbing psychological profile. Psychologist John Gartner argues that Trump has at least three personality disorders: narcissistic personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, and paranoid personality disorder [103]. Bandy X. Lee's edited volume, *The dangerous case of Donald Trump: 27 psychiatrists and mental health experts assess a president* [101], contains the work

of experts who agree. Both his sister, Maryanne Trump Barry, and his niece, Mary Trump, find serious problems with Trump's mental health [104]. Dan P. McAdams [105], a psychologist who teaches at Northwestern University argues that Trump has no inner story, no moral frame of reference:

> *Rather than see his life as an ongoing story Donald Trump lives in the emotional moment from one moment to the next. He refuses to be retrospective, prospective or introspective. He never looks back, he never looks very far forward, and he never looks inside. One after another, each life episode involves a battle of some kind, a struggle to triumph over an adversary because, as he sees it, the world is a dangerous place filled with vicious people. Without the luxury of a life narrative, each episode arises as a new event disconnected from others. Over the course of a day, a week, and indeed much of his life, Donald Trump has awakened anew to each event as if there were no distant past and will be no long-term future [105], p. 172.*

Because of this character deficiency, he has no inner story or evolving story, and he cannot learn lessons from his past or reorient his course for the future.

> *He is always on the surface, always right now. In his own mind, he is more like a persona than a person, more like a primal force or superhero, rather than a fully realized human being. Even at the Republican National Convention in the summer of 2016, when the Presidential nominee was expected to appeal to the American public by telling his own story, Trump refused to humanize himself. He passed up the golden opportunity to convey who he is, who he was, and how he came to be [105], p. 233.*

He did not do so, because he could not. In the 2020 Republican National Convention, his handlers had to construct an inner narrative for him, and it was mostly projected by his children, Ivanka, Donald Jr., and Eric. Others were instructed to humanize him: Trump's Twitter-man-slash-golf-caddy Dan Scavino said he was "a kind and decent man who shows endless kindness to everyone he meets." RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel observed that there are "private moments where he comforts people in times of pain and sadness." And Kellyanne Conway assured that when the president meets people in need he is "comforting and encouraging...assuring them that they matter." There is little evidence to confirm such stories [106].

McAdams calls Trump a "truly authentic fake" [105], p. 169, all surface with no depth. Perhaps because of this he captivates his supporters who can pour their hopes and imaginary stories into him, because there is nothing there than can contradict them.

There are little rational grounds for supporting Trump. Nicholas Kristof, in an assessment in the *New York Times*, examines 21 (of the more than 280) major promises that Trump made during his 2016 President campaign (e.g., build a wall and have Mexico pay for it, help students drowning in debt, repeal and replace Obamacare, drain the swamp in Washington, end chronic trade deficits, etc.), and there is only one promise that he kept (albeit with the enormous help of Mitch McConnell): put in conservative judges [4]. Perhaps there is one other basis: maintaining white privilege or racism. There appear to be no psychological grounds for supporting him either. Supporting Trump defies any sort of coherent rationale.

11. Conclusion: the age of inflamed grievances

Fox News and many right-wing social media sites are dominant cognitive authorities in the disinformation-misinformation ecology, though one cannot

deny the influence of political leaders, a political party, and white evangelical leaders, among others. At the moment, their focus is Donald Trump and what he has come to represent: a form of conservatism that seems to have denied its roots (fiscal responsibility, strong national defense, anti-communism). It is now heavily characterized as anti-liberal, for it seems to have lost a lot of the meaning that conservativism had before Trump. The consumers of *Fox News* and right-wing social media sites are predisposed to swallow what they expect to ingest, employing these sources by conscious motivation (such as willful ignorance or avoidance of information contrary to their beliefs) or unconscious ones (gullibility, cognitive biases), conditioned by previous exposure from "information" channels such as *Fox News*, or from like-minded peers, friends, associates, religious leaders, politicians, and pundits. They are also conditioned to avoid or reject certain channels of information, what they are trained to believe is fake news. Because of the "propaganda feedback loop" [78], p. 33, in which they live, a disinformation-misinformation ecology, each element reinforces every other element in a dialogical process, facilitating self-deception. Their self-deception or bad faith infects their friends and associates, and is reinforced by them (social self-deception), fostering a collective identity (collective self-deception), with such labels as "conservative" or "anti-liberal." It is a dialectical process that is self-reinforcing and in which any contrary fact, logic, or evidence is rejected. Their like-minded (false) cognitive authorities authorize the validity of their biases and beliefs, oppose other cognitive authorities either partially (e.g., rejecting parts of science that have been made out to be part of a culture war, such as scientific recommendations of wearing of masks during the coronavirus pandemic, but accepting parts of science when they take their children to the hospital for a ruptured appendix) or completely (non-like-minded media, such as the *New York Times*). Both cognitive authorities of *Fox News* and right-wing social media and their consumers tell themselves that they operate in a sphere of knowledge, when at best it is opinion and at worst propaganda or false opinion. They claim their authorities are authentic, credible, and trustworthy, but they only supply information to confirm their biases, cherry-pick facts or evidence, and omit data unfavorable to their narratives (e.g., they failed to show how incompetently Trump handled the response to the coronavirus pandemic or that he lied about knowing about its severity). They live in a filter bubble, where everything that does not accord with their worldview (even its inconsistencies) is not only ignored but strongly disavowed as "fake news." There is a strong case to be made for their commitment to its cause (the support of Trump and right-wing ideology) as being addictive. In terms of *Fox News*, their "addiction to tribal partisan porn" [58] triggers an emotional meme, trope, or narrative, about which the viewers are primed to be angry (whatever the emotional trigger) or are already angry.

The engaging, enraging emotional triggers may vary among individuals or groups, just as the motivations of Trump supporters vary along a wide range: at the top there is likely more "motivated reasoning," an attempt to rationalize acceptance of all things Trump in the interests in power, wealth, privilege or ideology. At the bottom are those who are addicted to their anger and resentments, their loss of privilege, their presumed displacement in society, and/or other antagonisms. All sorts of narratives can fuel their emotional state. Examples include the claim that the liberals are going to take away one's guns if they get into power, jobs are being taken by immigrants or sent abroad, one is being persecuted for being Christian, many people get free money from the government while you work hard for yours, and so forth. These narratives are stoked and restoked by daily examples dredged from the news and sometimes from dubious internet sources, such as alt-right sites. They can be distortions of events, such as claiming that there were no peaceful protesters in Portland, only rioters. They are repeated over and over again from the

same sources and different sources. Repeating information, true or not, increases its believability, and this applies to newspaper headlines, statements, or speeches [107]. They are repeated and echoed throughout the disinformation-misinformation ecology—from *Fox News* to/from conspiracy sites to/from friends to/from colleagues to/from associates to/from right-wing religious leaders to/from political leaders to/from government administrators and so on down the line, so that the emotional content is stoked into anger, aggression, a distorted perception of reality, fear and so forth. Like all addictions, the addiction to *Fox News* is never satiated. There is always a need for more and more and more memes, tropes, and narratives to nurse and inflame biases.

This condition of embracing and seeking self-serving tropes and narratives is similar to a perversion of what is presented in Søren Kierkegaard's notion of the demands of faith. In *Sickness unto Death* [108], God demands that Abraham sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. Abraham not only sets out to obey but also does not even try to rationalize and explain himself to others, and only God's intermediary, an angel stops him. For Kierkegaard, the act of faith entails following God's demands, as irrational as they may appear to be. Kierkegaard wonders what faith would be if it demanded only something that was rational. The more irrational the demand, the greater the demand of faith to follow through. This seems to be true of the addicted Trump supporters—the greater the insane comments and demands, the greater the unflinching allegiance (e.g., science is a cultural war against one's individual rights to refuse to wear a mask, unless your child gets a case of smallpox [anti-vaxxers not withstanding]). Like Abraham's unflinching acceptance of God's demands, consider the unflinching acceptance of conspiracy theories, such as the willing suspension of disbelief that was required to swallow one of the early conspiracy theories called Pizzagate. It was conspiracy theory espoused by the alt-right, particularly through Alex Jones, the host of InfoWars, that Hillary Clinton was sexually abusing children in the basement of a pizza shop, Comet Ping Pong, in Washington, DC. On December 4, 2016, based on his embrace of the Alex Jones' narrative (along with an anti-Democratic bias and other cognitive biases), Edgar Madison Welch, of Salisbury, NC, walked through the front door of the restaurant, pointed an assault rifle in the direction of an employee and fired [109]. Fortunately, no one was hurt, but the narrative was so compelling to Welch that checking the facts did not occur to him (e.g., that the restaurant had no basement). What is disturbing is his unflinching acceptance of the narrative, his emotional triggers having become supersensitive. Another case was the conspiracy theories about the cause of the horrendous fires in Oregon and California in the summer of 2020. The conspiracy theory was that the fires were set by members of Antifa (Anti-Facists, started originally to fight racism but expanded to include other extremists [110]) and when homeowners were asked to leave their homes for safety reasons, they refused, arguing that they needed to protect their homes from the roaming gangs of Antifa [111]. It was a false rumor most likely set by the alt-right trying to help Trump's reelection campaign. Even higher on the irrational scale are the QAnon conspiracy believers, who embrace a conspiracy theory that could never be shown to correspond to reality: e.g., Trump is secretly saving the world from a satanic cult of pedophiles and cannibals, most of whom are Democrats and the liberal elite. Every utterance or tweet Trump makes is a code that supposedly substantiates the theory. A QAnon embracer is told to believe that everything that Trump tweets or says has a meaning, even his errors in spelling and pronunciation, e.g., "covfefe" [8]. The theory is detached from any form of reality, which seems to strengthen adherents' devotion and addiction. Their faith in Trump is another form of sickness unto death, sickness built on an ill-conceived, propagandized self-righteousness. The difference between Kierkegaard's sickness unto death and theirs was that his goal

was redemption, while theirs is a willful ignorance that pretends it is not willful, an addiction to some Gnostic gospel that is supposedly the subtext of all political reality. Cognitive authorities like *Fox News* (and OAN and Sinclair Broadcasting) and right-wing social media sites train consumers to engage and inflame their anger because it keeps them addicted to their message. While such authorities create, engage, and amplify consumers' emotive state, they generally seek money and power [39] and promote a right-wing ideology that tends to run contrary to the real demands of most American citizens, 40 per cent of whom continue to support and empower them.

Privately *Fox News* staff acknowledge they feel tied to supporting Trump while absolving themselves of any journalistic integrity while feeding the "Frankenstein" that they have helped to create, sustain and perpetuate, a Frankenstein that demands uncritical loyalty, from whom they derive power, money, and support for their ideology of an unfettered capitalism. With social media sites, they perpetuate the addiction and uncritical loyalty, but they ignore its potential result: a civil war, the destruction of American democracy, the collapse of law and order, rampant corruption, the descent of the planet into an irreparable condition. Because their will to power feeds on the emotional triggers of its audience or social media engagers, their biases trump their abilities of critical thought, even their abilities to know that they do not have the ability for critical thought. That is why it is impossible to engage them with a rational argument or to train them in logical fallacy literacy, information literacy, media literacy, or digital literacy. Such tools, as critical and important as they are, are only useful to those who are open to using them, not to those that live in a filter bubble or closed "propaganda feedback loop" [78], p. 33.

In sum, *Fox News* and alt-right social media sites are two of the major factors that have contributed to the uncivil discourse in American society; the undermining of American democracy and democratic institutions; the decline in law and order; an anti-science, anti-humanistic agenda; and the hypersensitivity to presumed threats to one's rights and ideology. While we are engaged in disinformation wars in the Age of Disinformation, we also have entered the Age of Inflamed Grievances, given the in-your-face stoked grievances by the alt-right in cable news, social media, and the Trump administration. While we have had many grievances over the years, entities like *Fox News*, some social media sites (like Brietbart and QAnon), and other right-wing media have stoked and flamed one's resentments on a continuing basis so as to accumulate power, economic benefits, and an ideological supremacy, often quite opposite to interests of their supporters, democracy, and the survival of the country. To a significant extent, it has also become the Age of the Anti-Enlightenment, because science is not only treated as an alternate opinion but challenged as false (e.g., the coronavirus epidemic was a hoax invented by Democrats, and the Centers for Disease Control provide biased or false information about the pandemic).

Plato would not have expected Trump supporters' resolution to return to the Cave, where they now shout obscenities at those who want to move them out of the Cave (e.g., at the local stores, they berate clerks on their insisting they wear a mask as part of the store's policy in coping with the pandemic, or they attack Black Americans as if they were all going to attack them). We now have segments of extreme right partisans that choose to abide in their self-righteousness and non-negotiable postures, where every affront becomes a culture war, and any cause that disturbs them is inflamed into a righteous political act. Rather than a Socrates leading them out of the Cave, *Fox News*, right-wing social media sites, the Republican (Trump) Party, and the pro-Trump religious leaders, all want to secure the prisoners back into an enlarged Cave with self-imposed cells, where there is chaos, inflamed anger, tyranny, cruelty, fascism, narcissism, idolatry, arrogance, selfishness, and ignorance, and where many prisoners praise their jailors and oppressors.

We have entered a brave new world, where, as Alice in *Through the Looking Glass* [112] said, "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." The more one leans to the right, the truer this position seems to be. If one's sources of information are *Fox News* or like-minded news sites and alt-right social media sites, not only are you asked to perpetuate these impossible things, but you are also asked to promote these things with a sense of self-entitled moral outrage throughout your disinformation ecology. In the age of distraction, truth is "whatever makes you click" [113]. In the age of inflamed grievances, truth is whatever you are predisposed and enflamed to click.

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Debunking as a Method of Uncovering Disinformation and Fake News

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Abstract

Journalism is about much more than just seeking and processing information. Multi-skilled journalists of the twenty-first century have to fulfil the given basic tasks and invest much of their time in verifying the affairs that are presented, and uncovering half-truths or false information. That is why all truly professional editorial offices pay attention to demasking, denying, or explaining disinformation in order to monitor and properly check the publishing activities of other media subjects. The chapter is focused on so-called debunking, a method of identifying disinformation, or rather a media genre that is associated with investigative journalism. The present study therefore aims to further explain why nowadays more and more media recipients express their trust in disinformation or various conspiracy theories. The outlined theoretical frameworks are followed by a discourse analysis in which the authors reflect on the current strategies of debunking applied by selected online news media. The text's contribution to the contemporary scholarly discussions on journalism thus lies in defining various journalistic strategies associated with debunking, i.e., publicly uncovering false information that is disseminated in order to influence or rather manipulate the whole of society or at least its major parts.

Keywords: debunking, digital media, disinformation, fake news, hoax, journalism

1. Introduction

The post-factual era, as the scientific and media spheres call today, brings with it challenges not only for politicians but also for journalists. Although it is possible to speak of the presence and existence of various kinds of lies and manipulation techniques before the emergence of the Internet, no medium has provided such opportunities for the dissemination of fake news as does the digital space [1]. It is for this reason that journalists, whose ambition is to honestly verify and obtain information, are faced with various pseudo-media, blogs and social media accounts on a daily basis, presenting more or less thoughtfully and with certain goals various half-truths, information taken out of context or visual and audiovisual lies [2]. The creators of the news have thus (un)plannedly expanded their professional duties, namely on the one hand to identify the fake news itself and on the other hand to state the correct facts in the given context. In addition, their work on health and disease issues is very important, where disinformation and hoaxes directly threaten

the health of individuals and, as we can see during the coronavirus pandemic, the lives of the whole of society. However, this activity is often underestimated by the recipients because, as psychologists claim, individuals find it very difficult to change their attitudes and admit that they were wrong. The reason is a lack of critical thinking and its insufficient support and teaching by educational institutions. An appropriate method of publishing a combination of facts or arguments, however, can help change the attitudes of larger groups of people. Specifically, the phenomenon of debunking, the intention of which is to clarify the primarily false information presented and thus force the recipient to think more deeply about the published facts. The present study therefore deals with the current state of application of debunking in the Slovak media during the coronavirus pandemic.

2. Disinformation, fake news, misinformation, hoaxes, and debunking

Apart from the entertaining role of the media, the information needs of individuals have become one of the fundamental reasons for their reception of any media content, whether printed, radio, television, or, as currently dominant, online. Information-saturated content has the goal of presenting new knowledge, or to expand the recipient's knowledge of already known facts. In conjunction with the above, however, we can now talk about the origin and presence of the phenomena of disinformation, fake news, hoaxes or misinformation, which are respectively phenomena occurring mainly in the current online environment, which are described in layman's terms as a purposeful imitation of relevant information or the production of misleading messages and which furthermore, unfortunately, also fulfill the cognitive needs of recipients. It is also important to note that multimedia in particular has made a significant contribution to the development of this phenomena, in which even a nonjournalist can publish any information, and at the same time publish it both very quickly and easily [3].

The term "**disinformation**" represents the manipulation of facts or the publication of out-of-date, inaccurate and unverified information, the intention of their creators being to confuse the recipient and influence their opinion [4]. It is thus deliberately created and at the same time disseminated knowledge, the aim of which is to influence the public opinion of citizens [5], p. 247. In this context, it can be comprehensively argued that it is a deliberately distorted and at the same time deliberately inserted "fact" into a sophisticated information system with the ambition to permanently influence the actions and behavior of the users [6], p. 45. A characteristic feature of disinformation is, on the one hand, deliberately changed presented information, and, on the other hand, (often) the complete fabrication of a false fact (or lie), while the person who produces and subsequently disseminates it has full knowledge of this deception [7], p. 44. In this context, however, it should be noted that the explanatory term is frequently confused with the phrase "**fake news**," which can be understood as a collection of all misleading or false information in the online space, not excluding those which are disseminated improperly. The primary difference between the mentioned terms thus lies in the purely deliberate production of misleading facts (disinformation) and in the combination of the planned and at the same time unintentional dissemination of false knowledge (fake news). However, fake news can generally be considered as false news about certain events, existing mainly in the online space [8]. The mentioned theory thus clearly indicates the correlation of the existing phenomenon with the Internet media environment, in which no emphasis is placed on the veracity of reports offered to journalists, facts are usually not verified with several sources and the presented information is often made up [5], p. 247. An equivalent term to the previous two

mentioned is so-called "**misinformation**" or in other words, rumors. Even in these cases, it is false information, but disseminated exclusively unintentionally. This is due in particular to the failure of certain individuals to interpret the knowledge acquired, which is then passed on to another recipient. In this context, however, we must not exclusively mention the complete distortion of the intended information, but also about slight modifications of certain reports presenting mostly unintentional untruths [9], p. 8.

The presented findings thus indicate that false information can be broken down mainly according to its production as either being intentional or unintentional. However, within the researched issues, they found, mainly in the foreign online media space, usability in many forms. One form of misleading news, which has also established itself in the Slovak media, is the **hoax**. This, as a type of disinformation, is specific in that it both entertains and misleads the recipient. J. Makoš defines it as a deliberately untrue report, the creator of which tries to give the impression of truth to the recipients, sometimes it is composed of jokes, other times it is the central part of a disinformation campaign [5], p. 248. A Hoax is an alarm chain message, creating fear in recipients and thematically oriented to death or sex, while encouraging users to further share it via social networks or email communication [10], p. 140. As for the topic of hoaxes, it can also be messages discussing potentially dangerous situations, false requests for help, advice against diseases in the form of dangerous guidance on how to treat them, etc. [11], p. 45. In today's online journalism, however, we can also encounter modern types of disinformation, of which it is worth mentioning so-called "click-bait" ("click bait" in the title of the article, which is solely to entice the recipient to click on a particular website to increase its traffic [10], p. 18), "imposter content" (websites imitating socially known news sources, which differ mostly only by differingend domains [12], p. 11), "deepfake" or "cheap fakes" (fake videos, recordings or photography, which were created with the help of advanced artificial intelligence and are used as entertaining satirical material or as the subjects of targeted disinformation campaigns [5], p. 247; [13], p. 2–9), or "conspiracy theories" (reports explaining public events without credible and relevant evidence as a result of the secret conspiracy of a group of powerful governments, secret services, international organizations or others [5], p. 248; [10], p. 19).

Due to the noticeable presence of disinformation and its specific forms in media content, current (especially online) journalism is not only focused on the searching, processing and subsequent publication of information, but also on the verification of already presented knowledge, respectively on the identification of untruths and falsehoods. The given method of detecting false facts is called **debunking**. In a free translation, it can be defined as a declaration of a certain claim as conceited, untrue or exaggerated, or in other words, misleading [14]. The intention of journalists is simply to point out that a certain fact is not as important, valuable or true for society as it seems at first glance. Their aim is therefore to reveal a kind of myth currently prevailing in the consciousness of individuals. J. Cook and S. Lewandowsky, building on previous theses, argue that while the ambition of democratic societies is to publish accurate and truthful information, reducing the impact of disinformation on recipients is a difficult process and a demanding challenge for each and every society. According to these authors, it is easy elimination from the media environment is a misconception, because the presence of false information and its automatic acceptance are primarily a reflection of the lack of knowledge of individuals and their underdeveloped critical thinking. The debunking method therefore involves primary knowledge of the complex cognitive and perceptual processes of humans. This is because journalists need to understand how people process the acquired knowledge and information, how their existing knowledge is affected or how their worldviews impact their ability to think rationally. Thus, debunking is not primarily about what people think, but

about how they think [15], p. 1. The basic task of debunking is to reveal the afore-mentioned disinformation, fake news, misinformation, and their various forms, such as hoaxes or conspiracy theories. Despite the fact that the method evokes positive action, according to M. R. X. Denthit, the abovementioned term has a rather negative meaning, since debunking, in the sense of uncovering wrongdoings, is understood as a negative intention to point out the inaccuracy of a thing or concept. This is not only about the incorrectness of the published information, but also about the very act of drawing the audience's attention to the presented false findings [16], p. 2245. In this context, it is therefore essential to clarify the basic procedures, in particular the essence of the application of the debunking method.

3. Application of debunking in the online media environment and its ignorance by users

Thanks to the current development of multimedia, the behavior of the recipients themselves has been modified in journalism, among other things. Apparently passive consumers of messages have become active users who choose for themselves, from a considerable amount of content, what they will select [17], p. 37. The disadvantage is that, in addition to serious and truthful knowledge, there is also a large body of disin-formation, fake news, or misinformation in online media spaces, which the audience can barely identify. This fact determined the emergence of the so-called method of debunking, potentially a new area of journalistic work. However, its implementation and application in practice is challenging, as it is, on the one hand, to ascertain the untruthfulness of the presented report and, on the other hand, to rebut it, relating to achieving a change in the perception of a certain message by individuals.

In the context of debunking, journalists must focus on the cognitive processes already mentioned, which reflect how people not only perceive information but also how they accept the change in knowledge they have recently adopted. It is thus a kind of update to the recipient's knowledge and memory. In their work, J. Cook and S. Lewandowsky clearly state that at the moment of receiving disinformation, it is really difficult to additionally remove the impact on the recipient of the lie or misrepresen-tation. The authors give an example in an experiment from 1994, when a report on a fictitious fire in a warehouse was published. Immediately, the journalists published a correction of the information, which was untrue, but despite receiving the corrected data, the recipients showed a lasting effect of disinformation at the moment when anyone asked them for the exact wording of the event. The first rule of debunking is therefore the so-called "the familiarity backfire effect." The authors claim that in an attempt to publish corrective information to previous disinformation, it is neces-sary not to mention the original falsehoods (not even in the title of the presented article). The best approach is therefore to focus exclusively on the "new" facts that the journalist wants to communicate to his recipients and raise their awareness in society. The second, equally appropriate approach is "the overkill backfire effect." The essence of the application of this effect is the fact that easily understandable information is more likely to be accepted by the recipient than true information. The "less is more" rule therefore applies. A simple argument is thus much more effective than refuting several (and at the same time complicated) lies. The content presented should therefore not only be short, but also of good readability regarding the use of simple language [18], short sentences and an acceptable number of sub-titles or paragraphs. Illustration of facts in the form of infographics also seems to be a suitable strategy here. The last and at the same time the most effective method of debunking is the implementation of "the worldview backfire effect." This strategy is based on the assumption of the complicated nature of cognitive processes in

people who often unknowingly receive information in a biased manner. This group of individuals reinforces their misconceptions even more strongly when confronted with counter-arguments for disinformation (e.g., by searching exclusively for information that confirms their previous opinion). If possible, the information should also reflect the experience of the average individual with the phenomenon, which makes the presented facts more acceptable to the rest of the audience, or possibly frame the fact by emphasizing selected attributes that the journalist considers the important in this context, making it more successful in forming the opinion of the recipient. Comprehensively speaking, when disinformation is published and subsequently refuted, a so-called "mental gap" arises in the mind of the recipient, which is often dealt with by accepting an incorrect statement rather than respecting an unexplained falsehood or lie [15], p. 2–5. The debunking method should therefore adhere to the following rules:

1. Disclosure of falsehoods should focus on highlighting the facts, with the author omitting previously published disinformation.

2. Before making any mention of falsehood, the author of the recipient should point out that the following information is misleading.

3. The text should always contain an alternative explanation of the refuted disinformation, and thus not only say that the information presented was false, but also explain in more detail what specifically mislead the recipient.

4. The simple graphic processing of the message also presupposes a clearer acceptance of the intended message.

In that regard, Reid complements the findings of Cook and Lewandowski, arguing that it is equally important to focus on:

1. Disclosure of an idea and not of a person—authors seeking to point out widespread disinformation should focus on rumors and lies relating more to the subject of the event and not on the subject that is part of the event.

2. Storytelling—recipients find it easier to remember the facts if they are presented in the form of a continuous narration. The role of the debunker is to choose a suitable narrative structure for presenting arguments about particular falsehoods.

3. Selection of relevant sources—the author should work clearly in their text and refer to credible sources (not only textual, but also, for example, auditory or audiovisual), which increase the legitimacy of his statement.

4. Presence of positivity—as M. R. X. Denthit also mentioned, the term "debunking" as such is mostly associated with negative connotations. It is therefore important for the journalist to apply positive language in his or her efforts to uncover lies or misinformation, thus making a more positive and credible impression on the recipient [19].

In many cases, however, despite the successful application of debunking to the online journalistic environment, individuals continue to trust the disinformation presented. The most common reason is their lack of critical thinking or inadequate media literacy. Mr. Rogers considers that one of the main reasons for the recipient's

confidence in disinformation is the fact that they did not learn to work with information or to orient themselves correctly in such informational overload. We often accept information unquestioningly, we do not question the sources and intentions of the authors and we do not have well-established mechanisms or techniques by which we can distinguish false reports from quality information. The theorist adds that this fact is mainly due to the fact that our society has significantly shifted technologically in recent years, but the recipients have not been able to adapt their way of thinking. The presence of multimedia has not only accelerated the reception and processing of knowledge, but has also reduced the time to read the articles themselves or the time to think about the messages presented [20]. Also, thanks to the wide availability of modern technology, today anyone can be considered as a form of media or journalist (including authors of blogs, videos, etc.). However there is a difference in reading an article by a serious journalist or anonymous blogger, in which W. Rogers sees dangers, as according to him the average recipient cannot distinguish these two polar opposites, in other words they are not media literate. Most individuals are not able to think critically about media content and are unable to ask questions that help them to understand the reality of the everyday media [21], p. 120, 121. In this context, J. Markoš adds that people's trust in disinformation often lies in their being "tailor made for the recipients." A serious journalist cannot write what their readers would like to read—they are limited by the truth. However, authors of false reports are not interested in the truth of the message, so the more enticing and tempting they can make ideas, the more believed they are, despite the fact that they are misleading. Equally acceptable for the recipient is an ordinary sensory experience, which absolutely does not have to be based on truth, preferable to information of a scientific nature, which is often confusing or complicated for Internet users [5], p. 88–99. J. Makoš calls the belief in disinformation, or in other words restricting our rationality, cognitive distortion. According to him, the most important are:

1. anchoring—in an unknown situation, the recipient considers the first information to be the relevant message, even though it may be false,

2. peak-end bias—past events are evaluated as (un) true according to their most recent or most significant positive or negative experience,

3. survivalship bias—when evaluating an event, individuals tend to trust the version of successful, well-known people (although they can be misleading), ignoring the words of those considered less well-known or unsuccessful,

4. confirmation bias—recipients subconsciously seek confirmation of their (often false) opinions. As a result, they create groups of like-minded people on social networks, where they support each other in their belief in false information,

5. contrast bias—the human mind often uses comparisons and contrast in perceiving and evaluating certain (e.g., fictitious) events, which reassures it of its (incorrect) opinion [5], p. 175.

The findings of theorists are currently supplemented by practical findings. One example is logistic regression analysis, dealing with the perception of democracy and governance, carried out across 10 countries of the European Union. The research, among other things, identified five key factors that influence people's beliefs in disinformation and conspiracy theories. Above all was seen their willingness to trade their freedom for other benefits, support of an autocratic leader,

distrust of the media as such, and dissatisfaction with the social system and imbalance in their own lives. However, the presented analysis shows that the tendency of individuals to believe false information is also related to the historical and political significance of a country. According to the degree of belief in disinformation and conspiracy theories, the Slovak Republic ranked first (56%), while the least believing in published lies are Lithuanians (17%) from EU countries. Most Slovaks interviewed believed five out of six published conspiracy theories [22]. Similar data is published by the Reuters Institute in the Digital News Report 2020. They involved 40 countries in their research, and focused their attention partly on mapping the concerns of the population about media-presented disinformation and misinformation. Although more than half of all respondents (56%) are concerned about the fact that there is a significant amount of fake news on the Internet, there are more concerns about the reception of falsehoods in countries in South America or Africa than in Europe. The given results can be conditioned by several aspects. On the one hand, the greater trust by the European population in disinformation may be due to their weaker digital literacy, in contrast to countries such as Brazil, Kenya, etc. [23]. On the other hand, it does not have to be strictly just about technical and technological progress, in terms of the educational level of society, but also about its socio-cultural growth. Every nation has a certain cultural identity, while individuals belonging to it often intuitively try not to admit the fact of their ignorance, or errors in their ways in terms of belief in fake information [5], p. 233. By declaring their own ignorance, they would degrade their social roles, or social status.

It is the existence of the fact concerning the trust of the recipients in the fake news that raises the question of improving the implementation of debunking in journalistic practice, or in individual online media. As part of the discursive analysis, we will therefore try not only to point out the apparent dissemination of erroneous information in the current online media space, but also to map effective and at the same time heterogeneous journalistic creative procedures in the field of debunking.

4. Research methodology

The primary goal of the presented study is to discover the current state of practical implementation of debunking, which is used by the media in the Slovak Republic in order to refute fake news. Secondly, we also notice what new elements are brought by selected web media to this specific field. To achieve the above goals, we decided to use qualitative content analysis, or discursive analysis. Using the mentioned research method, we discover how selected Slovak web media notify about detected disinformation and hoaxes. Following on from the authors mentioned in the theoretical part of the work, specifically J. Cook, S. Lewandowsky and A. Reid, we note how domestic journalists follow the "rules" of debunking. We monitor specifically the "the familiarity backfire effect" (i.e., whether they mention the "original" untruths in the texts or in the titles of the presented texts, or present only new facts with which they try to orientate readers in the issue), "the overkill backfire effect" (whether they write short or reasonably large and comprehensible texts), and "the worldview backfire effect" (i.e., whether they publish disinformation, which they immediately deny or refute).

In connection with the method of qualitative content analysis, which always includes the determination of selected analytical categories, we map the following:

- authorship of the text—downloaded agency text/author's text;

- character of the title—informs/does not notify about disinformation;

- character of perex—informs/does not notify about disinformation;

- the nature of the opening attached image—evokes/does not evoke disinformation;

- placement of arguments refuting the disinformation (first/second half of the text);

- indication of the most relevant (key, most important) information (first/second half of the text);

- indication of the context of disseminated disinformation (yes/no);

- warning of disinformation, if it is in the text (yes/no);

- maintaining the objectivity of the text in terms of focusing on the event itself and not the subject, as well as maintaining the positivity of the journalistic speech;

- using the story and visualizations as tools to illustrate published facts;

- intelligibility of the text (simple language and clear formatting);

- accompanying visual and audiovisual material.

We perform the analysis using an encryption key composed of two numerical categories. Category 1 indicates that the text follows the given rule of debunking, while category 2 concerns journalistic speech that does not correspond to the expected creation rules. Within a certain research area, we subsequently create the median, when generalizing the facts from the analyzed coding units.

- Type of information in the perex: 1—it is not mentioned that it is disinformation; 2—it is mentioned that it is disinformation;

- Introductory image material: 1—does not evoke disinformation, 2—evokes disinformation;

- Refutation of disinformation: 1—in the second half of the text; 2—in the first half of the text;

- Location of the most important fact within the correct information—point with respect to key information: 1—beginning of the text (title, perex, first paragraph); 2—rest of the text (second part of the text);

- Using the story as a tool to explain: 1—yes; 2—no;

- Disinformation context: an explanation of what was introduced, or why: 1—yes; 2—no;

- Warning of misleading information if it appears in the text: 1—yes, 2—no;

- Data visualization: 1—yes; 2—no;

- Emphasis on the event itself, not on the entity that disseminates it: 1—event; 2—subject;

- Presence of positivity in the text, which presupposes the rejection of defamation of the other party's opinion, ridicule, etc.: 1—yes (preservation of objectivity, i.e., both parties were given space); 2—no.

However, we also focus our attention on analytical categories, which cannot be explicitly included in the encryption key. These are as follows:

- Stylistic level and comprehensibility of the text;

- Other accompanying visual/audiovisual material included—videos, photo galleries, photos, etc.;

- Description of the sequence of information in the text (in paragraphs), while the publication of truthful information must be in chronological order to create a universal formula for the implementation of debunking in the Slovak media space;

- Data concerning the number of mentioned disinformation in the text and the amount of sources used (with the aim of creating a comprehensive picture of the problem addressed).

When following the chosen research method, we ask ourselves the following research questions:

RQ 1: How is the debunking method implemented in the Slovak media space?

RQ 2: In what sequence does the Slovak media configure information in debunking?

RQ 3: How does the Slovak media use complementary journalistic methods of debunking, which are story, visualization and comprehensibility of the text?

RQ 4: Does the Slovak media observe objectivity in the form of debunking, in the form of focusing on the event itself, and on positivity of the text?

The selected research material represents the 10 most read portals in the Slovak Republic (according to the IAB Slovakia system as at 18 July 2020), from each of which we chose by random a selection of five journalistic texts reflecting the issue of disinformation published in connection with the coronavirus pandemic. Among the most widely read serious portals at present are, highest read first: Aktuality.sk, Pluska.sk, Topky.sk, Čas.sk, Sme.sk, Pravda.sk (but this online medium did not address hoaxes), Tvnoviny.sk, Hnonline.sk, Dennikn.sk, Dnes24.sk and Startitup.sk (as an alternative to Pravda.sk, which also did not deal with the issue of disinformation). Together, we analyzed 50 texts and, based on our findings, drew conclusions about notifying the general public about published and disseminated disinformation.

5. Result interpretation and main outcomes of the research

In the following part of the text, we present the results of the discursive analysis of the selected (the five most visited) web media, focusing on the nature of debunking and compliance with debunking rules. Each analysis represents an

evaluation of the approach of the work of each medium and is a summary/synopsis of the analysis of five journalistic texts. Data related to medians are given in parentheses, e.g. (), (2).

Aktuality.sk is the most read web medium in Slovakia. While one of the analyzed texts is the author's, the rest of the journalistic speeches come from press agencies (three times TASR, once AFP). In most cases, the headline, perex, and introductory visualization clearly refer to disinformation, reducing the chance of attracting the attention of readers with differing views. In total, the texts on the Aktuality.sk portal are assessed as follows: title (median 2), illustrative photography (median 2), perex (median 2), while disinformation is refuted in the introductory parts of the text (median 2). As for the principles of debunking mentioned in the theoretical part of the study, in all five cases the headlines of the articles make it clear that this is disinformation (a term mentioned in the headlines four times), misleading information or falsehood. Subsequently, in three cases, the illustrative photograph consists of the inscription FAKE NEWS (twice) or HOAX (once). The remaining two speeches are complemented by an illustrative shot that does not evoke the spread of untruths. The most essential information is usually published in the texts at the beginning, resp. in the first half of the text (1), which we evaluate positively. We also perceive positively the fact that the authors also state the context of the observed phenomenon (1) and present their ideas with appropriate arguments (1). We negatively assess the fact that the monitored portal does not mention the story (2) and in most texts or visualizations (2) in notifying about disinformation, which means that the reader loses the opportunity to better and more quickly orientate themself in the problem. The language of the articles is clear, without unnecessary or duplicate information, the formal editing of texts is clear. Overall, however, it cannot be stated that the theory is compatible with practice. Articles are divided into paragraphs, in some speeches with the use of subtitles, which means longer texts. Only in one of the examined examples is other accompanying material attached in addition to the illustrative image. Disinformation is mentioned in the text on average six times, while the average number of sources used is 5.4. With the sequence of information in the text, the authors of the Aktuality.sk portal work in most cases as follows: disinformation—refutation of disinformation—key information—argumentation.

The Pluska.sk web site is characterized by its tabloid format. All selected articles are of a news character and are taken from the TASR news agency, which deals with the debunking of disinformation in cooperation with the AFP agency. Captions are made up in tabloid style, there are words written in capital letters, punctuation, questions or exclamation sentences, but also colloquial expressions in order to attract the recipient, or to evoke emotion in the reader. Each caption indicates that the fact is a hoax (2). This trend continues in the perexes (2) of selected texts, which develop disinformation, and also it is refuted in this part of the text. Three out of five photographs emphasize that the articles concern unsubstantiated or misleading information (2). The location of the key fact (2), which is the most important of the truthful facts, is also problematic. This point appears to a large extent only in the final part of the text. On the other hand, it must be said that the authors of the articles managed to illustrate the context of the disinformation very well (1), by stating the facts explaining the real circumstances of the event. In two cases, the text even clarifies how the disinformation was verified. In one of them, the author explains how the Google Patents database works so that the reader can better understand the allocation of patents in connection with the production of viruses, and in the other, the creators explain the inVID reverse video search tool. We find these steps very useful because the creators of the articles explain how disinformers actually work. However, they do not draw attention to the presence

of disinformation, or mention it only after interpreting it. The texts on the Pluska. sk portal do not have an offensive impact and usually focus on the phenomenon and event itself, not on the subject (1), in which the authors also succeeded in using journalistic speech and in which the source of disinformation was a scientist. The positivity of the article is thus preserved (1). None of the texts contains a real story (2) illustrating the issue, nor is any visualization (2) used for better understanding. The language of the texts, as the articles are taken from news agencies, is neutral. However, due to the medical theme, they contain technical terms or abbreviations that not every reader understands and is of definitional character. Speeches are divided into sections without subtitles, and as for longer articles the content is divided into several pages, which makes the text more difficult. As for the supplementary material, one journalistic statement is supplemented by a video on how to recognize the symptoms of coronavirus; the other contains a gallery of more than 50 photographs taken during the pandemic in various parts of the world. However, images and video do not dominate in the analyzed texts. One article contains disinformation on average 3.6 times, which is not a desirable phenomenon. In addition, the authors use an average of four sources, which are not only based on other media, most often news agencies, but also on the opinions of respected institutions and offices, professional publications and experts in the field. Within the sequence of information in the text, we can state that it is not followed in the correct order, as in general the information is presented in the following sequence: disinformation—refutation—disinformation—information on disinformation spreaders—arguments—key information.

Topky.sk is also a tabloid news site that has a wide range of themes, among other things it also discusses agency news related to debunking. The authorship of the texts is unclear, as neither the authors nor the news agency is mentioned. Topky. sk, like other tabloid media, uses capital letters in the headlines, but no punctuation is used in connection with the articles we have selected. However, editors and authors in the headlines define that the topic is a hoax (2) and point out its spread via the Internet. As an example, we mention the caption "CORONAVIRUS HOAX video is spreading in Slovakia: Its author simply does not believe there is a pandemic!" At the same time, this is the kind of headline that is not completely unambiguous, and therefore does not contain information forcing the recipient to read the whole speech. Even the perexies of articles on Topky.sk applying the debunking method are in the spirit of disinformation (2), which they divide and interpret into about three sentences, such as: "ROME—Vaccination is unnecessary or even dangerous, Bill Gates has a plan to depopulate the planet and because of vaccines, people in developing countries can become paralyzed or die. These are just some of the false or unsubstantiated claims made in the Italian Parliament on 15 May in a speech by Sarah Cunial." In all cases, the introductory image material (2) contains a large red and white inscription HOAX, which may discourage readers who believe in hoaxing as part of debunking. The refutation of disinformation (2) is found directly in the perex, where both false information and reality are presented in the same way. On the other hand, key information (2) is in the background and the gradual publication of arguments culminates in the most important fact. The context (1) is based on selected evidence, which contributes very well to the individual parts of the disinformation, even if it is a far too noticeably a counterargument. In two perexes, we map the author's warning to published disinformation in connection with the current situation. We also encounter warnings (1) in the text, but their use depends on the topic of the particular article (e.g., the author refers to authority in the speech, in words such as "intentionally," or "manipulates" or by marking individual statements as "false or untrue"). In terms of maintaining objectivity, the texts adhere to the description of the event (1) and are also

conceived positively (1). However, the authors do not use the full opportunities of story (2) and visualization (2) to explain the issue at all. The tabloid website applies simple sentences and a clear division of the text in the form of paragraphs, subtitles and highlighting essential information in bold. The language of journalistic expression is of a layperson's level. The constant use of citations by authors can seem cumbersome and sometimes too professional and incomprehensible. The texts contain illustrative photographs as well as visuals of the disinformation spread, while it is the videos or photographs of the falsehoods presented that contribute to their credibility. Creators publish misleading information in the text an average of 4.4 times and use an average of 3.2 sources per speech. Regarding the arrangement of information within the debunking on the Topky.sk portal, we can summarize it as follows: disinformation—refutation—information on disinformation spreaders—arguments—key information.

The tabloid online portal **Čas.sk** mainly focuses on themes and information about celebrities, scandals and various interesting topics. All texts using the debunking method are, again, taken from the TASR news agency (in one case in collaboration with a specific author writing under the abbreviation "pkr"). We negatively evaluate the confusing labeling of authorship—this information is only beneath the ads below the article, and many users may not notice it. Almost every headline points out that the fact is hoax (2). On the other hand, it should be noted that, unlike other tabloid media, they work with "softer" subtitles—they do not emphasize the term "hoax" in capital letters or a different font color. The only exception is writing on the diagnosis of COVID-19, which, however, is used in this capital form in most media. While perex includes direct information about falsehood (2), the preview image is chosen differently; in most cases, the text only complements the illustrative image without a negative undertone (1). The disinformation is refuted at the end (1), with key information at the beginning of the journalistic speech (1). The authors base individual claims on strong arguments and use relevant sources. We negatively evaluate the fact that the authors do not draw the attention of the reader to the interpreted disinformation in advance. On the other hand, their efforts not to attack opponents, not to ridicule and not to shame should be emphasized (1). Like most of the monitored media, Čas.sk does not use story (2) or visualization (2) to interpret disinformation. They do not apply subtitles in their texts, they only divide them by means of paragraphs, but they make greater use of working in bold, with which they emphasize the supporting information. Overall, their work with the text is typical for tabloid media—i.e., the presence of simple, comprehensible information, colloquial words; absence of technical terms; relatively short texts and relatively long subtitles with many punctuation marks; use of citations (often marked in bold). It is a surprising finding that the supplementary material appears in the monitored articles in only one case out of five (it is an attached Internet link to a CNN video, from which footage creating disinformation is taken, thus increasing the credibility of the text). False facts in the text are mentioned by the authors on average 5.6 times, while in one article they quote an average of almost four sources. In simple terms, the scheme of the sequence of inclusion of information in the texts can be summarized as follows: disinformation—key information—refutation of disinformation—argumentation.

