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PhD dissertation summary

Fake news as a media product in the times of post-truth; Blue Whale Case Study

PhD dissertation written under the supervision of prof. UW, dr. hab. Tadeusz Kowalski
The issue of the dissertation

Post-truth, which was defined and described many years ago, was announced in 2016 as the word of the year. This significantly influenced the perception of this phenomenon, and above all, the interest in it by the media and scientific communities. This also began a discussion on the issue of truth in the media, manipulating public opinion and the value of information, especially of the "breaking news" variety. As a result of changes taking place in the modern world, such as the proliferation of the Internet, it has become necessary for the media to adapt to the challenges that technological progress has forced on them. The cultural change that followed has meant that the internet, which was to be a key tool to improve mass communication, has become a threat to it. Traditional media such as the press, radio and television not only had to enter the online sphere but above all face competition in the form of small broadcasters and ordinary internet users, who began to take over the role of broadcasters and distributors especially through their activity on social platforms. The lack of regulation and supervision amongst publications that appear on the web has led to information overload, which has manifested the inability to distinguish between true and false content. The latter is included in the collective concept of fake news, which is misinformation containing something true but often distorted or out of context. Disguised as factual information causes the recipients to be misled, including journalists, so that fake news is disseminated by all types of media, regardless of the source. The quick pace in which it spreads post-publication means that they reach a very large number of recipients and the lack of control often prevents the information being disclaimed or corrected, thus causing visible changes in social attitudes and their radicalisation.

The reason for addressing the issue of fake news in this dissertation is the intensification of this phenomenon over recent years and the increase of its importance in the public discourse. The fight against false news, which has been undertaken by institutions of many countries, including the media, prompts a reflection on the definition of truth in the media as well as the potential transformation of how it’s communicated. Without understanding fake news, determining its characteristics or how it spreads, it will not be possible to try to eliminate it or at least limit it within the media sphere. The position of journalists and the media environment regarding fake news is also crucial, as well as the opinions of publishers and editors preparing publications. The attitude of the media towards the issue is crucial as they are often burdened with complete responsibility for distributing fake news. They, in turn, transfer these responsibilities to social platforms, claiming that fake news is produced by users of these
platforms, not journalists. It is therefore important to know how the media treat fake news, how they perceive it, when they publish it, as well as how and why they do it.

One of the popular fake news that has spread around the world in recent years, chosen as a case study for the dissertation, is the story of an internet game called the Blue Whale. The game was based on performing various tasks which ultimately led teenagers to suicide. Interestingly, despite the fact that the source text that started the media panic had numerous shortcomings when it came to fact verification, and the existence of the game was quickly eliminated, it did not prevent the spread of fake news around the world. Thus, a piece of global fake news was created and the impact was very clearly felt in various areas of social life: from the reaction of the educational and medical environments to the most important people in state and law enforcement agencies.

The dissertation presents an analysis of media materials from Polish and international media while paying special attention to their content, in order to present the method of transmitting information about the Blue Whale, demonstrating the level of compliance of the publication with facts, as well as references to information about the fact that the game does not exist. Varying attitudes towards the phenomenon of fake news in different countries and the way of describing it as well as the attitude towards reports from other media centres are also presented. Attention was paid to the essence of the phenomenon and its impact. The analysis was performed on materials from 30 countries around the world, from different continents, which gives the analysed case a global character. Delving into issue also showed the convergence between the characteristics of fake news and the category of media product.

The case of the Blue Whale was taken under consideration due to its extremely wide impact, the rate of proliferation, as well as the nature of the information which was published about it. So far, this is one of the few cases of fake news on a global scale that has not yet been written about in the literature. Currently available scientific publications have fairly broad coverage of the theory of fake news and its presence in the field of politics, mainly due to the high-profile election campaign of Donald Trump. However, there is still a lack of research on how to present fake news in the media and its real-life examples, which can be attributed to the relatively short lifespan of false information which had such a wide range that can be observed in the 21st century. This is an extremely important aspect due to the wide impact of fake news. Fake news about the Blue Whale is news which could apply to anyone, regardless of age, gender, origin
or political preferences. It deals with an important problem - suicide - so its detailed analysis is important not only in the media but also in the human aspect.

**Thesis and PhD goals**

Changes within the media industry demand the verification of existing types of media products and determine the emergence of new ones. The main purpose of research undertaken for the purpose of this work was to check whether fake news has become such an important element of the media ecosystem as to include it within the classification.

In recent years, the perception of the media as a source of information has changed. Studies published by international research institutes show a slight decline in the popularity of traditional media such as television and the press, with a clear and growing interest in the internet as a source of information. Much more often than in previous years, users also get information from social media, i.e. where there are no filters and anyone can post information as long as they don't breach the terms and conditions. It should be remembered, however, that the process of media convergence has led to the mixing of genres. Almost every television station has its own internet portal, where it publishes news more regularly than they do on-air in the traditional sense.