SME.sk is an Internet version of the printed daily SME, which has a long tradition in Slovakia. Most of the articles analyzed come from news agencies, two are from authors. The construction of the text is based on headlines containing the information that it is a hoax or a false message or states that the fact is "not true" (2). The only positive example is the headline "State inspectors deny that ibuprofen promotes coronavirus proliferation," which does not immediately imply disinformation. Perexes of texts on the SME.sk portal are mostly made up of one sentence

and again emphasize that the main topic of the text is false information (2). In the headlines and perexes, the creators refer to authorities such as: "The State Institute for Drug Control emphasizes that it is a hoax." The opening image is mostly illustrative; it does not have a significant effect on emotions (1). They then proceed to the very refutation of the disinformation (2). In this case, refuting the untruth is a continuous process running through several parts of the text. On the other hand, the key information (1) that can explain the debunking is usually found in the introductory lines of the first or second paragraph. For example, in an article denying that a map shared on social networks shows the spread of coronavirus, the author explains in the perex that these are air routes and not the effect of the virus. The text concerning the refutation of information about the town of Žiar nad Hronom, where students tested positive for coronavirus, in turn confirmed with the authorities, who confirmed that the town has no such cases. The context of disinformation (1) is respected, as the authors of the texts work with sources such as authorities (mayors, school principals, police). These are local sources found in the author's texts, which increase the credibility of the article. The translated texts also cooperate with professional studies and their authors and also refer to factcheckers from other media (BBC). The authors of SME.sk do not provide warnings (2) when distributing disinformation. One positive example, however, is found: "The City Arena shopping center in Trnava is facing fake news about an allegedly infected person in a food vendor, which is spreading on social networks" the hoax being already mentioned in the title or perex. When manipulating image material, they explain how they adapt disinformation media for their purposes. We do not find elements of negativity in the analyzed articles of the SME.sk web media (1)—the authors always try to solve the given event and do not focus on the subject with regard to the spreader of the disinformation (1). Nor do they use stories (2) to "illustrate" an event (except for one article, which was based on the story of a person returning from abroad). In this context, it should be noted that newsrooms should not only expect these types of reports, but should proactively look for stories about real people, which is not difficult especially given the topic of coronavirus. The authors also do not apply visualizations to the given topics (2). The articles are relatively short and concise; they have news character, which can be assessed positively, as they can explain the essence of the facts in a relatively short text, albeit using a smaller number of sources. The language of the researched journalistic expressions used in this online portal is neutral and simple, it does not contain, mainly due to the choice of topics, much foreign and professional expressions or jargon. Overall, disinformation occurs on average 3.6 times in the text and two sources are used per article, which is due to the shortness of the texts. Regarding the organization of the information, the universal formula is as follows: disinformation—refutation—key information—arguments.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Based on not only the above findings, but also on findings from unpublished discursive analyzes of the remaining five mentioned web portals, we can state that the implementation of debunking within the Slovak media environment does not reach the required level. This is mainly due to the fact that a considerable amount of information is acquired from press agencies. At the same time, much of this information does not even go through the minimum editorial changes [24]. Even in ideal cases, only minor corrections are made, mainly concerning modification of the title, subtitles and perexes, or modification or addition of the accompanying visual or audiovisual material [25]. As an example, we can mention the misleading

infographics on the Aktuality.sk and Startitup.sk portals publishing the numbers of victims of the Covid-19 virus in comparison with other diseases. While the headline on Aktuality.sk reads "Coronavirus: Infographics comparing COVID-19 with other causes of death is misleading," Startitup.sk has it worded as follows: "Thousands of Slovaks shared an infographic that is a misleading hoax." In both cases, however, the authors ("incorrect"), immediately in the title, point out the disinformation. The perex and the subtitles used are also changed (two are used in both cases). From our experience with the analyzed texts, we can say that the more the author's intervention in the article, the better the text is in terms of fulfilling the principles of debunking.

The most widespread problem in newsrooms is the work of journalists with headlines and perexes [26]. Although the intention of the editors to publish and identify disinformation at the very beginning of the article is sufficient, as they want to draw attention to often dangerous lies, it is not so effective. The disinformation is refuted in the first paragraphs of the press text, which is also not in line with the worldview backfire effect, and is without the desired effect. In addition, the examples studied use incorrect terminology and disinformation is called hoaxes. Therefore, they apply the opposite procedure to debunking to that which is recommended. In general, the process is as follows: disinformation—a key fact—argumentation—refutation of disinformation. If we start with the analytical categories we chose, which reflect the findings from professional literature related to the issue of debunking, we must negatively evaluate the constant interpretation of disinformation in the texts (on average 5.24 times). These alternate between arguments and facts, while their authors draw on various authorities, experts, institutions (on average 4.46 times). This is an incorrect procedure within the implementation of the debunking method, the essence of which is the logical placement of various types of information. However, when it comes to setting the context, it is necessary that authors rely on relevant sources explaining the real situation regarding the topic of debunking. In many cases, the authors also unnecessarily explain where and through what media the disinformation spreads and also how many times it was shared. We also noticed that if the author works with only one argument, the text does not seem entirely plausible.

On the positive side, up to half of the articles contained key information in the introductory paragraphs of the speech, which is a desirable persuasive technique in debunking. With a few exceptions, there are no stories in the texts on the basis of which the negative consequences of the spread of disinformation in the field of health could be suitably illustrated. There are also no visualizations in the form of graphs, tables or infographics, suitably illustrating the issue with exact statistics. We also consider positively the preservation of the objectivity of the media, in terms of notification about the event, not the subjects. This fact assumes that the analyzed articles have retained a certain degree of positivity. Journalists thus avoid insulting and publicly criticizing the so-called "opposite camp," which could discourage the reading of the corrected type of news by the most important target group, namely people who tend to trust disinformation. As far as the formal and linguistic aspects of the texts are concerned, they were mostly news texts; the authors tried to write clearly without using complicated sentences. Unfortunately, the topic of coronavirus also requires the application of technical terms from medicine or pharmacy. However, they are not explained in more detail in the argument. In addition, the journalistic texts discussed do not include videos or photographs, and in many cases it is only text that is appropriately divided by subtitles or paragraphs, and this strategy is based on the rules of the formal editing of articles on websites. If we were to look at the level of debunking in the Slovak media environment, according to the average values of the median of individual analytical categories, we could

state that the Slovak online media adhere to the work with the introductory cover photo (1), appropriately state the context (1), put emphasis on the event and not on the subject (1) and maintain positivity (1). The median therefore reaches 1.5. The headline, perex, refutation of disinformation, warnings about fake news, work with the story and visualization received the median number 2. Based on the facts obtained, we can answer the research questions:

RQ 1: How is the debunking method implemented in the Slovak media space?

The research shows that the Slovak media generally do not follow the recommended principles of effective debunking. The editors include mentions of the falseness of the information right in the introductory parts of the text (title, perex, preview image), which clearly do not reflect the presented theoretical knowledge. We also perceive negatively the fact that the interpretation of disinformation in the form of stories is used by the authors of texts only very sporadically. Likewise, the authors do not draw the attention of their recipients to the upcoming publication of disinformation, nor do they use visualizations (in the form of clear graphs, infographics, and tables), which can quickly orientate the user regarding the problem. It can also be concluded that the editorial offices do not use offensive language, thanks to which, in our opinion, they are be able to address wider groups of readers. On the other hand, the use of a number of credible sources, adherence to the objectivity of the text, sufficient argumentation, appropriate placement of the event in context and focusing the creator's attention on the event itself, not on the disseminator of disinformation, should be emphasized.

RQ 2: In what sequence does the Slovak media arrange information in debunking?

In most of the analyzed media, the sequence of configuration of information was similar, and therefore: disinformation—key fact—argument—refutation of disinformation. In the title, the editors usually state their awareness of the hoax. The same procedure applies in the case of perex, while the preview images have a different character (they fluctuate between title images with depictions of disinformation to illustrative shots that do not evoke disinformation). Subsequently, the journalistic texts present key facts, which they immediately substantiate with appropriate arguments (drawn from relevant sources). In the end, the author usually refutes the disinformation (often in the form of a quote or paraphrase from a recognized expert familiar with the presented issues).

RQ 3: How does the Slovak media use complementary journalistic methods of debunking, which are story, visualization and comprehensibility of the text?

The findings evidently suggest that the selected Slovak media do not use the story as a method of explanation of disinformation. The presence of narration can be observed in journalistic texts only if it follows on from the context of the given topic. The examined text also frequently lacks visualization in the form of graphs or tables, which would be able to clearly supplement the necessary facts and arguments. However, the articles are written clearly, while the analyzed media adhere to the regularity frequency, in terms of their publication, the adequate scope of paragraphs and their work with subtitles. In many cases, the language of selected journalistic expressions suits the lay audience, but in some places technical terms or abbreviations also appear, which cannot be replaced by colloquial synonyms.

RQ 4: Does the Slovak media observe objectivity in the form of debunking, regarding focusing on the event itself, and the positivity of the text?

In their journalistic texts, selected web media try to maintain objectivity and do not significantly attack opponents who spread disinformation or half-truths. They mention them only in the context of spreading disinformation, mostly on or via social networks. Even if the media criticizes scientific authorities or other entities for publishing lies, a degree of decency via argument is maintained.

Thanks to the knowledge earned from theoretical reflection and from the subsequent empirical research, we were able to define several fundamental problems that the Slovak web media have in connection with the implementation of debunking. Recognizing the importance of truthful information, which is the basis for a realistic picture of individuals or of society as a whole about what is happening in the world and also for their advancement in various areas of human activity, we propose a number of suitable solutions for journalists and for entire newsrooms:

1. Journalists or editorial staff should also devote themselves to debunking from an author's point of view and not simply acquire content from press agencies. Although it is time-consuming and costly for the editors to draw attention to all disinformation themselves, the individual departments within the news, could identify the key topics they would like to address in the area of debunking. The texts from press agencies are written schematically [27], and the editorial staff should adapt this content to the target group and also to the basic rules of debunking methodology. As we stated in the introductory chapters, this is a formula or a template into which the required information can be inserted in such manner so as to increase the impact. Subsequently, it is also possible to convert press releases into the form required by the false detection method.

2. Editors should receive training on how to implement debunking. As this is a very straightforward and simple procedure, training should not be time consuming. Once they (for example, one of the members of the editorial board) are able to master the technique, on the basis of an understanding of the appropriate literature, they can in turn train other competent journalists.

3. We also consider it desirable to limit information on the volume and route of disinformation disseminated through various channels and also to stop emphasizing which specific media or authorities shared the false information. This method of disclosing facts is not relevant in the context of debunking, as it may give too much weight to the fake news, and instead should focus primarily on verified and truthful information.

4. An appropriate way to draw attention to disinformation is, for example, in the form of a subtitle clearly referring to the most recent lie. Mentioning it in the sentence just before the disinformation, which points to the possible lie, is also considered an adequate technique. We must not forget to choose appropriate language, and thus avoid expressions such as "lying," "false," "hoax," "lie" and rather focus on words and phrases as "not very relevant," "fictitious," "wrong," and so on.

5. However, if it is necessary to mention disinformation in the text, journalists should focus more on the story, or link it to the real experience of the participants in the event, which draws attention to the irrelevance of the fake news. This procedure is especially appropriate concerning health issues.

6. The average reader does not understand technical or pharmaceutical technical terms. It is therefore ideal to omit these words and phrases as mentioned by the press. However, if the author is forced (due to context) to use these terms, it would be appropriate to explain them in more detail (for example in parentheses or visually).

7. There are several useful tools for the above-mentioned visualization of information that can efficiently process different types of data. These include, for example, quadrigram.com, datamatic.com or datavisu.al and many others.

8. When implementing debunking, it is necessary to focus on the scope of the article. It is not possible to explicitly quantify how long the text should be, as each topic requires a different argument. On the other hand, research shows that only 10–20% of users actually read a complicated (online) journalistic text [28]. Therefore, this motto must be followed: All the essentials must be mentioned, and nothing more.

9. At the same time, the texts need to be created with a clear structure, which the reader will get used to and in which they will be able to orientate quickly. Therefore, we recommend that the editors choose a uniform formal arrangement of journalistic texts published on one page and avoid dividing the articles, via hyperlinks, into several pages.

10. Within the content of a published text, journalists should not focus exclusively on relevant sources, but should also explain the reasons why someone is spreading a chosen lie and what the consequences may be of this act. It is also a good idea for the authors to clarify exactly how the disinformation arose, as it is often a matter of modifying the truth and real facts or manipulating photographs, recordings, audiovisual content and also a subjective selection of information from the context.

11. We believe that it would be helpful for editorial offices to regularly include hyperlinks in their texts, which appeared only rarely in the articles we analyzed. They have a credible effect on readers, enabling them to search for and verify the interpreted information, often also from primary sources (since in many cases the editors worked only with agency sources, i.e., secondary sources—in the form of quotations or paraphrases selected by the agency).

12. In connection with the correct reference to sources and the publication of statements by experts, we do not recommend the media to refer primarily to their own texts, but rather to facts from other media or sources. People who believe conspiracies, often believing in various theories and condemning of certain types of media, may perceive work with such resources as self-serving.

13. Whether a person who believes in some disinformation receives a message that applies the debunking method also depends on the nature of the caption, the perex, and the appropriate introductory photograph. If the headline, perex or photograph suggests that the article refutes a previously published lie, the recipient's acceptance level of the newly published information is reduced. Therefore, it is appropriate to choose a neutral headline stating the key facts and resulting from a range of arguments in support of the truth, which should later be followed by the perex itself. When choosing a cover photo, it is necessary to choose illustrative shots, ideally those that show people, because they are more believable to the average recipient. Last but not least, it is essential to implement the debunking method quickly, including in the context of information sharing on social networks.

Acknowledgements

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Chapter 4

Lightweight and Simplified Truth as a Kind of Distortion of Social-Everyday Reality

Shestakova Eleonora

Abstract

Fake news has become one of the typical features of modern mass media. Researchers usually associate the dissemination of fake news with political, economic problems, with an obvious violation of civil rights and freedoms. But with this approach, several significant points are missed. Firstly, for people and society is significant the news of the "simple" spheres of life. Mass media has long been invaded to these sphere and its life forms, for example, through the genres of reality, largely lifestyle. Secondly, the social-everyday sphere is extremely saturated with various places of formation and existence of common senses, about which J.-L. Nancy. The introduction of fake news in them will inevitably lead to the revolution of everyday life, which A. Heller was thinking about. But it will be a deliberately made, artificial revolution of everyday life, built on the soft and strong manipulation of emotions, moods. Thirdly, fake news cannot be limited to the typological series of deception, misinformation, fake, forgery. Such news in the social-everyday sphere, initially, is based on the lightweight and simplified truth about a particular event, phenomenon, methods and possibilities of achieving the desired result. This determines the following objectives of the article. First of all, substantiate the importance of researching entertainment programs from the point of view of fake news and information. To prove that playing of the various types lightweight and simplified world in reality TV is an effective version of the modern type of propaganda, which leads to irreversible deformations of social-everyday reality and dominant patterns of behavior. Thus, fake news introduces into the world of a person, a social group, a society, it would seem, insignificant distortions, small erroneous ideas about reality. But, this leads to serious socio-cultural, worldview consequences.

Keywords: fake news, truth, social-everyday reality, manipulation, ideology, mass media, reality TV

1. Introduction

Obvious and aggressive propaganda of ideas, various kinds of falsity in social relations, manipulations with public consciousness have become a peculiar feature of the culture of the second half of the twentieth century. European sociologists and philosophers had purposefully written about this: J. Habermas, S. Moscovici,

P. Ricoeur, M. Foucault, M. de Certeau, H. Arendt, A. Heller, J. Baudrillard, J. Assmann, A. Assmann, L. Althusser, S. Zizek, J.-L. Nancy. In their opinion, this state of the social-everyday sphere of culture is largely correlated with the development of mass media and with the growth of various opportunities for a person to present his life in the form of a narrative about it. This range of possibilities unfolds from the traditional genres of journalistic interviews, articles, memoir literature to the modernity genres of reality TV, posts, comments and stories on social media. Media communications specialists emphasize: "The social channels we use are less important now than ever before. Today, it's all about how you tell your story" [1]. In addition: "Stories are immersive not only because they are full-screen, but because they are shared in the moment with your audience. <... > you are giving your followers a glimpse into what's happening in your life right now. They're getting a look at a moment in your day, and they feel like they are a part of it because you have invited them in" [2]. Modern society and people are becoming in many ways media texts. They turn out to be not only passive consumers of information from the mass media, but also, if desired, active participants in media communication, creators of conditional media reality. In this process, modern society and a person at the same time settle down in a new space, master forms of coexistence with it, and lose sensitivity to convention, play and, most importantly, to the invariably public essence of media reality. Therefore, social-everyday reality and media reality are constantly in the process of convergence.

This reveals two interrelated key issues: moral-ethical and sociocultural. Society and a person master media reality, be taught relationships with it, designated the foundations, boundaries, principles of what is permitted, of the trust and of the doubts about it, developed new ideas about building a reputation. In media reality quickly the formation of what H. Rheingold designated as informal public accumulation of useful knowledge and a change in the role of the degree of trust [3] to people and groups collecting and disseminating information. The degree of trust in the source, quality of information is one of the key conditions for a long, stable, effective existence of participants in both media communication and social communication. Simultaneously a predictable transformation of technologies for creating fake news, opportunities for manipulation, propaganda, and disinformation is observed. They are becoming more and more sophisticated and seek to captured, colonized the private world of an ordinary person. But, most importantly, they fill it with the necessary – from the point of view of ideological, political, economic benefits – ready-made ideas, meanings.

This kind of relationship between society, a person, and media communications is justly alarming. These are, at the outset, concerns about how, in what directions and on what basis the social-everyday reality develops. Undoubtedly, these are fears about what moods, preferences, ideas and dreams it produces, what behavioral patterns it sets under the influence of long and frequent interaction with media reality. This is actualized the issues that are related to: firstly, to the preservation of the ability and desire of society and the individual to distinguish truth from falsehood, disinformation, manipulation; secondly, with the problematic field of simplification, a kind of primitives of moral-ethical, socio-cultural problems and, accordingly, the perception of news, information, their identification as truthful, reliable/deceitful, fake; thirdly, with the education of a sharply critical attitude to information at first sight about useful things, products, opportunities, primarily in the private sphere; fourthly, with the proliferation of leisure and entertainment programs in the media reality, in which the borderline between facts and reality is inevitably blurred. These programs are initially based on obvious playful and highly emotional moments. They seduce society and a person with the possibilities of quick, easy, all kinds of pleasure from simple and ethically generally recognized,

permissible joys and comfort. These are, generally, gastronomic culture, fashion, sports, home design, healthy lifestyle, and family and youth entertainment, travel. In many ways, they make up the circle of useful social-everyday knowledge about which H. Rheingold wrote. This invariably leads to a smoothing of critical consciousness, activation of the emotional and sensory beginning and simplifies tasks for various kinds of manipulations.

One way to overcome these qualms is to cultivate the *fair memory* ([4], p. 9). This is a special kind of memory associated with collective memory. The collective memory is "the memory of the moral obligation to exercise fairness or to allow its embodiment. By doing good or bad deeds, a person is not just an individual under the pressure of circumstances, but a thinking subject who, faced with an obstacle, creates his own identity. Individual and collective memory, contributing to the formation of personal identity, gives rise to the problem of a fair memory" ([4] p. 10). One of the key points in this process is the formation of personal identity through a critical attitude to reality, as well as personal choice and actions conditioned by it. This applies not only to the "high" spheres of life associated with civil, political rights and freedoms. The creation of *a fair memory* (P. Ricoeur) is no less relevant for the sphere of everyday life. It is important to consider the following. Concepts memory and of a *fair memory* (P. Ricoeur) inextricably linked to language and narration: "Memory needed language as a means of expression, and a narrative" ([4] p. 8). The languages of mass media, media text in this sense play one of the leading roles. They are able to form not only collective, but also *a fair memory* (P. Ricoeur), principles, foundations, models for identity, but they can also play with memory, subtly manipulate it.

It is clear that the formation of *a fair memory* (P. Ricoeur) is in many respects the basis and condition for the stabilization, survival of the modern world, for which the problems of ethics, morality, responsibility, reputation, identity, self-identity of a person are relevant. Mass media continues to play the role of a strong consolidation factor, the creation of a collective mindset, consciousness, mentality. Although it is also clear that in the situation of strengthening the positions of the mass media, their focus on the private sphere of society and person life, the formation of the total of media reality, often filled with information chaos, dubious, unreliable news, it is necessary to understand the following issues. Firstly, what and as a result of what is included in the semantic and axiological scope of concepts of *fake news, information chaos*. Secondly, what are the conditions, principles, mechanisms of their implementation in social and everyday reality? Thirdly, is it always necessary and productive to consider them in a binary coordinate system: false/true, bad/good, unfair, forged/correct, trustworthy? Fourthly, what can resist, protect society, people from information and social chaos, inaccurate information, fake news?

2. Justification of the main approaches and areas of research

Fake news, unreliable information has become one of the characteristic features of modern mass media. It does not have to prove it anymore [5–13]. Rather need to join fair questions L Corbin: "Do not you find it unfair that in this new, complex eco-system of the new media, news organizations like the BBC, putting an effort into making sure that the piece of information is accurate, can lose to mere individuals, handsome men (or women) with good presentation, making people believe in something which is just not right? To an ordinary viewer, a nice guy sitting on a couch and making a self-video of his own might be more trustworthy than well-established news organizations, because of his/her appearance, the "one of us" style?" [5].

To date, researchers has identified the following leading types of fake news: "…six types of definition: (1) news satire, (2) news parody, (3) fabrication, (4) manipulation, (5) advertising, and (6) propaganda" ([6], p. 147). The creation and dissemination of fake news, disinformation is associated primarily with political, social, economic topics, with the violation of civil rights and freedoms, with the era of universal propaganda, devaluation of democratic values and the development of post-truth. This is not contested too. Fake news is correlated with a distortion of reality, lies, forgery, forgery, manipulation, inconsistency with reality, its transformations using parody, satire.

Leading signs of fake news: retreating from facts, hiding the truth; emphasis on rumors, speculation, links to unreliable, anonymous sources; non-personalized experts; the desire not to focus on the consequences of events; purposeful used of negative strong emotions; aggressiveness of tone, style of presentation; escalation of threats. Fake news has become a threat in itself "…not only to the integrity of political debate, but also to the broader health of society in general" ([13], p. 464). Furthermore: "On its own, this is a serious concern, but perhaps the most serious concern is the ability of Fake News to create an artificial worldview for specific groups of citizens that systematically distorts reality. There have been several recent examples where precisely this kind of distortion has led to devastating consequences" ([13], p. 466).

Accordingly, the advice on combating false information is focused on the opposite properties. Despite the fact that there are no easy answers to questions about the methods of struggle, according to experts, they agree on the following points. Society and individual must work out and than invariably, systematically exercise a skeptical attitude towards information; they must remember about democratic values; be supposed to take care of their media ecology; must learn to understood the disinformation landscape and tasks, goals of business models; check sources of information; constantly compare information about one event from different mass media; to give special attention to the emotional saturation of suspicious, controversial topics; enhance the role of analytics; to become a kind of researchers of what they see, hear. At the same time, it is important to take into account that it will be extremely difficult and long to get rid of the consequences of exposure to fake news.

When studying fake news and ways to overcome them, the attention of researchers is focused on the position, systemic actions and responsibility of a journalist, an editor and an edition, and their reputation. It is they who are called upon to resist information chaos, manipulations, lies, fake news, to fight their using traditional methods, the capabilities of high-quality journalism.

Dominance of this kind of approach to the problem of fake news leads to three key points is emphasized. Firstly, it is the position of the person which consumes mass media. The accent is on personal and conscious choice, responsibility for what he accepts/rejects as true, reliable, necessary, useful/false, unreliable, harmful information for him. Secondly, it is the informational content. Priority is given to socially, economically, politically obvious topics in their relevance, for example, presidential elections, military conflicts, increased civil protests, government response to the pandemic, falling living standards. Thirdly, it is the reputation and social responsibility of the journalist, editor and edition. They are viewed as guarantors of reliable, high-quality, socially responsible information. These are important, relevant and promising aspects of fake news research. But this approach misses a few significant points. Without a systematic study of these moments, it will remain incomprehensible why an ordinary person began to trust information from little-known handsome young man more than professional news from journalists and publishers with a good reputation. The question remains unclear why different people from different social groups are more concerned about how best to present themselves and their private life in the form of a media text than about the consequences of such actions.

3. Lightweight and simplified truth and mass media's creation of everyday life

News is essential for people not only from the world of politics, economics, civil rights and freedoms, but also from more "simple" spheres of life, which form the backbone of everyday life. For example, news of fashion, home design, gastronomic culture, etc. This is a socially everyday sphere and its forms of life, according to J. Habermas, which for several hundred years have shaped the culture of countries belonging to the "spiritual contour of the West" and its identity ([14], p. 44–45). They are important for the individual, for the family, and for various social groups. To manage them, to be able to gently, without violence, change their ideological and semantic content, values – means to have complete control over modern society. This kind of news about the "simple" private sphere of life is capable of no less creating an artificial worldview, as well as fake news from the sphere of politics, as Alibašić and Rose wrote about [13]. However, if the news about political, socio-economic events is perceived by an ordinary person as something external, as attempts to invade his private space, the desire to impose someone else's opinion, to deceive, then with news about "simple" spheres of life, the situation is different. There is no explicit and traditional opposition between power/person, public/private, society/home. These social-everyday forms of private life and their reflection in the mass media are initially perceived as efforts to support and revive the positive private values of everyday life.

The mass media have long invaded the world of everyday life, for example, through the genres of reality (reality shows, lifestyle). They show an ordinary person a variety of opportunities for entertainment, pleasure, comfort, fashion in what for a long time belonged to the sphere of private life, or rather even routine. Mass media at the beginning of the XXI century very quickly mastered this social-everyday form of life, realizing its importance from an ideological, political and economic point of view. The emergence and development of the lifestyle genre plays one of the leading roles in this process. So, P.M. Jensen especially emphasizes the socio-cultural environment of the emergence and spread of this new media phenomenon: "The lifestyle genre has its historical roots in factual programming genres of the didactic sort <...> Another particularity of the genre is that lifestyle programs are increasingly traded internationally as program formats, which are subsequently adapted locally to meet national market conditions outside their country of origin <...>" ([15], p. 37). This is primarily due to the high standard of living in these countries, as noted by experts analyzing the lifestyle genre [16–31]. Judging by the research conducted the emergence and rapid development of this genre led to four main consequences.

Firstly, it is the desire of an ordinary person, who leads a stable, financially successful and socially predictable lifestyle, to improve with the help of advice on design, cooking, fashion, healthy lifestyle, leisure time, their home, appearance, and routine. This contributes to the further development of reality genres to striving to maximize the fullness covered of social-everyday life forms.

Secondly, the spread of the Anglo-Saxon way of life to other, less socially, economically successful regions, which, through reality genres, adopt the image, living standards, behavioral patterns, value orientations of their more successful geopolitical neighbors. These genres, as A. Mazel emphasizes, analyzing programs with Jamie Oliver, create this or that image as a desirable lifestyle, encouraging users to buy goods in order to acquire this lifestyle. This is achieved, in particular, by the fact that "Cooking and eating are not represented as domestic labour or a necessity, but rather as a form of leisure and a pleasurable lifestyle activity. Oliver's 'naked' style makes cooking look effortless, accessible, and achievable" ([31], p. 138). The origin

and development, the successful existence of the lifestyle genre is associated with the everyday life of an ordinary person. P.M. Jensen describes it this way: "Lifestyle television deals with ordinary people's everyday lives. <...> The genre, together with reality, falls into the factual entertainment category, and programs are most often didactical at their core and give practical advice and inspiration on food, fashion, body, garden and house, all of which are phenomena through which we express and develop our identities" ([15], p. 38). As a result, a phenomenon develops, which researchers (Kate Soper, Lyn Thomas, Robert Caruana, Sarah Glozer, Giana M. Eckhardt [32–34]) refer to as "alternative hedonism": "'Alternative hedonism' is here theorized as an immanent critique of 'consumerism', and the impulse behind a new 'political imaginary' or vision of the 'good life' that might influence (along with other developments) the move to a more socially just and environmentally sustainable and enjoyable future" ([33], p. 1). This phenomenon is directly related to the genres of reality: "In lifestyle television we identified four sub-genres where the representation of the joys of consumption is tempered by anxieties about quality of life, and desires for other pleasures: narratives of 'relocation' from urban noise and pollution to rural community and natural beauty; cookery programmes focusing on quests for authentic, wild or local food; programmes focusing on spiritual journeys motivated by disillusionment with material success; and finally, 'ecoreality' programmes, where the protagonists are challenged to adopt a new and 'greener' lifestyle" ([33], p. 2).

Thirdly, the inevitable fusion of lifestyle with reality shows, as well as the purposeful use of melodrama and documentary drama techniques, first of all, to improve the image of reality. Although lifestyle, according to researchers, is softer, emotionally calmer, kinder, in fact harmless, in contrast to the real show genre.

Fourthly, the emergence of various kinds of manipulations, fake news, people who work for corporations, create a personal image through fictional stories, deception, speculation on vital topics. This creates quasi-social relations: "Lifestyle gurus embody the para-social, trading off the appeal of intimacy, authenticity and integrity. <...> social media have increased the levels of emotional investment, trust and attention capital in para-social relationships by providing ubiquitous access to native experts and creating the platform to achieve influence and micro-celebrity status. <...> the growing number of lifestyle gurus providing the public with health advice and scientific knowledge points to the need to examine critically the social and cultural landscape that enables micro-celebrities to emerge" [35]. However, in such cases of manipulations, deceptions, their exposure, the same ideas, advice, approaches work for the reality genres as for other fake news. We are interested in a completely different aspect, which, as a rule, is not taken into account by researchers.

It is important to understand: what kind of transformations and distortions of social-everyday reality genres of reality produce; how these distorted views are formed; why they should be interpreted in the problematic field of fake news and understand the full extent of the threats they pose.

The social-everyday sphere of life, as the development of reality genres has shown, is no less saturated with news and events than the political, social and economic. In this sphere of life, no less than in the sphere of civil rights and freedoms, moral and ethical principles, trust, foundations and values for identity and self-identity are important. News about the "simple" private sphere of life actively, but gently, unobtrusively forms an artificial worldview (Alibašić, Rose), similar to the "high" spheres of life. Influence of programs *Званый ужин* (*Dinner party*) (Ukrainian and Russian programs), *Едим дома (Eat at Home)*, *Завтрак с Юлией Высоцкой (Breakfast with Yulia Vysotskaya)*, *Кулинарные путешествия с Юлией Высоцкой (Culinary*

Journeys with Yulia Vysotskaya), *Паломник с половником* (*Pilgrim with ladle*)
(Russian programs), *Baking Tips from Anna Olson, Fresh with Anna Olson, Barefoot
Countessa, Dinner at Tiffani, Private Chef Neill Anthony, Giada at Home, Everyday
Italian*, *Giada's Weekend Getaways*, *Siba's Table*, *The Pioneer Woman: Ree Drummond*,
Kitchen, *Southern at Heart*, *Girl Meets Farm, Yes to the Dress, Tiny house, big dreams* at
the mindset and behavior patterns of an ordinary person are notably. At the same
time information which they have been provided about products, wines, recipes,
methods of preparation, design of kitchens, living rooms, dining tables, cafe halls,
restaurants, methods of building small houses, renovating old houses, etc. has based
on knowledge and on experience of everyday life. An ordinary person in general
knows about those things, products, situations that are discussed in reality programs,
and at the same time receives new information about them, their possibilities and
ways of application. It is important to take into account that the hosts of the programs
are famous and popular personalities of show business, motion picture industry,
business. Consequently, all things, products, situations, skills, clothes of presenters,
heroes in the genres of reality have a direct and increased ideological and symbolic
meaning.

This is how a certain way of life (urban, rural, "green", secular, healthy, slowly
food) is created and set, which is offered to an ordinary person as an ideal and
model. In addition, value preferences and behavioral models are accented through
individual points that are purposefully emphasized in various reality projects. For
example, presenters, heroes of programs create certain connotations for spices,
products, recipes, dishes. Cinnamon is warmth and a feeling of home, comfort;
greens of spinach, mint, leaf celery, parsley is the taste of freshness and a sense of
joy, fullness of a healthy life; raspberries, strawberries is the taste of sweetness and
feelings of pleasure, happiness, family vacations with children, romantic mood;
vanillin is refinement in everything and refinement of the atmosphere; graceful
fruit bowls are a sign of a sincere friendly/love meeting; a large dish is a sign of
a family holiday, a party of a cheerful company of friends; chocolate cake with
creamy cherry or strawberry filling is dessert for Valentine's Day, pasta options
is family dinner. This is reinforced both through verbal repetition, and through a
kind of careless, fleeting glance of the camera at products, spices, objects, flowers,
glancing around the kitchen, living room in such a way as to create from fragments
a hint of a holistic, flawless and harmonious world. The design of the table, choice
of dishes, places for breakfast/lunch/dinner/picnic/party are thoroughly com-
mented on by the hosts, guests, heroes. It sets and gently promotes value images of
places and situations. Scaling, abrupt or smooth change with the help of playing
with plans, cadres of the images of the face, hands of the host, products, cooking
process, dishes, combined with constant explanations of the hosts, guests create
the sensation of simultaneously stable, pleasant, familiar and newly discovered
through the nuances and images of tastes and smells of the world. Additionally they
fill him with strangely elusive memories of things, emotions, smells, tastes, and
strongly seduce him with the desire to repeat/embody all this in life. In this regard,
the montage of media text also plays a key role. In this regard, the montage of media
text also plays a key role. Similar techniques are actively used in lifestyle genre
varieties dedicated to home design, the art of make-up, a healthy lifestyle, fashion
for small houses, vintage kitchens and the ability to make and restore furniture. It
is apparently that advertising and PR of goods and services are gently and carefully
interwoven into these programs through an emphasis on comfort, beauty, useful-
ness of a particular thing, device, spice, product. There is no obvious deception or
forgery here, but this does not mean that there are no fake information and manipu-
lations in these programs.

An ordinary person falls under the influence of that information that he cannot, even with a critical attitude, actualize with a binary system true/false. On the one hand, there is nothing deceiving, fake in taste such as of cinnamon, chili, frittata from zucchini, bacon baked with maple syrup or a tiny house, a wedding dress from a famous couturier. This is not deception or fake information. This, as emphasized in the programs, is being a matter of personal taste/choice/favorite preferences.

On the other hand, all this can only be verified by personal experience, having tried to cook a dish, organize a party for friends, restore the kitchen, put the house in perfect order, and choose the wedding dress of your dreams. The reality show's presenters and guests of also constantly and persistently call for such an experience. However, it is important to take into account that genres reality TV is grouped into problem-thematic blocks and focused on one, local, way of life. Reality-project is propagandized of conceptual components this concrete, local way of life. Nevertheless, there are many such concrete, local ways of life. They endeavor to form simultaneously a holistic picture of social-everyday reality, and created information, semantic, ethical and esthetic chaos. Each of the ideological and semantic lifestyles claims to be unique, correct. Although this seems to be the basis and condition for the plurality and variety of choices for every person, social group, this is not the case. Each problem-thematic group of reality television genres is focused on the creation and soft promotion of the same value meanings and images, which can and should only have shades just to maintain the illusion of diversity. This is evidently, for example, when comparing programs like *The Pioneer Woman: Ree Drummond* and *Girl Meets Farm*. In these reality-projects, the farming lifestyle is contemporaneously realized through general, constant schemes, ideas, values, and through their detailing with recipe options, the nuances of the images of the presenter, their family life, house designs. All this leads to various kinds of distortions, first of all, the simplification of social-everyday reality, which is under the influence of ideas, images of media reality. Moreover, the proposed lifestyle appears in its kind of "ceremonial" form, when the external appearance of the presenters, guests, heroes of programs, situations, processes are shown from a side ideally designed for public representation. In this regard, they are close to the advertising world and its heroes, who are oriented, imitate social-everyday reality, but are not it.

On the third hand, an ordinary person falls under the influence of the image of "star" presenters, guests of programs, under the charm and pressure of ordinary people – participants in projects – who were able to realize their dreams of "simple" joys of life.

This is how reality genres set and sell not only an integral way of life, but also creates an idea of the value, importance, meaning of simple basic things, services, concepts, situations, as well as ways of articulating them. In the genres of reality stable set of models of behaviors and accompanying emotions is proposed. In the genres of reality, there are always a lot of smiles, laughter, emotions of happiness, pleasure. They constantly and persistently frame the stories of the presenters, the heroes of the programs about their families, past, failures, sufferings, dreams, desires, aspirations. The reality genres are always based on a certain minimal everyday situation, which is repeated from episode to episode in each season. This, too, inevitably leads to a simplified and lightened image of social-everyday reality. Especially when you consider that in the lifestyle genre, as a rule, all stories end up happily. All this actively contributes to the creation of identity, self-identity of the ordinary person, social groups, society as a whole, and, consequently, the formation of a collective and *a fair memory* (P. Ricoeur).

Consequently, one should not neglect the study of fake news and artificial worldview in this sphere of life of an ordinary person. It is no less important with what, how and due to what dominant models of communication an ordinary

person, social group, society correlates himself after consuming stable sets of life-styles, their components, heroes, ideas from reality genres. The types and methods of organizing the narrative, the peculiarities of the language of these genres gently set those models, meanings, ideas, values that will serve as the basis for the life of an ordinary person for a long time. An ordinary person usually is striving to inherit, imitate various lifestyles from reality TV. He will be building his life, social ties, relationships, values focusing on the resulting models.

4. Lightweight and simplified truth and places of formation and existence of common senses

Social-everyday reality is extremely saturated with various *places of formation and existence of common senses*, about which wrote J.-L. Nancy. They are created, in particular, through active communication, discussion of problems, phenomena, situations, including from the world of reality TV. This is evidenced by the popularity of reality genres, of comments on program sites and sociological research. These *places of common senses* (J.-L. Nancy) are always and invariably filled with ideological values. At the same time, they undergo qualitative transformations in the era of the dominance of propaganda and post-truth. J.-L. Nancy, in a conversation with M. Ryklin, insisted: "… in the era of domination of the masses …" "… material force cannot hold out for more than a certain, very short time, if it fails to legitimize itself with the help of symbolic ties" ([36], p. 117). Manipulations, fake news from the "high" spheres of social culture are based on the chain of power, on the importance of social hierarchy. For a "simple" social-everyday reality, such mechanisms are not so effective due to the fact that people are used to protecting their private space from external intrusions. This requires other approaches, which are actually used by reality TV. According to J.-L. Nancy, the modern "world ceases to be grasped in the form of a figure, the chain of power, the chain of existence disappears, there remains only a constantly growing ideology in which the masses are trained and which has its own rationality. The masses themselves may be irrational, but the mechanisms that take possession of them and that use them are rational" ([36], p. 113). Media communications continue to play one of the key roles in this process. This is especially important from the point of view of the development of reality genres, which smoothly push social-everyday reality to change with the help of temptation. Reality genres neutralize the opposition power/person, outside world/private space. But they, through the techniques of seduction, give the masses rational mechanisms, which will gently control an ordinary person, social groups.

This is a temptation, firstly, by the ease and speed of achieving the dream of comfort, prestige, affordability and, which is extremely important, personal conformity with generally accepted ethical and social norms. In the genres of reality, this is always emphasized: "You deserve it", "It's simple and easy", "It won't take much time and effort", "The efforts made will pay off with the joy of your loved ones", "It's so tasty, healthy, great …" that "you and your friends will not regret about … ","We managed to do it"," It was all worth it". This kind of verbal suggestion is always supported and enhanced by the appropriate musical accompaniment, video images, what in general creates and launches the rational mechanisms of symbolic connections, about which wrote J.-L. Nancy. Secondly, this is a temptation a diverse stable set of television lifestyles, through which the *places of formation and existence of common senses* (J.-L. Nancy). It is important that these lifestyles are only touching each other in passing. For example, cooking reality shows will not show how difficult and laborious it is to wash the dishes, the kitchen, the living room after lunch, dinner, what is emphasized in reality-projects about the love of cleanliness. How

will it not be in reality about the restoration of old furniture or the construction of a small dream house close-up to show broken nails, scratched, cut hands, bruises on the legs, dirty clothes, fatigue, as they do in reality, dedicated to the transformation of the body, its correspondence to ideas about beauty and glamor. They will not show in reality about the importance of a small house of the financial difficulties associated with its construction or purchase, the rough going of finding a place for its long-term parking. Together, in the reality they do not lie about real difficulties, problems associated with this or that lifestyle, but only gloss over them. Together, in the reality they do not lie about real difficulties, problems associated with this or that lifestyle, but only obscured, blur over them. Sometimes they are given a beautiful frame through the stories of the presenters and heroes about the importance and joy of overcoming these objective difficulties and problems, thereby making them seem insignificant, simplifying their sense. Consequently, to what extent the meanings and values from reality lifestyles correspond to the facts and possibilities of social-everyday reality is a significant question. It would seem that sets of lifestyles create and represent an integral, systemic social world and its key meanings. It would seem that the lifestyles offered by reality are an unconditional reflection of the objective social-everyday reality. It would seem that advice on improving the way of life, physicality softly offered with a smile and benevolently – these are just good, sincere, visual recommendations for achieving a model, a dream. It would seem that the variety of sets of lifestyles, situations and models, options for their solution is the proposed freedom of choice. It would seem that these are the *places of existence of common senses are formed and developed* (J.-L. Nancy), which the mass media wants to help people improve. It would seem that there is no point in talking about distorting the truth in this regard. But on this gap between simultaneously soft, insistent advice and seduction, the transformation and various kinds of distortions of social-everyday reality, as well as the formation of new and largely artificial places of existence of common meaning, are based. These places turn out to be representatives of the lightweight and simplified truth about social-everyday reality, its peculiar of fragments, claiming to be central and fully reliable knowledge about the world.

A person, trusting a smile, the benevolence of the world of reality shows and especially lifestyle becomes dependent on given and persistently, lucidly, imperatively explained for him places of common meaning. That is why the didactic aspect is so important in the genres of reality. This moment is simultaneously allows the heightened emotionality to be fully realized, which is important from the point of view of the introduction of inaccurate information, distortion of reality, and focuses on the purely positive nature of this emotionality, which neutralizes the critical attitude to information. In this regard, the tasks for manipulating personal and public consciousness are simplified; their impact is become more effective. J.-L. Nancy in book "Unproductive Community" (1986, 1990) defines the essence of the fate of a modern person as an atom, a part of society as follows: we must not forget that "… the fate of the atom is the fate of the world" ([37], p. 27). In genres reality persevere of the attachment is cultivated to idealized society. Moreover this society understood is as the "… loss or degradation of social (and communicative) intimacy …" ([37], p. 35). A value emphasis is placed on this systematically and purposefully. So, in all genres of reality there are presenters surrounded by guests and/or heroes of the program. The world that is created in reality is always densely populated with participants. And in this world always there are also many stories about the upcoming joyful, pleasant, crowded event In addition, in this world there are always many mentions, allusions, references to past pleasant, happy events, situations conditioned by the general theme of reality and the specific theme of each of its episodes. An ordinary person in reality exists in a stream of memories and anticipations

of joyful, sweet, kind, friendly communication. And cooking breakfast/lunch, party planning, renovating the kitchen, purchasing a wedding dress, cleaning the living room are an ordinary, necessary and also quite pleasant component of this everyday stream. Moreover, the audience is told stories about the private life of the presenters, guests of the programs, another's to them. This kind of narration is built according to a typical monotonous scheme: the memory of good events, moods, friends, relatives; a confidential story about supposedly very personal moments; moral and ethical conclusion in relation to the story; a clearly substantiated connection between the memory of good, kind events, people and how this influenced the choice of this particular recipe, dress, house; general conclusion about the importance of links between the past/present/future. This scheme is based on positive emotions, is aimed at ethical moments and is designed to activate similar moods and actions in the audience. Furthermore, the audience is actually asked to build, evaluate their life according to the models shown by the media text.

Such an idealized society and the importance of belonging to it are embedding as values for the collective memory. This happens, for example, by emphasizing attachment to family values: "This is the recipe of my mom, aunt, grandmother", "This is how my dad cooked", "I am (preparing, building a house, choosing this wedding dress, taking part in a competition, going on a culinary journey) because of my mom, uncle …", "We have been going to this cafe since our youth","Let us remember what dishes were fashionable in the era of youth of our mothers and grandmothers". These can be moods of openness to the world of adventures, of tastes: "I have long dreamed of street food in Mexico City", "We are building a tiny house so that we can always travel freely, at will", "I want to feel the taste of all the capitals of the world". This is all amplified and constantly supported by musical accompaniment and images of handsome, well-groomed, happy people, kitchens, living rooms, cafes, restaurants, street food and always different beautiful landscapes.

It is fundamentally impossible to update this with the usual binary coordinate system for fake news: true/false, genuine/invented. It is fundamentally impossible actualized this with the usual binary coordinate system for fake news: true/false, genuine/invented. Reality genres use typical stories from everyday life and the corresponding emotions, feelings that could really happen to the presenters, guests, heroes of the programs, or could be skillfully acted by them. But this is not a deception in its usual interpretation. His exposure will not significantly affect the worldview of people, but only change their attitude towards the presenter of the program. For example, if it turns out that the presenter's grandmother (aunt, mother) never knew how to cook well and did not keep a culinary diary with family recipes, tips that are shared with the audience. However, this kind of discloses will not cancel people's beliefs in family values, love, friendship, and even more so in sauce, pasta or fried chicken. Consequently, the information that is introduced through the genres of reality should be considered in a coordinate system not true/false, genuine/fictional, but in a different one. This coordinate system is as follows: naturally relevant, important for society/artificially relevant, significant for society.

Through the activation and scaling of positive emotions, feelings of affection, idealization, the importance of compliance with generally accepted ethical standards in the genres of reality, ideologically, value-marked meanings are created and maintained. In counterweight to this, the voice, the position of an ordinary person and social groups move to the marginal area for it is used traditional, standard techniques propaganda methods and techniques. First of all, this is the technique on which all reality is built: *Ad nauseam* is the tireless repetition of an idea. In reality and in general, and in each problem-thematic group, and in each specific episode, sets of general ideas are repeated, which are tirelessly promoted with the

help of significant details, clarifications, explanations. The technique of *beautiful people* is especially important, which in reality is complicated and deepened by the technique of *beautiful things*, *situations*, *utensil*, *food, landscapes*. This is a well-known technique of *labeling*, when, for example, Greek yogurt is promoted as ideal for many dishes and people, and mayonnaise is declared unfashionable, unhealthy. Although recently in many programs you can see how dishes with mayonnaise are prepared, and the presenters, guests of the projects admit that they love this product very much and ask to put it in a larger dressing. The technique of *brilliant uncertainty* is also used, when, for example, a crunchy layer on pies without explanation, just is enveloped in a flavor of emotionally attractive words, expressions and pronouns. Also important are the methods of *appeals to authority*, the *bandwagon, "inevitable-victory"* and *join the crowd*, the *common man*, when the opinion, tastes of an ordinary person, of a social group purposefully and gently switch to the necessary meanings and goals. We can also say that in the reality genres they are actively developed the *cherry picking* or the *fallacy of incomplete evidence* technique, when they give a certain stable set of truths about the social-everyday reality, but and giving it mixed up with some meanings, ideas, images the audience wants to hear. As a result, positive emotions and stereotypical didactic maxims from reality genres begin to actively play the same role as whipping up negative emotions, aggression and deception in fake news. They distort the social-everyday reality and actively manipulate the mindset and worldview. However, in relation to reality, the advice and methods of traditional exposing of fake news fundamentally do not work. This is due to the fact that reality is initially aimed at more complex and subtle layers of senses: constant socio-cultural values. In consequence of the reality, it is important to present the socially everyday world in a lightened and simplified way, so that it been more natural, familiar and people are easier to believe in it.