The same has happened with radio stations and press editorial offices. The recipients are not always aware of where the material being viewed or read by them comes from. What they see on the internet may have been prepared on television, and what is being broadcast on television may be based on material from the internet. In the case of fake news, the source of which often cannot be determined due to the multitude of publications, it is difficult to point out one distribution channel or type of media responsible for it. Often, the only key is the subject of fake news.

The main thesis formulated in this PhD covers not only the convergence of fake news and media product features but also the characteristics of the phenomenon of false information such as its viral nature, the lack of structuring of how fake news propagates, its dynamics and impact on the audience.

With the advent and dissemination of the internet and its most important feature, the anonymity of users, the reproduction of unverified and often untrue messages has been left unchecked. Because of the system the internet has become - diverse and quick - the audience can instantly
satisfy their curiosity without having to check whether the information they received and are transmitting is true. Due to the lack of content control mechanisms, the online sphere also accelerates the spread of fake news compared to the time when only traditional media existed and it itself became part of the clickbait culture.

**Work structure and research methodology**

The work has been divided into seven parts. The introduction discusses the subject of the thesis, the motives behind its selection, research hypotheses, as well as the purpose of the dissertation, the chosen methodology and research techniques. The theoretical foundations of the assumptions adopted in the thesis and key concepts used in the dissertation were presented. The introduction also contains the main bibliographic items and source texts as well as the general structure of the work.

The second chapter covers the issue of truth in the media as well as the characteristics of the phenomenon of post-truth. Classic and non-classical concepts of truth described in philosophy have been considered, as well as attempts to define both truth and lies. The analysis also covered the category of media truth, showing how the influence of the media on social life has built up over decades and how the media was used by influential environments to achieve their goals.

The third chapter presents the definition of a media product, which is a very broad term, perceived by a set of benefits that its recipient will ultimately receive. The issue of how information is selected and information policy, which determines the functioning of media enterprises and is implemented depending on the type of media and the assumptions of the sender, was also raised. News - content made public by the media - was presented as one of the media products. It was defined in accordance with Laswell's formula as current information considered by the broadcaster to be interesting. These blurred and fairly imprecise semantic frames contribute to blurring the genre boundaries and the discretionary nature of the news.

Chapter four of the dissertation deals with fake news, its attributes, classifications and accompanying phenomena. Its very definition poses many problems for researchers because there are different variants. From specifying fake news as a propaganda tool, through the cause of political and social trends to psychological warfare. One can also distinguish several of its classifications, among which the most popular is the one based on the content criterion, which
characterizes seven types of false information. The phenomenon which plays a large role in describing fake news, allows it to base itself in the minds of the audience and cover more ground with its activities. This is an information bubble based on the media consumer's tendency to choose content consistent with their beliefs, as well as the associated reverberation chamber effect and the spiral of silence.

The fifth chapter is entirely devoted to the case study of fake news about the Blue Whale using the qualitative method. It includes the source text that began the media history of the game, materials from the Polish media with the highest coverage and selected media materials from thirty countries of the world. The titles of materials, content components, visual components and overtones were analysed. In addition, the effects of publications were categorised as educational and those from authorities or services. These are specific decisions made by the state, triggered by media reports about the Blue Whale. It was also checked whether, if and in how many publications included information about the fact that the story of the game is fake news.

In chapter six, the research covers the awareness of the fake news phenomenon among Polish journalists, as well as their level of knowledge on this subject. The study covers the attitude of the journalistic environment to the phenomenon of fake news, its creation and distribution, based on surveys conducted among the editorial staff of various media. It is important how they define false messages, who they consider to be their main creator and distributor, and what role they see for themselves in the area of neutralising their impact.

The last, seventh part of the thesis is the ending summarising the results of the study. An attempt was also made to assess fake news and how it functions in the media and public space.

**Statement of results**

Combining the analysis of secondary sources (literature, research, reports) and the empirical part (case study) allowed the confirmation of the main thesis of the dissertation that fake news is a media product in the post-truth era.

Qualitative research has shown that creating fake news which has global reach is a relatively simple procedure. Despite the glaring shortcomings in the art of journalism during the preparation of media material, confirmed by the consequences of legal nature, fake news can
arouse interest and spread all over the world. This was demonstrated by the analysis of the source material, from which the story of one of the best known fake news began.