So *the place of common senses* (J.-L. Nancy) are gently prescribed to society through the distortion of a person's relations, his desires, opportunities and social-everyday reality. There is a gradual distortion of ideas about the complexity, diversity and reliability of social-everyday reality, its basic general meanings. This distortion is based on purely positive meanings, feelings, values and emotions, which, after repeated reproduction, acquire the features of exaggerated hyperreality. Everything in it is always good, easy, simple and cute, and the opposite sides of life, the variety of its shades are not important. More precisely, they are subordinated to ethically generally accepted joy, comfort, pleasures. Then this distorted view is introduced into the foundations of person's identity and social groups. Behind the seemingly simple, lovable, native desires to make people's lives happy and comfortable in society, something else is revealed. They display meanings, ideas, values, which, similar to news from "high" spheres of social culture, can be trivial manipulation and distortion of reality.

However, this kind of manipulations carries more threats and is stronger than false information from the "high" spheres of social life. They purposefully, insistently place an excessive emotional emphasis on a lightweight and simplified image of the world. In this world cooking, cleaning the house, choosing a wedding dress, fashionable makeup, plastic surgery, purchasing, building a dream house, culinary journey contemporaneously are the right moral-ethical choice and of a series of joyful pleasures. At the same time, moments that do not completely fit into the concept of the projects are still demonstrated. For example, these are the most time-consuming, difficult, requiring time, skills, unpleasant, painful, disgusting, fearful moments of cooking, cleaning, repairing, building a house, the first days after plastic surgery etc. But they move to the margins and are leveled by the stories of the presenters, guests, heroes of reality about joy, pride, satisfaction, new opportunities because of what has been done, what has been achieved. So reality, by means

of the temptation of the ease, simplicity and speed of achieving a dream which can be realized, distorts the basic ideas, meanings, processes, situations, and values of social-everyday reality. They level, and gradually destroy, the notions of complex and always systemic social, economic, political, household ties and personal, collective moral and ethical responsibility for the choice made.

The soft introduction of distortions based on a lightweight and simplified truth into social-everyday reality will inevitably lead to a revolution in everyday life. A. Heller has been thinking about this problem for half a century, starting with the book *Towards a Sociology of Knowledge of Everyday Life*. Developing these ideas, she already in an interview in 2001 emphasized, "... that a revolution cannot be political or economic, but can only be a revolution of everyday life" ([38], p. 161). The increase of media communications, the activation of reality genres in them proved the correctness of A. Heller, for whom it was important to show the perniciousness of the ideas of communism, the common good and the need to sacrifice of personal happiness and pleasure and life in his name. She rightly insisted that the ideology of self-sacrifice was initially false and distorted the relationship between a person and society, perverted the very idea of society. In counterweight to this distortion, A. Heller put forward the idea of everyday life as the value basis of society. Similar ideas are characteristic of J.-L. Nancy. He too reflects on the importance of maintaining an intimate and trusting relationship between a person and society. This kind of relationship contributes to the design of a long, natural life of the *places of common senses* (J.-L. Nancy). However, in the XXI century the development of reality genres has shown that the world of everyday life can also be successfully colonized by the mass media, which through the networks of soft temptation will begin to make a "quiet" revolution of everyday life in it. This "quiet" revolution is based not on aggression and the demand for personal sacrifice in the name of the common good, but on the contrary. A person voluntarily gives his tastes, desires, ideas, principles at the disposal of foreign, external, ready-made meanings. A person and society, not realizing themselves as victims of propaganda and manipulation, become such, first of all, betraying their own private life. Such a revolution of everyday life is based on an increased, systemic and deliberate exploitation of positive emotions and perceptions of social-everyday reality as a set of easily and quickly attainable goals. But this will be an artificial revolution of everyday life, built on the soft and strong manipulation of emotions and moods. But it will be an artificial revolution of everyday life, built on the soft and strong manipulation of desires, dreams, emotions, moods. It is clear that this will lead to a distortion of the collective mindset and memory. It is also clear that in this case it is impossible to talk about *a fair memory* (P. Ricoeur).

Thus, it is inappropriate to limit fake news and information to the topological range of deception, disinformation and forgery. Although difficult, they can and should be exposed. It is possible and necessary to oppose them with the truth, reliable information. In genres of reality this kind of binary relationship does not work. Social-everyday reality in these genres is presented as it is, as it is own copy. Social-everyday reality in these genres is presented as authentic, reliable, indisputably, documentary image of oneself. However, this is a reflection with seemingly insignificant semantic and emotional accents on the everyday situation that is important for this project and for a specific episode of the show. But these accents are also false. They reflect real, natural reactions for a given situation, albeit exaggerated, scaled up to meet the goals of leisure's, entertainment programs. Emotions and stories, descriptions of situations, events in reality are true. But this is a kind of truth, representing a one-dimensional world in which you can achieve a result (cooking a delicious dinner, buying a dream wedding dress, a successful life on a farm) outside the complex system of social-everyday relationships. In this one-dimensional world

of one dominant situation, truth does not oppose lies or false information and knowledge. Truth is opposed to itself in the sense that exaggeration, distortion, strengthening by positive emotions of the familiar, recognizable, but differentiated by sets of ways of life of the world, is the creation of an image of truth. There is no problem of lies, falsehood/truth. More important is the problem of the plurality of images of situations and the truths corresponding to them, which do not require self-sacrifice from an ordinary person in the name of society, suffering and submission. They, it would seem, do not pretend to be unique, absolute rightness, but offer good options for a comfortable world and the right to choose. However, it is precisely clear sets of lifestyles that distort the truth about social-everyday reality, replacing it with ready-made private meanings, ideas, types of heroes and values that are conditioned, subordinate to a specific everyday situation. The common thing that unites and connects these sets of lifestyles is desire, dominance of positive emotions, a life-affirming worldview, simplified beauty and comfort. The common thing that unites and connects these sets of lifestyles is the desire to live happily, easily, ethically of dignity; dominance of positive emotions; life-affirming worldview, simplistic interpretation of beauty and comfort. In this regard reality distorts social-everyday reality like all ideologically marked phenomena, when, according to J.-L. Nancy: "This is a simple and dangerous logic, implying that the absolutely separate contains, in its separation, something more than just the separate, or that the separation itself should be closed, and the closeness should not be limited to the territory <...>, but should be limited by itself closeness" ([37], p. 28). This determines the creation of artificial *places of formation and existence of common senses* (J.-L. Nancy), and it too is lead the distortion of social-everyday reality, and a change in cultural attitudes and collective memory. This kind of information, knowledge in the social-everyday sphere is based on a lightweight and simplified truth about a particular event, situation, phenomenon, ways, possibilities and ways to achieve the desired result.

But, in this case, there is no reason to talk about the possibilities of forming *a fair memory* (P. Ricoeur) and its implementation of moral, ethical and social tasks to create the foundations and principles of the natural identity of an ordinary person, social groups, and society as a whole. The languages of the mass media, the narration in the media text, are based on a simplified, lightened image of social-everyday reality, create, and set artificial of models everyday situations and of languages for a person and society.

5. The character and essence of the lightweight and simplified truth: the main conclusions and research prospects

The development of media communications, propaganda technologies and their fusion with social-everyday reality could not but lead to a number of fundamental changes. These changes, first of all, are aimed at the private space of an ordinary person and the cultivation in it of an irresponsible attitude towards their own private life, everyday life, and corporeality. This kind of sentiment is supported and encouraged by the media through reality genres: reality and lifestyle. These genres primarily produce are formation of an image of a lightweight and simplified truth about social-everyday reality.

The lightweight, simplified truth is a deliberate distortion of ideas about social-everyday reality, its basic models, and principles of existence. The lightweight, simplified truth is the desire to create the illusion of the possibility of a happy society in which ordinary people live comfortably, joyfully, cozily in harmony with friends, family, themselves and without violating the moral and ethical generally

accepted ideas. The lightweight, simplified truth is not a lie, not a deception of the audience by means of traditional methods and techniques of propaganda, but also not a genuine representation of the completeness, integrity of social-everyday reality. The lightweight, simplified truth is a complex kind of falsification, distortion through the cultivation and propaganda of a "one-dimensional" world order, a worldview based on the ideas and values of "everyday hedonism". The lightweight, simplified truth is the desire of the mass media to break up a complex social-everyday reality into separate independent problem-thematic sets (cooking, sports, housing design, bodily beauty …) and present them as an illusion of the fullness of life and of the possibilities of choice for an ordinary person. The lightweight, simplified truth is the desire to seduce an ordinary person with what he can collect, as in a supermarket or a restaurant, his own version of a comfortable, pleasant world from various sets. For example, such a comfortable and pleasant world may consist of genre varieties of culinary reality shows, lifestyle about fashion trends in living room design and makeup. But this image of the world may not include programs about travel, a healthy lifestyle. Consequently, distortion of social-everyday reality inevitably occurs simultaneously due, firstly, to the fact that in reality, through problem-thematic sets, its numerous variants are created. These options are easily, quickly constructed into a "ready-made" picture of social-everyday reality in accordance with the desires of an ordinary person. Similarly, any of the sets in such a world can be removed, replaced by a new one, which is fundamentally impossible in social-everyday reality. Secondly, all problem-thematic sets are based on positive emotions and on the desire to assure an ordinary person that he can achieve, try, get everything that is described and show in the program. The only condition is to want and not be afraid to repeat in your real life what was discussed in the program. Thirdly, reality TV distorts the truth about the necessary skills, abilities; material conditions opportunities so that, for example, an ordinary person can restore a vintage kitchen himself, build a tiny house, Thai chicken coconut curry, buy a designer wedding dress of his dreams, or dramatically change your lifestyle and move to a farm/small town. Fourthly, this kind of distortion is possible with the help of temptation by beautiful faces, things, landscapes, stories about successful events, which are traditional techniques and methods of propaganda.

The lightweight, simplified truth is both a perfectly acceptable embellishment of reality, and a desire to remove labor-consuming, difficult, unpleasant, disgusting moments, things on the margin, to pass them by in silence, or to present them in a playful light. This is initially and irreparably laid down in programs of leisure, entertainment nature, which are based not on deception, but on the exploitation of the means and methods of fiction, theatrical culture. However, this moment of the playing, and of some permissible conventionality, is made deliberately obvious to the viewer for several purposes. Firstly, in order to draw attention to the positive emotions, positive aspects of situations as central and value-determining, and to present difficult, disadvantageous moments as self-evident, well-known, and therefore do not require attention. Secondly, in order for didactic moments, which are ideologically significant, to be realized not due to obvious mentoring and edification, but due to the conventionality of the playing world, the active involvement of all communication participants in it. Thus, the lightweight, simplified truth gradually teaches an ordinary person, in a conventionally playful way of theatrical culture, to perceive himself and socially everyday reality.

In addition, in the genres of reality, especially lifestyle, the simplification of the model lifestyle is important from the point of view of its visibility and persuasiveness for the audience. This is, as it were, not a deception, but not the real truth, but its idealized version. This kind of truth about social-everyday reality presupposes the gradual creation and protection of a uniformity worldview and attitude. They

are based on the ideals of a simplified understanding of beauty, ethics, social harmony, the meaning of which is offered as ready-made ideas and beliefs. They are methodically and repetitively explained in each of the sets of life and each specific episode. In reality, it's simple. In reality, it's simple. After all, a person can buy, judging by the assurances of the presenters, guests, heroes of the programs, this or that sort of cheese, wine, bread, meat, dress, a set for the restoration of the kitchen in any supermarket, bakery, salon of wedding dresses. It is clear that along with these products, things, he cannot and should not receive the promised comfort, prestige, and joy. It is conspicuous that along with these products, things, he cannot and should not receive the promised comfort, prestige, and joy. An ordinary person acquires only a minimum condition, a basis for trying to enjoy food, beautiful clothes, and a home. The semantic and moral-ethical emphasis is carefully transferred to the ordinary person: this is your choice, do not be afraid to make a choice, and do not be afraid to try. However, at the same time, complex cause-and-effect relationships, characteristic of social-everyday reality, and the seriousness of responsibility for the choice made are leveled. In counterweight to this, a lightweight, simplified truth about life is proposed, which in reality is formed through a system of symbolic connections. So, in different problem-thematic sets of reality between meanings, ideas, situations, emotions, both general and private connections are established and fixed. For example, nuances such as burning candles and small flower arrangements on tables create the image of a romantic date. Through the fashion for Greek yogurt, spinach, cinnamon is fixed the possibility of a variety of tastes and need to take care of one's health and the happiness of the family. The question is, are there in fact such kindred, friendly, social relationships, connections that imply and describe in reality of the situations of a dinner party, a good meal, a fun party, a wedding dress, a new home?

Another is important group of questions. How is a person seeking to obtain one or the other way of life from reality, responsible for the choice they make in social-everyday reality? Can an ordinary person, facing an obstacle in the reality of his life, create his own identity and be responsible for his choices and actions, which is what *fair memory* suggests (P. Ricoeur)? Are these kinds of senses and techniques effective for fostering a *fair memory* (P. Ricoeur)? They are essential for building collective mindsets and memories. But the lightweight, simplified truth about social-everyday reality, based on separate sets of situations that can be quickly constructed in any set, does not prepare an ordinary person, social groups, society as a whole for complex problems of choice, for the difficulties of finding identity. It does not prepare for the inevitable responsibility of interactions between collective and individual memory. Lightweight, simplistic truth offers "ready-made" lifestyles and "ready-made" ways, ways to acquire them. In this sense, the lightweight, simplified truth turns out to be more harmful, pathogenic for the social-everyday reality than traditional fake news. Considering that a kind of mutual transition of media reality and social-everyday reality is gradually being established, and then it is necessary to ask the following questions. If an ordinary person and society as a whole get used to the world of the lightweight, simplified truth, then will not this destroy their ability and desire to distinguish lies from truth, fake from the original, the convention of a playing from the complexity of social-everyday reality? If the lightweight, simplified truth introduces into the world of a person, a social group, society, seemingly insignificant distortions, small erroneous ideas about reality, then will this not form a persistent desire to build, have, live in such a simple world in which there is no place for serious social, political, economic problems, and civil rights and freedoms are less valuable than the comfort and hedonism of everyday life?

This kind of lightweight, simplified truth and its purposeful cultivation of mass media lead to serious socio-cultural worldview consequences. A person and

society lose the ability of critical consciousness and gradually get used to living in a simple, one-dimensional, joyful, comfortable world, lose the ability and desire to be serious, analytically inclined to all news, situations, events. This gradually, but invariably, forms a community of not individuals, but their opposites: those whom J. Lacan called dividuals, videlicet disintegrated, fragmented people. Consequently, a comprehensive study of a lightweight, simplified truth in the context of the problems of false information, information chaos is a promising and productive direction.

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Democracy, Freedom and Truth at a Time of Digital Disruption: An Equation with Three Unknowns?

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Abstract

Knowledge-based societies rely to a large extent on intangible outputs and digital technologies, and these are having a growing influence on information systems, media, governance and citizenship. At the same time, the increasing role played by online platforms in manipulating transnational public debates, legitimising algorithmic non-transparent decision-making and inciting hate speech and violence through misinformation, disinformation and propaganda are warning signs of the negative repercussions such digital ecosystem can have on rule of law, political systems, free thought and critical awareness. There is a clear need for international regulation in this area. Rooted in an interdisciplinary approach, this chapter combines an examination of the theoretical, conceptual and methodological frameworks with an analysis of various relevant public and private archives. The aim is threefold: to outline the issues and challenges in terms of human (and labour) rights, freedom and democracy; to identify the regulatory provisions adopted at European and international level to promote accountability, civil participation, and digital literacy; and to identify future prospects, risks and uncertainties in the era of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: Knowledge-based societies, Democracy, Human and labour rights, Citizenship, Critical awareness, Algorithmic ecosystems, Artificial Intelligence, Digital misinformation and disinformation, Education and Media literacy, European Union, Interdisciplinarity, Digital humanities

1. Introduction

The pattern of a knowledge-based society relies to a large extent on digital technologies and intangible outputs and generates considerable transnational financial flows and gains. These technologies also play a key role in providing free access to data and information, encouraging citizen participation in public decision-making, fostering transparency and scrutiny of government action and mobilising new players capable of identifying alternative means of civic and political participation worldwide.

At the same time, the increasing impact of online platforms in manipulating transnational public debates and the surge in extremist groups using the digital ecosystem to incite hatred, hostility and violence are warning signs that these modes of communication may be having an adverse effect on democracy and that

the boundary between fact and fiction is not as clear as we may like to think. The misleading stories about the EU in 2015 following Russia's hybrid war campaign in Ukraine, the US presidential election campaign and the Brexit referendum in 2016, the theories about COVID-19 that have flooded the web since 2019, the terrorist attack against French teacher Samuel Paty on 16 October 2020 and the cyber-attack against Microsoft which seriously affected the European Banking Authority in March 2021 are just some examples that highlight these trends.

Considering that a significant proportion of the world's citizens now use online media as their main source of information, the proliferation of disinformation and the related threat of radicalism and extremism have led to a growing awareness of these issues at international and European Union (EU) level. What can be done to tackle the situation? How should democratic states with new forms of private power intervene in an algorithmic society? Where should the line be drawn between freedom of expression and media pluralism on the one hand, and intrusion and censorship of dissenting opinions on the other? How should information be defended as a fundamental right? Is there a moral or ethical code when it comes to information? How can we create an environment that is conducive to inclusive, pluralistic public debate? How can we equip citizens to develop a critical approach and take informed decisions? How can we balance innovation with the need to ensure transparency and fairness? Could we be witnessing a situation in which algorithms are "dissolving" democracy?

Drawing on the archives of international and European multilateral organisations (UN/UNESCO, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the G7 and G20, the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the EU Union) and several public and private stakeholders worldwide (including the International Fact Checking Network, the Ethical Journalism Network, the Future Today Institute, the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies and the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services), as well as an interdisciplinary interpretation of the specialist literature (especially in the fields of history, political and legal science, sociology, economics and computer studies), this chapter sets out to answer the research questions enumerated above from a threefold perspective: a) by analysing the issues and challenges raised by the proliferation of fake news, social media and algorithms and their impact on human rights, freedom and democracy; b) by highlighting the regulatory provisions implemented in this area at European and international level and identifying their strengths and weaknesses; and c) by identifying future prospects, risks and uncertainties.

2. Freedom of information and freedom of expression: a conceptual and legal framework

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, recognised by the United Nations General Assembly in 1946 [1] and by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose article 19 states that ["Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers [2]"].

Freedom of expression is inseparable from the principle of freedom of information, as enshrined in many international legal instruments, including the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (1945), which calls for the "promot[ion of] the free flow of ideas by word and image [3]" the International Covenant on Civil and Political

Rights (1966) [4] and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966). [5] Regional regulatory frameworks recognising freedom of expression have also emerged, such as the US Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) (1967) [6], the American Convention on Human Rights (1969) [7] and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1987). [8]

On the European continent, the Council of Europe (CoE), a multilateral intergovernmental organisation founded in 1949 with the aim of "fostering and maintaining a European state of mind [9]" was the forerunner in the defence of freedom of information and expression as an integral part of human rights. This principle was reflected in the European Convention on Human Rights (1950) [10] and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), set up in 1959, whose work helped harmonise national notions of such freedoms and gradually laid the foundations for a European case law and standard in this area. In 1954, the CoE also adopted a convention to promote a European consciousness and the free movement of ideas; later, in 1961, the European Social Charter guaranteed several rights for workers, including the fundamental right to information (about working conditions, social protection, etc.). [11]

With the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) [12] in 1951 and the European Economic Community (EEC) [13] and Euratom in 1957, Europe as a supranational polity was initially based around a "de facto solidarity" (to borrow Jean Monnet's expression) and interests related to economic integration; the question of human rights was not directly addressed. Nevertheless, the four fundamental freedoms of the internal market – where goods, people, services and capital are allowed to circulate freely – necessarily result in freedom of information. From 1969 onwards, the Court of Justice of the European Communities (CJEC), based in Luxembourg, made a point of interpreting Community law in the light of both fundamental rights common to the Member States and international instruments such as those of the CoE, thereby forging a Community case law and clearly confirming that human rights come under the aegis of European law. After the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, the enlargement of the Community to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, together with growing Community intervention in areas requiring the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, encouraged the EU to adopt its own protective mechanisms. The 1992 Maastricht Treaty [14] converted the obligation to respect the principles of freedom, democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law, previously applied by the European Court of Justice, into a treaty obligation for the EU and for Member States by virtue of their membership. The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) [15] stated that ["The Union is founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law, principles which are common to the Member States. [16]"] In 1999, the EU set out to draw up a Charter of Fundamental Rights, which was solemnly proclaimed on 7 December 2000 by Parliament, the Commission and the Council, then proclaimed again on 12 December 2007 after being amended. [17] Its preamble clearly states that ["the Union is founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law. It places the individual at the heart of its activities, by establishing the citizenship of the Union and by creating an area of freedom, security and justice."] Article 11 of the Charter, entitled "Freedom of expression and information", stipulates that: ["1) Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. 2) The freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected. [18]" The Treaty of Lisbon (2007) [19] gave the Charter "the same legal value as the Treaties", thereby making it binding for the Member States. [20]

It is also worth noting that the Merger Treaty (1965) [21] gave the ECSC, the EEC and Euratom (the "European Communities") shared institutions – the Commission, Council of Ministers, European Parliament and Court of Justice – which now had a duty to comply with transparency, accessibility and integrity, considered as "principles of good administration". With the Declaration on the right of access to information annexed to the Treaty of Maastricht, the EU entrenched its policy of institutional transparency, affirming ["that transparency of the decision-making process strengthens the democratic nature of the institutions and the public's confidence in the administration. The Conference accordingly recommends that the Commission submit to the Council no later than 1993 a report on measures designed to improve public access to the information available to the institutions [22]"].

The principle of freedom of information, whose origins can be traced back to the 18th century is an integral characteristic of pluralist democratic societies. [23] It states that all information held by governments and their various institutions must be public and generally accessible, and may only be withheld for a "legitimate reason" such as respect for privacy or safety issues. Some restrictions are therefore admissible, as long as they are regulated and comply with international law.

In recent decades, the right to information has been increasingly recognised worldwide and implemented by means of specific legislative instruments. This trend has been driven in particular by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which recently launched an "Open Government" initiative with the aim of implementing legal, regulatory and institutional frameworks that encourage transparency, participation and access to information in member countries. [24] For the OECD, the right of access to information is both a driver for inclusive growth and a challenge for democracy and public governance, with the potential to promote interest in public policy issues and encourage citizens to get involved in decision-making in this area. [25] While only 13 countries had national laws on freedom of information in 1990, now some 127 countries have adopted laws on access to information. Recognising the importance of improving universal access to information and knowledge, the 2015 UNESCO General Conference, followed by the 2019 United Nations General Assembly, proclaimed an International Day for Universal Access to Information, held every year on 28 September, with the aim of strengthening open science, multilingualism, ICT and media and information literacy, and reaffirming press freedom.

As demonstrated above, freedom of information and the free circulation of ideas are inherent to respect for human rights and central to the notion of democracy. Exercising the right to access information has a twofold impact: it encourages all citizens – civil society as a whole – to get involved in the public sphere, to participate in decision-making on public policy, to scrutinise and evaluate the performances of institutions and leaders, the economic system and the use of public money (and to identify instances of corruption); and it also prompts public authorities to be more transparent and open in the exercise of public governance, more responsive to signals from citizens, more attentive to the needs and criticism of society and therefore more open to reform. One of the most effective ways of tackling poor governance is open, enlightened debate with civil society – hence the importance of easy access to comprehensive, wide-ranging and accurate information for all citizens. Freedom of information can also lead to increased accountability and efficacy in governance and can bolster public confidence.

The need to adopt legislation to ensure freedom of information represents a major challenge in democratic countries worldwide. At the same time, the mere existence of international and national legislative and regulatory frameworks guaranteeing freedom of information does not mean that these will necessarily be applied

automatically or permanently. The content and scope of laws in this area vary, and their application depends on several factors, including the wider constitutional framework, the level of dedicated funding and human resources, the dynamism of civil society, and the ability of citizens to make use of the law. Even if legal provisions do exist, freedom of information may be hindered by complicated mechanisms to access information, inappropriate management and preservation of information (including archives), excessive bureaucracy and impenetrable systems. It is therefore vital that we move from a "culture of secrecy" to a "culture of transparency" in the public sector, and that efforts are made to raise awareness among civil society of the importance of more rigorous standards when it comes to information.

3. "Information, the key to democracy"

In the contemporary cross-disciplinary sense, the concept of democracy has several interdependent dimensions, three of which are seen as foundational: citizenship, the representativeness of political leaders, and the limitation of state power by means of fundamental rights. [26, 27]

In this context, citizenship serves as a leaven for democracy, reflecting the desire of citizens (states, districts, communities, even the world – "global citizens [28]") "to act responsibly in public life [29]" to exercise their right to contribute to the way in which society is managed, and also to share their stories, culture and general concerns. [30]

The exercise of citizenship implies first and foremost the existence of a "public space", the structure of which may be considered from four angles: 1) a(n) (intangible) political space where citizens discuss, debate, share their ideas and compare their arguments in order to try to reach a consensus on questions of general and/or overall interest [31]; 2) a social space, which gives rise to "ways of living together" and fosters a "recognition of the other [32]"; 3) an economic space, represented by "the market", governed in principle by objective rules and mechanisms, but which may nevertheless be a sphere for collective action with a political objective [33]; 4) a (tangible) physical space, which can be divided into different spatial levels, centered around multiple networks and where multiple "possible futures" can be discerned. [34]

Over the past three decades, the physical space has gradually become a space for citizenship and politics, insofar as social, political, protest and even revolutionary movements have emerged in the streets and taken over symbolic sites (squares, parks, gardens, etc.), with the aim not only of achieving physical visibility but also of expressing ideas, exchanging experiences, spreading messages and creating symbols. As well as serving as the *agora*, the public space has therefore also become a space of public opposition. [35] Examples of this phenomenon include the Tiananmen Square protests (Beijing, 1989), the University Square/"Golaniad" protests (Bucharest, 1990), the "Arab Spring" (a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in 2010–2011), "Occupy Wall Street" (New York, 2011), the Gezi Park protests (Istanbul, 2013), the Umbrella Movement (Hong Kong, 2014), the Maidan Square protests (Kiev, 2014), the "Nuit debout" movement (Paris, 2016) and the "Yellow Vest" movement (France, 2018–2019).

The notion of public space is inseparable from that of civil society, which provides a framework for regular citizen engagement with the aim of reaching collective decisions on matters of public interest. [36] Civil society plays a role in ["ensuring that all content and procedures related to public decision-making are accessible in the public space, and relaying to the political space any demands made

in the public space and the various social spheres. It helps to control and balance the action of instituted powers – not just the state but also economic powers and the religious sphere. In this respect, at least in an ideal world, it represents a key place for the promotion and defence of citizens' civil, political and social rights. [...] The workings of our democracies rely to a large extent on the distinction and complementarity between the public space, civil society and political institutions. [37]"].

More recently, civil society has become an integral part of the political decision-making process, not only through elections – the expression of direct democracy –, but also through the possibility of being consulted and sharing views on public issues – the expression of collective democracy. But if citizens are to freely form an enlightened viewpoint and make a useful contribution to the democratic process, they need to have access to information – reliable, pluralistic, independent information, drawn from diverse and varied sources and media, which they can absorb, analyse critically on the basis of their value systems, and incorporate into their own judgement. The quality and performance of democracy depends on it – as has become all too clear in the current era of "digital democracy" (**Table 1**).

	Democracy of transparency	*Democracy of debate*	*Democracy of consultation*
Type of citizenship promoted	Enlightened citizens who stay informed	Citizens who discuss, share ideas and compare their views with those of others	Citizens who take part in decision-making Citizens who govern
Main criticism levelled at current democracy	Lack of transparency in the workings of political institutions No real right to information	Public space closed or hampered by intermediaries	Leaders who are cut off from citizens and have become autonomous
Prevailing direction in which information circulates; online functions given precedence	Downwards Websites Mailing lists	Horizontally Forums Personal pages Email Cooperative groups Mailing lists	Upwards Email Discussion forums Electronic voting
Advantages of the internet	Low cost of storage and distribution Potential for custom searches Updated information	Direct horizontal communication that transcends social, organisational and geographical barriers and creates identity Reduced cost of engagement	Quick, direct, more informal access to elected representatives Less costly citizen consultations
Potential for interaction with the political sphere	Elected representatives with the role of informing or educating Alternative press	Elected representatives as catalysts/leaders Associations	Elected representatives in an advisory role Institutional channels for participation
Frequent problems	Tendency for model to lapse into mere provision of practical information Information overload	Unequal participation How to move from debates to action or decision-making	Unequal ability to make requests Security, confidentiality, authenticity of communications

Source: Vedel, T. L'idée de démocratie électronique: Origines, visions, questions. In Perrineau P, editor. Le désenchantement démocratique. Editions de l'Aube : La Tour d'Aigues ; 2003 ; 243-246. Here p.251. Our translation.

Table 1.
The key trends in electronic democracy [38].

["Politics takes precedence over economics; Parliament is sovereign. The fourth power already exists: it is the power of information [39]"].

In 2019, under the aegis of the UN, the International Partnership on Information and Democracy was set up to promote and implement democratic principles in the global information and communication space with the aim of guaranteeing free, pluralistic, "quality reporting despite the changes resulting from new digital communication forms [40]".

3.1 Media – at the intersection of democratic culture and technological progress

The notions of *information* and *communication* are inseparable from that of *media* (the plural of *medium*), a term whose primary definition – means of communicating information – is surrounded by multiple additional facets relating to the techniques used to process that information, to content itself and the way in which it is organised, presented and formatted, and to the regulatory frameworks governing these processes.

Characterised by varying temporalities, materialities and scales and by specific theoretical and methodological approaches, the many aspects implicit in the notion of *media* have changed considerably over time, as revealed by the emerging field of media archaeology. [41] Following on from the written word (used in the print press and also in telegraphy – the transmission of written messages), audio (for telephony and then radio broadcasts) and images (for cinematography and then television), new processes based on information and communication technologies began to be developed, driven by the emergence (1969) and global spread of the Internet, the arrival of the World Wide Web in the mid-1980s and the advent of the *information society*, bringing about a paradigm shift. [42] Non-instant communication (of written, visual or audio material) was replaced by communication in real time. [43] As new innovations gathered pace, this paved the way for information itself to circulate ever more quickly via new platforms, transforming the use of content (in both technical and social terms) and the way in which information is perceived, assimilated and consumed by the public. At the same time, ["No medium has its meaning or existence alone, but only in constant interplay with other media. [...] Radio changed the form of the news story as much as it altered the film image in the talkies. TV caused drastic changes in radio programming, and in the form of the thing or documentary novel [44]"].

The notions mentioned above relate to social phenomena: "the media represent an organisational system that takes these notions (information and communication) and incorporates them into various spheres: economic (supporting businesses), technological (boosting the quality and quantity of dissemination) and symbolic (serving citizen democracy). [45]" The following points can therefore be observed: 1) Given that all members of civil society (citizens, politicians, businesspeople, associations, etc.) interact with information, the media can only exist in the public space, where they target both individuals and the community, with an impact that is both global and local, general and specific. In the public space, information becomes a common good, a source of democracy. 2) Over time, information has become more than just a source of knowledge; it is a product in its own right, a commodity that is subject to economic logic and the rules of the market. For example, in the mid-19th century, the print press was able to prosper and become a "press for the masses" precisely for commercial reasons, by printing advertisements that created a link between producers and consumers (at a time when the purchasing power of the working classes was on the rise. [46]) Readers were seen as both citizens and consumers. Even if the press was structured in such a way that there was a clear separation between owners and news writers – resulting in the emergence of the

profession of *journalist* –, this nevertheless raises questions as to the way in which the media address their readership. How do they reconcile a sound business model (based on profitability, capturing market share, etc.) with the principles of objectivity, transparency and balance that are intrinsic to information? To what extent do commercial obligations and ideological, cultural and societal factors influence the media discourse and products available to the public? Is this discourse neutral or skewed by a biased perspective and a prevailing value judgement which are instilled in members of the public, thereby diverting them from their own reasoning and subjectivity?

When he wrote ["[...] for the eye sees not itself, but by reflection, by some other things [47]"] Shakespeare was making the point that we only perceive reality by the way in which it is represented. The media do not offer us a "mirror of the world" by means of a neutral transposition of a series of facts, but rather a "showcase of the world", in other words a view determined by a specific selection of information that is prioritised and presented in a specific way. These processes ["are governed by the journalist's *habitus*, as stimulated by changing circumstances: an event-driven view of reality, an individualistic view of the social sphere [...] and a relative allegiance to the ruling elites, with which many journalists are in contact, both because of the routines of their profession and because they belong to certain circles for decision-making and discussion that shape current events and opinions. [...] Roughly speaking, all we know of the world is what the media tell us [48]"].

3.2 Information and the need for truth

In a democracy, information is a common good, a resource belonging to the public space and to the realm of public debate, which must be based on a need for truth. But in the past twenty years, the informative role of the media has undergone a number of major shifts, which have had an impact on the very notions of *truth* and *democracy*.

The first shift is technological: digital technologies have prospered at a rate never before witnessed in the history of technology, bringing about changes in the production, management, dissemination and consumption of information – in short, the way in which we relate to information – for society as a whole (information professionals, politicians and citizens.) [49] A second shift involves practices and uses, which have resulted in a new type of relationship between information/media and their audience. ["The rise of social networks and their effect on mediated communication in present societies, as well as mobile communication, artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality, and transmedia strategies, have encouraged the search for experimental and innovative responses [...] which encourages extensions of the person for services, personalisation of content, and [an] updated meaning of place and time. [50]"] A third shift has occurred in the realm of information itself, which has been democratised beyond censorship, is now shared instantly across borders [51] and has been radically liberalised, to such an extent that any individual, often anonymously, can produce and share information and opinions and can judge and take a stance on the basis of their own truths and values. Information now finds itself within a transitional ecosystem in which traditional and innovative media coexist and old concepts are co-opted to deal with new challenges. As algorithms take centre stage – in the absence of any meaningful ethical framework [52] –, information has become horizontal and fragmented; we are faced with an information overload and are rapidly reaching saturation point. ["Allowing every opinion into the public sphere and giving it serious time and consideration, far from resulting in a process that is conducive to knowledge formation, destroys its very possibility. [53]"] At the same time, the instant nature of information, ["the religion

of scoops and real time, the imperatives of concision and sensation, are conducive to stereotyped reflection, clichés and spontaneous acceptance of conventional ideas [54]"].

The proliferation of sources and the phenomena of fake news, "alternative facts", disinformation and misinformation are becoming increasingly prevalent in public discourse, eroding the credibility of information and giving rise to scepticism, relativism and even to a "pandemic of credulous thinking. [55]" Examples include the radioactive cloud from the Chernobyl accident in 1986, which was infamously said to have "stopped" at some European borders; the false evidence of weapons of mass destruction which served as a justification for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003; and more recently, in 2016, the pro-Brexit campaign and the US presidential election campaign. Alongside the information crisis, we are also witnessing a crisis of truth, fuelled by the deeply anti-democratic idea that there is no "established truth" and that the source of information may have more value than the information itself. In the "post-truth era" [56] ["a large share of the populace is living in an epistemic space that has abandoned conventional criteria of evidence, internal consistency, and fact-seeking [57]"].

In its 2020 edition, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report– which examines long-term trends in media use worldwide and analyses the role of social media in the context of online news usage – highlights two main observations. [58] The first is that news consumption is changing – news sources on the internet are gaining in importance, especially social media, which plays a vital role among young people. The second is the rise of intermediaries – "brokers of information that position themselves between producers and consumers while altering the flow of information. [59]" An in-depth look reveals that in 2020, in many European countries, the proportion of the population using social media as a news source ranged from about 30 to 60%, and thus algorithms are becoming the dominant news source. These algorithms filter, sort, personalise, recommend and classify news content by prioritising data and opinions that corroborate existing preferences, while at the same time excluding (filtering) other content classified as non-relevant for the user. ["Intermediaries act as 'gatekeepers' by means of these functions. [...] This task was traditionally performed by professional mass media (newspapers, television, radio). In the digital media environment [it is] increasingly replaced by algorithmic curation [60, 61]"].

At the same time, traditional journalistic criteria (professional assessments, the market and the audience) [62] are gradually giving way to what might be referred to as "news values – such as controversy, conflict, negativity, proximity or elite people. [63]"] While traditional media outlets are aimed at society as a whole in a bid to give citizens access to reliable factual information that is cross-checked, impartial and relevant so that they can make well-considered decisions, algorithms target users/citizens individually. But relatively little is known as yet about the way in which algorithmic systems of intermediaries function – they are often referred to as "black boxes" –, and this makes it difficult to accurately assess their societal influence. [64]

Could we be witnessing a situation in which algorithms are "dissolving" democracy?

4. Europe and "algorithmic democracy"

In an increasingly globalised, competitive geopolitical context, in which innovation is seen as a key driver for economic growth, Europe is keen to give its Single Market a strong digital dimension. [65]

4.1 Completing the European single market: from digital to data

In building what it refers to as the Digital Single Market, the EU "has to get to grips with new principles and notions arising from globalisation – such as dematerialisation, deterritorialisation, cyberspace and e-governance – and find answers to new questions about the nature of work, national sovereignty and territoriality, as well as the exercise of power and of democracy. This raises unprecedented social, economic, fiscal, environmental and democratic challenges with the potential to cause societal upheaval [66]".

Europe is facing considerable challenges. First and foremost, despite its size (513.5 million inhabitants, representing 6.9% of the world's population), its level of development (21.8% of global GDP) and its technological ambitions (2.07% of the EU's GDP in 2019), the EU still lags behind the US and China and is struggling to assert itself as a digital power. [67] It also has to grapple with the technological and economic heterogeneity and asymmetry of the Member States in their approach to the digital transition (in which Scandinavian countries and the UK, Germany and France are the leaders). And finally, multiple stakeholders acting on different levels across broad cross-cutting policy areas are generating "contradictions between techno-nationalism and techno-globalism [68]".

At the same time, digital wealth creation is strongly concentrated in the United States and China, which together hold 75% of all patents related to blockchain technologies, 75% of the cloud computing market and 90% of the market capitalisation value of the world's 70 largest digital platforms. [69] The US holds a growing place in the daily lives of Europeans through the pervasiveness of web giants such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft ("GAFAM"), and this has increased yet further with the arrival of a "new wave" of American giants of the digital economy – Netflix, Airbnb, Tesla and Uber ("NATU") – and by the rise of the three largest Chinese technology companies – Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent. [70] This phenomenon is leading to new mechanisms for value creation based on knowledge and intangible assets; to the increasing dominance of networks of stakeholders over individual players; and to the emergence of new forms of sharing, creation, collaboration and consumption – especially in the realm of information. "The challenges are not just commercial, but touch the very heart of the future of Europe as a political unit mastering its own destiny [71]".

The EU is currently working to develop a technological ecosystem that will facilitate innovation; it wants to assert its "tech sovereignty" and maintain regulatory sovereignty in key areas. The bloc is cooperating at international level to harmonise rules, standards and policies within a multilateral framework (UN, UNESCO, OECD, G7, G20, CoE). A number of sensitive regulatory issues have emerged recently, all with the potential to influence democracy, including the market size of social media, how to tax intangible assets, personal data management and the question of "ethical algorithms. [72]" The EU's approach reflects its strategic objective to move from a "digital economy" to a "data economy" – its ultimate aim is to develop a single market for data within the European Single Market. [73]

4.2 A fair digital information ecosystem for the EU?

In the digital transformation of Europe, the question of disinformation (including misleading or outright false information) and its impact on democracy has become a priority for the EU since 2015. [74] The rise of populism and extremism in some countries (Austria, France, Hungary, Italy, the Czech Republic and Poland) and the campaigns for Brexit in 2016 and for the European elections

in 2019 – both of which were marred by foreign interference – have led to a growing awareness within the EU and internationally of the harmful effects on public debate, political decision-making and democracy of manipulative communication via content distribution networks, social media services, video-sharing platforms and search engines. Disinformation campaigns led by third countries, cyberattacks and interference in the electoral processall represent threats for the EU's internal security. [75] There are also privacy-related issues regarding the massive volumes of personal data collected by these platforms and the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult to prevent third parties from storing and using them. [76]

Even if powers in the area of information lie with individual Member States, it is clear that the transnational and cross-border dimension of online disinformation makes a coordinated European approach necessary to ensure the protection of the EU's citizens, policies and institutions. In 2015, on the initiative of the European Council, the EU institutions and the European External Action Service set up the East StratCom Task Force "to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns. [77]" The 2017 Joint Declaration on "Fake News," Disinformation and Propaganda provides a focused treatment of the application of international human rights standards to the phenomenon of disinformation. [78] It sets out general principles and standards and defines roles and responsibilities for states, digital intermediaries and media outlets. The document emphasises states' "positive obligation" to create an "enabling environment for freedom of expression" and identifies broad strands of public policy to this end. [79]

In June 2017, the European Parliament adopted a resolution urging the European Commission to carry out an in-depth review of the legislative and regulatory framework to limit the dissemination and spread of fake content. [80] In 2018, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre carried out a study on fake news and disinformation which revealed that two thirds of consumers of online news prefer to access it through algorithm-driven platforms (search engines, news aggregators, social media websites) and also that market power and revenue streams have shifted from news publishers to platform operators who have the data to match readers, articles and advertisements. [81]

In March 2018, the European Council addressed the question of social networks and digital platforms, reiterating the need ["to guarantee transparent practices and full protection of citizens' privacy and personal data. [82]"] The European Commission launched a comprehensive online consultation with citizens and stakeholders in 2017–2018 [83] and set up a High-Level Expert Group to advise on this matter. [84] Also worth noting are the adoption of the Directive on security of network and information systems (the NIS Directive), the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Regulation on Cross-Border Delivery Services. [85] The entry into force of the GDPR (2018) resulted in more stringent obligations for those using personal data and stronger rights for individuals, both within and outside the EU.

In its judgement of 13 May 2014, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) ruled on a first case of the "right to be forgotten" online. [86] The Court concluded that Google was responsible for the processing of personal data that appeared on its pages. In September 2019, two other judgements handed down by the CJEU on "de-referencing" consolidated the basis of the "right to be forgotten". [87] The first judgement restricted the territorial scope of the right to de-referencing, which is limited to the EU's borders and is not binding for other countries. [88] The second judgement was related to the terms of application of search engines. Under this ruling, the personal data set out in the General Data Protection

Regulation (genetic and biometric data, data on sexual orientation, criminal offence data, etc.) are protected. But a balance needs to be found between the right to access information freely and the fundamental rights of those who request de-referencing. In the European Democracy Plan, which aims to empower citizens and build more resilient democracies across the EU (2020), the Commission sets out measures ["to promote free and fair elections, strengthen media freedom and counter disinformation. [89]"] The plan proposes measures to increase protection for journalists and tackle disinformation and interference, while fully preserving freedom of speech. In 2020, the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), managed by a consortium led by the European University Institute in Florence (EUI), was also set up with the aim of "creating and supporting the work of an independent multidisciplinary community capable of contributing to a deeper understanding of the disinformation phenomenon and [increasing] societal resilience to it [90]".

The debate over the lack of sufficient safeguards, oversight measures and enforcement to adequately deal with information, which is eliciting a response from civil society, politicians, regulators and, more recently, stakeholders of the global digital economy, has given rise to a self-regulatory Code of Practice on Disinformation drafted in 2018 by representatives of online platforms, leading social networks, advertisers and the advertising industry to address the spread of online disinformation and fake news and to protect users from disinformation. [91] The code, which came into force in September 2019, sets out a number of commitments for a more transparent, trustworthy and accountable online ecosystem and includes a list of best practices that the signatories pledge to adopt to implement these commitments. Initial signatories include major online platforms (Facebook, Google, YouTube and Twitter), software providers (Mozilla), advertisers as well as a number of trade associations representing online platforms and the advertising industry. Microsoft and TikTok have now also signed the code (in May 2019 and June 2020 respectively), and like other companies have devised individual roadmaps with specific measures, methods and tools to combat disinformation that they intend to implement in all EU Member States. [92] The Commission will work in conjunction with the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA) to monitor the effectiveness of these commitments (**Figure 1**) [93].
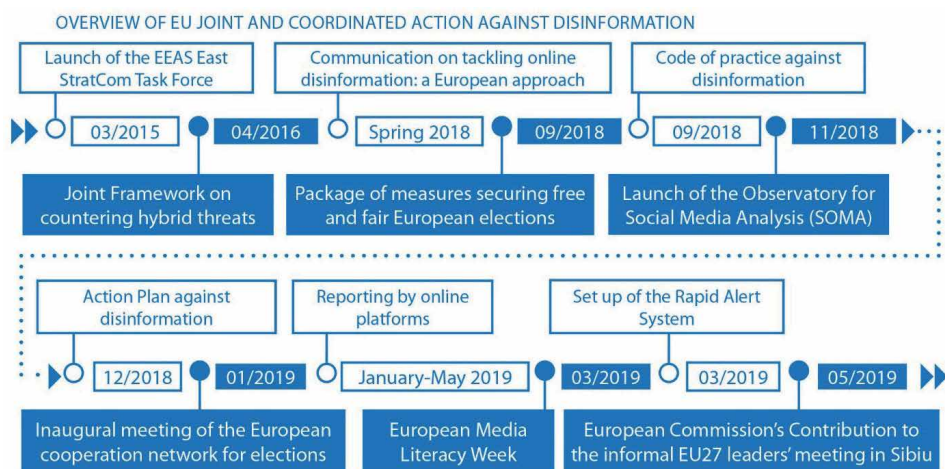
Figure 1.
Overview of EU joint and coordinated action against disinformation (2015–2019). Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/tackling-online-disinformation. Source: © European Union, 1995-2021.

At the same time, the Commission is working to raise awareness of the intentions, objectives, sources and tools of disinformation and to highlight our own vulnerability in this area. ["It is essential to understand how and why citizens, and sometimes entire communities, are drawn to disinformation narratives and define a comprehensive answer to this phenomenon. [94]"] In this regard, an independent European network of fact-checkers is working to develop common methods, exchange best practices and achieve the broadest possible coverage of factual corrections EU-wide, in accordance with a strict International Fact Checking Network Code of Principles. [95] A secure European online platform on disinformation will take shape to support the network of fact-checkers and relevant academic researchers with cross-border data collection and analysis, as well as access to data across the Member States. [96]

A number of stakeholders, including the Media Pluralism Monitor (run by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom in Florence), EDMO and the academic community, are working in synergy to develop a sound scientific methodology which could help identify key EU-wide vulnerabilities. [97] A further step is to empower EU citizens to better identify and deal with disinformation and undesired content (as hate speech, child pornography, elements of pro-terrorism guidance or proselytism) through online media education and digital literacy. [98]

5. Charting an uncertain future

Information technology and the use of algorithms, big data and AI – all of which have already proved their worth in terms of economic growth, employment, innovation and improving quality of life – are set to play an increasing part in the development and workings of society and individuals.

While the positive potential of these factors has not yet been fully identified and harnessed, it is important to consider their impact on democracy, human rights (which overlap with wider ethical concerns) and the rule of law [99], as well as their influence on individual behaviour and thought. [100] How can we know, for example, whether a person's vote – the ultimate expression of democracy – reflects a deep individual conviction or merely the influence of algorithms, or even manipulative fake news? If big data produces knowledge that is devoid of concepts and is not based on any preliminary hypothesis, will it merely result in "expertise without experts"? If so, who will take responsibility for it? Won't this deprive citizens of the right to debate and decide? How can we safeguard the integrity of democratic principles? Recommendations by computers may have an air of rationality or infallibility, and people might blindly follow them. ["The human being may often be led to 'rubber stamp' an algorithmically prepared decision, not having the time, context or skills to make an adequate decision in the individual case. [101]"] Although they are portrayed as ["neutral tools of economic progress and social advancement, digital technologies have acquired an aura of ungovernability. [...] In a rapidly unfolding datafied world, the integration of digital intelligence needs to be rooted in frameworks of accountability, where social intent guides the appropriation of technology [102]"].

In recent years, this issue has been high on the agenda of many European [103] and international multilateral stakeholders [104] which are reflecting on the need for common understanding of concepts and principles, and appropriate transnational regulation in the area of AI, with the participation of all segments of society – governments, public and private key actors, experts, practitioners and citizens. [105] States need to adopt interdisciplinary strategies to address the risks to democracy and human rights – and workers rights - posed by machine learning. [106] They should specifically legislate against forms of "illegitimate interference",

including forms of persuasion and intrusion that compromise democratic principles, and they should encourage public debate on the subject. ["[...]Governments should keep an eye of emerging disruptive technologies such as deep learning and generative adversarial networks (GANs), which make it possible to manipulate images and video so well that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish manipulated them from authentic ones. Apps like FakeApp and Lyrebird have made the production of "deep fakes" accessible to anyone. [107]"] AI needs to be grounded in human rights principles, and states need to update and enforce data protection regulations with respect to machine learning technologies and to promote policies that create a diverse and pluralistic information environment, including the regulation of technology monopolies in the domain of AI. [108]

It is clear that in the years to come, journalism will be permeated by AI – computational journalism and computer-assisted reporting; i-teams for algorithms and data; natural language generation for reading levels; computational photography; and journalism as a service [109] – and ["the advent of deep fakes and generative adversarial networks may accelerate this trend."] This will give rise to new cross-disciplinary challenges – technological, editorial, philosophical and ethical –, which will only be resolved by a combination of research, politics, cybersecurity, moral standards and education.

This new ecosystem raises various long-term issues. First, it may impose a dominant culture, or even a single way of thinking (English is already virtually ubiquitous as the language of communication in this environment, and certain world views are particularly dominant). On the other hand, paradoxically, in this unfettered digital environment, the notion of borders and boundaries may suddenly rear its head in the form of standards and accessibility. In this context, digital education and media literacy are essential. The main responsibility lies with academia, since the key is not just the acquisition of digital know-how, but more importantly the development of a critical approach (not only to identity "fake news" but also to appraise "real" news stories) and a genuine ability for analytical thought, and a willingness to apply these skills. ["Critical thinking and discerning consumption of meaningful content, in a technoscape full of falsehoods remains an important challenge and policies that advocate critical media and digital literacy in schools and institutions in this context will be a positive move [110]"].

6. Conclusion

The multidimensional paradigm that is emerging in today's competitive geopolitical environment is driven by a number of factors, including the primacy of intangible assets in value creation; the growing transnational and international dimension of production, consumption and innovation; the prevalence of networks of stakeholders over individual players; the transition from human labour to AI; and the need to harmonise rules, standards and policies within a multilateral framework. [111] The development of big data, data mining, algorithmic analysis and predictive profiling raises unique challenges for the rule of law, human rights, sovereignty and democracy.

These structural shifts will have a long-term impact on social and cultural practices, interpersonal and societal relations, the public space, citizenship and the exercise of democracy. In our digital world, there is a gap between the protection of freedom of expression and opinion and the reality of a globalised public space where, in the absence of appropriate regulations, anyone can interfere, often anonymously. Powers that were once the preserve of the state are now delegated to private structures or state entities in other countries.

In Europe, traditional media is subject to wide-ranging rules on impartiality, pluralism, cultural diversity and harmful content. Democracy in the EU depends on the existence of free and independent media. The emergence of a virtual media environment, with its arsenal of "fake news", "alternative facts" and disinformation, is generating new risks and uncertainty for society, especially since it is deeply intertwined with the broader digital ecosystem, in which technologies and tactics will continue to evolve. The exposure of citizens to large-scale disinformation represents a major challenge.

Tackling this phenomenon will require a coordinated effort on the part of governments, institutions, traditional media outlets and social media platforms, users, civil society and the academic community. The EU aim to take the lead in raising public awareness about disinformation. Its long-term action in this area is based on several strands: 1) cooperation between platforms and public authorities, including mobilising and coordinating fact-checkers; 2) an incremental approach to regulation, combining self-regulation (including "citizen regulation") and co-regulation, in a way that supports diversity and pluralism (increased exposure to non-mainstream content) and promotes transparency (e.g. with "cyber nudges") and shared practices; 3) a proactive media policy that encourages responsible behaviour in conveying information to end users and a more sustainable evolution of the online news market; and 4) a long-term strategy for digital education, media literacy and broad user empowerment.

Acknowledgements

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democracy in general, either
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(38%). Intentional disinformation
aimed at influencing elections and
immigration policies, followed by
disinformation in the fields of health,
environment and security policies, were
the top categories considered likely to
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Fake News as Aberration in Journalism Practice: Examining Truth and Facts as Basis of Fourth Estate of the Realm

Sulaiman A. Osho

Abstract

The deliberate publication of fake news by any media organisation or online network is an aberration in journalism practice. And such sophist intentions and dissemination of falsehood to the people through the virtual media, social media and old media is a depravity against humanity to spread mischief, acrimony, crises, disease, corruption, and squalor. It is total negation of journalism values and news values. Thus, this chapter seeks to examine the concept of newsworthiness in the wake of resurrection of the ghost of fake news in this digital age, which was the practice in the age of ignorance when unlettered men abound as journalists. It investigates the ideological constructs of news because it is a violation of journalism practice for any organisation to base its ideology on the publication of fake news. This study highlights news production process in tandem with the socio-cultural interests, political philosophy, and economic interests of the sponsors, financiers, and owners of the media. The chapter critically examines factors of news or factors of newsworthiness in relation to the concept of fake news. If the twelve factors of news are frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite people, reference to elite persons, and reference to something negative, should there be anything fake called News? In narrative and argumentative form, the study concludes that anything fake or any information that is based on falsehood cannot be regarded as News. If it is news, it must be based on Truth and Facts. If it is news, it must be new. If it is news, it must be based on actualities. If it is news, it must be based on evidences. If it is news, it must be fair. If it is news, it must be based on realities. If it is news, it must not be based on vendetta. If it is news, it must not be hoax. If it is news, it must not be fallacy. If it is news, it must not be innuendoes.

Keywords: fake news, journalism values, news values, truth, facts

1. Introduction

A study of fake news is crucial in this digital age of instant message of news dissemination and interaction globally, when the spread of fabricated news is gaining relevance in the mass media, new media, social media, websites, and blogs. Fake News as form of neologism, is otherwise known as junk news, pseudo-news,

alternative news or hoax news to fabricate news with harmful intent to spread lies (Dis-information); to transmit false information without harmful intent (Mis-information); and to convey genuine information with intent to cause harm (Mal-information) [1–3]. The spread of fake news is quite appalling as they are being presented as factually accurate and truthful. Whereas, propaganda, or satire news cannot be disseminated as authentic news, but yellow journalism.

Really, fake news discourse has been popular in recent times due to the manifestation of the 'Global Village' theory, through Online journalism, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram et al.; Websites, Blogs, and the desperation of people to gain financially and politically. Hence, the Global network and platforms are besieged with sensational, dishonest, outright fabricated news, and headlines to increase readership, advertisement patronages [4, 5].

The post-truth politics has also pushed fake news to the front burner with the easy access to online advertisement revenue, increased political polarisation and the popularity of the social media, especially the Facebook News Feed and Twitter [1]. Meanwhile, the resurrection of the ghost of fake news in various newsrooms has undermined serious media coverage and makes it difficult for journalists to cover significant news events [6].

A survey by BuzzFeed that the top fake news about the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election received more engagement on Facebook than the top 20 election stories from 19 major media outlets [7].

Meanwhile, fake news can be historically traced to the 13th Century B.C., when Ramses the Great spread lies and propaganda portraying the Battle of Kadesh as a stunning victory for the Egyptians. The fake news depicted Ramses the Great himself killing many of his foes at the Battle. Whereas, the Treaty between the Egyptians and the Hittites, reveals that the battle was actually a stalemate [8]. Besides, Octavian misinformed the people against his rival Mark Antony, portraying him as a drunkard, a womaniser, and a mere puppet of the Egyptian Queen Cleopatra VII [9].

In fact, MacDonald [10] reveals that Octavian published a fake Will of Mark Antony which caused an outrage among the Roman populace. The fake testament claimed that Mark Antony upon his death wished to be entombed in the mausoleum of the Ptolemaic Pharaohs. However, Biography.com [11] notes that Mark Antony killed himself after his defeat in the Battle of Actium, and after hearing false rumours promoted by Cleopatra herself saying that she had committed a suicide.

In the second and third Centuries A.D., false rumours were spread about Christians claiming that they engaged in rituals and cannibalism, and incest [12, 13]. Also, in the late third Century A.D., David Gwynn [14] discloses that Christian apologist Lactantius invented and exaggerated stories about pagans engaging in acts of immorality and cruelty. And Gillian Clark [15] declares that Porphyry, fabricated similar stories about Christians.

Indeed, the publication of fake news spans through all ages to the present digital age of the 21st Century. During the Medieval period, a significant fake news in 1475 claimed in Trent that the Jewish community had murdered a two-and-half year-old Christian infant named Simonino [16]. The false news triggered the arrest and torture of Jews in the City, where fifteen of them were burned at stake. All attempts by Pope Sixtus IV to suppress the phony news proved abortive. The "blood libel" news had turned tragic as the Jews were claimed to have killed Christians deliberately to use the blood of the children for religions or ritual purposes [17].

In the aftermath of the invention of printing press in 1439, the publication of counterfeit news became widespread. Yet, there was no standard journalistic ethics to follow. In the 17th Century historians started the practice if citing their sources in footnotes. The trial of Galileo di Vincenzo Bonaiuti de Galilei, the Italian

astronomer, physicist, and engineer in 1610, actually pushed forward the demand for veritable news [16].

It is remarkable that in the 18th Century, publishers of fake news were fined and banned in the Netherlands. A publisher, Gerard Lodewijk Van der Macht, was banned and fined four times by Dutch authorities. And he re-established his press four times [18]. Also, Jacob Soll [16] unveils that Benjamin Franklin wrote fake news about murderous 'scalping' Indians in the American colonies. They were working with King George III in an effort to diffuse public opinion in favour of American Revolution.

Perhaps, as part of American wonders in history is the 1835 fake news on the Great Moon Hoax. The New York Sun published articles about a real-life astronomer and a made-up bizarre life on the moon. According to Brooke Borel [18], the fake news attracted new subscribers, and the penny paper suffered little setback, as it was meant to entertain readers, and not to mislead them.

Also, in the 19th Century, yellow journalism reached its peak in the 1890's as there were circulation war of sensational news between Joseph Pullitzer's New York World and William Randolph Hearst's New York Journal. The publishers of fake news inspired US government into the Spanish-American war, which was triggered as USS Maine attacked the harbour of Havana, Cuba.

Truly, fake news actually expands with the democratisation of communication improved technology as traditional media are in high demand in the 20th Century. It is revealed that Woodrow Wilson, the American 28th President (1913–1921) promoted the phrase, "Fake News" in 1915 [19]. Although, the phrase had been used in the United States in the previous Century, we will appreciate the fact that this is the period of First World War, when there was anti-German atrocity propaganda, and others to outwit one another in the global conflict.

It is crucial to note that Hitler and Nazi Party established the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in 1933 on attaining power, and made Joseph Goebbels the Propaganda Minister [20]. Just as Hitler's Germany was using propaganda to disseminate fake news to fan the embers of Nazi rule, the British propaganda used radio broadcasts and leaflets to publicise phony news to discourage German troops. Also, the American propaganda used The New York Times and others as propaganda machineries to spread fake news [21].

With the global network of information through the World Wide Web (WWW) in the 21st Century, fake news continues to be widespread [22]. It is amazing how fake news is increasing at increasing rate with the emergence of the International Networking (Internet), and creation of untruthful, misleading, and unwanted information which lacked verification. These are disseminated through email, social media, blogs, websites, WhatsApp, and others with the aim of deceiving readers into clicking of the links to maximise the traffic and profit through advertisement [23].

Besides, we have satire news, that's not intended to mislead but to inform and share humorous commentaries about real news and the mainstream media [24]. Such satirical news as opposed to fake news reflect in television programmes in United States television shows such as Saturday Night Live's, Weekend Update, The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, The Late Show with Stephen Colbert and The Union newspaper [25, 26].

Truly, President Donald Trump of America has propagated fake news in the new dispensation with his daily Tweets, dispelling negative news about him and his presidency as fake news [27, 28]. The British government has however decided in October 2018 that it bans the use of the term "Fake News" as it is a "poorly-defined and misleading term that conflates a variety of false information, from genuine error through to foreign interference in democratic processes" [28].

The Internet has assisted protagonists of fake news to spread their illicit trade to go viral globally. The inventor of World Wide Web (WWW), Tim Berners-Lee says in 2017, that fake news is one of the most three significant trends that must be checked, if the Internet must truly "serve humanity". The other two trends to be resolved is the use of Internet by governments for both "citizen-surveillance purposes, and for cyber-warfare purposes" [29]. The Reuters [30] reveals a research finding that 58 per cent of people had less trust in social media news stories as opposed to 24 per cent of people in mainstream media after learning about fake news.

This stems from the fact that fake news websites spread misinformation, falsehood, and misleading news to spread mischief, vendetta, and hatred. According to Michael Radutzky [31], huge patronage of advertisements in fake news websites make it global and spread the fake news. Thus, Jestin Coler, who establishes fake news websites for fun, discloses that Ten Thousand Dollars is earned monthly through advertisements placed on his fake news websites [32].

This study about fake news becomes pertinent as it is gaining more popularity with the social media spreading fake news, which people easily access, as against the traditional media. The Pew Research Center [33] reveals that 62 per cent of American adults gets news on social media, and most of them are fake news, compared to the mass media of radio, television, newspapers and magazines.

2. Exploring the concept of fake news

It is crucial to explore the true meaning of Fake News, especially as President Donald Trump of America has redefined the term to mean any negative news in the media against him and his presidency [27]. But Fake News is a neologism that means news stories that are untrue, not factual, and deliberate falsehood. Fake news does not mean unfavourable news, but news that were fabricated as a lie to mislead people, and cause chaos and anarchy among people. Fake news are formulated stories that are conjured as vendetta, and spread rumour mongering through the traditional media, social media, fake news websites, blogs, and other media outlets [1].

Fake news are machineries of propaganda strategy to deceive, mislead, confuse, and coerce people to influence and further an agenda, so that they may be psychologically brainwashed to believe the falsehood being promoted for supports. Propaganda use different methods, according to Lee and Lee like name calling, bandwagon, transfer, card stacking, testimonial, plain folks, and glittering generalities to gain support for what Frank Jefkins [34] identifies as "an opinion, creed or belief".

Meanwhile, Claire Wardle [35] identifies seven types of fake news thus: i. satire or parody ("no intention to cause harm but has potential to fool"); ii. false connection ("when headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content") and spread through the traditional media, social media, websites; iii. Misleading content ("misleading use of information to frame an issue or an individual"); iv. false context ("when genuine content is shared with false contextual information"); v. impostor content ("when genuine sources are impersonated" with false, made-up sources); vi. manipulated content ("when genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive", as with a "doctored" photo); and vii. Fabricated content ("new content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm").

It is through these differentials that we can identify and differentiate fake news from the true news in different media. But the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) gives some tips on how to actually spot

fake news [36]. They are: 1. Consider the source (to understand its mission and purpose); 2. Read beyond the headline (to understand the whole story); 3. Check the authors (to see if they are real and credible); 4. Assess the supporting sources (to ensure they support the claims); 5. Check the date of publication (to see if the story is relevant and up to date); 6. Ask if it is a joke (to determine if it is meant to be satire); 7. Review your own biases (to see if they are affecting your judgement); and 8. Ask experts (to get confirmation from independent people with knowledge).

The spread of fake news through the social media such as Twitter, Facebook news feed, Websites, and Blogs continues to worry experts in linguistics and the field of mass communications. This manifests in the spread of fake news with over 100 incorrect articles on the 2016 United States presidential election [37]. It is revealed that the fake news articles were disseminated through satirical news Websites, individual Websites, daily Tweets of President Trump, and others to propagate false information on the elections.

Prevalence of Fake News seems to be winning against correct news when we realise that it propelled Donald Trump to win 2016 presidential election in America. The election was won through Electoral College and not through majority votes. Donald Trump and Mike Pence of Republican Party won at Electoral College with 304 votes, as against 227 Votes for Hilary Clinton and Tim Kaine of Democratic Party. This is against the popular votes of 65,853,514 won by Hilary Clinton with 48.2 per cent of the votes, as against the 62,984,828 Votes of Donald Trump with 46.1 per cent [38]. And out of 7 faithless electors, 2 pledged to Donald Trump, and 5 to Hilary Clinton [39, 40].

But the daily Tweets of Trump dispelling correct negative news against him as fake news, and multiplicity of fake news sponsored in the media to create confusion propelled Trump as glorified candidate against all odds, to mould public opinion wrongly. Thus, steps must be taken urgently to checkmate fake news in the media to save humanity from untruth to pervade the globe against truthful news to elevate peoples of the world.

However, scientific efforts are being made to detect fake news in the media. Language techniques, theories, and models such as n-gram encodings and bag of words are being developed to determine the legitimacy, the credibility, and truthfulness of the news. Some Websites such as "Snopes" are developing methods to detect fake news manually, while some universities are developing mathematical models to detect fake news.

It is hoped such scientific efforts will meet the voracity of desperations being displayed by the protagonists of fake news to spread their illicit trade in the mass media, online media, and social media to create hatred, chaos, and anarchy among peoples of the world.

3. News and news values

It is apposite to consider the correct meaning of news, and factors determining news values so as to situate it against fake news. News is the reportage of current events or happenings, which may be normal, oddity or calamitous and transmitted through the organs of mass communication of radio, television, cinematography, newspaper, magazine, or the International Network (Internet) to the numerous heterogeneous audiences [41, p. 328].

The novelty of news makes it a major ingredient of the mass media and the new media which people pursue on daily basis, as it forms the immediate dissemination of information which is a major function of the media [14, pp. 42–44].

It is actually through the news that the media unveils the unknown to the people; confirms known information to the public; corrects innuendoes from propaganda devices; confers authority on issues, events, and opinions through reportage; reports opinions which are free; and presents sacred facts to the populace to ward off speculations, gossips, and rumour mongering in the society.

However, news is perceived from conflict point of view by Marshall McLuhan [5, p. 45] as he notes that 'the real news is bad news'. This orchestrates the common definition of news by the American journalist, Charles Anderson Dana (1819–1897), who states that, 'When a dog bites a man that is not news, but when a man bites a dog that is news' [42–44].

Meanwhile, Maria Elizabeth Grabe [45] offers an evolutionary psychology explanation for why negative news have higher news value than positive news. According to her,

Human perceptive system and lower level brain functions have difficulty distinguishing between media stimuli and real stimuli...The brain differentiates between negative and positive stimuli and reacts quicker and more automatically to negative stimuli which are also better remembered. Negative media news fall into this category.

News is categorised to hard news; soft news; spot news; developing news; and continuing news or running stories. These differentiations of news by journalists are based on the kind of news content or the subject of events as news. According to Gaye Tuchman [46, p. 179], these are Pres-scheduled event-as-news and the Non-scheduled event-as-news. The former refers to an event that is announced for a future by a convener which may be Congress debate sessions, press conferences, Annual General Meetings, court sitting, and among others. The news of such events is disseminated immediately, because, if it is news, it must be fresh, immediate, and timely.

The latter on Unscheduled event-as-news is an event that occurs unexpectedly such as accidents, fire, flood, or the death of prominent news maker such as a president. Such news is spot news that must be disseminated immediately. Scoops or investigated stories are non-scheduled events-as-news too, which may be disseminated as the editorial board of the news organisation may decide based on the nature of the exclusive news.

The objectives of news are embedded in the institutional framework of news media operations through what Gaye Tuchman [47] calls 'news beat' arrangements, official settings, time rhythms, and the journalistic reports.

In furtherance of the work of Berger and Luckman [48] on social construction of reality through news, Gaye Tuchman [47] stresses that the meaning of news reports is entrenched in this institutional 'newsnet' and 'routinization' of news through objectified methods of news processes.

4. Between news values and journalistic values

News is compiled by journalists based on the factors of news worthiness. As Boyd [49] notes, the news values or news criteria are often referred to as 'news worthiness', which serves as guide for the news journalists to cover, report, grade, and select news.

In their determinist view of news values, Conley and Lamble [50, p. 42] declare that,

News values will determine whether stories are to be pursued. They will determine whether, if pursued, they will then be published. They will determine, if published, where the stories will be placed in news presentation. Having been placed, new [sic] values will determine to what extent the public will read them.

In the etymology of news values, Walter Lippmann [51, p. 322] is widely acknowledged as the proponent, and describes it as 'attributes or conventions for the selection of news items to be published'.

Indeed, Richardson [52, pp. 91, 92–94, 182] examines news values from language perspectives as one of the professional practices 'that shape journalism as a discourse process and therefore help to account for the products of newspaper discourse', which helps the journalists to 'select, order and prioritise the collection and production of news', based on the 'imagined preferences of the expected audience'.

Meanwhile, Caple and Bednarek [5, p. 55] give three approaches to the discourse of news values:

a. a focus on news workers' beliefs or judgements about the newsworthiness of an event in its material reality (a 'material' perspective); b. a focus on news workers' beliefs or judgements about the newsworthiness of an event for their target audience (a 'cognitive' perspective); and c. a focus on how news production texts (press release, interviews, published story...) construct the newsworthiness of an event through language, photography, etc. (a 'discursive' perspective).

4.1 Journalistic values

There are basic differences between news values and journalistic values, just as functions differ from principles of a phenomenon. And as Johnson and Kelly [53, 54 p. 116] agree, 'news values' differ from 'journalistic values'. They regard journalistic values as 'accuracy and balance', which Fuller [55, 56] describes as 'standards and guidelines' such as 'objectivity, accuracy, fairness, neutrality, intellectual honesty, and degrees of proof'.

These journalistic values deal with the ethical standards in the practice of journalism in the print and electronic media as well as the new media. This is because of the need to have self-control in the coverage of events, the writing of the news, and the dissemination of the news.

In their estimation, Caple and Bednarek [4, p. 55] describe news values as 'properties or qualities of events', just as Kepplinger and Ehmig [27, p. 58] note that 'news values are regarded as the 'journalists' judgment about the relevance of factors. While news factors are by definition 'qualities of news stories', which might be the degree of damage reported, the status of people involved, the geographical distance between the event and the place where the recipients of the news stories live'.

This explains the position of Westerstahl and Johansson [57, p. 71] who perceive news values 'as systems of criteria central to the decision-making process as to what will or will not be selected as news', which Stromback et al. [58, p. 719] declares that 'the news values exist in the minds of journalists' to drive coverage and dominate their practice.

As 'ideological constructs of news', Curran and Seaton [59, p. 336] note that news values are tacit newsroom culture that determines the framing of news to meet the ideological inclinations and philosophy of the news media, which Golding and Elliot [60, p. 114] describe as 'routine and highly regulated procedures'.

From sociological point of view, news is selected to meet the social sensitivities of the sponsors, and are constructed ideologically to meet certain goals and objectives within the framework of the media establishments, which are influenced by the background and orientation of the journalists to meet corporate goals and objectives [61, p. 184].

In his declaration, Schulson [62, p. 142] states that 'news is not simply selected but constructed', as by-products of journalistic procedures and ethical practices apart from meeting ideological inclination of the sponsors.

This also attests to the view of Murdock [63, p. 163] that 'news production process is not random reactions to random events', it is based on the socio-cultural interests, political philosophy, and economic interests of the sponsors, financiers, and owners of the media.

4.2 Types of news values

The first set of news values were listed by Galtung and Ruge [64, p. 71] who describe them as 'factors of newsworthiness or news factors'. They argue that the 'news factors are a set of selections based on common-sense perception psychology, created through analogy to radio wave signals'.

In their research, Galtung and Ruge [64, p. 66] declare that 'the more an event accessed these criteria, the more likely it was to be reported in the print and broadcast news'.

The 12 factors given by them include:

1. Frequency; 2. Threshold (absolute intensity, intensity increase); 3. Unambiguity; 4. Meaningfulness (cultural proximity, relevance); 5. Consonance (predictability, demand); 6. Unexpectedness (unpredictability, scarcity); 7. Continuity; 8. Composition. These first 8 factors are considered as 'culture-free' that are based on perception. The remaining 4 factors are 'culture-bound'. These are: 9. Reference to elite nations; 10. Reference to Elite people; 11. Reference to persons; 12. Reference to something negative [64, p. 71].

In a review of the Galtung and Ruge study on news values, Tunstall [65, pp. 21, 22] identifies an 'unusual strength of the coherent set of hypotheses' that has the potential of application in a wide range of news contexts, including broadcast news. These hypotheses are:

a. 'The higher the total score of an event, the higher the probability that it will become news, and even make headlines'. This is 'Additivity Hypothesis'.

b. The second one is 'Complementarity Hypothesis' which is, 'Wherein an event low on one dimension or news factor will have to be high on another 'complementary' dimension to make it the news' [64, p. 71].

But in their critique, especially in relation to radio news, Niblock and Machin [66, p. 201] identify some factors of news values that are not covered by Galtung and Ruge.

According to them, the factors are: 'time, procedural requirements and targeting' in relation to selection and running order of radio stories aimed at different markets [66, p. 201].

In his classifications of news values, Bond [44, p. 5], lists the news criteria as:

a. Impact of the news to the audiences; b. Proximity or nearness of the news to the people; c. Timeliness or the freshness of the news which must be immediate; d. Prominence which makes the media to sell; e. Novelty nature of the news item to make it attractive to the audiences; f. Conflict such as crises, calamities, fraud, scandals, and others that arrest attention of people; g. Audience, which explains the heterogeneous receivers of news in the media; h. Human interest, which denotes human angle to news events that concerns the puny such as a baby surviving an accident, children being kidnapped, women being abused, and old people being traumatised; i. and Significance, which signifies the importance of the story to the people such as weather forecast.

These values of news serve as the basis for the allocation, selection, and construction of news to suit the ideological foundations, political philosophy, economic

interests, social interactions, and cultural dynamics of the media owners, sponsors, and financiers [67, 68, p. 298].

5. Framing of news

The dissemination of news carries with it a mythology, which make people regard news as a mirror of the society or as a reality of the scheduled and unscheduled events, or through which people can perceive the society.

This perception of news as representing 'the way it is', of various events opens a multilateral range of important questions to research, which brings up the idea that news is socially constructed or framed just like other forms of knowledge.

This concept of news 'frame' or 'construction' is perceived by Erving Goffman [69] as the principles of organisation that govern people's interpretation of and subjective involvement with events.

But Robert Hackett [70] perceives the concept of the framing of news beyond the narrow concern of bias and deviation from an objective standard. According to him, news framing tilt towards a more fruitful view of the ideological character of news, which is thoroughly structured in contents, practices, and relations with society. The framing of news underscores the constructed quality of news, while the notion of news bias suggests that a faithful reflection of events is possible.

However, Todd Gitlin [71, pp. 7, 21] defines news frames as 'persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse'. This lays the emphasis on the routine organisation, which transcends any given story and is 'persistent' over time (resistant to change). In the dissemination of information, the framing of news enable journalists to 'recognize it as information, to assign it to cognitive categories'.

This gives frames a power, to actively bring otherwise amorphous reality into a meaningful structure, making them more than the simple inclusion or exclusion of information.

In their understanding of news frames, Gamson and Modigliani [72, p. 3] describe frame as a 'central organizing idea...for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue', signified, by the media 'package' of metaphors and other devices.

In his estimation of news frame, Entman [73, p. 52] notes that a frame is determined in large part by its outcome or effect, stressing that 'to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation'.

The duo of Hertog and McLeod [74] however define frames as organising principles that are socially shared and persistent over time and that are working symbolically to provide a meaningful structure for the social world. In their analysis of social movement coverage, they note that if a protest march is framed as a confrontation between police and marchers, the protesters' critique of society may not be part of the story. This is not because there was not room for it, but because it was not defined as relevant.

6. News as discourse and instrument of surveillance

The centrality of news as major ingredient of the media confers high degree of authority, legitimacy, power, and status on the organs of mass communication to

influence public opinion. It actually symbolises the media as privileged social institution in the society to seek information and disseminate it without fear or favour.

From political perspective, news is selected and constructed to meet the dynamics of democratic process, since the media serves as major institution of democracy to ensure free and fair elections, promote people's rights to select and elect their leaders regularly within the framework of political liberty without terror or panic, to expose corruption in the system as surveillance of the environment [75, p. 37; 76, p. 33; 77].

These are carried out based on the political ideology of the media establishment which may be conservative, liberal, or extreme left; and which may be based on the political interests of the sponsor, advertisers, and financiers.

Economically, news is used by the media to enhance the commercial interests of its owners, advertisers, sponsors, and financiers. Thus, the radio and other organs of mass communication construct narratives that use a specific temporal order of events to construct meanings that will further the frontier of economic interests of their promoters [78].

As veritable instrument of socialisation, the radio news and other media organs provide common pool of knowledge to the people to enable them interact effectively in the society; and to foster social cohesion and awareness for active public life [79, p. 14].

As vanguard of cultural promotion, news in the media are ideologically used to disseminate the cultural and artistic products for the purpose of preserving the heritage of the past; further the embracement of advantaged culture by widening the mental horizons and exposure of individuals; awakening the imagination of groups of people; and stimulating the aesthetic needs and creativity of the people [80, p. 296; 81, p. 41; 82, p. 141; 83, p. 154; 84, 85].

Hence, Denis McQuail [86, p. 376] declares that news is 'central ingredient' of the media that,

… It is one of the few original contributions by the media to the range of cultural forms of expression. It is also the core activity according to which a large part of the journalistic (and thus media) occupation defines itself… Media institutions can barely exist without news…

The power of the media to influence public opinion and to serve as surveillance of the environment are being explored and exploited by media owners and the elite in Nigeria to achieve their political, economic, social, and cultural interests [78].

Indeed, this is a universal occurrence as it happens in different countries of the world, which confirms the media to be bias, and which confirms news to be ideological and un-neutral [87–90].

7. Taming of fake news

The preponderance and rascality of fake news has enveloped the world with the prompt blanket of the International Networking (Internet). There is urgent need to checkmate fake news, so as to save humanity from calamities of promoting hatred, violence, blackmail, and killings through distraught caused by spreading falsehood through deliberate dissemination of fabricated and incorrect news. It is imperative to tame fake news through the following:

1. **Self-Regulation** by the Mass Media; Online Media; Social Media; Blogs; Websites: It is crucial for media captains to strengthen collaboration across countries of the world to check fake news, ban fake news publications, and come up with sanctions against media organisations on the Internet from contravening the self-regulating laws. This is the best form of control, as government controls may be more

devastating where self-control fails. Therefore, media professional associations, unions, and institutes should come up with self-regulatory rules, guidelines, laws, sanctions, and prohibitions against fake news, violators banned from practising, and to withdraw their licences for operations.

2. **Government Legislations**: There is increasing concerns on the need to control hate speech, fake news, hacking of election results, and abuse of the Internet in the social media, traditional media, and online media. Hence, there is need for countries of the world to have regulations to ban hate speech, fake news, and others. Acts of parliament should be put in place to sanction those who publish fake news on websites, blogs, and others within the cyber space in their respective territories. The Facebook Chief recently agreed for governments to play a "more active role" in regulating the Internet, urging more countries to adopt versions of sweeping European rules aimed at safeguarding user privacy [91]. This is a good development as Facebook and other Internet giants have long resisted government intervention, but the leading social network has reversed course amid growing calls for regulation, in an apparent bid to help steer the debate. According to Zuckerberg, "I believe we need a more active role for governments and regulators. By updating the rules for the Internet, we can preserve what's best about it...the freedom for people to express themselves and for entrepreneurs to build new things -- while also protecting society from broader harms. New regulations are needed in four areas: harmful content, protection of elections, privacy and data portability. Facebook has drawn fire over all four, from hate speech on the platform and the recent live streaming of attacks on mosques in New Zealand, to its use in foreign efforts to meddle in elections and concerns over its collection of personal user data. Facebook would support more countries adopting rules in line with the European Union's sweeping General Data Protection Regulation, which gives regulators sweeping powers to sanction organisations which fail to adhere to heightened standards of security when processing personal data" [91].

3. **International Agencies to ban fake news online**: There is need for United Nations agencies like United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and United Nations Information Service to set machineries in motion to stem the tide of fake news to save humanity from chaos and anarchy caused by deliberate use of lies to create and spread hatred and enmity in the world online.

4. **Coalition of International Human Rights organisations against fake news and hate speech**: There is need for the coalition of national human rights groups against fake news and hate speech to form international organisation that will sign treaties and regulations against fake news publications online through websites, social media, blogs, and others.

5. **International Networking (Internet) Regulation Controls**: There is need for Internet regulation controls to ban and remove fake news websites, blogs, and others from the cyber space permanently, and put sanctions in place against perpetrators of such fake news promoters in different countries of the world.

6. **Radical agitations against fake news through**: Music, protests, academic papers, public speeches, lectures, drama sketches, poem, essays, films and cinematography, and others.

8. Conclusion

This study in narrative form has been able to examine fake news, true news, the values of news, the framing of news, values of journalism, and news as discourse and as instrument of surveillance so as to be able to understand the true meaning of news, and appreciate the havoc being done by fake news in the society.

Since news forms the centrality of the mass media and online media, the spread of fake news erodes the essence of the media and its powers. The heavy prevalence of fake news in the media corrodes the values of the organs of mass communication as the authority, legitimacy, power, and status of the media are negated by the dissemination of fake news. Apart from self-regulations which is the best form of control professionally, government legislations are desirable from all countries of the world to punish culprits of fake news promoters around the world. Humanity suffers great setback with the spread of fake news in the media, which worsens globally with the online media. Besides, fake news undermines true journalism, professionalism, and for journalists to serve humanity as surveillance of governments and society. Indeed, fake news slips the world into the abyss of silence as falsehood is spread untamed, at the detriment of good journalism to serve humankind. Apart from threatening democracy as demonstrated in the 2016 presidential election in America, fake news threatens press freedom, free speech, democratisation of information, true journalism to serve as surveillance of society. All hands must be on deck to check fake news from spreading in the mass media, online media, and the social media for sanity to prevail in the world.

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Alternative News and Misinterpretations: Fake News and Its Spread in Nigeria

Dumebi Otulugbu

Abstract

Down the ages and across cultures, information has occupied a very crucial space in the life of any society. Today, our world with the speed in technological advancements is characterised with easy access to the collecting, refining and distribution of information. This has left media houses especially the large ones with the burden of competing with alternative media, as media producers abuse the privilege in liberal democracies that is granted citizens as regards human rights and freedom, as the rate of disseminating false information continues to grow. This piece attempts at stating clearly information on fake news, misinformation and hate speeches as disseminated globally in the guise of media scientists, showing the means through which this end is met, especially with the easy that comes with the use of social media and in the end, showing the challenges and risks that are resultant effects of this acts.

Keywords: alternative news, media, misinterpretations, research and specialist

1. Introduction

The act of manipulating information has existed long before the advent of social media, an active feature of history long, even before the coming of modern journalism through established standards which define news as a genre based on particular rules of integrity. Facts affirming the above claim dates back to an early incident recorded to have occurred in ancient Rome, when Antony met Cleopatra and his political enemy Octavian launched a smear campaign against him with "short, sharp slogans written upon coins in the style of archaic Tweets." The perpetrator became the first Roman Emperor and "fake news had allowed Octavian to hack the republican system once and for all".

The term 'news', in its ideal form stands for verifiable information in the public interest, this is why any information that does not meet these aforementioned standards does not deserve the label of news. What this implies is that whenever there is a mention of the term, 'fake news', it would simply pass as an oxymoron, that where two words of opposite meaning are used together, an attempt aimed at simply undermining the credibility of information which does indeed meet the threshold of verifiability and public interest – that is real news. Having stated this, we can freely employ the use of the term "fake news" for the purpose of this paper.

Fake news is defined as a situation when misinformation takes the form of a news story to approximate the legitimacy which society associates with real news [1]. Many scholars focus on the intention behind fake news when defining the term, it is also defined as information that has been deliberately fabricated and disseminated with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts [2]. In this regard, it is disinformation that is presented as or is likely to be perceived as news. Fake news is viewed as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers [3].

Seven types of fake news were identified by Claire Wardle of *First Draft News*, which includes the following; Satire or parody (this has no intention of causing any harm although it has potentials to fool), false connection, (this is when headlines or captions do not support the content), misleading content (here misleading information is used to frame an issue or an individual), false context (this is when authentic information is shared with false contextual information), imposter content (this is when authentic sources are impersonated with false, made-up sources), manipulated content (this is when authentic information or imagery is manipulated to deceive, as can be related in the case of a doctored photo) and fabricated content (in this case, the content is 100% new, yet false, it is designed to deceive and do harm) [4].

Fake news is currently an issue of global interest right now; this is so because globally discussions about fake news and its impact on global affairs are being held. This century sadly has seen the use of information as a weapon in rather unprecedented scale. the exploitation and falsification of contents have simply become rather easy with the presence of Powerful new technology, this has also given easy rise to the use of social networks in intensifying the rate falsehoods in rather very dramatic fashion especially as peddled by States, politicians, deceitful corporate entities, and individuals who go about sharing uncritical publics stories, these and other forms of misinformation are perpetrated with the intent seeking or gaining platforms to pursue financial gains in the advertising section. There is a high spread of the fake news phenomenon on the internet; this is so because of the internet's ever connected nature and a major function of the masses' preference for speed over accuracy. Thus, since those who provide content on the internet are a Zero-sum, winner-takes-all battle for attention and for of course the revenue that comes with advertising, they do not mind doing any and everything to boost traffic. Distinct from print publications that allows for enough time before reporting a breaking story the next day, publications that are made online which are majorly reports on the franticness of the present world. Due to the nature of modus operandi of the internet, one who is on that space might as well go fast or go home. Hence, so many journalists are left in an unreasonable competition for attention, where they are forced to publish information first and then verify the authenticity of their contents later, this hunts our world today badly [5]. Nonetheless, this is also a Nigerian problem, as there are also a bulk of new sites and blogs that publish contents without properly authenticating their sources. Fake news stories are usually thrilling in nature and by this factor, are very likely to spread quickly; since these blogs or platforms by their nature contain a high level of followers, making the news possess an existing number of massive reader base that have their notification on, looking up to them for second to second information, and since these have special flavors added to them to make them captivating, such stories will most likely be believed by those who them, in turn, these people will share the story on social media as today it is about a thing of pride to be the first to have information about a story, sadly though, this is how fake news goes on and on, more painful is the fact that even after the story has been debunked, Sometimes, the fake news still prevails.

2. Relevant literature reviewed

Journalists, those who for the purpose of this piece are referred to as media specialist and the organizations they work for produce news is fundamentally, an individual as well as an organizational product; nonetheless, when the ways in which news is being constructed is considered, it becomes imperative as [6] would put it to examine the procedure whereby an excessive amount of proceedings and issues relating to a given day are filtered into a bulletin or newspaper. These proceedings we can divide into two chronological stages those of "the selection of proceedings and issues on which we base the news stories and subsequent construction of such stories" In an attempt at seeking the definition of journalism, it is imperative to examine the end product of journalism, which is news.

Notwithstanding, with the emergence of what [7] calls the 'participatory web' user generated content has gradually become an important part of the digital culture [7, 8]. The resultant effect brought major changes to the news media industry. particularly, this change was seen in the ways in which news was reported and shared across populations were expanded through media platforms that are connected, this has created positive influence on people especially on engaging the young people with news and information on current affairs [9]. At the same time, it is important to mention here that the monetization and rapid circulation of 'news' through the use of digital platforms especially the social media is responsible for such widespread and effective forms of media manipulation. These digital platforms tend to democratize the creation and circulation of news, however, what they fail to bring into consideration is that, in all these doings, questions abound, questions around what news is, how it gets made, shared and read in online contexts are also raised.

Today the reason why people seek information is aimed towards various ends, these ends include but not limited to the following: comfort, empowerment, learning, knowledge to act among others. However, not all information is useful and credible to them. Thus, they are then charged with a duty to filter out useless information and retain only what is useful and believable. Credibility is thus one of the criteria used in filtering unbelievable information [10]. Credibility as defined by [11] is a "judgment made by a perceiver (e.g., a message recipient) concerning the believability of a communicator", save for other scholars, this definition should also include institutions as well as persons as communicators as indicted by [12]. Generally, the learned assessment of credibility falls in with about one of the oldest lines in communication research, originating with ancient Greeks [13, 14]. More often than not, information that is credible is referred to as believable information [15, 16], in fact, Eisend calls it a person's perception of the truth of a piece of information [17]. This is why Self opined that this concept brings to mind Aristotle's argument that persuasion was based upon fitting the message to audience need in the linear model of speaker-message-audience [18]. All in all, different researchers, in fact, employed different definitions of credibility. This definition helps to demonstrate that credibility as a concept is complex, interdependent, and a multidimensional [19]. Due to the deep penetration of the Internet Media credibility, has received renewed attention in recent years [20]. However, interest in newspaper credibility reached the highest point in the late 1980s, regrettably, media credibility issue has recently been revived, this is so because of the involvement of traditional media those of the television and newspapers in the Internet [21], recent study on "Perceptions of Internet information credibility", which was conducted by Flanagin and Metsger shows that the information gotten from the Internet was as credible as that gotten from the television. Thus, the authors reached the conclusion that the credibility among various kinds of information that audience seek, say news and entertainment, differed by

media channels. Reports from respondents showed that they did not verify Internet-based information. However, this finding varied, this variance was measured by the kind of information needed, the level of experience using of the Internet and the audience's perception about the information were among others related with whether they made to verify information found on the Internet [22].

The Internet however helps the flow and freedom of information, introducing an increased possibility for error or misuse on information. But credibility of online information may be derived from the strength of mutual interaction between users and sources. However, these authors have been investigating for several decades this relationship between media use and perceived media credibility but the findings of a study conducted indicate that there is need to clearly distinguish from level of preference the rate of media use for various media [23]. Studies of media use have time after time shown that online media complements traditional media more correspondingly than competitive media [24]. Based on this aforementioned finding concerning the online media, it can be inferred that credibility is something a medium cannot earn it by its own, but it also should be obtained by other media.

3. Causes of fake news

In an attempt at stating clearly the causes of fake news in Nigeria as well as the world at large, so many factors come into consideration, but for the sake of emphasis, this piece include but not limited to the following:

Monetary gains: this is about the major reasons for the creation and spread of fake news today, basically all other reasons are means tilting towards this end, this is why Jestin Coler, who was formerly owned the fake media conglomerate *Disinfomedia*, was once known to have stated that when he ran his company, he once had to employed about 20 to 25 writers making up $10,000 to $30,000 per month just from advertisements [25]. A close look at this has shown that this is about the same story with that which is obtainable in the Nigerian media market.