There are several factors that determine the success of fake news and its international impact. First of all, this is the topic of the publication, which in the analysed case concerns a significant part of society and is able to arouse the interest of a wide audience. The titles of materials put common sense on the back burner, which the presence of could have resulted in the verification of facts, which is another factor determining the popularity of fake news. It is the high level of emotional impact on recipients. A clear suggestion regarding a possible threat posed by an event presented in the publications forces the audience to read the content. How the material is presented or announced allows the audience to draw conclusions without needing to go into the details. The choice of words not only immediately introduces the main characters but above all defines them, determining the narrative. All these factors show that fake news responds to the needs of the audience and is aimed at satisfying curiosity or hunger for sensational information. This is conducive to its popularity, which in turn conditions the quick spread of fake news.

The analysis of the content of media materials showed how dynamic the spread of unverified, false news is. The lack of consistency of information and the divergence of facts have become less important in the face of newer emerging reports on the same subject. Although it was confirmed during the creation of the material that the message was fake news, it seems that nothing could stop the appearance of subsequent publications. Their dates are different from the chronology of events, they seem not to refer to it at all. The spread of fake news resembles the life cycle of a virus that appears out of nowhere, spreads very quickly, and then disappears as soon as it appeared. It is impossible to determine the path of information flow between individual countries, except for defining the starting point. It can, therefore, be concluded that fake news spreads in a way that is difficult or even impossible to structure.

It is impossible to specify one type of media that distributes fake news. The publications analysed come from all types of media. Most of the material is available on the internet, but it was not created only by online editorial teams. They are located on specific television portals, radio stations or press editorial offices. Researching the Polish media has shown that even media with the highest coverage, which are expected to have a higher level of content verification, are also responsible for fake news publications. Although qualitative research was limited to one fake news, it showed how clearly it marks its presence in the media ecosystem.
Their appearance has attracted the attention of media from around the world in a relatively short time. Regardless of the cultural area or continent, false information has left its mark not only on the recipients of the media but on society as a whole. The impact of fake news on reality is demonstrated by the authorities' reactions to media reports described in the materials analysed.

In surveys conducted among journalists, one can notice the superficiality of their treatment of the issue of false news. High awareness of the phenomenon and knowledge of the term fake news, do not go hand in hand with the sense of responsibility and the possible consequences it causes. In terms of producing fake news, the media environment is clearly divided. There are journalists who admit to creating fake news, they do it on purpose and do not consider their actions unethical, as are those who find the question of creating fake news offensive, emphasising the leading role of truth in the profession they practice. The results of quantitative research show that there is a lack of standardised procedures in the Polish media for checking the accuracy of information. Journalists do not know how to properly verify received messages or communications. They mostly use the internet, while admitting that it has the highest amount of fake news. There is no common denominator that would clearly define the message as true or false. This insufficient attention to verify sources can contribute to an increased number of fake news in the media.

Summary
Post-truth has become a sign of the times in which modern man lives. Modern tools facilitated incredible progress in civilisation and technical achievements which improved the flow of information and quickly became a threat to social and political systems. The lack of, or low costs of entering the media market, anonymity which guarantees the lack of responsibility for what’s posted, the spread of false messages and the resulting distrust of broadly understood media have led to changes that need to be addressed. Stormy discussions and debates are taking place in many countries and institutions because these phenomena have ceased to be the domain of the media industry and have become an important issue for the whole world. Faced with needing to deal with economic, migration or military crises, strategies need to be developed whose implementation on a large scale would help prevent the destruction of societies. It can take place if all processes that deepen misinformation are not stopped. This is not a simple task but necessary for the world to function in an orderly manner. However, to do this, it is necessary to know and understand the phenomena which the modern man faces. The crisis often becomes
an opportunity to introduce beneficial changes, re-evaluate existing rules and develop new ones.

The considerations made in the dissertation have shown that an attempt to fight fake news can be not only sensible but above all effective. Both the media and consumers of media content are able to ensure the quality of information and thus eliminate false information. First of all, the media should establish verification standards that will be based on clear criteria that can be used by any journalist. They must take into account both the rules of editorial work and the specificity of the work of a reporter or editor who are burdened with a large number of tasks necessary to complete in a short time. Therefore, these procedures cannot be too long because they will not be able to be implemented. It is necessary to determine which sources are the most reliable, which path should be followed from the moment the journalist receives it until the material is prepared on its basis.

The recipient can also take care of limiting the number of fake messages. The postulate of rational thinking comes to the fore, which precludes the non-reflective reception of media content. Using guidebooks such as the one prepared by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions makes it easier to navigate the maze of information. Checking sources or authors of publications does not burden the recipient temporarily or logistically, they can perform these activities from a computer or smartphone. Also, reading texts and viewing materials in full, instead of a brief glance at the headline, allows you to familiarise yourself with the topic.

Education and public discussion are the basis for effective prevention of disinformation. A conscious and active approach to the issue of false information, both of the media and recipients, may in the future result not only in raising the level of published content but in increasing overall knowledge and intellectual level.