More so, some media outlets have indulged in fake news simply for the sake of significance, this is a major feature of the social media in Nigeria where persons and organizations go any length just to be "verified", to do so they fill their space with anything, irrespective of how credible it is or not as long as such information say stories or advertisement or can attract enough viewers to their space. Furthermore, another factor that aids the spread of fake news is in states with government authorities that are unfriendly, together with have over the years been known for creating and spreading fake news, especially during events such as an election where certain information are in the custody of the government only, we can find this during elections.

Although the loosed nature of the guidelines regulating the internet is one factor which is also responsible for the spread of fake news. When the internet was made reachable for the general public in the 1990's it was dine for the chief purpose of seeking and reaching information. But with the advent of fake news in the internet, obtaining credible information has become though. Since there are really no stringent rules on the internet Fake news have become rampart with the use of news sites that are falsified, they do so by creating catchy news or gossips, pretending to be reliable sources.

4. Effects of fake news in Nigeria

Fake news are lies propagated for selfish reasons, and like all lies it comes with certain degrees of pains on those to whom such lies are framed, this is why the

Minister of Information and Culture Lai Mohammed is quoted to have said "the global epidemic of fake news is already having far reaching repercussions across the world". In fact, some researchers at the Ohio State University in the United States concluded in a recent study showed that Russian interference and the fake news it spread almost certainly aided in depressing the support Hilary Clinton got on the day of Election of the 2016 presidential elections in the United States. Some of this Fake News include that due to a serious disease she was is in poor health; that Trump got endorsed by Pope Francis; that she approved weapons sales to Islamic Jihadists etc. [5].

Elebeke shows how In India, how about six people were killed simply because of fake news of prank messages. They were killed after this message showed that they were involved in of child abduction based on the fake messages circulated via the WhatsApp social media platform [26].

In Nigeria, we do not have a better story, for fake news here is not sole a function of the social media for on 5th July 2018, the National newspaper's front page headline read: *Court orders National Assembly to begin impeachment of Buhari*. Creating unnecessary tension on the polity, that news was a simple manipulation of the following judgment: "*The applicants are hereby granted leave to issue and bring an Application for the order of Mandamus to compel 1*ˢᵗ *to 3rd Respondents to start impeachment proceedings against the 4th Respondent, the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*" as delivered by the Presiding Judge of the Federal High Court in Oshogbo. Fake news over the years have aggravated the herders/farmers crises in Nigeria, this is why The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) once reported that the fake news circulating in the social media is a major factor responsible for the fueling of the farmers/herdsmen crises in Nigeria., it stating that "fake pictures circulating on social media which users are falsely claiming depict inter-communal violence are inflaming already high tensions in Nigeria" one of such stories was the fake report which circulated the social media in Nigeria of the story that claiming that about five students of the College of Education at Gidan Waya, were ambushed and murdered by Fulani herdsmen in the Southern part of Kaduna. Also, major Nigerian news outlets once ran a story alleging that Danladi Ciroma, a leader of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association, said the attacks in the Plateau were retribution for the loss of 300 cows, they even went ahead to have quoted him to have said that "Since, these cows were not found, no-one should expect peace in the areas", nevertheless, Mr. Ciroma had denied making such reports before the media organization apparently tendered apology [27].

Based on seven articles that was analysed, six major fake news epidemics with serious adverse consequences across Nigeria were identified; Plotted stories caused an increase in polio cases (2017), Ebola 'cure' kills two (2014), President Muhammadu death in 2017 and his marriage saga in 2019, Fake Facebook post intensifies the regional and religious crisis (2012, 2018), Fake photos and news exacerbate tensions between the herdsmen and farmers conflict (2019), Claims of under-age voting in elections and other misleading stories (2015 presidential election) [28].

In the face of the 2020 pandemic (Covid-19) the cause of Corona virus was linked to 5G mobile broadband technology is will replace 4G LTE connection with faster internet connectivity which will enhance faster downloads and other internet activities. 5G conspiracy theorists argue that the newly developed network generates radio frequency radiation that can damage DNA and lead to cancer and premature ageing. They also contend that the network can disrupt cell metabolism, and potentially lead to other diseases through the generation of stress proteins, and Corona virus in particular by weakening the immune system. In fact, a notable Nigerian Bishop took to social media in a protest against the installation of 5G network in

Nigeria. Though it had not been proven that 5G network is responsible for Corona virus pandemic, originators of fake news disseminated stories online that suggest that 5G network has a direct causal link with Corona virus [29]. Mosquitoes bite transmission: Although it's always appropriate to keep a safe distance from the insect that spreads paludism and dengue fever, respiratory viruses don't seem, at this stage, to be transmitted by mosquito bites, but by droplets of saliva or nasal secretions expelled by an infected person when coughing or sneezing. Speaking of animals, no house pets seem to have been infected by the new coronavirus. Infected facemasks, some plausible, but useless: Antibiotics work against bacteria, not viruses. Taking antibiotics to treat or prevent coronavirus could prove harmful by reducing a person's vigilance. Vaccines against pneumonia don't provide protection against COVID-19 either. The potential efficacy of chloroquine is currently being studied but doesn't look particularly promising. Remedies, transmission via parcels from China: Although their lifespan varies depending on the environment and temperature, pathogenic germs can only survive on objects such as parcels, coins and credit cards for a few hours. Products imported from China to Africa have been travelling for too long to transmit the virus. Bioweapon rumors: theories surrounding the coronavirus posit that the disease is a bioweapon engineered by the Chinese government, the US government or Bill Gates's foundation and that it was either deliberately or accidentally released. These rumours overlap with tall tales of former Soviet bloc countries supposedly carrying out secret geopolitical operations to weaken democracies via massive viral propaganda campaigns [30].

In the end we can clearly see that Fake news most often leads to confusion, tension, and even the tendency to be suicidal, depending on the person or institution as the case may be, while on the other end, it waters down the efforts of serious media coverage making the work more difficult for journalists to cover significant news stories.

5. Management of fake news

In attempting at seeking and finding lasting solutions to the problem of fake news, it must be brought into consideration that if there would be a solution to the problem of fake news and a lasting one at that, we must realize from the onset that is must be a collective effort, not just a mere function of the government or the media outlets, it must be a collective responsibility we owe ourselves and this responsibility must be carried out consciously and carefully, this is why Brian Hughes, a professor of media studies at Queens College, City University of New York, is quoted to have written that "it would be a mistake to pressure Facebook and Google into acting as censors" for news because, "we have already seen how much such an approach can backfire". To better make this point sink, he cited the example of how Facebook manipulated its trending newsfeed to suppress conservative news. He stated that this attempt only increased the distrust the public had for the media, making them appear as less credible sources of information. Thus, for him of adopting the Fairness Doctrine for digital media would go a long way at managing fake news; this is how he stated companies like Facebook can 'individually program their news feeds for balance and accuracy" since they are already able to identify consumer niches this does not mean the government has no place here, as Nicholas Lemann of the New Yorker has argued proposing that the government invest more in the pubic media to give more room for press freedom and journalistic integrity, although this would be difficult in state like Nigeria where the government is viewed as corrupt and not trustworthy [5].

More so, big technological companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter have begun addressing this issue. For Google, it is reported to have budgeted about 300 million US dollars over the next three years in an attempt at fighting and curbing the spread of false news. While Facebook on its part, according to Bloomberg, in the first three months of 2018 took down 583 million fake accounts. According to Reuters, Twitter withdrew license from over 70 million accounts, and the pace of this withdrawal has continued to increase [26].

Okogba in his piece identified the position of Jamie Angus, the Director of BBC World Service Group on this topic, Jamie encouraged the public to use the most trusted news brands and rely on them solely for genuine information. Advocating an increased standard of education and media literacy for fake news cannot be eliminated, as long as we still have people willing to buy tabloids and read blogs that they already know have in the past contained lies or half-truths, and as long as the number uneducated people that are unable to differentiate between real and fake new continues to increase, the sale of fake news will continue to increase. Thus, he went further to state that today more than ever there is the surging need to educate people especially the young ones in particular, that equipping them with enough skills at identifying and differentiating true from untrue information [31].

6. Conclusion

It has been observed from the reviewed literature that alternative and misinterpreted news has caused a lot of fear/anxiety/panic and damages among the populace. Despite these, the consequences of fake news from the literature has been outlined as follows; aggravate distrust, violence and division among the people and weakens confidence and certainty of the people in the media.

From the above we can clearly see that alternative news and misinterpretation is our today's reality, causing more harm and no good at all, thus we must strive to encourage media literacy as it is very paramount in this regard. More so, people should invest more in making sure that media specialists' partner with good, reputable and credible international media organizations. And yes, government must ensure that they seek and find ways to support its foundational traditional media for acceptability as against those of the social media. Finally, Nigeria as a country must seek and find a way in making sure that its print media and TV stations are known to practice quality journalism, as this would boost their acceptability by the people; when that is successfully achieved, then Nigeria might make the move for the consideration of an independent regulation of the media; as this would definitely reduce the attention that is poured on fake media outlets and this would make identifying and punishing those who get spread for spitefully published information. Thus, librarians can lead the way as information professionals toward an information common through information and media literacy skills. Little has been studied by librarians about the direct impact of fake news on researchers.

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Chapter 8

The Replication and Spread of Functional Food Messages: The Influence of Personalities on Internet Meme Behavior

Jon-Chao Hong, Ming-Yueh Hwang and Kai-Hsin Tai

Abstract

The term Internet memes was coined to describe the phenomenon of replicating and spreading messages via social media. This study explores individual personality traits in relation to Internet meme behavior in the context of online news about functional foods based on the expectancy-confirmation process, and also the correlates between value perception and consequential behavior. An online convenience sample was used to collect data by posting on LINE, the instant communication tool, and a total of 343 questionnaires were returned, 252 valid questionnaires were used for structural equation modeling and hypothesis verification. The results found that: (1) Neuroticism was positively related and Extraversion was negatively related to value expectation for consuming functional foods; (2) The food value for health expectation participants can predict replication and usage satisfaction; (3) The usage satisfaction and replicative behavior can predict the frequency of spread messages. The results suggest that consumers with Neuroticism will need to reduce processes of Internet memes to online fake news about functional food.

Keywords: extraversion, fake news, internet meme, neuroticism, personality traits

1. Introduction

An internet meme is the phenomenon whereby information is passed through the Internet or other media. It can influence people's actions as they imitate, learn, and follow-up on the information [1]. Dawkins used memes as a conceptual tool for discussing evolutionary principles, and the concept of memetics, understood as the replication, spread, and evolution of memes, came about [2]. Extended from memes, Internet memes are defined as users' online behavior of receiving and exchanging mediated messages [3]. According to the resource exchange theory, exchange refers to transferring resources or messages between two or more social units [4]. However, social media often involve the spread of inaccurate information [5], and misinformation is more rapidly disseminated through social media than through other media when there is high uncertainty and high demand for public information about issues such as health concerns [6]. Examples of such health-related misinformation include the beliefs that a steak-only diet can beat arthritis and carrot juice cures cancer. Fake news in the world of social media is widespread,

and messages are accepted and transferred regularly by millions of internet users [7]. In fact, there are various instances of "fake news" relating to food functions that have circulated on LINE, the most popular instant messaging application (app) in Taiwan [8]. Such Internet memes may spread rapidly, but the behavior of consuming certain foods for health reasons (i.e., functional foods) [9] has not yet been explained. Thus, this study explored the spread of Internet memes related to functional food consumption behavior via LINE.

The expectation-confirmation process (ECP) [10] is a theoretical framework that has been used to explain consumer satisfaction, acceptance, purchasing, use and switching decisions [11, 12]. For example, when applied to consumer purchase decisions, the ECP suggests that consumers base their original purchase decision on the subsequent satisfaction they gain from their consumption or use of the product which helps them determine if their initial expectations about it were correct [13]. Related to consumers' need for social interaction, whether their expectations are confirmed or disconfirmed will affect their intentions to share their experience [14]. Additionally, people constantly share values as well as expectations and preferences in their social interactions via Internet memes [15]. When making decisions to choose products or services, personality characteristics have been shown to affect behavioral response [16]. That is, personality type can be a predictor of social media activity [14]. Specifically, study, users in the high extraversion personality groups were found to engage more in active social media use, including generating content, sharing with others, and engaging in groups, than those in other personality groups [17]. Memes are a never-ending process [15], and although Internet memes are prevalent on social media, there has been little research on the effects of such messages related to foods for health. Thus, this study examined personality traits related to replicative and spreading behavior in relation to foods for health based on the expectation-confirmation process model, and explored the correlates between value perception and consequential behavior.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Personality traits and health behaviors in the context of social media

The Confucian Analects state that human beings should be concerned with more than 20 virtues, such as benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, loyalty, forbearance, faithfulness, humbleness, respect, filial piety, and so on. In order to conduct this current explorative research, the present study classified some core virtues into "benevolence," "courtesy" and "righteousness" to be elaborated as follows.

In the research on personality traits, many studies have used the Big Five or five-factor model, including the five dimensional traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness [18] to assess human personality. Moreover, Gray posited that the behavioral activation system (BAS) and the behavioral inhibition system (BIS) are a paired set of neural circuitries assumed to be the way in which personality affects behavior, and which are dependent on the interaction with objects or environments [19]. Forsman postulated that an individual's extraversion tendency is due to a strong BAS but weak BIS, whereas introversion tendency is due to a weak BAS but strong BIS [20]. In line with this, Sharpe, Martin, and Roth viewed the linked construct between neuroticism and extraversion as a bipolar individual difference variable ranging from the pessimistic to the optimistic [21].

As the main social network is the Internet and its use is related to personality [22], the personality theory of neuroticism and extraversion has been especially utilized by Hamburger and Ben-Artzi to study the connection between personality and Internet use [23]. Neuroticism is often hypothesized as having a protective function when worry and anxiety motivate a person's behaviors in seizing limited social opportunities and avoiding distress [24]. In contrast, high extraversion refers to the extent to which a person is social, talkative, assertive, energetic and outgoing [25]. In addition, research by Casciaro, Carley, and Krackhardt demonstrated how individuals' perceptions of their social networking are influenced by their personality traits [26]. For instance, individuals who possess a high level of neuroticism are less likely to engage in social networks [23]. On the other hand, extraversion could be expected to cause people to enter desired social relationships, resulting in their receiving and contributing messages to and from social networks [27]. However, to date, no specific studies have been conducted on how personality relates to Internet memes. Thus, this study explores whether extraversion or neuroticism have a relationship with Internet memes.

2.2 Online behavior related to the expectancy confirmation process

The importance of interaction goals in one's perception was originally highlighted by Jones and Thibaut [28], and was first incorporated into most accounts of the expectancy confirmation process by Darley and Fazio [10]. The expectancy confirmation process has been applied in a number of studies [29] involving research on social perceptions and social interaction [30, 31], which are considered as expectancy confirmation processes [32, 33]. That is, expectancy mediation research has documented overt and subtle perceiver behaviors (step 2) that mediate the effects of perceivers' expectancies (step 1) on targets' influence (step 3) [34]. In line with these three steps in the context of Internet meme behavior, we viewed value expectation as the first step, the replication of perceivers' behavior as the second step, and the spreading of messages to targets as the third step.

The most interesting theoretical gap may lie between the second and third steps of the behavioral confirmation process: the path evaluation through which perceivers' behaviors elicit expectancy-consistent target behaviors by passing information implicitly [34]. For example, the negative behaviors displayed by the targets may then confirm the perceivers' negative expectations. Thus, Internet memes support a process through which perceivers' expectancy-congruent behaviors elicit targets' expectancy-confirming performance [34]. A perceiver's positive expectancy-driven behavior (i.e., value expectation and usage satisfaction) may lead to behavioral confirmation (i.e., usage satisfaction and finding targets to spread messages to). The expectation-confirmation indirectly influences respondents' intentions through satisfaction with the social media and the perceived usefulness of the site; furthermore, interactive engagement influences the perception of usage while usage influences expectation confirmation [13]. Therefore, how these steps of online social interventions with functional foods interact is explored in this study.

3. Research hypotheses and model

3.1 Personalities related to value expectation

Generally, it is agreed that neuroticism and extraversion are the personality traits most significantly related to online activities [22]. Particularly, neuroticism

tends to lead to negative effects, such as affective instability and elevated stress levels, and it has also been associated with negative health behaviors [35]. On the other hand, individuals who possess the extraversion trait show online sociability and positive emotionality [36]. More specifically, expectations refer to future experiences, and therefore it can be argued that particularly low future expectations may lead to decreased suffering among people with high levels of Neuroticism [37]. On the other hand, Extraversion is related to openness to experience with a low level of value expectation [38]. People with high extraversion personalities have been shown to have less value expectation when consuming health foods [39]. Therefore, how these two personality types are associated with consumers' value expectation of consuming foods for health was hypothesized as follows:

H1: Neuroticism is negatively related to value expectation.
H2: Extraversion is positively related to value expectation.

3.2 Value expectation related to replicated behavior

According to Kyle, Absher, and Norman [40], involvement is a reflection of individual self-concept, needs and values. McIntyre and Pigram posited that active involvement can be measured in terms of attraction, self-expression and centrality in one's life [18]. Researchers (e.g. [41]) have considered the expectation values that affect consumers' intention to replicate in reporting that replication may increase one's confidence to perform an action again if the reliability of the effect is considerable [42]. The following hypothesis was therefore proposed:

H3: Value expectation is positively related to replicative behavior.

3.3 Value expectation related to usage satisfaction

According to Vargo and Lusch [43], value is idiosyncratic, experiential, contextual and meaning-laden. Building on this notion, managers working in business customer organizations are constantly and idiosyncratically making decisions affected by experiences. Eccles, Adler, Futterman, Goff, and Kaczala highlighted that the expectancy value theory is composed of two essential elements, namely, expectation and usage satisfaction [44]. The classical economic viewpoint states that current utility can be indirectly affected by one's beliefs about future events since beliefs can change the frontier of future possibilities and thus motivate different consumption behaviors today [45]. That is, the expectations to enhance future health can increase present utilities [46]. In this sense, expectation and usage satisfaction are value-enhancing, and so the following hypothesis was proposed:

H4: Value expectation is significantly related to usage satisfaction.

3.4 Replicative behavior related to usage satisfaction

Flint, Blocker, and Boutin found that when selling goods, anticipating what customers want will result in higher customer satisfaction [47]. From the perspective of social psychology, the attempt to replicate "social priming" effects has been interpreted as incidental values affecting usefulness judgments [48]. However, replicating "social priming" effects (e.g. [49, 50]) may increase confidence and behavioral satisfaction [41]. Accordingly, the following hypothesis about replicative behavior relevant to usage satisfaction was proposed:

H5: Replicative behavior is positively related to usage satisfaction.

3.5 Usage satisfaction related to the spread of messages

Expectation-confirmation theory posits a positive relationship between expectation and satisfaction, predicting that consumers would subsequently confirm positive expectations and would either continue purchasing goods [51] or if satisfied, encourage others to make the same purchase, because they would communicate and make their behaviors explicit [52] regardless of any possible negative responses they receive [53]. Regarding social interaction, Shifman suggested that individual replicative behavior and the spread of messages to others can be analyzed in the context of social media [54]. Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H6: Usage satisfaction is positively related to the spread of messages.

3.6 Replicative behavior related to the spread of messages

Although the term meme refers to the concept of how influences, preferences and behaviors can rapidly spread from one individual or group to another within a given culture, most advocates of human memetics also agree that memes arise from social learning [55] with language as the principal medium of transmission [56]. Consumers with a high level of replication usually have a high level of willingness to spread their activity by introducing it to others via social networks [57]. This study therefore explored the idea that the replication of functional food consumption messages could predict message transfer to others. Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H7: Replicative behavior is positively related to the spread of information.

3.7 Research model

In this study, we applied ECP to understand the behavioral interactions regarding functional food messages via LINE. Additionally, personalities have been shown to be stable in different situations and when perceiving and responding to online messages [16]. Accordingly, this study examined two personality traits (i.e., neuroticism and extraversion) related to replicative and transferring behaviors regarding food for health messages, focusing on ECP. The research model is shown in **Figure 1**.
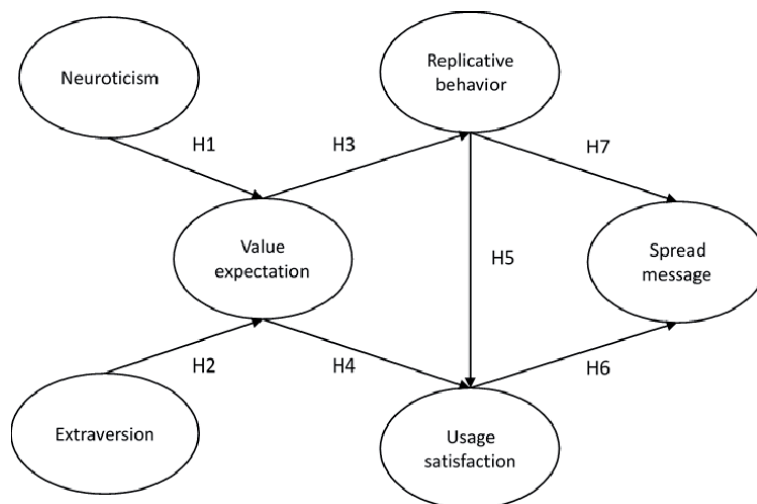
Figure 1.
Verification of the research model.

4. Method

4.1 Procedure

Taiwan was an early adopter of LINE, with an estimated 21 million Taiwanese people using the app by 2019 which means LINE users is about 91% of Taiwan's total population [58]. Users could use LINE to communicate with others through text, photo, audio, and video messages. It has since been adopted by the young and old alike, and has become the primary mode of communication for many families in Taiwan [8]. This study focused on individuals who had consumed functional foods recommended on LINE, and applied convenience sampling. Using the questionnaire function in Google, we posted the questionnaire to members of LINE groups who had previously sent messages about functional foods to the researchers. The research duration spanned from September 15 to 30, 2018. A total of 343 questionnaires were replied to, of which 91 invalid questionnaires were eliminated, leaving 252 valid questionnaires.

4.2 Participants

Among the 252 useful samples, there were 136 females (53.4%) and 116 males (46.6%). The age range of the participants was between 26 and 40 years old. There were 126 valid samples in the 26 to 30 age group (48.9%), 67 in the 31 to 35 age group (26.3%), and 29 in the 36 to 40 age group (11.8%). As for the education level of the participants, 95 held undergraduate degrees (38.2%) and 157 held graduate degrees or above (61.8%).

4.3 Measuring questionnaire

According to the research model proposed, there were six constructs in this study. A 5-point Likert scale was applied to each questionnaire item. After designing the questionnaire items, face verification was conducted to ensure the accuracy of those items; they were then subjected to analysis in order to ensure the reliability and validity of the constructs.

Extraversion and neuroticism: Extraversion is one of several basic higher order axes of personality variation, encompassing correlated behavioral facets of sociability, expressiveness, assertiveness, and status motivation [24, 25, 59]. Neuroticism, a personality construct characterized by emotional reactivity, anxiety, and negative emotionality [60], has been extensively linked to a higher risk of depression. The operative definitions of each dimension are as follows: (1) Neuroticism: The control level individuals have over their emotions and (2) Extraversion: The degree of individuals' assertiveness and expressiveness. The measurement items were designed accordingly.

Value expectation and satisfaction: This study took the content of the questionnaires based on expectancy value designed by Eccles et al. [44] as a reference, and designed two elements, value expectation and usage satisfaction, as the tools to measure individuals' expectancy values in relation to consuming functional foods. The questionnaire was designed to include seven questions.

Replicating and spreading messages: In this study, memes were examined in the context of two dimensions: replicating and spreading messages. Regarding the questions, replicative consumption is defined as the behavior of buying and eating foods for health due to external information, and spreading messages is defined as behaviors of sharing information after consuming foods for health.

5. Results

In this study, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to ascertain the suitability of the questionnaire constructs, and the software AMOS 20.0 was used to verify the goodness-of-fit and pathways of the model.

5.1 Analysis of reliability and validity

Originally, the questionnaire consisted of six scales: neuroticism, extraversion, value expectation, usage satisfaction, replicative consumption, and intention to spread messages, each with five items. After performing CFA, all items with a residual value exceeding 0.5 were removed [61]. This left four items in each of the scales for neuroticism, extraversion, and value expectation, and three items in each of the scales for usage satisfaction, replicative consumption, and intention to spread messages. The reliability and validity of the questionnaire were then analyzed as described below.

The first step was to measure internal consistency by investigating the composite reliability (CR) of the constructs [62]. In this case, the CR values ranged from 0.71 to 0.88, which all exceed 0.7, the recommended threshold value [61]. The second step was to calculate the Cronbach's α values [63]; all values exceeded 0.6, as can be seen in **Table 1**. The third step was to verify the convergent validity by ensuring that: (1) the average variance extracted (AVE) values all exceeded 0.5 [62] and (2) the factor loadings (FL) of all items exceeded 0.5 [61]. The results are listed in **Table 1** and indicate sufficient convergent validity for FL.

5.2 Model goodness-of-fit test

The model was hypothesized as χ^2 = 398.12, df = 183, χ^2/df = 2.18. As the result is less than 3, it reveals a level of probability p = 0.000. Correspondence between the values and the model was indicated by the following values: Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA = 0.065), goodness of fit index (GFI = 0.956), and adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI = 0.816). According to Hair et al.'s suggestion that Chi-squared values and other measures of fitness be considered together [61], we calculated the values of fitness which were all found to exceed 0.9, as follows: Normed Fit Index (NFI = 0.937, RFI = 0.911), Incremental Fit Index (IFI = 0.945, TLI = 0.905), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.944). It can therefore be seen that the inclusive measures indicate that the model fits the data values [61].

5.3 Path analysis

The following path coefficients, all of which displayed significant values [61], can be seen in **Figure 2**: Neuroticism toward value expectation was 0.258 (t = 3.834***), Extraversion toward value expectation was −0.359 (t = −3.89***), value expectation toward replicative behavior was 0.442 (t = 8.917***), value expectation toward usage satisfaction was 0.6 (t = 16.604***), replicative behavior toward usage satisfaction was 0.295 (t = 7.364***), replicative behavior toward spreading messages was 0.298 (t = 4.713***), and usage satisfaction toward spreading messages was 0.176 (t = 2.824**). The explanative powers were: Neuroticism and Extraversion to value expectation was 38.1%; value expectation to replicative behavior was 26.8%; value expectation and replicative behavior to usage satisfaction was 18.6%; and replicative behavior and usage satisfaction to spreading messages was 40.4%. All of the variables in this study therefore show high predictive ability in terms of Falk and Miller's [64] suggested threshold value of 10%.

Constructs	M	SD	FL
Neuroticism: *M* = 2.83, *SD* = 0.92, CR = 0.80, AVE = 0.61, α = 0.79			
1. I always worry that something will go wrong.	2.70	0.90	0.82
2. I get stressed out easily.	2.54	0.98	0.61
3. I am much more anxious than most people.	2.83	0.88	0.86
4. I cannot relax most of the time.	3.23	0.93	0.65
Extraversion: *M* = 3.48, *SD* = 0.87, CR = 0.77, AVE = 0.63, α = 0.76			
1. I talk to a lot of different people at parties.	3.54	0.84	0.69
2. I do not mind being the center of attention.	3.64	0.82	0.69
3. I feel comfortable around people.	3.48	0.85	0.74
4. I like to start conversations.	3.24	0.95	0.80
Value expectation: *M* = 3.46, *SD* = 0.85, CR = 0.88, AVE = 0.65, α = 0.87			
1. I expect that consuming foods recommended via social media is good for my health.	3.57	0.87	0.94
2. I expect that consuming foods recommended via social media could be good for my health.	3.65	0.77	0.87
3. I expect that having foods recommended via social media will cause few side-effects for my health.	3.22	0.82	0.71
4. I expect that the effect of those foods recommended via social media will last for a long time.	3.39	0.92	0.69
Usage satisfaction: *M* = 3.30, *SD* = 0.91, CR = 0.83, AVE = 0.62, α = 0.82			
1. I am satisfied with consuming foods recommended via social media.	3.17	0.92	0.84
2. I am satisfied with the effect of consuming foods recommended via social media.	3.46	0.78	0.82
3. I feel healthier consuming foods recommended via social media compared to real shops.	3.26	1.02	0.71
Replicative consumption: *M* = 2.90, *SD* = 0.80, CR = 0.71, AVE = 0.61, α = 0.77			
1. When I see messages related to foods for health posted on LINE by my friends, I almost always buy and consume them.	3.43	0.84	0.61
2. Even when I see messages posted by strangers on LINE about foods for health, I will try to buy and consume them.	2.52	0.77	0.65
3. I will consume foods most often by following online friends' suggestions.	2.74	0.80	0.79
Intention to spread messages: *M* = 3.18, *SD* = 0.81, CR = 0.84, AVE = 0.64, α = 0.82			
1. I will spread a message to my friends about functional foods, if I have consumed them.	3.20	0.93	0.85
2. I will spread a message related to foods for health to my friends after I have purchased them but before consuming them.	2.77	0.72	0.86
3. If I believe a type of food will be beneficial for my friends, I like to spread the message to them.	3.58	0.78	0.67

Table 1.
Reliability and validity analysis.
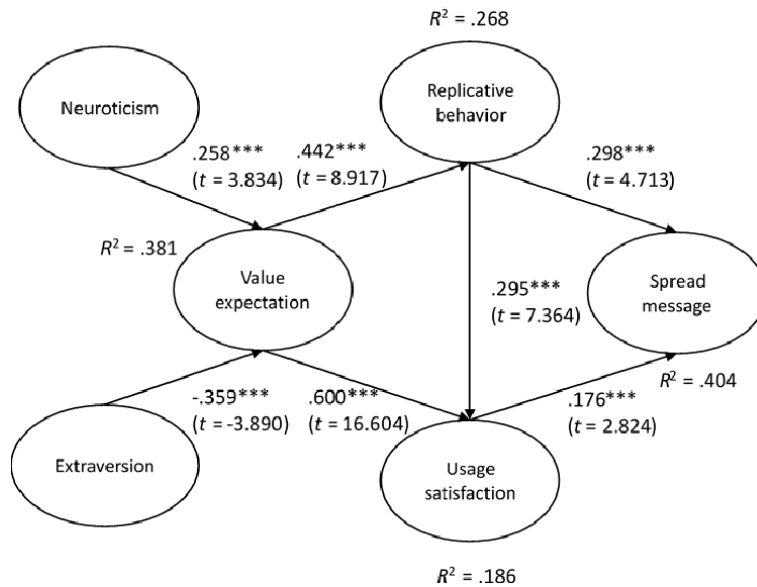
Figure 2.
Research model.

6. Discussion

Research on social perceptions and social interaction has highlighted a three-step expectancy confirmation process [33], indicating that expectancy mediation research has documented overt and subtle perceiver behaviors (step 2) that mediate the effects of perceivers' expectancies (step 1) on targets' influence (step 3) [34]. Considering these three processes in the context of Internet memes, this study viewed value expectation as the first step, replication as perceivers' behavior as the second step, and spreading messages to targets as the third step. The results are elaborated as follows.

Some individuals consume certain foods for their health benefits; the perceptions of consuming functional foods and individuals' related behavior in social networks was the focus of this study, the goal of which was to clarify how specific personal dispositions relate to meme behavior. Hypothesis 1 was proposed to test if neuroticism is related to value expectation, and it was found that a high level of Neuroticism was correlated to a high level of value expectation to buy and consume functional foods. Hypothesis 2 was proposed to test if Extraversion was related to value expectation, and it was found that a high level of Extraversion correlated to a low level of value expectation to buy and consume functional foods. To explain the results, this study viewed the social psychology framework in which expectations have been defined as future-directed cognitions that focus on a specific event or experience [65]. More specifically, expectations refer to future experiences, and therefore it can be argued that particularly lower future expectations may lead to decreased suffering among people with high levels of Neuroticism [37]. Extraversion is related to openness to experience with a low level of value expectation [38]. People with high levels of extraversion have been shown to have less value expectation when consuming health foods [39]. Accordingly, individuals with Extraversion are likely to experience less stress when buying goods.

In examining Hypothesis 3, the results revealed that value expectation is positively related to replicating behavior. This result is consistent with the perspectives of scholars who have indicated that value expectation can actually predict

replicative consumption. For example, Brandt et al. considered that values affect consumers' intention to follow and replicate a message, and if the reliability of the effect is considerable, the consumer may replicate a message with increased confidence [41]. Thus, participants with more expectations of functional foods are more likely to purchase and use them. In examining Hypothesis 4, the result showed that value expectation was positively related to usage satisfaction. According to the expectation-confirmation theory, high satisfaction can be observed when expectation is either high or has been confirmed. If expectations of utility via choices are made on the basis of those expectations, then there may be implications for optimal usage of information [46, 66]. This is supported by an outcome of this study, which showed that a high level of value expectation was correlated to a high level of satisfaction with functional food consumption.

In examining Hypothesis 5, the results revealed that replicating behavior is positively related to usage satisfaction. Flint, Blocker, and Boutin found that when selling goods, anticipating what customers want will result in higher customer satisfaction [47]. As replicating "social priming" effects (e.g. [49, 50]) may increase confidence and behavioral satisfaction [41], customer value expectation refers to the values for anticipating that would most likely facilitate usage satisfaction. In examining Hypothesis 6, the results revealed that replicative behavior is positively related to spreading messages, showing that a high level of replication is correlated to a high level of spreading functional food messages. This is supported by Shifman [54], who suggested that individual behavior replication and spread over a certain environment can be analyzed from a purely social perspective, such as buying functional foods and spreading messages.

The concept of the Internet meme concerns how influences, preferences and behaviors can rapidly spread from one individual or group to another within a given social network or medium. Consumers with a high level of replication usually have a high level of willingness to spread their activity by introducing it to others via social networks [57]. In examining Hypothesis 7, the results revealed that usage satisfaction is positively related to spreading messages, revealing that if the satisfaction individuals obtained from consuming functional foods is high, message transfer regarding that health food will also be high. This result is supported by Stukas [52], who suggested that consumers will introduce others to purchase if they are satisfied with the usage because they will communicate and make their behavior explicit.

7. Conclusion

With globalization and the widespread use of the Internet, understanding how to exploit memes is a key factor within industries. Social media often involve the spread of inaccurate information [5]. Misinformation is more rapidly disseminated through social media when there is high uncertainty and high demand for public information about the issues, such as health concerns [6]. In fact, various fake news stories related to food functions have circulated on LINE in Taiwan. From the model analysis of this study, we can see that customer personality types appear to be an operant resource that may offer value anticipation and affect participants' Internet meme behavior.

7.1 Implications

Foods are an alternative for taking care of one's health, and online messages about such functional foods are widely spread by the LINE population to treat problems and diseases of the major human organ systems [67]. Ultimately,

customers with extraversion will need to modify their sensing processes of online fake messages in relation to functional foods in order to successfully alter their attitudes toward Internet memes on LINE. In addition, this research can enable managers to use scientific evidence to enhance users' value expectations with a lead advantage over Internet memes.

7.2 Limitations and future study

The research targets of this study were LINE users in Taiwan who shared messages related to functional foods. As such, we did not examine non-users or individuals from other countries with regard to their willingness to share messages. Future studies may involve different meme content and different groups from other countries based on popular social media use.

De Jong, Ocke, Branderhorst, and Friele found that there is a higher ratio of educated females in the higher age groups who consume functional foods [68]. Therefore, future studies can examine the Internet meme behaviors of different genders or age groups in order to further understand the factors affecting willingness to consume functional foods as a result of Internet memes.

Individuals may have low potential risk consciousness of functional foods, and the traditional idea to "cure the illness, strengthen the body" increases the health risk of people using functional foods without understanding how to decrease the risk. Future studies may emphasize the awareness of the side effects of consuming functional foods in relation to memes.

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Conflict of interest

This research was not funded and the authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

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Section 2

Regional and Local Contexts of Processing Information

The Potentials of Radio in Combating Misinformation about COVID-19 in Nigeria

Philip Effiom Ephraim

Abstract

Radio remains an important mass medium in Nigeria and across Africa. Issues of power availability, internet connectivity, and media costs, make radio a highly sort after medium for public information. However, the potentials of radio in efforts to combat misinformation about COVID-19 are yet to be fully exploited in Nigeria. Extant efforts have mostly focused on live press briefings, TV programming, SMS, and social media messaging. Media sources show that the spread of misinformation about the pandemic in the country is rife. This chapter critically evaluates the state of radio in Nigeria and proposes various strategies for utilizing its resources in efforts to debunk and minimize the spread of misinformation, with wider implications for Africa.

Keywords: radio, misinformation, COVID-19, Nigeria, Africa

1. Introduction

Radio as a mass medium employs electromagnetic radio waves through transmitters and antennas, to disseminate information, education, and entertainment to listeners. Attributed to the Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937) and several other inventors in Europe and the USA; radio has developed since the 1890s to become one of the most widely used mass media in the world. It is argued that despite the immense popularity of television and the internet, radio remains the mass medium that reaches the widest audience in the quickest possible time [1]. Statistics show that radio reaches over 5 billion people, representing 70 percent of the total world population. There are over 44,000 functional radio stations worldwide. Predictions based on research findings by Nielsen and Deloitte show that people aged between 18 to 34 will most likely spend more time on radio than watching television by 2025 [2].

The portability, convenience, cheap cost, and availability of free signals make radio a very popular medium in both developed and developing climes. In Europe and North America, radio is well established and has become a viable industry that generates billions of dollars annually. Within developing countries especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, radio is still maturing with many untapped potentials. There exist both state and private-run radio stations in most country capitals and other large cities and towns across Africa. However, their transmitters often reach only a few miles. People at the grassroots, often living in remote communities, are often excluded from these broadcasts [3].

In response to community needs for public information, community radio stations were established in several African countries in the 1990s. Community radio describes radio stations owned and run by people of a specific community to promote and protect the community's common interests and objectives [4]. Through community radio, people at the grassroots can voice their concerns on issues central to them including; health, gender relations, human rights, security and infrastructure. Countries like South Africa, Niger, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Mali have well established community radio networks. However, in Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, the first community radio was only established in 2015.

The arrival of radio in Nigeria could be described as the arrival of electronic broadcasting to the country. Radio was introduced to Nigeria in 1932. The first radio stations were established as re-broadcast stations for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Radio at the time served as a tool for spreading and reinforcing the narratives of the British colonial government. Radio helped colonial officers to keep abreast with current events in Britain. Locals were not considered in the programing and outreach activities; as the medium was meant to satisfy the information needs of the British colonialists and not Nigerians [5].

In 1951, the colonial government established The Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS). The NBS set out to convert all existing re-broadcast stations to fully-fledged and nationally focused radio stations. However, the NBS soon came under sharp criticism for being too pro-government and not working in the interest of citizens. The NBS was called out for its insensitivity towards the multicultural and religious sensibilities of the people. In April 1957, the NBS was reformed and restructured to become the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC). The main goal of the NBC was to promote the establishment of regional radio and TV stations across the country. These broadcast stations were to maintain independence and impartially in their programing and outreach [6].

Sadly in 1966, the military overthrew the then civilian administration. However, radio under military regimes, still continued to develop. The NBC established radio stations in most state capitals. In 1978, the military government restructured the NBC and renamed it the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN). The main goal of the FRCN was to manage federal government owned radio stations, with supervisory oversight on state owned radio stations. In 1992, the then military dictator of Nigeria General Ibrahim Babangida issued Decree 38 of 1992, granting permission for individuals to establish private radio stations. With the return to a democracy in 1999, Nigeria witnessed an expansion in radio broadcasting. State owned and private radio stations were established in the country's 36 states. Currently, the FRCN still manages radio in the country. There are currently over two hundred radio stations operating in Nigeria [7].

Infrastructural problems such as limited power supply, internet availability and costs, make radio hugely popular in Nigeria. Many Nigerians, especially at the grassroots, live far below the global poverty line and cannot afford to buy televisions, laptops or smart phones and hence, resort to radio as a key media source for daily information, education and entertainment. Despite the country's vast resources, most Nigerians are unemployed and live below the global poverty line, surviving on less than $1.90 a day [8]. Battery powered portable radios are widely used in cities and at the grassroots.

Currently in Nigeria, community radio together with more established state- and privately-owned radio stations, work together to disseminate public information to listeners in cities, towns and at the grassroots [9]. Radio functions not just as a mass medium for disseminating general information and entertainment, but also in particular as a medium for disseminating public health information, as witnessed during the Ebola outbreak in 2014 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

COVID-19, a deadly illness caused by a corona virus was first reported in Nigeria on February 27, 2020. The index case was an Italian construction worker who had returned from Milan. Since February 2020, the number of infections escalated to over 52,000 with over 900 deaths in August. In response to rising infections and deaths, the Nigerian government issued directives for lockdowns and social distancing in the three worst-hit states of Lagos, Ogun, and Abuja, the country's capital. State governors also issued total or partial lockdowns in their respective regions based on prevailing circumstances. However, lockdowns caused untold hardships for many Nigerians, due to the government's chaotic and lousy social welfare structures [10].

The Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) and The Federal Ministry of Health have been at the forefront of efforts to combat COVID-19 in Nigeria. Both organizations have been active in setting up isolation centers, hospitals, and spaces to manage suspected and confirmed cases. The NCDC has also been engaged in training personnel and setting up rapid-response teams across Nigeria's 36 states [11]. However, despite efforts to combat the spread COVID-19, both organizations have been seriously challenged by a particular problem - the spread of misinformation or false information about COVID-19. The spread of misinformation has been described as the single biggest danger Nigeria faces in its fight against COVID-19. Misinformation has created public panic and is inhibiting efforts to stop the spread of the corona virus in Nigeria and across Africa [12].

2. The problem

As part of efforts to combat misinformation, NCDC periodically hosts daily press briefings to keep the press and the public up to date with its activities. These briefings are often broadcast live on the major national TV stations including the National Television Authority (NTA), Channels TV and African Independent Television (AIT). The NCDC has also teamed up with leading movie actors to produce public service messages on TV to debunk fake news and rumors about COVID-19. Besides, the NCDC has also teamed up with mobile network operators to send weekly SMS to Nigerians warning them on the dangers of misinformation. Through its social media pages on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, the NCDC regularly posts messages showing the daily number of confirmed cases, recoveries and deaths.

While existing efforts have mainly been focused on social media, SMS, TV and live media briefings, the potentials of radio in efforts to combat the spread of misinformation about COVID-19 has been downplayed. Direct observation of twenty-five radio stations across Nigeria over a three-month period (March to May 2020), revealed the airing of only one radio advert titled '*Make you take responsibility*' directly sponsored by the NCDC. The one-minute advert produced in Nigerian pidgin, highlights the need for citizens to take responsibility for their safety through safe practices like hand washing, social distancing and not touching their faces.

There is still a strong need for the use of radio, Nigerian languages and town criers to ensure that correct information about COVID-19 reaches people, irrespective of their location or literacy level [13]. Radio is one of Nigeria's leading media channels, with a capacity to reach tens of millions daily. There is a need to employ radio in the disseminating of safe and accurate information about hand washing, social distancing and other safe practices to prevent the transmission of the corona virus in Nigeria [14].

3. Misinformation about COVID-19 in Nigeria

Misinformation is a term that describes the dissemination of false and inaccurate information. Examples of misinformation includes; rumor, spam, hoaxes, half-truths and fake news. Unlike the closely related term, disinformation; misinformation is often unintentionally propagated by its recipients. Recipients unintentionally spread misinformation merely due to existing trust for family members, friends, colleagues or influential users in their social media networks [15].

The growing spread of misinformation globally, has been attributed to the proliferation of the internet and digital media channels. More than half of the world is digitally connected. This new information ecosystem has created a fertile ground for the rapid dissemination of rumors, hoaxes and fake news.

Misinformation has a particular advantage over factual information. This advantage informs its rapid spread, compared to the latter. Misinformation is not constrained by reality. It is usually very appealing and attention grabbing. Misinformation is often more memorable than factual information [16].

Misinformation about COVID-19 has mostly proliferated through social media platforms, mainly in the form of rumors and conspiracy theories [17]. A notable example was that the corona virus was a biological weapon invented by China's for use against its enemies in a bid to become the main world power [18].

The rapid spread of misinformation about COVID-19 has been labeled an *infodemic* by the United Nations (UN). Misinformation has created public panic and led to dangerous practices which have worsened the spread of the corona virus and led to the loss of many lives in many countries [19]. Social media platforms constitute a serious threat to public health by allowing the promotion of medical fake news, which seriously puts lives at risk [20].

As in most countries, misinformation about COVID-19 has mostly circulated through social media channels in Nigeria. Social media is immensely popular in the country. Social media channels have provided citizens spaces for free expression with little or no government control [21]. With the proliferation of smart phones and lowering internet costs, Nigerian youths are increasingly participating in both national and international conversations. Sadly, these youths are also engaged in abetting the spread of rumors and other harmful content on social media platforms [22].

The first rumor about COVID-19 emerged in January 2020. The rumor held that it was impossible for the corona virus to reach Africa or even survive in Nigeria, due to the generally warm climate. Stories of natural shielding by nature were circulated mostly through WhatsApp [23]. By February, the rumor that black people were immune to COVID19 due to melanin in their skin, reached Nigeria from the USA. This rumor widely circulated through Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook. After news of the index case, another rumor emerged that COVID-19 could only affect rich and corrupt politicians, hence most poor Nigerians were safe from the virus [24]. At the same time were rumors that taking ample quantities of Vitamin C or bathing in warm water laced with ginger and garlic would kill the virus [25]. Several YouTube videos (all taken down) were made by pastors and several conspiracy theorists in Nigeria to promote these stories.

In April, the 5G theory emerged. This conspiracy theory held that 5G transmitters were responsible for the rapid escalation of COVID-19 infections in Europe and North America and were about to be installed across Africa. It was rumored that these transmitters will cause massive number of infections and deaths in Africa. At the forefront of promoting this conspiracy was Chris Oyakhilome the head pastor the Christ Embassy Church. In reaction, the UK government severely sanctioned his Loveworld News; a channel that broadcasts both from Nigeria and the UK [26].

The effects of misinformation took a serious toll in Nigeria. Several deaths and hospitalizations due to chloroquine overdose and food poisoning were reported. Many people with serious symptoms refused to turn themselves in to the NCDC, but rather preferred to manage treatment at home with phony herbal mixtures due to fear and stigma [27]. In Cross River State in South Eastern Nigeria, there was severe public panic as it was rumored that a nurse and a university student had already infected hundreds of people in Calabar the capital city. People became terrified and refused to step outside their homes for days. Businesses suffered [28].

4. Strategies for combating misinformation through radio

Radio has the power to promote citizen's resilience during periods of health crisis. Radio has the potential to influence opinions, change behavior and accurately inform the public about COVID-19 [29]. In order to effectively position radio to debunk misinformation about COVID-19 in Nigeria, several strategies could be employed.

Using credible sources is probably the first important step towards combating misinformation. UNESCO describes credible news sources as the best vaccine against COVID-19 [30]. These sources comprise of health experts directly working on treatment or limiting the spread of the virus. These experts have firsthand and factual knowledge. Radio stations need to contact and collaborate with the information departments of the NCDC, Federal Ministry of Health and other recognized health-based NGOs related to COVID-19. However, with lockdowns and social distancing, radio reporters have been impeded from physically visiting relevant locations. Investigative reporting during COVID-19 pandemic has become very difficult as reporters are fearful of getting infected. The NCDC has a dedicated website and pages on various social media channels including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram from where radio reporters could source verified information. The NCDC's social media pages are updated daily, showing the number of people infected, deaths and recoveries. These organizations also publish regular updates on how best to keep safe as well as news on ongoing efforts to find a cure against the virus. At regional levels, community radio stations could collaborate with their state government's COVID-19 task force, to obtain verified information on the state of the pandemic.

Broadcasting statistical updates at community level is another strategy. Similar to the NCDC's daily broadcasts on national TV, community radio stations across Nigeria could also broadcast their own daily statistical updates. These local broadcasts should be based on verified information and could appear as short items in the news, or in-between programs. Verified statistical figures help to minimize the spread of rumors and fears about the extent of infections. Statistics help to shape public understanding of COVID-19 by presenting figures that are factual and clear. Statistical updates via the media help health experts to carefully monitor likely infection hotspots around the country [31].

Radio jingles are tools which could be employed to tactically to combat misinformation. A jingle is a short musical advertisement of products or services. Jingles are also used in non-advertising contexts to share public service messages. Jingles work by transmitting sensory messages through sound [32]. When sound is well synchronized with the message, the listener easily remembers the message. Radio jingles are often employed by public health organizations to alert the public about the spread of diseases and to announce environmental cleanups [33]. Radio stations could produce and broadcast jingles to promote the need for sourcing verified information. Jingles could be produced to directly debunk rumors about COVID-19. However, it is recommended that message of the jingle be presented in simple

language, preferably, in an indigenous language or in Nigerian pidgin to enhance wider reach and better understanding due to the nature of the general populace.

Expert interviews provide great platforms for debunking misinformation through factual discourse. Radio stations could invite health experts and NGO officers directly working in COVID-19 portfolios for interviews during news broadcasts or talk shows. Interview questions could be designed to elicit responses on the current state of the pandemic and to address any misinformation. These expert interviews could feature call-in segments to allow listeners to directly pose questions to guests to clarify any doubts, rumors or misconceptions about COVID-19.

Combating misinformation is not an easy task. Radio stations will need to involve community. Radio stations could engage in community outreach activities that involve children and youths in efforts to stop the spread of misinformation. Children and youths are an important population group that needs to be protected in times of health pandemics. This group is also particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 if they have any underlying health conditions. Children and Youths have a strong information potential. However, due to their limited knowledge and experiences, children and youths are often engaged in spreading rumors in the playground and during discussions among peers. Radio stations need to tap into this potential by guiding the youths to channel their energies positively towards dispelling misinformation. For example, with the aid of appropriate sponsors, radio stations could organize poetry, essay or song writing competitions that will compel children and youths to do more research on the causes, symptoms, and safe practices of COVID-19. Through research, children and youths will gain a better understanding of COVID-19.

Dedicated segments during the news or program broadcasts are good avenues to dispel misinformation about COVID-19. Radio stations could dedicate ten to twenty percent of news time to informing listeners on the latest updates in the fight against the virus. Best practices for staying safe, could also be discussed in these segments. In Burkina Fasso for example, Radio Salaki dedicates the first five minutes at the beginning of each program to talk about COVID-19. During these dedicated segments, presenters talk about preventing transmission, symptoms and other important information [34]. Radio stations in Nigeria could emulate this strategy from Burkina Fasso.

Radio drama could also be employed as a tool in the fight against misinformation. Radio drama or radio play is a performance art that communicates through actors, music and sound effects. Radio drama is storytelling through sound [35]. Radio drama functions as a tool for entertaining and educating the public on various topical issues. An example could be producing a short drama or drama series to highlight the dangers unsafe practices as a result misinformation; something terrible happens to Mr./Mrs. X as a result of false information about COVID-19. Radio drama reflects what the public think about the corona virus. It helps to correct falsehood and highlight the importance of adhering to scientific fact.

5. Conclusion

Radio has strong potentials to reach ordinary citizens including people at the grass roots in Nigeria and across Africa. Radio remains a strong source for public information in times of health crisis. With widespread panic caused by misinformation about COVID-19, radio can play a huge role in combating the spread of false and misleading information.

This chapter advocates for the use of the traditional electronic medium of radio to tackle the menace of misinformation created and spread through social media

channels. Radio as a medium is not perfect, it has its shortcomings. However, unlike social media, radio has active gatekeepers; news editors that keep serious check on content before they are broadcast. The freedom, access and minimal gatekeeping of social media, make them particularly veritable spaces for spreading rumors and other falsehoods.

Radio stations need to recognize that they have an important role to play in the fight to minimize misinformation in Nigeria and across Africa. News and program content need to be carefully sourced and tailored to ensure that listeners in cities and at the grassroots, receive updated and accurate information about COVID-19. Government and private sector support are also necessary for radio to function effectively in Africa. Sadly, many radio stations are underfunded.

The strategies outlined this chapter, could be viewed as the author's modest contribution to supporting the battle against growing misinformation about COVID-19. It is hoped that these strategies will be seriously considered, tested and adopted by radio stations in Nigeria and across Africa.

This chapter is advisory and futuristic. It did not seek to measure the effects of radio on misinformation. The author relied on direct observation and consulted primary sources comprising newspaper websites and news blogs to gain verified information on the extents of misinformation about COVID-19 in Nigeria. Future studies might want to test these strategies qualitatively or quantitatively to support or refute them. For example, what are the effects of radio drama in minimizing misinformation about COVID-19? Do the public pay attention to expert interviews? It will also be interesting for future studies to consider other strategies for utilizing radio resources to combat misinformation beyond Nigerian and African contexts.

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Chapter 10

Disinformation as a Society-Wide Threat: Journalism and 'Fakecracy' in Venezuela

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Abstract

In political systems restricting communication by means of official controls on information, the dissemination of fake news, as well as counterfeit content in general, increases. Audiences in such locations can be more vulnerable to misinformation, as there are no contrasting sources to check or confirm what is being misrepresented. Concurrently, the dynamics of social media also make fact checking difficult given the large volume of content that can be accessed almost instantly. This piece reviews both concepts surrounding the fake news phenomenon and an approach to citizens' perception of misinformation in their midst. The existence of a political regime hellbent on controlling information creates conditions for citizens to echo rumors and hoaxes. The – still tentative – answer, precisely in view of a system that generally encourages disinformation, hinges on journalism, particularly that engaging in fact checking.

Keywords: fake news, disinformation, misinformation, journalism, audiences, Venezuela

1. Introduction

By April 2020, cell phone coverage reached 66% of the planet's total population (5.16 billion users), internet coverage reached 59% (4.57 billion users), and the number of active users on social media reached 49% (3.81 billion users) [1].

Meanwhile, by March 2020, every 60 seconds, 4.7 million YouTube videos were viewed worldwide, 4.1 million Google searches were completed, 2.5 million Snapchat snaps were created, 2.5 million images were viewed on Imgur, and 1.3 million logins on Facebook were completed, 1.1 million e-commerce transactions were performed, 190 million emails were sent, 59 texts were sent on Facebook, Messenger, and WhatsApp messaging, 19 million SMS messages were sent, 694,444 people posted on Instagram, 194,444 people posted on Twitter, and 400,000 apps were downloaded from Google Play and Apple Store [2].

Undoubtedly, in this age, the flood of information to which people are exposed has significantly marked the way they relate, interact, and access newsworthy information. By means of apps and social media, people receive a wealth of information in real time. The confines of time and space are no longer an obstacle to learning what happened elsewhere in the world immediately.

The speed and amount of information exchanged is inversely proportional to users' ability to fact-check, filter, and prioritize it in an expeditious manner. This context sets the right conditions for rumors, misinformation, and fake news to play a major role.

2. On the term 'fake news'

Let us pause and consider the 'term fake news' from the perspective of its meaning in different languages, starting with Spanish, which is the mother tongue and primary language of academic production of the co-authors of this chapter.

In Spanish, the term 'fake news', untranslated, has gained momentum instead of its literal equivalent, *noticias falsas*.

How can this be *noticias falsas*? A news story can be false if a journalist has made mistakes and missed some information. It can be false if a government official lies on a public statement. It can also be false if a media outlet gives news showing only one side of reality for ideological reasons and shapes a news item after a conspiracy thesis, deviating from elements of accuracy in the treatment of information. Therefore, *per se*, *noticias falsas* seems to be a very broad term.

Spanish, unlike English, allows us to check whether the translation *noticias falsas* can have connotations that are more specific. In recent times, the use of the original English 'fake news' does not only refer to mere *noticias falsas* or a news item commonly associated with journalistic work. It seems that technology and the migration of human interaction to the digital realm has spawned new meanings that make 'fake news' seem incomplete or inaccurate.

In the first year of operations of the Venezuelan Observatory of Fake News (Observatorio Venezolano de Fake News, OVFN), founded by the authors and Professor Mariela Torrealba in July 2019, it has been noted that tampering with messages to manipulate the public opinion is linked to processes that, while reflecting the adjective 'fake' in their contents, pale in view of the tools that leave the mere 'fake' in a mild and insufficient description. This adjective becomes a robe that does not completely cover its wearer, and leaves out new ploys in the process of lying, creating confusion and misunderstanding, or seeking to control the belief systems of social media users.

When detecting the information units reviewed by the OVFN, dramatizations have constantly been found in audio messages, with voices of people weeping and crying alert on non-existent events. Additionally, a host of voice notes calling for protests that no groups have convened, making reckless statements to dupe the gullible in the troubled waters of distressing times, manipulating logos and screenshots with doctored graphic design, and using photos of children to make waves of false rumors regarding child abductions have been detected.

It has been noted that international writers and political figures have been misquoted in messages with criticism at certain regimes falsely attributed to them; messages have been forged by mixing half-truths with hoaxes to create confusion among retired persons regarding steps to collect their pension or discredit institutions. Also altered company logos have been used to deceive people into buying products, perform phishing of private banking information, harvest email accounts and send ads on Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, or other social media.

In the barrage of malicious intentions to confuse people, to attack someone's character in the perception of others, or make them believe a situation that has been blown out of proportion, the resourcefulness of players in the shadows has included the simple, inexpensive, and easiest item to alter: a simple audio file containing false information expressing pain or fear. This has been part of the perverse game of creating disinformation units that also circulate, which are outright false, flooding

the web and thereby seeking to disrupt the meanings and constructs that make up what people consider to be reality.

In summary, not only does the term 'fake news' refer to mere counterfeit content, but it also reaches beyond flat-out lying on mainstream media, a practice historically present since their inception. In their midst, intentional deception of leaders and sources has not escaped from public affairs, on issues regarding political power, propaganda, and ideological differences.

From the beginning of civilization to the present day, sometimes an official making a public statement on a certain subject lies. In that case, a journalist writes the note, quotes the statement, and the news is already false from its origin, from the communicational fact of the spokesperson's message, in an attempt at influencing beliefs of the society at which it is directed. In this case, it is a lie on a public statement, a hoax. The news is false because of the spokesperson's statement, not because the piece has been manipulated by its writer. In other words, in real life, it happens that officials lie and this is not considered fake news, although it is a component of misinformation. Hence the importance of the work done by those who check and detect lies and manipulation in public statements, contrasting them with evidence providing audiences with elements to assess whether something was false or some government or interest group intended to manipulate them.

We insist: One thing is the originally false and deceitful, where a falsehood has been stated and, as a communicational fact, it exists and is real, and another thing is the fabrication that someone said something, that a nonexistent statement has been made by an institution. There, the source does not lie, but someone, with misleading intent, counterfeits reality, fabricating an item under the guise of news, in the form of an alleged statement, a voice note, a message from a neighbor, a photo altered by fiction. A content is out there, actually trying to persuade, perhaps by appealing to emotions so it will go viral, because it is desirable, appealing, feared, or disgusting – therefore, because it is conspicuous, it is shared, creating a snowball effect that goes viral, deceiving, falsifying, and disturbing people's belief system.

3. Misinformation and fake news

The fake element is a component of misinformation that could be depicted as a three-legged table: The first one contains ideological propaganda of any kind; the second one, a structured muzzle with censorship mechanisms; and the third one, counterfeit content farms. Fake news may well be the hypotenuse of the triangle. In turn, the word 'disinformation' can be illustrated with a geometric shape of three vertices: a triangle of opacity, censorship, and manipulation.

The term 'fake news', or the one we have proposed to our Spanish-speaking colleagues, *contenidos falseados* (counterfeit content), cannot be replaced with 'misinformation'. Doing so would be to fall into a generalization that seeks to describe a part with the name of the whole. Fake news can cause misinformation, but they are not synonymous, and in that metonymy, inextricable aspects of each term, not necessarily equivalent to each other, go missing.

In many countries, the term 'fake news' has risen to prominence in the form a buzzword from the lips of government officials who often mention it to describe practices that they regard as "communicational attacks". This misuse of the term, in order to blame professional journalists with producing fake news simply because they are critical, has become popular in political circles. Additionally, in academic and journalistic realms, the term 'fake news' has begun to be rejected, and the word 'disinformation' is used to describe this phenomenon, despite the fact that this term also alludes to falsehood from government spokespersons and censorship mechanisms.

Italian researcher, reporter, and teacher Simona Levi [3], an expert in the field of digital democracy, communication, and collective action against corruption, mentions the tendency to selectively omit the term 'fake news' in order to overlap it with the use of the dusty and once more household name 'disinformation'.

In certain circles, the term 'fake news' is rejected and 'disinformation' is preferred. As we will see, an underlying misinformation problem is certainly present. Not only does misinformation include false information, but also disinformation, i.e., the production of altered information in combination with facts or practices reaching far beyond anything resembling news, such as automated social media accounts (bots), doctored videos, or covert and targeted advertising [3].

The definition provided by the Spanish Royal Academy (Real Academia Española) in its Spanish Language Dictionary (Diccionario de la Lengua Española) for the literal verb form linked to 'disinformation' implies a deliberate intent:

desinformar (lit. "disinform")

1. (transitive) to give manipulated information intentionally in order to serve certain purposes.

2. (transitive) to give insufficient information or to omit it.

In Spanish, there is not a morphologic or semantic equivalent to 'misinform/ misinformation'.

Thus, it coincides, in the deliberate trait, with the noun 'disinformation' in English, per Merriam-Webster Dictionary [4]:

disinformation: false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence the public opinion or obscure the truth.

In Spanish, the verb *desinformar* is used to refer to ways of publically stating falsehoods, to creating fake news on social media or to disseminating counterfeit content, whatever this may be. The word also refers to omitting or giving insufficient information, that is, it includes concealing or conveniently failing to inform the public, thereby also alluding to preventing access to public information.

Giving intentionally manipulated information does not exclusively imply the use of fake news, since there are also mechanisms of deception associated with propaganda, that is, the communicational defense of ideological positions of certain governments, or distortion of reality by government spokespersons in order to hide sensitive information, turning it into privileged data only available to small elite groups. Disinformation, then, encompasses more acts than fabricating fake news.

Let us look at the other side of the syllogism: Is every fake news story made with the clear intent to 'disinform', as befits the intrinsic motivation behind this action so defined? What happens when, by mishandling sensitive information, the content is falsified organically, seemingly in an unintentional manner or in a way that cannot be attributed to a disinformation farm? For Romero [5], theoreticians have tried to disassociate these errors. "American and French researchers have separated consequential or mistaken disinformation (misinformation, *mésinformation*) from that premeditatedly and maliciously produced (disinformation, *désinformation*), thereby delimiting two distinct fields of study whose difference is based on the prior intent by the disinformation agent.

Romero acknowledges that, by not including a mistaken and unintentional component in the term, disinformation elements are left out by appealing to their deliberate nature and not to their consequences. Ultimately, as for the sender, it implies a deontological assessment on the legitimate or illegitimate purpose of their communication. Notwithstanding, what goes through the mind of a receiver who

is unaware of the deception? Is the intent of the sender evident in the content as to protect the receiver from the effects of the message on their perception?

Levy [3] finds that separating the unintentional aspect from the premeditated one could be compromising in terms of shielding those who unwittingly issue a false content without premeditation. By excluding them because of their lack of intent to manipulate – the above expert points out – they are removed from a problem of which they are a significant part and, contradicting those who believe that disinformation only exists when it is intentional, Levi points out that it includes misleading, inaccurate information resulting from something premeditated, but also from inertia and malpractice.

The term disinformation was used in the early 20th century by the Soviet regime (*dezinformatsiya*) to refer to activity linked to disseminating partially or completely false news, in an attempt to influence the public opinion, thereby disorienting it [6]. The Russians who migrated into France towards the end of World War I reported that the Bolshevik police used that term to refer to actions aimed at preventing the consolidation of the communist regime, hence its subsequent meaning, in 1944, per the Dictionary of the Russian Language, published in 1949, which defined disinformation as "the action of inducing error by means of deceitful information". In the Dictionary of the Russian Language, the ideological aspect included the meaning "the disinformation of the public opinion conducted in capitalist countries"; and in 1952, in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, it was considered "the distortion that the United States exercised over global public opinion, through its enormous informational potential" according to Jacquard, as quoted by Andrés Rodríguez [7]. In the late 1950s, Rodríguez states that it was the Russians themselves who, through their secret service, the KGB, established disinformation offices, which replicated during the 1960s in other nations such as East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria, then in the Soviet orbit. Disinformation was considered an instrument to condition individuals.

4. The context in Venezuela

In Venezuela, by January 2020, there were 20.5 million Internet users, 23.21 million active cell phone lines, and 12 million active social media users. Of these, 81% had access through mobile devices. There were 11 million Facebook users, 4.2 million Instagram users, and 1.3 million Twitter users [8].

Data regarding Internet and cell phone coverage in Venezuela would seem to indicate that a large section of the population has online access and can get information from the varied choices available on the Internet. However, reality includes other variables: Broadband speed in the month of March 2020 was 2.83 Mbps for downloads and 1.47 Mbps for uploads [9], placing Venezuela in second to last place worldwide for its slow connection speed (175 of 176) [10]. On the other hand, in recent years, there has been recurrent and selective blocking on news websites and social media by state-owned Compañía Anónima Nacional Teléfonos de Venezuela, CANTV, the largest Internet service provider (ISP) in the country, as well as by other privately owned ISPs [11].

These controls on Internet content have increased in the last five years with the incorporation of bots and trolls [12] by the government, in order to distort public discussion in the digital realm by positioning certain topics and messages for propaganda purposes on such social media as Twitter.

> *The activity of SIBCI (Bolivarian System of Communication and Information*
> *[Sistema Bolivariano de Comunicación e Información]) officials and their*
> *bots positions, on a daily basis, hashtags that artificially rise to trending topics,*

> *consequently burying the topics that are actually being discussed by Twitter users in Venezuela. Social spamming and trolling mechanisms are used, including fabrication of pseudo-news based on controversial tweets by public officials and trending topics powered by the SIBCI. The fact that many public officials do not declare to journalists, but instead direct them to follow their Twitter handles to receive information, helps consolidate this one-way government communication. This tactic makes it easier to 'introduce talking points' on the media, directing them to follow pseudo-news, which would otherwise have no impact on the public opinion [12].*

As part of the conflicts encouraged by the government, networks of cyber-activists [12] linked to the propaganda machinery, were also established to promote the political and ideological values of the 'socialist' model. Among the purposes of these networks are criminalizing dissidence and concealing or making invisible misdeeds in public administration (such as acts of corruption or human rights violations, poorly functioning utilities, etc.).

A restrictive regulatory framework for the exercise of information freedoms and communication rights, recurrent bureaucratic actions against the media (administrative penalty proceedings, seizure of equipment from radio and television stations), court procedures (arbitrary detentions for exercising the right to freedom of expression in which due process is not respected, trials initiated against journalists or media executives potentially resulting in jail terms), economic pressure triggering media shutdowns, executive orders resulting in censorship, buyouts of independent media outlets seeking to change their editorial lines, among others, must be added to the restrictions in the virtual realm.

The choices to get news in Venezuela are steadily narrowing. Government information is wrapped in a shroud of opacity, along with severe restrictions on the freedom to seek, receive, and disseminate information in a free and pluralistic manner. The shrinking of the mainstream media ecosystem results in audiences migrating to the digital realm in order to try to get information, and they are thereby left exposed to the intrinsic risks and limitations of this space, already described above.

Media shutdown or buyout by investors with ties to the government, while reducing the menu of information choices, has encouraged the emergence of independent digital journalistic initiatives, characterized by quality information and the conduction of extensive journalistic research covering public interest issues and bringing to light hidden misdeeds that affect citizens. In reason of the impact of their work, they have regularly faced censorship measures and content blocking, as well as developed mechanisms to protect their publications, and encouraged using such tools as virtual private networks (VPNs), so that audiences can overcome the blocking and gain access to their content.

Concurrently, dozens of sites self-described as news services have emerged; but they do not do a rigorous job and rather work as news aggregators that, in many cases, take content from other media without appropriate attribution. Some include, among their practices, the dissemination of shocking content, without any type of sources or documentary basis.

On the other hand, the state-owned media system, which includes dozens of radio stations, TV channels, print media, and a news agency, has become a propaganda machine. From this system, a single view of what is happening in the country, which favors the ideology of its particular socialist model, is conveyed.

Since the Nicolás Maduro administration, another strategy making evident abuse of the ruling power has been devised: The use of the entire system of public and private radio and television media in Venezuela for simulcasting overtly propaganda-oriented addresses without purchasing airtime and on a mandatory basis, known as *cadenas* (lit. "chains"). This is how, in 2019, 116 mandatory addresses were

broadcast on national radio and television *cadenas*, reaching 122 hours, 28 minutes and 54 seconds. Furthermore, the total number of hours of mandatory broadcasts since the regime's rise to power is 1161 hours, 46 minutes, and 10 seconds [13].

In addition, state-owned media have been used to criminalize dissidence and expose public opinion leaders, opposition political figures, human rights activists, and journalists to public scorn. Between 2013 and 2020, Maduro has appeared on the main state-owned television network, Venezolana de Televisión (VTV), for 1812 hours, 29 minutes, and 33 seconds. This complex outlook is the perfect seedbed for the use of disinformation as a strategy, whereby broadcasters spread their ideologies, beliefs, or prejudices to the detriment of fact checking.

Disinformation "consists of the intentional selection of biased, incomplete, or altered data," "all content fabricated and distributed" that is "false, inaccurate, or misleading [...] intentionally designed, presented, and promoted to cause public harm or private gain" [14]. It is deceptive in order to modify the "perception" and influence the "behavior" of individuals or groups.

Disinformation processes are manifest among the public opinion "when information processes regarding important facts that in some way concern audiences are incomplete or non-existent" [15]. Disinformation can occur in circumstances such as those taking place worldwide today, under which citizens, via the Internet, are exposed to high doses of content that may result in "misinformation due to an excess of information", which occurs "when a wealth of information about an event is available, but it is provided in a partial, biased, contradictory, or confusing manner" [15].

It may occur as a result of "poor management of information" or as a result of "manipulation by sources, governments, interest groups, or the media themselves in order to prevent the public from clearly and fully perceiving the meaning of the facts" [15]. Unlike journalistic practices in which identification of sources and/or clarity regarding the source of news prevails, disinformation is based on the intent to confuse and encourage certain behaviors among the audience.

> *The negativity of disinformation is based on the corruption of the reliable process of collecting and presenting facts. Thereby, those who produce it have an extensive menu of hybrid propositions, between the true and the false, in order to spawn doubt, fear, or controversy with the aim of biasing the perception and behavior of different social groups [14].*

5. 'Fakecracy' in Venezuela

In order to refer to government communications management based on lies in the digital era, we propose the term 'fakecracy'. It does not matter what ideology is adhered to by a given democratic or authoritarian government resorting to these communicational strategies. What matters is to denote, with this portmanteau, a recent phenomenon in political communications, powered by human interaction on social media by using tricks, ploys, to 'fakecratically' boost certain officials' popularity, set non-organic trends on Twitter, measure the reaction of the public opinion to potential policies through rumor campaigns, fuel fear of government sanctions, even if these are not overtly mentioned, in instances when social control against protests of any kind is necessary.

A government with a 'fakecratic' profile is one that makes premeditated use of falsehoods in official public statements as the basis of its communicational and doctrinal apparatus. It is one that rules from the false, the counterfeit, by establishing restrictions – penalizing or suppressing communicational rights of newscasters and audiences – to avoid the circulation of critical information. Various media have

kept track of lies told by leaders of their respective countries. This effort lays bare the intent of some actors in the Executive branch interested in manipulating the public opinion based on hoaxes or misdirection.

Fakecracy is directly linked to increasing the power of deception in public statements, when that power is enhanced by means of restrictions in the communicational sphere and non-transparent methods to boost trends on social media. What happens if anonymous fabrications are also made to damage the reputation of leaders of power factions not aligned to the official ideology? This is how, in practical terms, hoaxes undermine those "tolerated" spaces – broadcast media owned by the State and those allegiant to the government.

In an environment of fakecracy, criticism only occurs competitively in the digital realm, yet unequally, resulting from a less far-reaching and impactful internet coverage. The power of deception is fueled by censored mainstream media, since the consumption of information on the web is asynchronous. This diminishes the ability to organize social protest and mobilization, contrary to what would happen with criticism and synchronous coverage of certain events on broadcast media. It is managed by the power of media control in order to strip the social fabric of articulation options, of the knowledge product of a common cognitive experience from collective events.

The term fakecracy is suitable in these cases. Every time government officials evade their responsibility under claims that cannot be fact-checked, resulting from citizens and critical and independent press being denied access to public information; every time there is a communications environment where opacity clouds phenomena of great social impact from the public opinion, such as the status of the electric power infrastructure, epidemiological bulletins, or water quality; every time that transparency in government management is not possible because of the systematic failure of accountability regarding public investment, by making use of the media for propaganda and by means of omitting sensitive issues, by resorting to lies tailored by the government in service of the power elite in order to convince people of alleged conspiracies against the those in power, then we speak of fakecracy, of the power of lies, of what is false, counterfeit, used to cling to power.

The term fakecracy, as proposed, attempts at describing a government that links the political use of deception in official addresses, imposed as apparent truths unveiled by means of a communications apparatus also resorting to aligning and orchestrating statements from spokespersons along with counterfeit content circulating on the Internet and to forging non-organic pro-government trends on different social media. Consequently, fakecracies are regimes that resort to fake news in order to persecute dissidents.

We believe that Venezuela may be undergoing a fakecratic process. Part of the regime's communications policy has extolled the achievements of a socialist revolution providing "happiness", while blaming the American empire for the most severe socio-economic crisis in the nation's history. According to social indicators released by the National Survey on Living Conditions (Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida, ENCOVI) 2018, prepared by Andrés Bello Catholic University and published in 2019, 48% of the population lives in poverty and 94% without sufficient income to meet their basic needs [16].

The only way to counteract fakecratic schemes is freedom of communication, in the form of critical media that can be read, seen, or heard by the population. Therefore, fakecracy relies on citizens' vulnerability resulting from misinformation, rumor campaigns, non-organic trends fueled on social media, and the viralization of fake news.

Venezuelans are vulnerable to fakecracy because of a communicational environment characterized by:

- The inexistence of independent and critical print media, as a product of the government restrictions on newsprint imports, distributed at the discretion of state-owned Corporación Maneiro.

- The censorship of broadcast television channels. After the shutdown of flagship private network Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV) in 2007, other private channels bowed to prior censorship. State-owned television maintained a propaganda machinery in favor of the regime, while some other outlets – El Universal daily, Globovisión news channel, Cadena Capriles publishing group – were acquired by government cronies, consequently changing their editorial lines [17].

- The removal of independent news channels from pay TV systems by decisions of the National Telecommunications Commission (Comisión Nacional de Telecomunicaciones, CONATEL), a media regulatory agency used as a political commissar.

- Poor Internet coverage [18].

Individuals' vulnerability to fakecracy increases in restricted information environments marked by other disinformation strategies such as denial of access to public information, censorship, and an official propaganda machinery.

6. Journalism v. disinformation

Prior fact checking, rigor in treatment, validation, clarity, cohesion, coherent speech, proper use of language (spelling and wording), and attribution of sources are fundamental conditions in journalism. Data search, on-site news coverage, time and space contextualization to assist in understanding events also are essential aspects. However, it is not a matter of reporting on just any event. Truly newsworthy information must possess such attributes as novelty, timeliness, social relevance, and human interest [15]. In order to be newsworthy, an event must have an impact on the community where it takes place. News, in its pure state, always arises from a surprising, shocking, paradoxical, or transcendental and, above all things, recent event [19].

It is important that journalistic work be done, as a starting point, under standards allowing guaranteeing the quality and rigor of its contents. "A news item, however, may lack some of these characteristics and be equally worthy of publication. But it will lose strength the further it moves away from such premises" [19].

Other elements, defined by Olga Dragnic as "news factors", are also relevant, conferring it informative value and serving as a guide in the process of informational hierarchization taking place within the media: immediacy, geographical proximity of the event, prominence of those involved in the news event (either in light of their social role or their performance in public office), connection of an event with a conflictive situation, effects or consequences thereof, suspension or absence of resolution, which is an indicator of a breakthrough (of economic, scientific, social, health, educational, or cultural nature), peculiarity, presence of unusual aspects, involvement of women in an event [15].

Journalism focuses on facts and goes beyond the obvious. "The knowledge of a concrete fact by the journalist should not be enough to conclude their work. Both they and the editor later reviewing their text must go beyond and search for consequences and repercussions, along with, of course, its background. Sometimes these can become very important regarding the news event" [19].

7. In closing: human rights standards

Under international human rights law and doctrine, all persons have the right to freely express ideas and thoughts "of all kinds" through any medium. Furthermore, they have the right to seek, receive, and disseminate information of their interest, without any preconditions or censorship. Today we cannot speak of receivers or passive subjects amidst the information overflow that exists in the world. Any person who has a digital device and an Internet connection can become a newscaster in full exercise of their freedom of expression.

However, the media and journalists, through the exercise of their informative role, "materialize" this right, as stated by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in its Advisory Opinion AO-5/85 of November 13, 1985, regarding mandatory membership under the law in a professional association for the practice of journalism:

> *If freedom of expression requires, in principle, that the communication media are potentially open to all without discrimination or, more precisely, that there be no individuals or groups that are excluded from access to such media, it must be recognized also that such media should be, in practice, true instruments of that freedom and not vehicles for its restriction. It is the mass media that make the exercise of freedom of expression a reality. This means that the conditions of its use must conform to the requirements of this freedom, with the result that there must be, inter alia, a plurality of means of communication, the barring of all monopolies thereof, in whatever form, and guarantees for the protection of the freedom and independence of journalists [20].*

This role of materializers of freedom of expression, recognized by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, is more than a privilege; it is a commitment made by the media and journalists to guarantee that societies can access information regarding matters of public interest. To the extent that a society is informed, in a free and pluralistic manner, citizens have the necessary input to join public debate and contribute to the defense and/or strengthening of democracy.

Consequently, as the Court has pointed out, plurality and independence of the media and journalists undoubtedly act as a counterweight to the powers-that-be. They contribute to balancing the distortions or manipulations exerted by such powers through after-truth and disinformation practices.

As the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has expressed therein, freedom of expression constitutes the "cornerstone of democracy":

> *Freedom of expression is a cornerstone upon which the very existence of a democratic society rests. It is indispensable for the formation of public opinion. It is also a conditio sine qua non for the development of political parties, trade unions, scientific and cultural societies and, in general, those who wish to influence the public. It represents, in short, the means that enable the community, when exercising its options, to be sufficiently informed. Consequently, it can be said that a society that is not well informed is not a society that is truly free [20].*

Moreover, it grants journalism a privileged position in the defense of democracy and the rights to information and free expression by stating: "Journalism is the primary and principal manifestation of freedom of expression of thought" [20].

This status of journalism and the media as defenders of democracy is ratified by The United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Organization of American States (OAS) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information. In their Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and "Fake News," Disinformation and Propaganda, they established that "It is the mass media that make the exercise of freedom of expression a reality. This means that the conditions of its use must conform to the requirements of this freedom" [20].

Similarly, the declaration warns that: "State actors should not make, sponsor, encourage or further disseminate statements which they know or reasonably should know to be false (disinformation) or which demonstrate a reckless disregard for verifiable information (propaganda)" [21].

Practices such as the use of digital operators (trolls) to boost propaganda content and make other issues of citizen interest invisible, as documented by Puyosa [12], are contrary to the standards set by the declaration.

It should be reminded that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, in Principle 5 of its Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression, states that "[...] the arbitrary imposition of information and the imposition of obstacles to the free flow of information violate the right to freedom of expression" [22].

"State actors should, in accordance with their domestic and international legal obligations and their public duties, take care to ensure that they disseminate reliable and trustworthy information, including about matters of public interest, such as the economy, public health, security and the environment" [21].

This premise of the Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and "Fake News", Disinformation and Propaganda, is also repeatedly violated in Venezuela. Opacity of information is proven by the concealment and denial of access to documents essential for citizen control of public administration, such as reports and statistics of public agencies, epidemiological bulletins, and economic indicators (inflation and price indices), among others. Nevertheless, well-supported research, conducted by independent journalists and media, can contribute to breaking the siege and opacity on information, by providing citizens with fact-checked and contrasted information on matters of public interest.

In spite of the restrictions to the informative freedoms, journalists of emerging digital media in Venezuela have organized in the last years, managing to do informative work, in which they have brought to public light facts that had been concealed regarding corruption, human rights violations, damage to utilities infrastructure, among others.

The development of ethics-based journalism can generate essential sources of newsworthy information, with criteria for methodological rigor and fact-checked information, thereby contributing to rebuilding trust and credibility in what we read, see, or hear. If based on the tenets of what is considered and defined as authentic journalism, which we have reviewed in this chapter, and by making this authentic journalism a reference to obtain information, the risks posed by fake news and disinformation will be reduced. Citizens would be better and more adequately informed and equipped with useful tools to develop personally, exercise their rights, and participate in a free and pluralistic exchange of ideas, necessary for the preservation of democracy.

Conflict of interest

The authors are Venezuelan Fake News Observatory management.

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The Scramble for Cyberspace: Internet-Based Reporting of Genocide in the Southern Cameroon-Ambazonia Crisis

Nanche Billa Robert

Abstract

The post-truth politics has been ascendant in Cameroon since the beginning of the Anglophone crisis. Consequently, the country's political culture has been influenced by appeals to emotion, usually ignoring factual rebuttals. We collected original data using Facebook accounts which are a preserved archive of the way hundreds of millions of Southern Cameroonians and other relate to one another and share genocidal information. The data indicate that the government's stance on bearing genocidal responsibility changes continuously when internal and external actors pressurize it to investigate crimes committed against humanity as it was the case in the 2020 Ngarbuh massacre and it either remains stagnant or the blames are shifted to the separatists when no serious pressure is exerted on it. The more the truth about crimes against humanity is hidden, the more tension increases, the more trust is destroyed and the more the war will prolong and widen the divide between Ambazonians and La Republique du Cameroon. Martial and cosmetic solutions only help to radicalize the population and instigate them to defy state institutions. Ambazonians' responses indicate that they did not have to rely on an international community but themselves and it prompted them to take arms and fight the more.

Keywords: alternative media, Facebook, genocide, massacre, social movements, ICT, post-truth politics, Ambazonia

1. Introduction

Tensions between the English-speaking community which forms about one fifth of the national population have been high due to an ongoing separatist movement. It escalated considerably in October, 2017 with the unilateral proclamation of the Ambazonian Federal State by Sissiku Ayuk Tabe who was later on arrested in Nigeria with his Cabinet at the Nera hotel and transferred to Cameroon where he, is serving a life imprisonment term [1]. In 2016, lawyers, teachers and students in the two Anglophone regions initially carried out demonstrations and strikes which eventually engulfed a wider section of the population. This mobilization was due to their marginalization by the Francophone-dominated government in which they were highly under-represented in nearly all aspects of national life: political

appointments and professional training and had been treated as second-class citizens since their reunification. They complained that their vibrant economic and political institutions had been completely wiped out, and their education and judicial systems had been neglected and degraded [2]. How did activists succeed to raise the awareness of the population? What were the reactions of the population to the various videos and posts sent?

Social movements are one of the main ways in which people collectively give voice to their grievances and concerns, and demand that something be done about it [3]. This has been facilitated recently by the media environment that has radically changed with the development of new media technologies which has helped activists to actively spread videos which exposed security forces abusing human rights (by suppressing peaceful gatherings, beating, harassing, arresting and killing protesters, burning their houses, schools and hospitals) in order to produce a counter-narrative to the 'official story' that main-stream media had been producing. The videos show appalling images not just of how French-speaking soldiers tortured Anglophones but also their inability to communicate with them adequately although they share the same country [2]. The various videos incriminated Cameroon security forces and therefore as a result, the Cameroon government shutdown the Internet in January 2017 for 93 days in the tension-ridden Anglophone zone. It was after the Anglophone teachers, lawyers, and students went on strike over alleged social bias in favor of Francophone. Education, financial, and healthcare institutions as well as businesses that depended on the Internet access were affected. International bodies pressurized the government to restore internet access.

Although Internet access was restored in April 2017, the network was very unstable. In October 2017, the government effected a second Internet blockade, targeting social media and apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook where activists sent videos incriminating the government. It continuously affected the country economically, and many citizens were forced to travel back and forth to regions with Internet access for business or information. It is worth-noting that Social media is important because it allows activists to get in contact with people locally, regionally, nationally and even internationally [4]. These activists mostly based in the western world understand the characteristics of their target audience (What they call the people at Ground Zero) and are able to personalize their messages to reflect the situation of their audience more appropriately on popular platforms. Facebook allows users to post, like and share content (pictures, videos, articles, etc) on sensitive issues with just the click of a button to a much large audience as much as possible.

Rather than referring to satirical material, fake news refer to the trend of Internet-based publications purporting to be genuine news sources which propagate inaccurate stories based on rumor or blatant untruths [5]. Our objective in this write-up is to examine how the social media is population-friendly by showing the reactions of the population to the Internet-based information. We equally made an effort to show how the activists and the government struggle to outsmart each other in promoting their narratives in the cyber-space. Our attention will be paid on the Ngarbuh massacre because of the struggle between the activists and the government each struggling to dominate the cyberspace by promoting its narratives.

2. Literature review

The rise and spread of new ICTs has transformed the way that society is organized, which of course include social movements. Internets and SMS messaging for examples have enabled activists to coordinate protest in record time, giving raise to the 'flash mob' phenomenon [6]. 'Flash mob' is a term that originally referred to social experiments,

and countercultural movements to reclaim 'public spaces' [5]. The Anglophone movement can be dubbed as the 'Twitter Revolution' or 'Facebook Revolution' emphasizing the role of social media in diffusing videos of human rights abuses and to organize protest mobilizations both at the local and international levels [3].

ICTs transform mainstream dominated media systems into multifaceted media environment. Media today are more diverse and offer more options for people to access political information. Social movement actors also communicate political messages through a wide range of interconnected outlets, and the advent of ICTs has not only broaden but has also changed some of the forms this communication has taken, its impact and its reach.

One of the key way social movements engage in cultural resistance is by means of the production and dissemination of multiple forms of media in order to mobilize support, to reach out for supports beyond those already in agreement with movement claims, and to increase the legitimacy of their claims and demands. Social movements operate at a considerable disadvantage when trying to influence news portrayals of issues than do their better-funded opposing groups and organization [3].

ICTs are unquestionably central to activists' repertoires of communication, moblisation, and deliberation processes and have been harnessed in many creative and strategic ways to increase the power and reach of social movement communication and action. Alternative media produces strong counter-narrative to the "official' story which in this case was that the separatist caused the atrocities. Communication flows from the mainstream media to activist alternative media which is then disseminated via listserves and telephone as people called each other to talk about what had happened and to question the official version of events. Information flew in this case from Rene Sadi and Atanga Nji from the mainstream media to the alternative media and the information was given quite a different interpretation.

Activists in the Ambazonian crisis created a strategy which [7] considered as alternatives which is the creation of their own independent media or public forums of communication in order to communicate for a lack of interest or bias by established media. Alternatively, in the Ambazonian crisis, many videos were produced that facilitated the mobilization and production of a counter-narrative to the 'official story' which indicates that there is no Anglophone problem in Cameroon and the professionalism of the security forces. The Internet makes the process of sharing easier, faster and with a potentially larger audience than ever before. These messages in the videos from the alternative media environment have made their ways into mainstream mass media like the various reports carried by BBC, France 24, TV5 monde etc.

One of the concepts that has occupied the political area in Cameroon has been the Post-truth politics. This refers to a political culture wherein debate is more emotional and disconnected from the details of policy, and the ignoring of factual rebuttal. The most popular fake news stories during the Ambazonian crisis have been shared more widely than the most popular mainstream media reports. The impact of fake news on the construction of a post-truth media consumer's reality is profound. Post-truth differs from traditional contesting and falsifying of facts by relegating facts and expert opinions to be of secondary importance relative to appeal to emotion. This was less notable before the invention of the Internet and related social changes. Post-truth politics has been ascendant in Cameroon since the beginning of the Anglophone crisis. The Cameroonian government preaching one and indivisible Cameroon hardly makes reference to the cases where the majority Francophone-Cameroon abused the constitution to disfavor the English-speaking. They equally denied the existence of an anglophone problem which [2] shows that it really exists.

3. Methodology

We collected the qualitative data of acts of genocide in Southern Cameroon used in this work from the Internet from seasoned activists' accounts who had sent out numerous posts on numerous issues to their targeted population. They served as a fertile ground of textual material: videos, blog posts, comments, social networking posts which are all as [8] puts it, are parts of the expanse of qualitative material online. It is described by [9] as "a new continent, rich in resources but in parts most perilous." which had "lain undiscovered, unmined and uninhabited" for the past 30 years.

Activists posted many materials online to awaken Southern Cameroonians' consciousness of the events of the War of independence, therefore Facebook was a fruitful site of the way as [10] puts it, hundreds of millions of Southern Cameroonians and other relate to one another and share genocidal information: it provide an entirely preserved archive of data featuring, write-up, friends' comments, pictures, about the Ambazonia war of independence. We judged the information as a true reflection of participants' minds, uses and behavior. Therefore, the participants were 'doing' things with their postings. As may be expected from our theoretical stance, our questions focused on how people talked and interacted on Facebook of events of massacres in the Southern Cameroon. The symbols of the posts to the public drew our as well as the people's reactions. We considered their comments in order to understand how their various posts either raise their awareness to the independence of Southern Cameroon as the activists promoted or to the concept of "one and indivisible Cameroon" as the government of Cameroon did everything to maintain the souvereignty of the nation. So the target population was the population of the Southern Cameroon who received information from both ends. How did they react to this information was our main point of focus.

4. Internet-based posts on the Ngarbuh massacre

On the 16th February, 2020 activists and other people inundated the cyberspace with the picture below which drew the attention of the entire world because it was a genocidal act that involved the massacre of children and pregnant women who were buried in a mass grave. The caption was:

"These are some of the Victims of the Ngarbuh Massacre, in Donga Mantung Division, in Cameroon's Northwest region. Locals have blamed the military and it's allied militias for the attack. The death toll now stands at 38" [11] (**Figure 1**).

On the 15th March, 2020, activists sent another post in order to prick the conscience of humanity which stated: "One month on...#NGARBUH still haunts me! Why did you kill our innocent children Biya[1]??? May this reminder prick the conscience of the world. 14th Feb #Massacre still on my mind. Sleep well Angels...".

On April 30th, activists sent a video showing the mass burial of pregnant women, children, and other women and men who were in Ngarbuh and asked a rhetorical question of what happened to the authors.[2] Another video showed clearly the wailing of people in the background which indicated that people had wounds in their hearts that would take time to heal [12].

Activists sent ceaselessly posts on the heartlessness of some of the elite of the region who celebrated the massacre. The following article was sent on the 1st June 2020 and the video had been deleted at the time we consulted it on Facebook:

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[1] Meaning President Paul Biya: the President of the Republic of Cameroon.

[2] The soldiers who killed them.

Figure 1.
Picture of the slained children and their grave. Source: Atlantic Chronicles [11].

"This was 14th February 2020 at 7:10 am, when #GerardNgalla got news that the #NgarbuhMassacre went successfully as they had planned. In celebration Gerard had his breakfast live on Facebook. He was congratulated by many, I mean many from Donga-Mantung, at the moment that we were mourning our children and pregnant women killed by Gerard and BIR. All I have to say is, there must be #Justice4Ngarbuh. *Na last time be time*[3]." The following responses were received:

"How for market Gerald as heat dey come on for Ngarbuh gaz? Dat gaz dey smell so badly," "Dealer," and evn abused him saying: "pig-style eating! real wild animal in human form! Beast" [13].

Commentators were hard on him while relying on divine intervention and wishing the children a peaceful rest by saying, "God will protect them in Jesus name, Amen" "Lord God, have mercy!" "May they rest in peace" "Lord please help them..." "May God give them internal rest" "Heavenly rest is open unto them" "God is seeing everything," "God help," "May their souls rest in peace," "Chai JESUS, Follow up this incident for us. You are the only righteous to do this and liberate your children from the hands of the heartless" [13].

The others call for resistance by imploring on the people's feeling and pragmatism: "I asked the "amba camp" they said the Army should drop their guns. This is a Republic, the Army will never do that not even in the USA. Please please please for the sake of our junior ones I'm calling on you artist, musicians, bloggers, celebrities pleas for the sake of our junior ones. Just Imagine how these children were feeling, close your eyes and imagine. They would say our brothers and sisters abandoned us to die. Some will go to Ivory Coast and pay tribute to Arafat whereas he can go to Mamfe his homeland and pay tribute to the lost souls. Fame is like a candle."

5. What really happened at Ngarbuh

In accordance with the Post-truth politics, the government of Cameroon refuted the facts of the Ngarbuh massacre and even called those who had investigated it "bad angels" until they yielded to international pressure which

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[3] Apigin phrase which mea nit is the end that matters.

demanded them to investigate it. After the investigation, they acknowledged that their military carried out the massacre.

5.1 Government defense minister

Cameroon's defense minister made two statements: on February 17, he first announced that the government had opened an investigation and that its results would be made public. In a second statement he said the results of the investigation "may be made public at the appropriate time". In both statements, he claimed that armed "terrorists" attacked government security forces and that the clash resulted in the explosion of fuel tanks, which destroyed several homes and killed a woman and four children. This statement was reiterated on February 18, in a press release, by the Minister of Communication [14, 15].

5.2 The minister of communication

After several days of accusations regarding the Ngarbuh Massacre, communication minister, René Emmanuel Sadi has finally broken the silence [16]. Despite high numbers from the UN, media reports and witnesses, minister Sadi confirmed the story of the army spokesperson in a statement on Monday February 17, saying only five civilian lives were lost, one woman and four children. The minister questioned: "How can one believe for a moment that an army as disciplined and civic-minded as ours can loot civilian properties and kill the people whose protection and security is their mission?" He reiterated that "under no circumstances have our defence and security forces deliberately undertaken to perpetrate abuses of any kind against the civilian populations at the service of whom they are assigned." Minister Sadi ascertained that the situation in the North West and South West regions is gradually improving because the Head of State was implementing the recommendations of the Major National Dialog.

It was not the first time the government had refused any wrong doing; the government had made similar statements of atrocities that soldiers had committed against civilians in the Northern Region of Cameroon where military killed a woman and her child. In several occasions, government had placed the blame for crimes committed against civilians on Ambazonian separatists, even in cases of lack of evidence. The UN, USA, rights groups and politicians have asked for an investigation into the massacre, demanding thatwitnesses be protected.

5.3 Human right watch

Government forces [16] and armed members of the Fulani ethnic group killed at least 21 civilians, including 13 children and a pregnant woman, on February 14, 2020 in the village of Ngarbuh in Cameroon. They also set fire on five houses, looted many other property and beat residents. The corpses of some of the victims were found charred in their homes. The government denies that its troops have deliberately committed crimes. "The murders of civilians, including children, committed under horrific conditions, are heinous crimes that should be effectively and independently investigated and those responsible brought to justice," said Ilaria Allegrozzi, researcher senior on Africa at Human Rights Watch. They stressed that, the denial of the military involvement in the crimes would further traumatize the survivors and would only encourage the government troops to commit further atrocities.

They reported that, witnesses assured them that between 10 and 15 soldiers, including members of the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), an elite unit of the Cameroonian army, and at least 30 armed Fulani first entered on foot in Ngarbuh 1,

a district of Ngarbuh, on February 13 at around 11:00 p.m. and looted many houses. Some members of these forces then continued towards the Ngarbuh 2 neighborhood, looting houses and beating residents. At around 5:00 a.m. on February 14, a group of soldiers and armed Fulani attacked the Ngarbuh 3 neighborhood. They killed and burnt 21 civilians in four houses. Using satellite images taken on February 14 at 10:24, results indicated that several houses in Ngarbuh had been damage possibly with fire.

They narrated the story of a man who hid himself and saw the killing of his entire family as they tried to escape and set their house on fire. Residents affirmed that there was no confrontation between the armed separatists and the security forces and they did not hear any explosion so the killings were deliberate. It was aimed at punishing civilians suspected for harboring separatist fighters and were threatened not to harbor separatist fighters warning them that their village would be destroyed if they continued to harbor separatists (**Figure 2**).

In the state television, the minister of Territorial Administration responded to Human Right Watch by calling them "misguided angels" who were out to destroy the image of the Cameroonian defense forces who were doing a wonderful work. He called on them to rather condemn the atrocities of separatist fighters whom he called terrorists and threatened ending the activities of Human Watch Right because their report was erroneous. He added that they had given money to private media to weaken the institutions of the state [17, 18].

5.4 Coalition of civil society

On Friday 14th of February 2020, at around 3 a.m., an attack was launched in the village of Ngar 3 from Fiiru by a joint military operation consisting of six soldiers, three armed men belonging to ex-combatants of the restoration forces of the Virtual State of Ambazonia and numerous herdsmen. The operation burnt and shot everywhere. The joint mission was led to Ngarbuh by the former separatist fighter: Nfor Marcel called "Bullet" alongside two other ex-combatants who had left the war of independence and had joined the National Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Committee.

The attack was bloody, no one was spared, some villagers were burned alive and those who could not find shelter were shot, as shown by the bodies of the victims scattered in the bushes. Pregnant women and children who escaped gunfire and machete sheltered in a house were all of them were burnt alive. Some survivors attested that a total of 13 houses and many villages were burnt beyond recognition. Among the 35 corpses discovered were three (3) pregnant women, three (3) children including a

Figure 2.
Picture of persons the military killed in Ngarbuh. Source: Human Rights Report [16].

Figure 3.
Mass grave of massacred civilians. Source: Mimi Mefo Info [19].

family of about 9 persons and other men and women. The victims consisted of about 9 men, 6 women, and 14 children. After the departure of the soldiers, some villagers, pastors and Ambazonian fighters, buried the victims on Saturday February 15, 2020 in numerous mass graves [19] (**Figure 3**).

6. The Government's admittance of genocide

This was after the works of a commission which Paul Biya sanctioned February 17 to investigate the killings, following incessant national and international pressure across the board. The commission was headed by Divine Chemutah Banda, Chairperson of the National Commission of Human Rights and Freedoms, Bishop George Nkuo of the Kumbo Diocese and Imam Ahmadou Baba Sale, among others as members [20].

The government of Cameroon admitted a mixed Battalion commissioned by the Commander of the 52nd Motorized Infantry Battalion in Nkambe of Nangono Ze Charles Eric orchestrated the extrajudicial killings headed by Sergeant Baba Guiba mixed group of Ntubaw. Villagers narrated that three military elements and two Gendarme left Ntubaw at 10 pm on February 13, while the the head of them took along 17 members of the vigilantist group. At the entrance to Ngarbuh, they split in two to "take care" of Ngarbuh 1 & 2. At Ngarbuh 3 the site of the massacre, Sergeant Baba Guiba and 10 members of the vigilante waged an attack. The report shows that five terrorists were killed and arms were seized, and three women plus ten children were also killed. Due to panic, the soldiers and the members of the vigilante group covered the facts by burning houses. Sergeant Baba Guiba then returned to Ntubaw and deliberately sent a biased report to his hierarchy which the Government used for its communication. The report indicates that the corpses were actually exhumed in order to establish their facts and that disciplinary sanction were charted.

The following post went viral when the report was released "The Ngarbuh report by LRC is fake. Names of soldiers and military people mentioned in it do not exist. What a scam!"

Even most of the comments considered it to be a lie: "When you make lies part of you, there will come a time when the lies will turn to lie to you", "It is no surprising issue to me. That is their best arts, lies telling. The report is just powder in the eye!, "Even some are fake not all are fake because sergeant Baba guida I know him personally", "What to expect from endemic dysfunction? Without a verifiable system of records and accounting - anywhere in the world - it is impossible to implement Truth while so-called "civilized" cultures create all kinds of tools/instruments to enforce Truth", "Could never be a true list, have they mentioned the DOs ,Governor, and ministers who were the real commanders,those names could be late soldiers or fake."

The data indicate firstly that the government's stance on bearing genocidal responsibility changes continuously when internal and external pressures are exerted on it to investigate crimes committed against humanity as it was the case in Ngarbuh and it remains stagnant or the blames are shifted to the separatists when no serious pressure is exerted on it as it was the cases of the Ofen-Tiben massacre, Menka-Pinyin massacre, Bakweri town massacre, Buea Town massacre, Muyuka massacre, Ekona massacre, Munyenge massacre, Kwa-Kwa massacre, Wum massacre, Weh massacre, Esu massacre, the killing of the baby Martha, the beheading of Sam Soya, the burning of mami Appih etc.

7. Internet-based reactions to the Ngarbuh massacre

7.1 Internal reactions

7.1.1 National committee for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration

The Facebook page of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Program, the National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR) on 16th February, sent out a post which stated: "Amba want their kids to die so that they cry for genocide and that in so far as Ambazonian fighters continue to exist every body including children shall continue to be targeted'". The same Facebook page attributed the killings of the Ambazonians and what happened as "collateral damage." "For as long as Amba boys exist in your communities, there will be casualties, and some of them will be children. It is called collateral damage. AmbaFools sit abroad and say, we have to break eggs to make an omelette" [21].

7.1.2 The catholic church

On the 21st of February, Aaron Yancho Kaah and other sent a post entitled: "Kumbo diocese mourns the victims of the Ngarbuh massacre today". He said the eucharistic prayer at the kumbo cathedral was in honor of the 35 slained innocent peasant farmers and children by Cameroun soldiers at the Ngarbuh village on the 14th February [22] Thousands of Catholic faithful around kumbo attended the solemn mass "which left many la Republique Cameroonian loyalists grumbling". Prayers were offered for the bereaved families and they called on God to forgive the perpetrators of such a hate crime. His Eminence Christian Cardinal Tumi also attended.

However, it left many unanswered questions in the minds of Ambazonian and the the following comments were made: "Cameroon is Two and Very Divisible. We Ambazonian keep saying this yet Francophone think its a joke. Why is it the Catholic Church and not the government leading these proceedings if truly the region was peaceful? Why is there no official delegation from Yaounde in Kumbo for this funeral? Why did Paul Biya not declare a national day of mourning for the victims if truly it was a collateral damage? In Bafoussam the Prime Minister was there after the landslide right? Why are Anglophone hated so much by Francophone? We shall continue to fight until we achieve the Restoration of our lost Independence."

Other considered Cardinal Tumi as a hypocrite, "What did Tumi go to do there after he had claimed that normalcy was returning and forcing evil special status on us which has embolden the ememy to kill us for his sports,", "God is always on the throne", "Silence means", guilty", "Chaaaaiiiiiiiii Ambazonians have suffered", "The only thing that disturb me is what Cardina Tumi went there to do,", "Adieu little

friends, parents et al.", "Rest well...", "Make dem all go massa", "I doubt whether God can forgive the perpetrators of this massacre. If He can forgive them, I think He goes wrong ---- He should deal with them squarely and nothing like forgiveness."

8. Ambazonians' expression of anger and frustration

Post-truth politics is more emotional and consequently the most popular fake news stories during the Ambazonian crisis have been shared more widely than the most popular mainstream media reports. This permitted friends to share their emotions with others. This part treats the categorization of the comments of people who received the posts either from activists and people. The fact that the Cameroon government tried by all means to falsify the happenings in Ngarbuh provoked an outpour of emotion from Southern Cameroonians. They express their helplessness by calling for resistance till the last man standing, labeling political actors negatively, unearthing the wickedness and inhumanity of the military forces, expressing the need for divine intervention, showing optimism for independence, indicating how the state has failed to protect its citizens, considering international bodies as being unfair and powerless etc.

No Facebook posts received as many comments as the one which carried the reaction of the minister of communication in which he styled the military as professionals and the separatist fighters as terrorists [15]. Ambazonians knew the truth which other Cameroonians did not know. After the killings and burning of houses, the separatist fighters buried the dead. The more the truth is hidden, the more the wound widens, the more tension increases, the more trust is destroyed and the more the war will prolong and which may probably end up widening the divide between the two peoples. Martial solutions only help to radicalize the population and encourage them to defy state institutions.

Their comments were a call for rebellion because the state considered everyone of them as Amba so they had to carry gun and fight. They wondered how the government could refuse to acknowledge such genocidal acts and they were determined to pick up arms against the government and to force the Francophone out of their land. They question the trust of the government and the government thought it could only regain it through intimidation. They felt helpless in front of international organization.

"Today I'll be picking up my own arm against this government, it's too much", "Sometimes shame di hold me for this pipo their chance.[4] How can this he-goat deny this. So it's no more petrol accident", "Is high time we all pick up guns, since we are all ambas in the eyes of military, anyhow any one left behind will tell me if those children were ambas", "Operation Frogs to leave Ambaland has been activated and shall soon enter full gear. All frogs should leave Ambaland[5] for their own safety. A word to a wise na sophi ei sense.[6] "The earlier you kill all of us, the better. We shall not sit and watch our country eaten up by vampires. Enough of these jokes. Kill us all if you care...You cannot silence this generation. We've seen more than what any other generation had ever seen. Non...", "Professional Army huh...I reserve my comment", "This photo was automatically covered so you can.", "Does it mean no one in the world has power in this world to stop this barbarism in Cameroon. Even UN, AU, EU US?", "How can people be lying like this and are asked to do investigations?

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[4] I am ashame of this people.

[5] Operation Francophone to leave Ambaland.

[6] Sufficient.

What will be the outcome?", "Even in the North the Force of law and order did not kill women and children.[7]"

In reactions to the post on Facebook, the Ambazonian people poured frightful curses on them and wish them dead mysteriously. They labeled the minister a wizard and wished him mad and they thought they are demon possessed. They mocked them by saying it happened in Mali.[8] They think that they will be consumed by their own evils.

"Thunder will strike all of you someday idiot. It happens in Mali", "I've never cursed but this time around I release dementia to that Rene of a human.", "Either this man's brain is short or he is just possessed. We all saw the Cameroonian military people killing...executing...some women carrying their kids on their backs", "You will excrete clotted blood after a prolonged painful incurable ailment for saying this! People have lost everything. ..I mean everything they have reason to be alive for, in the most dreadful manner, and you say this???", "Thanks very much in the days of appointment we celebrate we never knew you were the witchcraft behind our back," "The demons that lives in you will surely one day consume you all," "This country will never change if people like you remain in power. Please change from your wicked ways for judgement awaits us all", "It shall never be well with you Mr man for the blood of those children is on your head", "May thunder strike him where ever he is right now and may the spirits of everyone killed haunt every soul involved in this massacre", All the ministers and service heads in Cameroon need to be given mass burial for a new country to emerge. *Chai* what has come over them or its really that the devil is at work? The bloody money u eat and talk nonsense shall one day prevail on your life and the life of your family members. You shall not see route".

The comments also exposed the wickedness and inhumanity of the government and the Francophone community, labelling them as devils and terrorists, and vampires as people suffering from mental problem: "These Devils still lie even when captured on camera. Our people in that community were living in peace, they didn't ask Cameroon military to come and protect them. Boko haram is slaughtering their citizens in the North, they wouldn't go for their protection,", "Terrorists like him ..They want to suck more blood", "The paradox of doing the will of it's master contradicts the ethics of good soldierhood. Your advocacy would have been harnessing if you had an iota of feelings towards the victims, their families, friends and relations, but is rather unfortunate that ...", "I used to think Devils have some funny looks but its like they're some of these human faces we see everyday", "This man i curse you and your entire generation to come. You have drunk just too much blood that even if you are found carrying a big mess on you, you will claim to be clean you vampire and your entire clan will all pay for just wait and see".

Another aspect of the comments dwelled on divine reliance or intervention, truth and divine justice. They thought the government supported the military and promoted them to fight against them. That is why they relied on divine intervention They reminded them that God exists and He is awake and protects those who fights for the truth and He will punish those who murder the innocent people at Ngarbuh. They were certain that God will exhaust their prayer and a time will arrive when those killing them would be unable to continue doing so. Not only did they wish them deadly diseases but also that God would punish them from one generation to another. They ask on God to protect them.

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[7] It is a mockery because the military killed a woman and her child.

[8] When the military was accused in a video that went viral, the government said it took place in Mali before later on accepting that actually it was in Cameroon.

"*Chai!!!!Chai!!!!!* There's God oooo, *chai chai chai,* there's God ooooooooo"
"They should keep on with their lies only only the truth will save us, Happy are the people who are fighting for the truth, Lord protect us from Every danger and restore peace in our hearts", "René or whatever you are called, God will take away your children same way you took ours. He is awake. Our cries won't go unheard. We trust in him. It's just a matter of time," "May God expose all these lies you keep telling everyday and. may your generation never find happiness. May God punish your family and generation with deadly diseases forever in the name of Jesus!As the spirits of those dead watch u in tear tell lies f...", "A season is coming their way, when they wouldn't be able to go further. Jesus is the beginning & the end."

They were optimistic considering the present as temporal which means that they were going to be triumphant because according to them God is on the throne and He is a God of justice and would disgrace the wicked they believed. They invited their brothers in Ngarbuh to wait on the Lord because evil has never prevailed and God is for the helpless. Therefore their messages gave solace to those who were affected.

"The mid-way race doesn't matter. It's the end that matters...All fingers crossed. God is seated on His Throne...", "The one that the military did in Bamenda....that's in the city, they still deny it .... God of Justice visit our enemies they are too strong for us...my people keeps living in pain everyday. "Praise God for them. God is on His throne laughing at them. For He will make them a public disgrace in the days ahead. (Ps. 2:1-8). Dear Ngarbuh brothers wait on the Lord, His is coming and He is here. He is the Lord for the helpless. Evil has never prevailed", "One day you will cry and shed tears only for the words you used over innocent souls. May God give you another Chance to Change else, you will be consumed by the wrath of the angry Almighty."

They even offer a prayer and waited on the time of God: "Lord Jesus, help us to have a heavenly view and a heavenly perspective. Help us to understand that we all have an eternity which will supersede our temporal existence here on earth. Help us to shape our acts and our words to fit our eternal reality. We...",

They said if death were not weak, the militarymen would have all been dead and reminded them that they would equally be killed, the same way they were murdering them because he who kills using the sword die by the sword. They said the acts of the military would bring them nightmares, sleepless night and curses on them and their families:

"Just that the death is as weak as the word weak if not you guys won't see no peace", "He who fights with a sword will virtually die by the sword.as you jubilate and feast over the blood of the innocent, be rest assured, all you perpetrators of this evil, your day of reckoning is just by the corner", "We are waiting now for Mr "buried the bereaved[9]" to come and say his own nonsense", "A fallen hero once said that how long shall they kill our prophets while we stands aside and look. We need to be emancipated. Set the captive free", They have created their own hell, nightmares, sleeplessnights, curses upon their families from generation to generation, God is alive", Jesus is lord, only with this—I do not want to say that God is sleeping but rather the right time is coming", "God is slow to anger and has given ample warnings that he will destroy those who oppose him and threaten his people (ex 34:6-7) don't continue to provoke God for you will not be able to contain his wrath."

They also showed that the state had failed in its duty to protect the population. It was quite perplexing for them to understand why an army should kill instead

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[9] Mocking the Minister of territorial Administration who once erroneously made this statement. Instead of saying bury the dead, he said buried the bereaved.

of protecting the population, why those who criticized the army are tracked and punished. They concluded that the army was there to satisfy the government and their creator[10] and not the population and God.

"I don't know whether this article is a joke or something serious. To whoever is talking, it is truly unbelievable that our protectors have turned against their duty. Whether the mind believes it or not, it is just the ideal. The reality lies in evidence!", "How can one believe for a moment that an army as disciplined and civic-minded as ours can loot civilian properties and kill the people whose protection and security is their mission?" But they are doing it so maybe they want to set the government hope...", "How can one believe for a moment that a corrupt government like that of Cameroon can attest for something they've done that could lead to more investigations?", "We understand. If you dare criticize the army, they can decide to bring you down. Every life is important in Cameroon and deserves protection", "That's why the military keeps causing their havoc because they would be protected by their boss....", "Rene Sadi I pity you. You are a diplomat by profession. You want to please your master and creator Biya. My advice to you is to fear GOD ALMIGHTY."

One also clearly sees the feeling of impartiality in their write-ups: A situation where conclusions are drawn without full knowledge of the situation, a situation in which a third party is lacking: "I only laugh at those asking people like him to investigate the massacre, this already tells us the outcome of the investigation. God have mercy on us all", "Has this man, in his capacity as minister of communications, ever gone down to the field to examine the situation first-hand before making any declarations? Please, somebody should help me understand. Maybe I'm not current.", "In the face of it all, adversity, pressure, oppression is the only breeding ground for critical thinking, inventions and innovations! Keep pushing us. Maybe this is why we needed to think outside the box."

They made a mockery of the system and the use of military force for survival and said it was a system without trust and were kept in power by the military: "I understand Issa Tchiroma[11] better now. What a professional army indeed! This professionalism must be in hell where rape, looting and killing is the norm. *Ahhh*, go and sit down", "The regime has lost the confidence of the population. It is not a surprise. Sample the opinion of 90% of francophone, they will say the same thing", There's only one thing keeping the regime in power: the military", The only people standing on the way for Cameroon potentials is the military. When military becomes electorate, judiciary and administration... the old and incompetent can stay in power...", "It was crossfire between the military and infrastructures[12]...to be continued", "A General admitted on record that the military deliberately burn houses! Can you comment on that Mr Minister?"

"How can we imagine that ministers can embezzle state funds and they are allowed to live like kings", "The devil has no shame", "Where on earth can a notorious thief caught red handed quickly and simply confess and admits his criminal acts just like that, he prefers to be hang", "Short sightedness is really killing this octogenarian regime", "What I see here is idolization of some incarnates in the name of humans", "Preparing to take over your land if the last person falls. The Ngarbuh inccidence has really motivated you and now you are thinking of other ways to completely eliminate every body in Ambazonia, that why you are thanking the head of state, Paul Biya...."

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[10] The president of the Republic who had appointed them.

[11] The former minister of communication who used to consider the military as being professional.

[12] Meaning the military burnt houses.

9. The government of Cameroon's reaction

9.1 The senior divisional officer

On the 19th February, 2020, [23] sent out the post below: "SDO for Nkambe, if separatist did the massacre in Ngarbuh why you people reduced the number of deaths to only 5".

This means that all the government officers were liars and were not working for the interest of the population but for the government. They did everything to maintain the regime in power against the people's will: The people had this to say: "What a simple nice question? SDO,oya. Answer the question", "He is still working on the report", "God has a way of exposing these barbarians by simply making them confess their crimes directly or indirectly", "A very good question", "Shame to Cameroon government, a country where all authorities are liars", "Admission of guilt, they killed 32-5=27 people, acquiescence is not acceptable, it simply means, they know they did commit the genocide but want to share little of it with the Separatists. They failed to see that they started the war which is still ongoing and they cannot fault the defenders in anyway, whatsoever.", "God has a way of exposing these barbarians by simply making them confess their crimes directly or indirectly", "Tens of people have been killed. We all see them excluding those who have died in the bushes after sustaining gun shots. If LRC gov't were honest about their claim, the exact figures would have been published but by the simple act of downplaying the numbers is telling enough of their guilt. They are trying to conceal their crimes, and in so doing they naively exposed themselves", "God will see us through. It's ordained",

9.2 Government criticism of human rights' report

Human Right condemned the massacre and called for an independent investigation: "The murders of civilians, including children, committed under horrific conditions, are heinous crimes that should be effectively and independently investigated and those responsible brought to justice," said Ilaria Allegrozzi, senior researcher on Africa at Human Rights Watch. "To deny that these crimes were committed adds further trauma to survivors and will only encourage government troops to commit further atrocities."

According to [18], the minister of Communication hit back at a recent report published by Human Rights Watch over the Camerron's military involvement in the Ngarbuh massacre and burning of houses. Reacting to the report during a press briefing on Thursday in Yaounde, Communication Minister Rene Emmanuel Sadi described the report as overtly biased and rejectted all accusations. He stressed that the Head of State has ordered for a commission of inquiry which will publish its findings soon and there was no need for organizations to go ahead and publish what he described as false information on the incident without having gone to the scene to carry out investigations. He said Human Rights Watch has no material evidence to support their assertion and denounced their approach which to him is an attempt to undermine the image of Cameroon and the stability of the institution.

Ambazonians expressed optimism stating that La Republique needed not to deceive themselves because they did not cover the truth of what happened at Ngarbuh on 14th February forever. They also added La Republique's thugs were panicking already because no amount of distraction and obfuscation could save them. They equally expressed the hope that they would be dragged to the International Court of Justice for their crimes against Ambazonians. They equally wished there had been satellite images to uncover the truth of Ngarbuh. However,

they depended on God because they believe He is awake. They said no matter what they would get freed one day and reiterated that they were their own enemies because of their their "divide and rule fallacy".

10. Resistance and internalization of the massacre

10.1 United Kingdom and the commonwealth

Facebook reports had it that two angry Cameroonians attempted burning themselves up with fuel in front of the Cameroonian Embassy in London, in protest against the Ngarbuh massacre. The two victims were rescued by the British police and administered medical care. The writer commented that the Ngarbuh massacre was yet to be over in the minds of many people world-wide and the worst case scenario in retaliation to that incident was expected in the coming days as southern Cameroonians looked forward to having black Friday that week. This post by Aeron Kaah was widely shared and commented [24].

The martyr was considered as a BAS UK member. They asked for Divine intervention and complained that they have cried a lot until their tears could no longer flow because they were living in a painful moment and environment: "God of mercy protect us,", "God have mercy on us. Oh look at your beautiful children", "God Almighty is watching", "Ohhh God, please help us for the pain is tooo much" "Everyday ooh na so so cry ooh,[13] water don finish for my eyes. God have u become an IDP[14] too?? Come to our rescue", "My fellow Ambazonian please hold yourselves together, don't add more pains on us please we know that it hates my brothers take heart LRC government and its allies shall never go unpunished", "That's a good move hope I could be found where I could as well burn myself rather than shamelessly being alive while innocent children are roasted without any sympathy", "The ngarbuh messacre is so painful it calls us all whether you belong to which political party," "This shall continue until the international community does something. Even if they don't want to listen to Ambazonia, let there be Justice for ngarbuh".

According to [25] in a post entitled: We must not sleep, emphasized that, they too shall not sleep as our children and our unborn Ambazonians are being burnt alive by a beast. He said President Rawlings called Biya a "beast" after the Ngarbuh massacre. He called on his fellow Ambazonians in the UK to follow up the African Bar letter they had sent to their MPs[15] in the United Kingdom. He called on them to contact commonwealth countries via their respective embassies in London, to shame them and question their loyalty to Africans since they were mute following the Ngarbuh massacre, and to remind Namibia that she was a South African colony that was rescued from the hands of apartheid colonial master (South Africa). They were offered their independence because Ethiopia and Liberia had taken their case to the International Court of Justice. Despite this, Namibians had ignored their quest for independence.

Kenya which was the Chair of the commonwealth and ought to have called for action against Cameroon had remained indifferent. Ghana's President who gave the impression that he was a moderate and could not be influenced by the west had said nothing about the genocide in Southern Cameroons despite the calls for actions to be taken against Biya from his fellow statesman: Rawlings. He concluded that those African leaders were still puppets to Britain but they had to give them tough

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[13] We only cry everyday until our tears have dried off.

[14] Internally Deplaced Persons.

[15] Members of Parliament.

time and tell them what they thought about them. They had to hold them responsible for the genocide in the Southern Cameroons. Ambazonians had to ask them to DISMISS Cameroon from the Commonwealth for failing to respect the values and principles of the organization or those countries themselves should leave the Commonwealth. He gave them the numbers of the various embassies for them to talk with their ambassadors to let them know that they had failed African children in order to please colonial powers.

This post was widely shared and it received some of the comments below: "We have to be very serious here because UK is the heartbeat and focal point in this our case of Southern Cameroons due to their colonial role. More pressure should be mounted on them to stand up at once", "Oh my God! Can u imagine Namibia ignoring us when I can remember way back in the primary school, our class six madame never allowed us rest with one song with opening lines..

"Namibia..... Oh oh Namibia...

Namibia... Your woe is our woe...".

"If we make like this it will be as if we are begging them let us arm our RFS and see how the professional military will beg us", "Great job bro and thanks for the sharing", "Only God will do what no man can do. Ambazonian be strong for the almighty is with you", "Good one comrade", "Good strategy".

10.2 Commonwealth secretary-general's reaction

Gina Informs shared the Commonwealth Secretary-General Patricia Scotland's reaction after the Ngarbuh Maasacre [26]: "I strongly condemn the recent killings of civilians, including women and children in the North-West of Cameroon on 14 February 2020. We noted the Government announcement that there would be a full investigation into the incident. We encourage the Government to conduct an impartial investigation, for perpetrators to be held accountable and for results to be made public. The Commonwealth strongly condemns all forms of violence, and in particular, the loss of lives of innocent civilians including women and children.

Cameroon is a noted member of the Human Rights Council and as such we are minded of General Comment 13 to the Convention on the Rights of the Child to freedom from all forms of violence which is underscored by the understanding that no violence against children is justifiable, all violence against children is preventable."

Southern Cameroonians blamed her for not helping them enough and that she had collected a gift from the Government in order to be quiet and labeled her as a noise-maker and a pretender: "When this Scotland or Poland Woman came to Cameroon, what did she say and collect? After corruption sealed your lips, you can now blow grammar from that end. God is watching", "After receiving a Golden statue she is acting up. Corruption knows no shame. She should be ashamed", "All this useless noise makers. Are they not fueling people with hate instead?", "If she was serious she would have suspended Cameroon from the CW[16] long ago but she enjoys the statues she gets from yde,[17]" "man tell that lady to shut up. She should stop playing holy."

10.3 The United Nations

On the 16th February, Aaron Yancho Kaah sent a post entitled: Ngarbuh massacre. 'The UN visit to this village is a Non-event' cries an insider. [27] The post

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[16] Commonwealth.

[17] Yaounde.

stated that, more than a dozen UN field staff had arrived to Ngarbuh: a farming community, to investigate the massacre of the more than 35 peasant farmers who were mostly children by trained Cameroun soldiers on Valentine's day and that there was an infiltration of LRC's agents in that mission and that some people loyal to the Biya's regime in those communities had been brainwashed and paid to testify that they saw Amba fighters committing those acts. The post noted that those communities were gripped by fear and would say anything henceforth to secure their lives and freedoms. The post concluded that, it was inconsequential and a non-event that nothing should be expected out of it and that the Southern Cameroons civil society consortium had called for an independent thorough investigation into these killings that had left Southern Cameroonians in tears world-wide.

The following were the reactions: "What are we doing with an investigation? Total Retaliatory plan is what we needs….. take out the traitors. Simple", "UN has first hand information my bro. They don't work on propaganda, so there are under agents", "If you were tagging the UN and US congress members that would have reached power eyes and ears", "My brother was shot at Ichim on the 14th Feburary by amba and he died in hospital with reason that he voted, meanwhile he did not vote. What have you got to say about this?", "wickedness in the both camp's."

On the 25th February Aaron Yancho Kaah sent another post which went viral with about 176 shares on the entitled "Look Here please.." [24]. He wrote.

Information reaching us this morning confirms that Danjuma popularly known as DJ the good Samaritan who helped the UN and Human Right Watch to access vital pieces of information about the Ngarbuh Massacre is under going severe torture and assault after been kidnapped by cameroun soldiers at gun point yesterday. There concerns he may have been killed today as the Biya regime struggles to conceal the story behind the Ngarbuh attacks. There is a commanding demand for the UN to give it's witnesses protection unless they want to discourage everyone from telling the truth. "The intimidation of villagers and eyes witnesses of the Ngarbuh massacre is scary and many of the victims are on the run to Nigeria with their families" reported an insider on thr line to Donga today.

10.4 United Nations secretary general's reaction

According to [28] UN SG Antonio Gutteres through spokesman reacts to the Ngarbuh Massacre. The Secretary-General is deeply concerned over reports about the killing of civilians, including children, in an attack on the village of Ngarbuh in the North-West Region of Cameroon on 14 February. He extends his deepest condolences to the families and calls on the Government of Cameroon to conduct an investigation and to ensure that those responsible are held accountable. The Secretary-General calls on armed actors to refrain from attacks against civilians and to respect international humanitarian and international human rights law. He reiterates the readiness of the United Nations to work with stakeholders towards a political solution to the crisis in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon through meaningful dialog.

11. Ambazonians' reactions against the United Nations

The people responses to the killing of Danjuma and the United Nations' Secretary General reaction indicate they did not have to rely on an international community but themselves and it instigated them to take arms and fight the more. They considered Cameroon an unsaved zone.

"Terrible", "This is sad. More reason why UN must take serious measures.", "Why did the UN allow him unsaved???????", "God safe him from these wicked people", "Hi Camemeroon Na Danger Zone", "Wondering where this world is heading to", "Oh JESUS", "Truth always surface (LRC will never succeed in Jesus name Amen)", "They should share this and even to that UN office to let them know what's happening after they left", "Where is the UN. Why is the UN afraid of Biya?"

They considered the UN SG as being evil, a nincompoop, and being unfair in their decision because according to the commentators, a person who has committed a crime cannot investigate himself. They called on him to leave a legacy by thinking of his being a father too to children like those massacred at Ngarbuh. His non-action was considered as a disgrace.

"Look at his face! Traces of evil all around it", "You ask the person who burnt houses for bi firefighter and again at the same time arson investigator. Wandas", "Tell him I said that he is a nincompoop ", "Mr S/G what legacy will you keep behind after your turn of office is over? Sir you are a disgrace to mankind and to father-hood", "I wonder who he is sending condolences to….; Is he speaking with dead people?" "If I understand well, the UN is insinuating that arm groups are attacking civilians and may have committed the crime. All anglophones have been sold into slavery by the UN", "I see to refrain attacks against civilians and do what? Continue killing themselves? Why are these people this wicked?", "I wander who brought this man as secretary general at the UNITED Nations. I know America regret this very man",

They considered the United Nation as being powerless comparing it to a toothless bull dog and that actions were better than comments. Since he could not use his office to right the wrongs committed during independence, they then consider him as a noise-maker. They considered him as someone prone to corruption than justice and also as the worst UN SG ever. Guterres was considered as a criminal, an accomplice and a collaborator to dictators and repressive governments. They are labeled as blood-suckers who were happy when people are killed. They show their hatred to the UN because according to them, it is a useless organization.

"Toothless bull dog" you are the father of all nations, when your children are bloodily fighting, you look for means to forcefully call them to order and for negotiation, you do not sit in your comfortable chair and said u're ready to welcome the protagonists", "Mr.S/G! You need to act. The time has come for ur organisation to act. no more time for comments and condemnations. Or are waiting to see all of Southern Cameroonians in graves before u wld know things are not getting better over here.", "Two sides Cutlass condolences, and to think that this folk can use the office given him to solve the errors of the UN, in the 60s make me sick", "Nonsense noise-maker. We need actions and not your usual noise Mr. SG", "It is now very clear to us that ever the UN have been both over with money what shame. But we will never so render because you will killed time to last man standing", "Antonio Guteres the worst UN Secretary General ever. You are waiting for a full blown war before you act? Shameless!",

"Forget about them, all of them are blood suckers AU, UN and what so ever, these are occultic groups, when innocent babes are killed, they are happy, how can you be asking the perpetrators to investigate, what is he investigating, the government profession…", "Time to dissolve this Divided Nations bullshit. It's sickening, how eat and fart doing nothing. Is LRC and Southern Cameroon such a complicated equation to solve? Put this case in court for God's sake!", "Empty man who only have increased on his own organization while many are dying, is it today that they see our people dying in their numbers", "What in any of those lines is new?", "Is it calling on the government to investigate or respect human rights?, "Useless organization. Let them keep asking Cameroon Government to investigate untill every one is killed. Toothless bull. I hate UN. Useless organization",

They considered the UN SG evil because he was trying to cover up the situation in the Southern Cameroons because according to them, President Paul Biya was not going to investigate the massacre.

"The UN is a useless organization. A toothless bulldog. It should be dissolved. Its serves no purposes", "Same useless song", "Pls ask dem to stay quite, we dis generation demands action or dere should stay quite forever.!!!", "The same language every day, "Which Dialogue again?, How many times will the UN claim innocence that they never know Biya can never be sincere about q meaningful political settlement or are they buying time enough to enable the entire anglophones be destroyed?, "He and his UN are always and ever concern about worsening situations around the world. Rubbish", "Cameroon is one and indivisible no one have a right on this fighting", "Clowns!", "Anthem", "Bullshit", "Nonsense," "Shame", "Talk is cheap!", "Papa get out", "Politics dirtiest Game ever", "Fuck them all. They keep on talking but can't do anything. Demonic organization, "See face,", "Cowards UN they are not even brave enough to come to southern Cameroon", "Toothless bulldogs, fuck", "Hypocrites",

12. The United Nations call for investigation

Nelborg Steve on a post entitle:, DEVELOPING NEWS initiatially posted by Jenifer DK, indicated that the UN had called for an independent international investigation into the Ngarbuh massacre including: Ofen-Tiben massacre., Menka-Pinyin massacre, Bakweri town massacre., Buea Town massacre, Muyuka massacre., Ekona massacre., Munyenge massacre, Kwa-Kwa massacre, Wum massacre, Weh massacre, Esu massacre, The killing of baby Martha, The beheading of Sam Soya, the burning of mami Appih.

Southern Cameroonians appreciated the move by saying: it was "Spirit-lifting", "The sleeping UN is gradually getting up from sleep", 'And Florence Ayafor's case, I was shocked to see that Video from a Catalonian activist page", "Let the investigation only be done thoroughly. Other killings be done for it's a genocidal act", "Good news", "Why have they not included this imam that they used and failed to protect", "Excellent! But what about the Guzang Massacre, the beheading of Ayafor Florence, the Krugwe Massacre? Ok ooh", "Better late than never", "GOOD NEWS", "just the beginning", "Matters arising from the minutes. Slowly but surely the world is awakening from the stupor."

13. Theoretical implication

When the military burnt houses, rape women, massacre people as they did in Ngarbuh, the government labeled them as professional and disciplined soldiers while the separatists who defended themselves against the outslaught of the soldiers are considered terrorists. On the other hand, the separatist also labeled the military as terrorists. Who then is a terrorist? In the perspective of the government which is struggling to maintain the territorial integrity of the country, it is the separatists who are trying to cut off themselves from La Republique Cameroon.

Therefore, the labelling theory is very applicable in this work. It is an attempt to explain deviance as a social process by which some people who commit deviant acts come to be known as deviants and the others do not. Deviance is seen as a consequence of society's decision to apply that term to a person. Therefore, deviant behavior is what a decision labels as deviant. The critical point here is not the behavior itself but why the behavior was labeled as deviant. Not all who engage in deviant activities are labeled deviant but some are [29].

Patrick Ekema who fought against the separatist movement was given a medal for patriotism wheras the separatists considered him as him as their worst enemy. He did the worst of thing sealing business people's shop and was even accused of murder. All senior government workers are labeled by Southern Cameroon separatists as enablers because they did all they could to disrupt the revolution by cooperating with the government. They are labeled as good people by the government not because what they do is good but that their actions help the government to maintain territorial intergrity. They are very insensitive to the cries of their people, they do not denounce the military atrocities but instead help the military to fight against their people. Therefore, the people labeled them as devils, terrorists, vampires, as people suffering from mental problem etc.

They labeled the United Nation as powerless comparing it to a toothless bull dog, a noise-maker, criminal, an accomplice and a collaborator to dictators and repressive governments, blood-suckers who were happy when people are killed, a useless organization because of its inability to take action and to listen to them.

14. Conclusions

The rise and spread of new ICTs has transformed the way that society is organized, which of course include social movements. As a result, satirical material, fake news which are Internet-based publications purporting to be genuine news sources which propagate inaccurate stories based on rumor or blatant untruths have come to stay. This is enshrined in the post-truth politics which refers to a political culture wherein debate is more emotional and contrary ideas are hardly welcomed. The most popular fake news stories during the Ambazonian crisis have been shared more widely than the most popular mainstream media reports and it provoked a lot of reactions.

No Facebook posts received as many comments as the one which carried the reaction of the minister of communication in which he styled the military as professionals and the separatist fighters as terrorists. Ambazonians knew the truth which other Cameroonians did not know. After the killings and burning of houses, the separatist fighters buried the dead. The more the truth is hidden, the more the wound widen, the more tension increases, the more trust is destroyed and the more the war will prolong and which may probably end up widening the divide between the two peoples. Martial solutions only help to radicalize the population and encourage them to defy state institutions.

Their comments were a call for rebellion because the state considered everyone of them as Amba so they had to carry gun and fight. They wondered how the government could refuse to acknowledge such genocidal acts and were determined to pick up arms against the government and to force the Francophone out of their land. The people question the trust of the government and the government thinks it can only regain it through intimidation. They felt helpless in front of international organization.

In reactions to the post on Facebook, the Ambazonian people poured frightful curses on government officials and wish they mysteriously died. They labeled them as wizards and wished them mad and they thought they were demon possessed. They mocked them by saying it happened in Mali. They think that they will be consumed by their own evils. The comments also exposed the wickedness and inhumanity of the government and the Francophone community, labelling them as devils and terrorists, and vampires as people suffering from mental problem.

Another aspect of the comments dwelled on divine reliance or intervention, truth and divine justice. They thought the government supported the military and

promoted them to fight against them. That is why they relied on divine intervention They reminded them that God exists and He is awake and protects those who fights for the truth and He will punish those who murder the innocent people. They were certain that God will exhaust their prayer and a time would arrive when those killing them will be unable to continue doing so. Not only did they wish them deadly diseases but that God would punish them from one generation to another. They ask on God to protect them.

They were optimistic considering the present as temporal which means that they were going to be triumphant because according to them God is on the throne and He is a God of justice and would disgrace the wicked they believed. They invited their brothers in Ngarbuh to wait on the Lord because evil has never prevailed and God is for the helpless. Therefore their messages gave solace to those who were affected. They also showed that the state had failed in its duty to protect the population. It was quite perplexing for them to understand why an army should kill instead of protecting the population, why those who criticized the army are tracked and punished. They concluded that the army was there to satisfy the government and their creator and not the population and God. One also clearly sees the feeling of impartiality in their write-ups: A situation where conclusions are drawn without full knowledge of the situation, a situation in which a third party is lacking: They made a mockery of the system and the use of military force for survival and said it was a system without trust and were kept in power by the military.

They considered the UN SG as being evil, a nincompoop, and being unfair in their decision because according to the commentators, a person who has committed a crime cannot investigate himself. They called on him to leave a legacy by thinking of his being a father too to children like those massacred at Ngarbuh. His non-action was considered as a disgrace.

They considered the United Nation as being powerless comparing it to a toothless bull dog and that actions were better than comments. Since he could not use his office to right the wrongs committed during independence, they then consider him as a noise-maker. They considered him as someone prone to corruption than justice and also as the worst UN SG ever. According to them, he was a criminal, an accomplice and a collaborator to dictators and repressive governments. They are labeled as blood-suckers who were happy when people are killed. They show their hatred to the UN because according to them, it is a useless organization.

Therefore Internet-based news is people-friendly because it helps them to express their feeling which is in cossonance with the post-truth politics.

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Chapter 12

Framing Xenophobia on Social Media: An Analysis of Xenophobic Attacks on Nigerians Living in South Africa

Emeka Umejei

Abstract

This study examines mis-and disinformation concerning xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa in 2017 and 2019. The study uses narrative theories and netnograhpy involving thematic content analysis and focus group discussions with undergraduate university students, youths and adults across the three dominant regions of Nigeria. The study answers the question: what motivates Nigerians to share mis-and disinformation concerning xenophobic attacks against Nigerians living in South Africa on social media? The findings of this study suggest that national solidarity is an overriding motivation for sharing mis-and disinformation about xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa on social media.

Keywords: Xenophobia, national solidarity, social media, Nigeria, South Africa, reprisal attacks, tensions

1. Introduction

The Nigerian rumour mill is usually on overdrive. It is an industry that is resilient and immune from the vagaries of the Nigerian political and economic climate (Odunfa [1]). The affordances of digital technology have, in no small measure, contributed in weaponizing the Nigerian rumour mill. Now, rumours, misinformation, disinformation and half-truths travel at the speed of light and reach a wider audience. This is the case of xenophobic attacks against Nigerians living in South Africa in 2017 and 2019 in which rumours, mis-and disinformation resulted in reprisal attacks on South African businesses in Nigeria. A typical example of how the Nigerian rumour mill works is the story of a Nigerian, who was among those that attacked South African-owned Shoprite at The Palms Mall in Lagos, Nigeria. When the young man was asked why he joined others to attack Shoprite and other South African businesses in Nigeria, he responded that xenophobia, a Nigerian living in South Africa had been killed by South Africans. Hence, attacking South African businesses was the only way he could get even with the death of xenophobia in South Africa. Even though this story has not been verified, it goes to show the potency of mis-and disinformation and how it could have adverse impact on the government-to-government as well as people-to-people relations between two countries. For instance, mis-and disinformation has been identified as factors

responsible for reprisals attacks against South African businesses in other African countries (Osuagwu & Elebeke [2]; Somdyala [3]). Chenzi [4], p. 3 explained that "foreign nationals residing in South Africa share content with their relations who reside outside South Africa about their xenophobic experiences." He emphasised that the social media content these foreigners often share about xenophobic violence in South Africa at times, turn out to be misinformation, leading to reprisal attacks [4]. However, there is limited academic investigation into the motivation for sharing mis-and disinformation concerning xenophobic attacks against Nigerians living in South Africa on social media. This chapter provides an insight into factor (s) influencing Nigerians to share mis-and disinformation concerning xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South. The finding has both academic and policy relevance for the literature on mis-and disinformation as well as South Africa-Nigerian relations.

2. Background

Xenophobia has attracted widespread attention within and without the academic community. The reason is obvious; it is considered an anomaly that foreigners, particularly Africans, would face the magnitude of hatred that Xenophobia spews. The first major xenophobic outbreak in post-1994 South Africa happened on 11 May 2008 and there have several other outbreaks of violence against foreigners in South Africa. While recent incidents may not be of the same magnitude as the incident of 11 May 2008, its recurrence points to a troubling relationship between locals and foreigners. For instance, on 30 May 2013, 25-year-old Abdi Nasir Mahmoud Good, was stoned to death in Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The violence was captured on a mobile phone and shared on the Internet.[1] Again, on 7 June 2014, a Somali national was stoned to death and two others were seriously injured when an angry mob of locals attacked their shops in Mamelodi, South Africa. Three more Somalis were wounded by gunshots and their shops were looted.[2] In April 2015, there was an upsurge in xenophobic attacks throughout the country. The attacks started in Durban and spread to Johannesburg. Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini was accused of igniting the attacks with his remarks that foreigners' resident in the country "should go back to their countries."[3] In October 2015 the serene town of Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape recorded an outbreak of xenophobic attacks on foreigners. According to the news report, more than 500 people were displaced and more than 300 shops and homes looted. Muslims were identified as the target of the attacks.[4] While South Africa witnessed a modicum of peace after the Grahamstown xenophobia outbreak, it ruptured in February 2017 when another xenophobia outbreak was recorded in Pretoria, South Africa. The incident took a new turn on 24 February 2017 when a large-scale anti-immigration protest suspected to have official approval, according to the Nelson Mandela Foundation, erupted in the capital city of Pretoria.[5] The Protesters marched to the Foreign Ministry and handed a petition to government representatives. Protesters accused immigrants of taking jobs from South Africans, causing crime

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[2] http://www.worldbulletin.net/news/138539/two-dead-in-xenophobic-attacks-in-s-africa

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[5] https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/anti-immigration-march-is-march-of-hatred-nelson-mandela-foundation-20170224

and complained that "they are arrogant and they don't know how to talk to people, especially Nigerians." The February xenophobia outbreak affected many Nigerians resident in Pretoria, who the locals accused of being "arrogant and don't know how to talk to people."[6] However, xenophobic attacks on Nigerians in South Africa escalated in 2019 resulting in the repatriation of more than 600 Nigerians, who were flown home aboard Nigeria's Air Peace.[7] Both incidents resulted in reprisal attacks in Nigeria but it was more fatal in 2019 resulting in the closure of the South African High Commission, South African-owned Telco, MTN, Shoprite and other South African businesses in Nigeria.[8] Even though the repatriation of Nigerians from South Africa incited reprisal attacks, it was mis-and disinformation on social media that worsened it and stoked tensions between South Africa and Nigerian relations. Hassan and Hitchen [5], p. 3 show that in Nigeria, disinformation is most effective when it draws on existing narratives and contexts to sharpen existing social divides and aimed at "delegitimising institutions, groups or personalities, glorifying a leader or, during elections, confusing voters, instigating apathy or marginalising women and other vulnerable groups."

3. Xenophobia or Afrophobia?

The occurrence of xenophobic violence has become a feature of the lived realities of foreigners who reside in South Africa. Xenophobia has been defined as a hatred for foreigners (Steenkamp [6]; Williams [7]). However, Harris [8], p. 2, contends that Xenophobia extends beyond hatred; rather, it should be redefined to "incorporate practice" because it is not just a "dislike or fear of foreigners but a violent practice that results in bodily harm and damage" [8].

The South African Migration Project (SAMP) identified several factors responsible for the outbreak of xenophobic violence. Some of these include isolation, relative deprivation, Nation Building, Public and official discourse, Legislative and policy Frameworks, Human Rights Education, Data and Information, Public and Officials Discourse, Opportunities for Interaction, Going beyond the Debate(s), Peer Education, and Establishing a Network (Crush et al. [9]). For his part, Harris [8] identified three hypotheses responsible for the occurrence of xenophobia in South Africa including the Scapegoating hypothesis; the isolation hypothesis and the biocultural hypothesis. However, the perception of African migrants as the economic threats has been identified as a major causative factor in the occurrence of xenophobic violence [9]. This was highlighted in the SAMP survey of 2006, which noted that attitudes towards foreigners as a national threat to the economic well-being of South Africans have hardened. For instance, the survey result showed that "the proportion of South Africans arguing that foreign nationals use up resources grew by 8% from 59% in 1999 to 67% in 2006. Furthermore, the survey also highlighted that migrants are being increasingly associated with crime rising from 45% in 1 1999 to 67% in 2006 as did the idea that migrants bring disease 24% in 1 1999 to 49% in 2006" [9], p. 3.

On the other hand, xenophobia does not apply to all categories of foreigners in South Africa. Black Africans bear the brunt of xenophobic violence outbreak in South Africa. Steenkamp [6], p. 442 explains that xenophobia is carried out along

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[6] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/24/south-african-police-use-force-anti-immigration-protest-pretoria

[7] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/nigeria-begins-repatriate-nationals-south-africa-190911074310949.html

[8] https://www.voanews.com/africa/nigerians-attack-south-african-businesses-retaliation

certain categories. The major targets of xenophobic attacks in South Africa are black migrants, who are perceived as economic threat to black South Africans. Therefore, the incidences of xenophobia in South Africa could be majorly considered as "Afrophobia" because it is majorly targeted at African migrants' resident in the country.

Unfortunately, this contradicts the role of other Africans nations during the apartheid era when South African exiles were accommodated and educated in other African countries [6]. During this period, several high profile South African political leaders took shelter in other African countries, where they were accommodated, supported and encouraged to sustain the struggle against the Apartheid government in South Africa. For instance, Thambo Mbeki was posted to Nigeria as Deputy head of the ANC's Department of Information and Propaganda. Additionally, many Nigerians were taxed to provide assistance to the ANC-led struggle against apartheid. In fact, it is estimated that the Nigerian government provided an annual subvention of $5million to the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) to aid the struggle against the Apartheid regime at the time.

4. Theoretical framework

Prinsloo [10], p. 130, explains that narrative is universal because it is "recognised as crossing all social and cultural divides." Narrative is, therefore, a sense-making mechanism for understanding the real world (Fiske [11]; Wigston [12]). This study draws on structuralist approach to narrative analysis, which combines the syntagmatic and paradigmatic. Prinsloo [10], p. 133, explains that "the syntagmatic type of analysis identifies and describes the structure of formal organisation of the text following the chronological order or the linear sequence of the narrative while a paradigmatic type of analysis seeks to identify the deeper latent patterns or organisations which underpin the story." Hence, a combination of syntagmatic and paradigmatic "approaches enable questions of positioning and power to be posed" (Prinsloo [10], p. 157). Also, structuralism "relies on binary opposition in order to transfer meanings in the easiest way because we make sense of concepts and ideas by contrasting them with their opposites [12], p. 142. Levi-Strauss explains that when "two characters are opposed in binary structure, their symbolic meaning is virtually forced to be both general and easily accessible because of the simplicity of the difference between them" [12], p. 152. Explaining further, Wigston [12], p. 154, pointed out that Levi-Strauss is not "interested in the sequential development of the narrative, but rather in the relationships between the various characters and their settings and hence, binary opposition then provide us with a means of undertaking a paradigmatic analysis of a text where we can determine these relationships." Therefore, by analysing the binary oppositions in a text we can "uncover the ideological and manipulative structure of the values embodied in that message" as well as "reveal deep structures below the surface of the message that are not immediately clear but are implied in every opposition" [12], p. 172.

This study draws on Propp and Todorov narratives theories. Propp's model like Todorov's provides a means of identifying the conventional narrative structure in a text. While Propp and Todorov models are useful for comparing text, other analytical devices such as Levi-Strauss binary opposition is needed to gain deeper insight into the structure of a text [13]. Hence, this study combines Propp and Todorov narrative theories to analyse the framing of the February 2017 and August 2019 xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa on social media. This chapter is concerned with the narrative of xenophobia on social media and how it influences emotion, rational and sentiments among Nigerians [10], p. 130.

4.1 Social media and fake news

The affordances of digital technology have resulted in the rise of mis-and disinformation with dire consequences for truth and credibility of the media (Wasserman [13]; Schifferes et al., [14]). Wasserman and Benequista [15], p. 35, explain that the "ease with which media can be produced online has made it possible for rumours, untruths, and disinformation to spread and threaten the credibility of the news media." The use of social media to manipulate public opinion has become a global challenge and sub-Saharan Africa is not an exemption. The role of Cambridge Analytica in election manipulation in Kenya and Nigeria is a pointer to this reality (Granville [16]). For instance, it is estimated that "organized social media manipulation has more than doubled since 2017, with 70 countries using computational propaganda to manipulate public opinion" (Howard and Bradshaw [17]). This has adversely impacted the average level of trust in the news across all countries (Nielsen et al. [18]). Even leading religious leaders such as Pope Francis of the Catholic Church has acknowledged fake news is a "very serious sin."[9] Chenzi [4] explained that "fake social media content about the xenophobic violence in South Africa is one of the triggers of reprisal attacks against South African businesses and nationals in other parts of Africa [4]. This is because most the content they share with their loved ones back in their home countries are likely to be "fake news leading to reprisal attacks" (Chenzi, [4], p. 3). This study examines the motivations for sharing mis-and disinformation concerning Xenophobic attacks against Nigerians living in South Africa on social media.

5. Methodology

This study is a netnograhpy involving a thematic analysis and focus group discussions. It uses narrative theories, thematic content analysis and focus group discussions with undergraduates and postgraduate students, adults under 40 and adults above 40. The two complementary methodologies enabled the author to collect comprehensive information on the motivation for sharing mis-and disinformation concerning xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa (Sade-Beck [19], p. 49). In a netnograhpy three categories of data are recognised including archival data, elicited data, and fieldnote data (Kozinets [20], p. 4). This study uses archival data from messages posted on xenophobic attacks against Nigerians living in South Africa on Twitter and Facebook. First, the study developed a codebook for categorising Propp's seven characters (see **Table 1**). Second, a total of 581 Facebook posts were harvested manually in relation the xenophobia outbreak of February 2017. Furthermore, the study focused on Facebook accounts with more than 2000 followers. This reduced the number of Facebook accounts to 100. These accounts were further coded using Google form. The Twitter analysis focused on the tweets of *@JJ Omojuwa*, who is regarded as a social media influencer in Nigeria. *@Omojuwa* is a known public opinion moulder, who also works as a consultant and runs a foundation. He is highly regarded within the Nigerian social media space. His Twitter account is also verified evincing his status as a social media celebrity in Nigeria. *@Omojuwa* has 560,000 followers on Twitter, which makes him a major influencer of events in Nigeria and Africa at large. The Twitter analysis is focused on the debate ignited on Twitter by *@Omojuwa's* tweet on the February 2017 Xenophobia outbreak. *@Omojuwa's* tweets were also selected because he travelled to South Africa within the period of the February 2017 xenophobia outbreak and was

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[9] https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2016/1208/Why-Pope-Francis-says-fake-news-is-a-sin

Entries	Categorisation
South Africans are evil, south Africans are jealous of Nigerians, South Africans are lazy, they are ungrateful for the role Nigerians played in ending apartheid	Villain
Nigerians are victims of South African wickedness, jealousy	Princess
Seeks peace and reconciliation between Nigeria and South Africa	Hero
Portrays themselves as the hero seeking for the betterment of Nigerians but they are fuelling the conflicts by posting fake news	False hero
Calls on the Nigerian government to rescue Nigerian citizens leaving in South Africa	Dispatcher

Table 1.
Code book.

asked for detailed identification by South African border police, which resulted in his being delayed for a few hours. Rather than frame his tweet on this incident as an immigration issue, *@Omojuwa* framed it as a continuation of xenophobic attacks on Nigeria.

Second, A total of eight focus group discussions were held across the three dominant regions of Nigeria. Each of the focus group discussions lasted between 50 and 90 minutes and were conducted in English. In instances where the Nigerian colloquial English was used it was translated to English language. A total of 68 participants joined the discussion in groups ranging from 8 to 10. The discussion guide was structured around five sections, each containing a list of key questions to be asked in all focus groups, and a set of additional questions to be asked at the discretion of discussion facilitator.

6. Analysis

An analysis of the Facebook posts and tweets suggest there are five broad themes that dominated social media framing of xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa. The themes are: *Retaliate, Lazy and ungrateful, Jealous and inhuman, Irresponsible government, South Africans are barbaric*.

7. Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis focused on a few accounts on Facebook and Twitter. The accounts were selected for relevance and reach. Three accounts were selected purposively including @Engr.Chris Moore, AY COMEDIA, and YAW on Facebook and @JJ Omojuwa on Twitter.

Engr. Chris Moore's profile on Facebook describes him as a former system administrator, who lives in Milan, Italy. He is followed by 2138 people on Facebook. On 18 March 2017, he posted the following message on his Facebook wall:

> *Fellow Nigerians please, stay away from South Africa because of their xenophobic attacks on Nigerians in their country. Please, travel to countries that can at least protect your human right. Please, keep sharing to keep our citizens from travelling to such country.*

This post was accompanied by five gory pictures. Four of the pictures were from the 2008 xenophobic violence in South Africa. The fifth picture was from a scene

of *necklacing*[10] in Nigeria. This post was shared by 1596 people, liked by 82 people and attracted 124 comments on Facebook. While responding to comments to this message, *@Engr.Chris Moore* sustained this narrative with another post that "South African government is not doing anything to arrest the situation" but this is not true because about 136 South[11] Africa protesters were arrested by the South African police on February 24 during the anti-immigrant protest in Pretoria.

The post by *@ Engr. Chris Moore* ignited widespread debate on Facebook about xenophobic attacks on Nigerians resident in South Africa. However, most of the debates were informed by alternative facts and stereotypes. This is because most of the participants in the debate are not resident in South Africa (see **Figure 1**) and relied on secondary sources. This was highlighted by some of the respondents, who pointed out that the pictures posted by *@Engr. Chris Moore* were old pictures that had been used elsewhere. For instance, *@Ehis Ese* confirmed that one of the pictures was that of an armed robbery perpetrator that was *necklaced* in Warri, Delta State, Nigeria: "Dis guy was a thief and was burnt last year in estate *roundabout* in Warri, Delta state. I mean this particular guy but I don't know about the rest" (Sic). *@Oscarpedro Osagie* also noted: "Wrong. This photograph was on before this incident". Another respondent, *@Mountain Omobaorun Ododo Omoleye*, who is resident in South Africa also pointed that the pictures were not a true reflection of the incident of February 2017: "Hello people this post and the pictures, I have not seen this picture and the news here in South Africa, pls which path of South Africa did this happen" (Sic). A South African *@Mapie Mhlangu* queried why *@Engr. Chris Moore* was spreading fake news on Facebook: "But Why are you spreading fake news?"
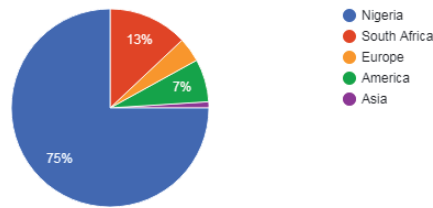
AY COMEDIAN is a celebrated Nigerian comedian, whose Facebook account is a community. *AY COMEDIAN* lives in Lagos Nigeria and his Facebook community is followed by 4, 718,434 people. On 23 February 2017 *AY COMEDIAN* posted a picture of a man being mobbed by an angry crowd with the following message: "Xenophobia: Angry South Africans Mob Brutally Attack a Nigerian Man in SA." The man that was being attacked cannot be identified through the picture because his face was not visible. How *AY COMEDIAN* knew that the man being attacked was a Nigerian demystifies human knowledge but the picture helped promote the narrative that South Africans were attacking Nigerians that are resident in South Africa. The source of this picture was given as *gistvilla.co* but this is a non-existent news site. This particular post was shared by 433 people, liked by 1400 and attracted 1200 comments. Another post by *YAW*, a leading Nigerian comedian and radio host also promoted the same narrative of xenophobia. YAW is a community on Facebook followed by 241, 455 people. On 27 February *YAW* posted a video on Facebook with the following message: "Another video of South African youths shooting a young man to death in the xenophobic attack has emerged. Watched the video below." The source of the video was given as *http://yawnaija.tv/xenophobic-attacks-south-africa-2017/.* First, the video in question was not produced in South Africa because the actors in the video spoke the Arabic language, which suggests it could have been in any of the Arabian countries in Africa. Secondly, the source of the video was traced to Yaw's online news site which goes by his own name, *http://yawnaia.tv*. However, this video was used to promote the xenophobic narrative that

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[10] Necklacing. This is an approach to summary execution and torture by forcing tyre round the neck of victims. It is a common practice in Nigeria. For further detail, See https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/world/2012-11-28-necklacing-murder-of-students-shocks-world/

[11] https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/p2-136-arrested-in-pretoria-during-xenophobic-violence-phahlane-20170224

Figure 1.
Geographic location of social media handles.

South Africans were attacking Nigerians resident in their countries. This post was shared by 46 people, liked by 54 and attracted 20 comments. Furthermore, YAW posted another three pictures with the message: "We are all foreigners somewhere." Two of the pictures were from the 2008 xenophobic outbreak in South Africa but were used to frame the incident of February 2017.

On Twitter, the analysis is focused on @JJ *Omojuwa's* tweet in response to the outbreak of xenophobia in South Africa. *Omojuwa* tweeted about the February xenophobia outbreak in South Africa on March 2 to his followers: "Xenophobia: Stop being ingrates-Thabo Mbeki." This was former President Thambo Mbeki's message cautioning South Africans to replicate the friendliness that other African countries showed to South Africans during apartheid. The tweet attracted 62 retweets and 29 likes. After this post was made on March 2, @*Omojuwa* travelled to South Africa on March 4 and was asked by South African border Police to provide further details about his trip, which he could have done without attracting attention but it presented him an opportunity to promote the xenophobic narrative about South Africans. However, there were a few of @*Omojuwa's* followers who saw through the attempt to frame an immigration issue as xenophobia. One of his followers with the handle @*LuamboJT* replied that it was all about Omojuwa's arrogance: "my man, your arrogance will put you in danger some other days, last time I checked, no Nigerian has been killed in SA." In another tweet, @*LuamboJT* cautioned @ *Omojuwa* that "the big issue to be addressed is your attitude my man, you don't go to a foreign country and say things you were saying."

8. Retaliate

The responses in this category urge Nigerians to retaliate against South Africans by either attacking their businesses in Nigeria such as MTN, Shoprite or attacking South Africans that are resident in Nigeria. A Facebook post by @*Aniebonam Rusky Lotachukwu* captures the majority of framing in this category. He responded to AY COMEDIAN's post with the following message: "I swear the war has just begun..... Nigerians *gonna* burn down any shop or business owned by South Africans since South Africans seem to be wise.....soon South Africa will fall like an ass and will be one of the poorest country because no country now is happy with their devilish behaviour" (Sic). Another Facebook response by @*Juliet Nganwaozuzu* reproduced the same narrative: "We should start killing all the South African people that are in Nigeria without mercy please enough is enough" (Sic). This category comprised 38.7% (see **Figure 2**) of social media posts on the February xenophobia outbreak in South Africa. This suggests that Nigerians are in support of a reprisal attack in the face of xenophobic violence against Nigerians resident in South Africa.

Words used to describe South Africans
75 responses
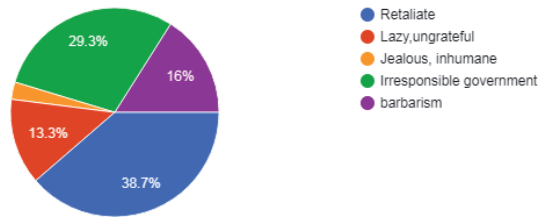
Figure 2.
Words used to describe south Africans.

8.1 Lazy and ungrateful

Messages in this category suggest that South Africans are ungrateful for the help rendered to them by the Nigerian government during apartheid, when some of their citizens were sheltered in Nigeria. For instance, *@Omoabass Kafayat Anifowose* responded to AY COMEDIAN's post that: "Just South Africans are ingrate so easy to forgetting the favour Nigeria did for them. We stood by their side and we fought for them. So to kill Nigerians is what to pay them back?" (Sic). Messages in this category comprise 13.3% (see **Figure 2**) of social media posts on the xenophobic violence of February 2017.

8.2 Jealous and inhumane

In this category, South Africans are framed as being jealous of Nigerians because they are hardworking and attract the attention of South African women. A Facebook post by *@Allan Donann* is representative of the framing in this category. He posted in response to *@AY COMEDIAN's* post that: "I just can't believe how a fellow black man will treat his fellow black man like this. This is absurd and inhuman. The lazy mind is a frustrated mind. Why blame your failures on hardworking people" (Sic). Another Facebook post by *@Jayne Bahanack Betow* responded thus: "I will say this loud and clear without mincing words and in all confidence.... These very lazy South Africans are super jealous of hardworking Nigerians....I am a Cameroonian and I witness how hardworking, consistent, smart and intelligent Nigerians are when it comes to business and other essential and lucrative things.... And we Cameroonians admire and respect them for that. Guess what? Many Cameroonians are beginning to learn from them.....so please South Africans enough of this hatred and jealousy instead try to learn from them" (Sic). This category comprises 2.7% (see **Figure 2**) of social media post on the xenophobic attack of February 2017.

8.3 Irresponsible government

The responses in this category frame the South African government as is responsible and doing nothing to arrest the attacks on foreigners living in the country. For instance, *@Olufemi Obembe* posted that: "I feel that South African authorities are not responsible. They are supposed to protest lives and properties of everyone living in their territory, most especially foreigners" (Sic). This category comprises 29.3% (see **Figure 2**) of social media posts on the xenophobic outbreak of February 2017. This suggests that many Nigerians think that the South African government tacitly support xenophobic violence on Nigerians resident in their country.

8.4 South Africans are barbaric

In this category, South Africans are framed as barbaric and wicked. For instance, *@Tee Jay* responded to AY COMEDIAN's post that: "Being confronted by two South Africans before on the street and they said all Nigerians must die without saying anything to them; had to run for my life because they hold knife". In the same vein, *@YemmyOcean Ige* responded to *@Engr. Chris Moore* thus: "Why are d South Africans bad minded as dis, it's not right oooo, let all Nigerians there come back home oooo, Abeg" (Sic). This category comprises 16% (see **Figure 2**) of social media posts on the xenophobic violence of February 2017.

9. Interview analysis

9.1 Southwest under 40

The majority of participants in this category are likely to share misinformation on social media platforms if it involves the mistreatment of Nigerians in the diaspora as a means of group solidarity. This is evinced in the xenophobia outbreak in South Africa in 2019 when videos from the 2008 xenophobia attacks in South Africa were shared as that of 2019. This resulted in reprisal attacks on South African business interests in Nigeria. One participant in Lagos, Nigeria mentioned that she felt that sharing misinformation about xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa amounted to doing good. This suggests that Nigerian youths are likely to share mis-and disinformation about xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa is a way of expression national solidarity with Nigerian victims.

9.2 Northeast under 40

In the northern part of Nigeria, Participants under the age of forty are also likely to share fake news to show solidarity with Nigerians being maltreated in the Diaspora. One participant said he shared fake videos on the 2019 xenophobic attacks against Nigerians living in South Africa to make Nigerians know what was happening to fellow Nigerians in South Africa.

9.3 Northeast above 40

Also, for participants above 40 years of age in the northeast of Nigeria did not share misinformation on Xenophobic attacks against Nigerians because they felt it could result in reprisal attacks. So, most of the people in the age bracket of 40 years and above in the northern part of Nigeria are not likely to share such videos.,

9.4 Southeast above 40

In the southeast, the view that Nigerians are likely to share mis-and disinformation concerning xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa as a form of national solidarity is valid. Some participants said they shared videos from the xenophobia outbreak of 2008 when it reoccurred in 2019 leading to reprisal attacks in parts of Nigeria. One participant mentioned that he shared misinformation concerning Xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa but pulled it when he found out it was false:

> *I have been a victim of sharing false news/information from people like the xeno-phobia in South Africa. I got pictures of events that happened before that xeno-phobia. I went as far as sharing it, but when I came back to verify the authenticity of the news, I discovered that those events had already happened long ago. So, it is false from my side, I pulled it down.*

9.5 Nigerian students

Nigerian undergraduate students are also likely to share trending misinforma-tion that has elements of patriotism and emotions. For example, participants shared fake news on the July 2019 xenophobic attacks on Nigerians resident in South Africa without verifying it. This is because the xenophobia outbreak in South Africa was the trending news on social media especially Twitter at the time. So, for undergraduate students sharing videos of xenophobic attacks from 2008 as that of 2019 was part of trending on Twitter and garnering more followers. One participant said he did not care to verify the videos he shared on social media when he saw someone that someone was being burnt alive; it angered him and he shared it on social media but he later realised that it was from the 2008 xenophobic attacks in South Africa:

> *When I saw the video of someone who was burning; and there was someone adding fuel to the fire, I was angered and has to share it on Twitter. Later, I started seeing on Twitter that the video was from the 2008 xenophobic attacks. I deleted it and put up the link to where they said it is fake news.*

This student was one out of many undergraduate students who found it respon-sible to delete a misinformation posted on social media and also put up link showing it was fake news. This could be considered an isolated instance not the norm among undergraduate students in Nigeria. Another undergraduate student regurgitated a Nigerian stereotyping of South Africans of being lazy people who are jealous of hardworking Nigerians. This stereotyping happens on both sides of the divide. While South Africans tar Nigerians with the label of drug peddlers, Nigerians retort that South African men are lazy and jealous of Nigerian men, who are winning over their women:

> *If you look at a typical South African man, he is lazy, no offence...he is actually a very lazy person and people come into your country to help you, just like Chinese people come into our country to help us build airport, did we kill them?*

This view correlates with one of the themes identified in the framing of xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa on social media, Lazy and ungrateful. There is a perception among Nigerians that South Africans are lazy ad ungrateful for the role Nigeria played in bringing an end to apartheid in South Africa.

On the other hand, for postgraduate students, most of them said that they only share contents that are verified. Hence, they did not share fake videos on xenopho-bic attacks on Nigerians because they were unable to verify the authenticity of such content. The findings in this segment suggest that Nigeria youths are more likely to share mis-and disinformation concerning xenophobia as a form of national solidar-ity especially when it involves the 'mistreatment' of Nigerians in the diaspora such as the incident of Xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa in 2017 and 2019.

10. Conclusion

This chapter answers the research question: What is the motivation for sharing mis-and disinformation on xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa on social media? The chapter answered this question through an analysis of social media-Facebook, Twitter framing of both incidents as well through focus group discussions across the three dominant regions of Nigeria. The findings suggest that the framing of the February 2017 xenophobic outbreak in South Africa was based mis-and disinformation and reproduction of stereotypes on social media platforms (see **Figure 3**). Alternative facts accounted for 65% of the framing while 35% was based on fact. For instance, 80% of the posts on social media-Facebook and Twitter- framed South Africans as villains while 16% were framed as the false hero (see **Figure 4**). An analysis of the geographic location of the social media accounts-Facebook and Twitter-suggests that majority of them are domiciled in Nigeria (see **Figure 1**). For instance, 75% of the social media accounts are resident in Nigeria and relied on secondary sources, to frame xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa; 13% are resident in South Africa and 7% are resident in America (see **Figure 1**). Consequently, the framing of the xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa in 2017 and 2019 were based on rumours, untruths, mis-and disinformation emanating from the Nigerian rumour mill. Also, analysis of interview suggests that there is a general consensus among Nigerians that sharing mis-and disinformation about xenophobic attacks on Nigerians living in South Africa amount to some form of national solidarity; a show of patriotism to save
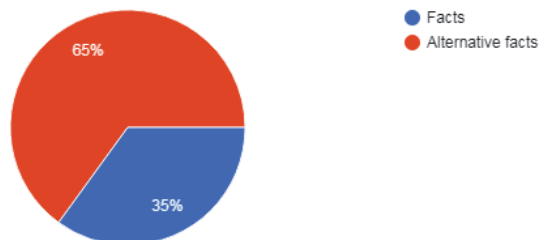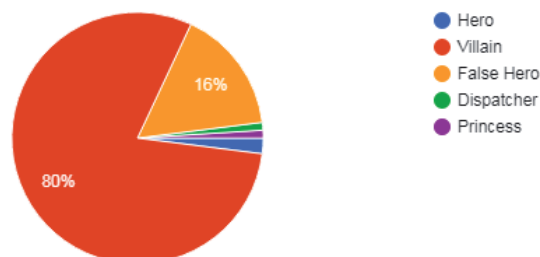

Figure 3.
Category of social media posts.

Figure 4.
Categorisation of social posts.

Nigerians from the dangers of living in South Africa. This point is validated across the three dominant regions of Nigeria as well as among undergraduate students. Consequently, this results in reprisal attacks and diplomatic tension between the Nigerian and South African governments. For instance, the Senior Special Adviser to the President on International Affairs, Honourable Abike Dabiri rebuked South Africa's Minister of Home Affairs, Malusi Gigaba's that "it appears that Mr. Gigaba would rather dwell on and entertain himself with diplomatic niceties when the welfare of Nigerians resident in South Africa are at stake now more than any time in recent history. His response to the xenophobic attacks, which has now become a recurring decimal on Africans, most especially Nigerians living peacefully in their host country of South Africa was, indeed, unfortunate."[12] Additionally, the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs followed up with a summon on the South African High Commissioner to Nigeria: "The High Commissioner of South Africa to Nigeria is being summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during which government's concerns on this matter will be brought to his attention."[13] The findings correlate with Chenzi's [4] that mis-and disinformation about xenophobia on social media is a leading factor for reprisal attacks on South African businesses in Nigeria and diplomatic tension between Nigeria and South Africa.

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[12] http://www.pulse.ng/news/local/xenophobia-abike-dabiri-erewa-slams-sa-minister-id6287420.html

[13] http://www.pulse.ng/news/local/xenophobia-foreign-ministry-summons-south-african-envoy-over-attacks-on-nigerians-id6255692.html

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COVID-19 Infodemic and Indian Media: An Evaluative Study

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Abstract

The global widespread of novel COVID-19 also witnessed fake news being circulated in social media. Dealing with these infodemic and providing authentic information was a big challenge for the government and media professionals. The present chapter is an attempt towards this direction to evaluate the role and initiatives of Indian media in dealing with fake news and providing authentic information to the people. A desktop analysis approach of news channels, news websites will be used to conduct the study. The study also lists various credible sources, myth busters and fact checkers on COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, infodemic, fake news, media, journalism

1. Introduction

The outbreak of novel COVID-19 across the world, parallelly witnessed various misleading information, rumors, fake news and misinformation referred as infodemic by WHO [1]. A study of PAHO (Pan American Health Organization) reveals that about 361,000,000 videos were uploaded on YouTube with keyword "COVID-19" and "COVID 19"; 19,200 articles have been indexed by Google Scholar on COVID-19; and 550 million tweets have been found in March with keywords "coronavirus," "corona virus," "covid19," "covid-19," "covid_19" or pandemic [2]. The overabundance of information generated on COVID-19 especially scientific and medical information and its rampant sharing without being vetted is critical for a pandemic. Fake information often dissolves the available authentic information. The uncertainty and anxiety arising from COVID-19 has provided the perfect base for immediate and widespread sharing of fake information.

Newspapers, News channels, News websites are potential medium for people to seek information on latest topics and events. News stories and articles published in these channels generate awareness, guides and inform people in many ways. According to Schmidt et al. [3] news coverage aims to report any event effectively and present various perspectives of the event. Amidst the current pandemic situation news agencies are continuously serving people with information on COVID-19, its preventive measures, guidelines issued by the government and fake information being circulated. A need was henceforth identified to study the role of news agencies in controlling the fake information.

According to WHO [4] myths related with COVID-19 are scattered on various domains. Some of the most common myths are:

1. Hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine used for malarial patients can be used to cure COVID-19.

2. Masks should be used during exercising also.

3. COVID-19 can spread through shoes.

4. COVID-19 is caused by bacteria.

5. Use of mask for longer duration can cause CO_2 intoxication.

6. Alcohol consumption can prevent from COVID-19.

7. Thermal scanners can identify COVID-19 infection.

8. COVID-19 is transmitted through flies.

9. 5G mobile networks are spreading COVID-19.

10. Sun exposures prevent from COVID-19.

11. Pneumonia vaccines prevent from COVID-19.

12. Using saline water to rinse nose prevents COVID-19.

13. Garlic consumption reduces the risk of COVID-19.

According to Naeem and Bhatti [5] "in such a rapidly changing situation, with millions on lockdown, social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and WeChat, have become major sources of information about the crisis." Another study of Islam et al. [6] points out that "Facebook, Twitter, and online newspapers have been identified as the best platforms for monitoring misinformation and dispelling rumors, stigma, and conspiracy theories among the general people." A need was therefore felt to analyze the websites of news channels to study the approach adopted to control the fake information. Researcher identified two key roles of media professionals in the current pandemic situation: (a) To generate awareness among the people; (b) To disseminate authentic information and filter fake information.

2. Scope of study

The scope of study was limited to the websites of Indian news channels. Future studies can be carried on news programmes focusing on mis-information, comparative study of print and electronic media, larger samples can also be considered for study.

3. Methodology

Desktop analysis approach validated in earlier studies of Nash and Churchill, 2020 [7]; Yuvaraj, 2020 [8] was used in the study. WHO has notified some misinformation related with COVID-19. In the present study researcher evaluated the

S. No	News channel	URL
1	AAJ TAK	https://www.aajtak.in/
2	ABP NEWS	https://www.abplive.com/
3	ZEE NEWS	https://zeenews.india.com/
4	Republic BHARAT	https://bharat.republicworld.com/livetv
5	NDTV India	https://www.ndtv.com/
6	NEWS18	https://www.news18.com/

Table 1.
Websites of news channels.

coverage of Indian news channels on the misinformation topics notified by WHO. The official websites of news channels was considered for the study. Each topic notified by WHO was searched on the news websites and the information obtained was subjected to analysis. **Table 1** shows the websites considered for study.

Researcher used the fake news segments enlisted on WHO myth busters [4] webpage to evaluate the fake news covered by the news channels. The criteria are listed below:

- 5G Mobile networks

- Alcohol

- Antibiotics

- Bleach

- Cold weather, snow

- Drugs

- Garlic

- Hand dryers

- Holding your breath

- Hot and humid climates

- Hot baths

- Hot peppers

- Houseflies

- Hydroxychloroquine

- Masks, CO2 intoxication

- Masks, exercise

- Medicines

- Methanol, ethanol

- Mosquitos

- Older people, younger people

- Pneumonia vaccines

- Recovery

- Saline

- Shoes

- Sunny and hot weather

- Thermal scanners

- Ultra-violet (UV) lamps

- Viruses, bacteria, antibiotics

4. Findings

The findings of the study are summarized below.

Table 2 and **Figure 1** shows the coverage of news by the news channels where Aaj Tak channel webpage had more news articles or post (38) than other channels followed by ABP News (35).

It can be seen from the analysis that Aaj Tak covered 38 issues followed by ABP News 35 issues, 33 issues by Zee News, 29 issues by News 18 and Republic Bharat out of 28 major misinformation topics identified by WHO. These channels covered 2–3 news stories on a misinformation related with COVID-19. At times when print media is also suffering, as most people have stopped subscribing to print newspapers due to fear of COVID-19, Indian media is responding through electronic media and news websites to cater to the information needs of the people.

5. Conclusion

The current study found the active role played by the News channels in combating fake news and making people aware about authentic information. Media has to play an important role in pandemic situation as there is no any proper vaccine or drug to treat COVID-19. Only awareness and following preventive measures is the key to overcome the current health crisis. The study also validates that the key role identified by researcher (a) to generate awareness among the people; (b) to disseminate authentic information and filter fake information is actively being carried by the Indian media. Also, tackling infodemic is a big challenge. In order to control the rapid spread of fake information through social media there is a need to monitoring or regulatory body to filter information on the web. Also, government should authorize institution or organization who can issue information so that people can also identify

S. No	Segments	AAJTAK	ABP NEWS	ZEE NEWS	Republic Bharat	NDTV	News 18
1	5G Mobile networks	3	2	2	2	2	2
2	Alcohol	5	4	3	2	4	3
3	Antibiotics	1	1	0	0	0	0
4	Bleach	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	Cold weather, snow	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	Drugs	1	2	1	2	1	1
7	Garlic	2	2	2	2	2	1
8	Hand dryers	0	1	1	0	0	1
9	Holding your breath	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	Hot and humid climates	1	1	1	1	1	1
11	Hot baths	2	2	2	1	1	1
12	Hot peppers	0	0	0	0	0	0
13	Houseflies	2	2	2	2	2	2
14	Hydroxy chloroquine	2	2	2	1	1	1
15	Masks, CO2 intoxication	0	0	0	0	0	0
16	Masks, exercise	1	1	1	1	1	1
17	Medicines	2	1	1	1	1	2
18	Methanol, ethanol	2	2	2	2	2	2
19	Mosquitos	1	0	0	0	0	1
20	Older people, younger people	2	2	2	2	2	2
21	Pneumonia vaccines	2	2	2	2	1	1
22	Recovery	1	1	1	1	1	1
23	Saline	1	1	1	1	1	1
24	Shoes	1	1	1	1	1	1
25	Sunny and hot weather	2	2	2	1	2	1
26	Thermal scanners	2	1	2	1	1	1
27	Ultra-violet (UV) lamps	1	1	1	1	1	1
28	Viruses, bacteria, antibiotics	1	1	1	1	1	1
		38	35	33	28	29	29

Table 2.
Coverage of news post on fake news.
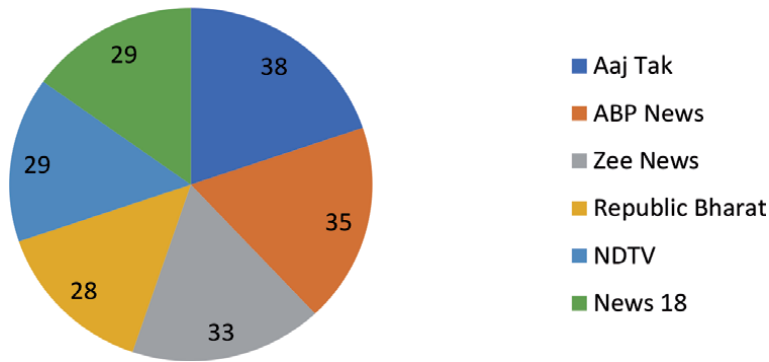
Figure 1.
An overview of coverage of each channel.
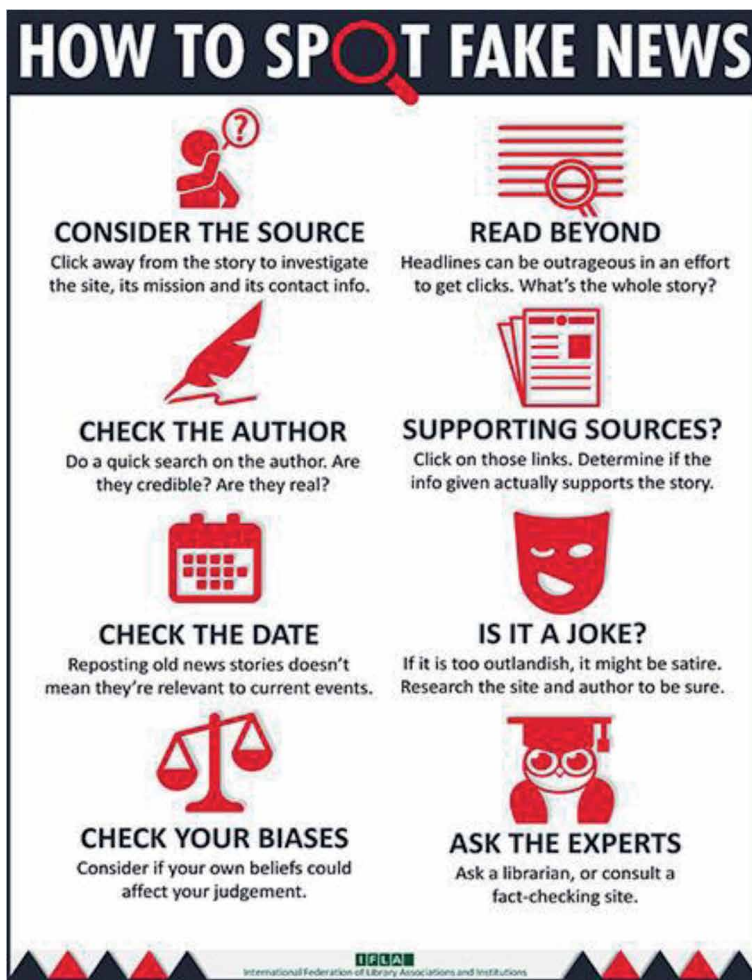
Figure 2.
IFLA guidelines on fake news [9].

credible, authentic information and easily figure out fake information. Similar research can be carried to evaluate the role of media. The present study was limited to the websites of news channels. It would be interesting to conduct a study of news programmes focusing on fake information and carrying a comparative study of print

and electronic media. One can follow the recommendations below to evaluate the information and overcome infodemic.

6. Guide to identify fake news

Global library association IFLA has released an infographic to spot fake news shown in **Figure 2**.

Alternatively, WHO mythbusters website (**Figure 3**) can also be used to get authentic information related with COVID-19.

News Guard (**Figure 4**) can also be used to get trusted information from the Internet.

Some of the trusted information sources on COVID-19 are:

1. https://www.who.int/emergen.../diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

2. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html
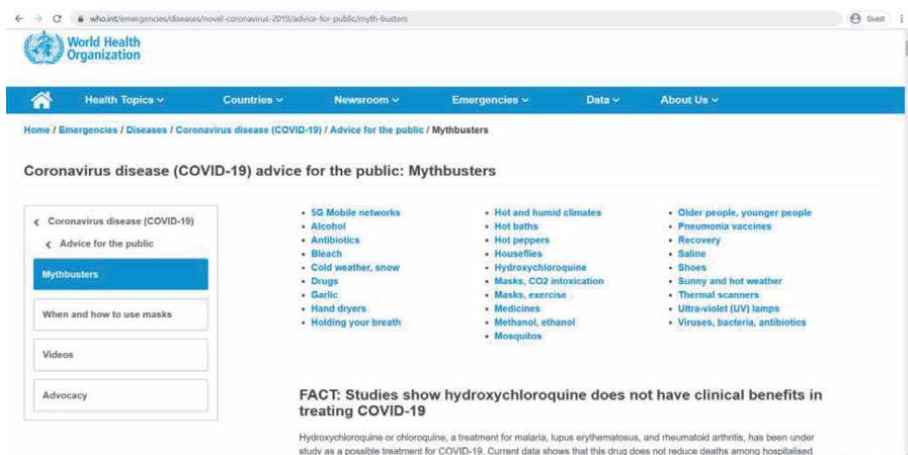
Figure 3.
WHO mythbusters on COVID-19 [1].

Figure 4.
NewsGuard [10].

3. https://experience.arcgis.com/.../685d0ace521648f8a5beeeee1b9...

4. https://www.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html...

5. https://pages.semanticscholar.org/coronavirus-research

6. https://www.kaggle.com/allen-ins.../CORD-19-research-challenge

7. https://www.mohfw.gov.in/

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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[10] News Guard. Available from: https://www.newsguardtech.com/ [Accessed: 2020-08-01]

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We live in the era of the digital revolution characterized by easy access to obtaining, processing and disseminating information on a global scale. The emergence of these global digital spaces has transformed the world of communication. This shift in our understanding of what we should be informed about, when and how, manifests itself not only within mature liberal democracies, which grant their citizens and the media constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech and rights associated with obtaining information, but also within developing countries with different types of political establishments. Moreover, many media producers, especially journalists and persons claiming to be journalists, abuse their crucial mission and, instead, foster a set of serious communication phenomena that threaten basic human rights and freedoms, weaken them or decelerate their development. The publication is focused on the ways fake news, disinformation, misinformation and hateful statements are spread across society, predominantly within the online environment. Its main ambition is to offer an interdisciplinary body of scholarly knowledge on fake news, disinformation and propaganda in relation to today's journalism, social development, political situation and cultural affairs happening all around the world.