

False News and the Public Agenda

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Abstract: *The text proposes to discuss the context in which 'false news' have appeared and developed in the democratic societies and how they function against the public agenda. At the same time, it distinguishes between intentional fake news and non-intentional false news, which will result in deliberate or non-deliberate misinformation and manipulation. The Digital Revolution offers ordinary people the possibility to practise what has been called citizen journalism. As a reply, professional journalists have developed videojournalism. None of the two camps is spared from the false news. Their area of activity is not limited to the political arena that has established them, it aims at all levels of society. The text argues that informational pollution can only be avoided by observing the ethic-professional codes and by increasing the educational level of the information users, so that they may apply and develop examination criteria and systems to enable them to discriminate between false news and true news.*

Keywords: *public agenda, information, opinion, persuasion, manipulation, fake news, false news*

Introduction: the context of the emergence and proliferation of false news

I will start my article by asking a few questions that will eventually lead me to define the concepts I propose. What are we talking about when

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we are talking about mass-media in a democracy and does the press still represent the public agenda? What do we mean by truth and post-truth, by the relativity or the non-relativity of truth, by fake news and the informational war and by false news? It would seem that philosophers, politicians, political analysts or psycho-sociologists have all the answers. Notions such as "fair" or "unfair opinion", "persuasion" and "the psychology of persuasion", "moral" and "immoral" attract or reject each other in a perpetual game of supporting and contradicting, on the free market of ideas.

I have chosen for the present analysis the notions of "fake news" and "false news", the latter defined as a "different type of" fake news against the public interest. First, let us put this in context and answer yet another question: what is the reality these "informational artefacts" are grafted upon? And the facts are: any individual may be a potential journalist today, only because he/she owns a smartphone, can film and download on a social network any deed, committed by anyone, anywhere and at anytime, no matter how important or unimportant it may be, which can make that individual imagine himself/herself as a news author.

Thus, the minimal information unity, the news, seems to suffer radical changes: the answers it should provide to the "wh"- questions, what?, who?, where?, and when? are already given by "anything", "anybody", "anywhere" and "at anytime".

This seems to be a radical change of paradigm! No more personalities, no more spatio-temporal proximity. The social signification of the fact has become utopia, as well as the public agenda it was supposed to serve. And yet, since we are talking about news, we still need to answer the more complicated and, sometimes optional questions, how?, and why? And here seems to be the key to our dilemmas.

They first called it citizen, participatory journalism. Professional journalists rejected it, and rightly so, condemning its diletantism, its lack of credibility, due to unchecked information, decontextualization and lots of other shortcomings.

Then those same professional journalists started to fear its potential "competition" and invented the "mobile journalism" and the "mojo", the "mobile journalist" with his smartphone, functioning like an entire television crew. "Smart jo" may be a better term though, since the videojournalist needs, besides the smartphone, all the qualities of a classic, traditional journalist to enable him/her to produce high quality material. In Europe, the first edition of *Rencontres francophones de la vidéomobile*, held

on February 2, 2017, reunited those francophone professionals who produce videos with their mobile phones. Where did this happen? At the Romanian Embassy in Paris, the organizers being *Samsa. fr*¹, a consulting company founded by Phillippe Couve, journalist at Radio France International, in 2010, and the Romanian Ambassador in Paris, Luca Niculescu, former editor-in-chief at Radio France International, Bucharest. Meanwhile, videojournalism is becoming increasingly visible, and *Rencontres francophones de la vidéomobile* will hold its third edition in Paris, on February 7, 2019.

Mojo and datajournalists work together at *Samsa. fr*. Datajournalism is that type of journalism that treats information starting from data: figures, statistics, maps that need to be 'translated' to become intelligible to the audience (datavisualisation). This has triggered the development of infographics which means data presentation, analysis and explanation. The first conference on datajournalism took place in 2010, in Amsterdam. While in France, there is also a festival called *Mobile film. fr*, started in 2005!

We are thus beyond the false alarms heard in the history of culture and civilization each time a new technology appeared. As time went by, experts announced the death of the theater, the death of the cinema, of the book and of television, until the time of professional journalism to be axed by the unmerciful participatory pseudo-journalism seemed to have come. Yet, as they say, what does not kill you makes you stronger.

At the same time as mobile journalism, Marshall McLuhan's almost biblical prophecy, „media is the message” and his planetary village, abstract concepts in the 1990s, becomes an obvious reality requiring the re-invention of traditional mass-media with a new *savoir-faire* and a new aesthetics. In this sense, the news television channel BFMTV equipped its reporters with all they needed for smartphone filmings and the radio news channel, France Info, has a Mojo live show.

Therefore, as I have said earlier, the change of paradigm is radical: traditional journalism as we learned it requires its practitioners not to interfere with the event, but only to record it or write it down with full objectivity. This is not the case with mojo where the smartphone places the individual into a hyperproximity vis-a-vis the event, transforming him/her into a fully involved actor, instead of just a witness. There seem to be more advantages to mojo: it puts an end to the suspicion, specific to classic television, that editing could manipulate. But the journalist still needs

¹ See <http://www.samsa.fr/>, accessed 20.09.2018.

his/her context. And then, when the war correspondent broadcasts a bombing and films his/her own flight from death, how emotional the mojo becomes as opposed to the traditional journalist!

The deontological aspects of the live images of war, the terrorist attacks, the natural disasters, the road accidents or the idea of the encroachment on private life dim the advantages of hyperproximity, hyperemotionalism, and hyperreactivity. Unfortunately, in this new context of mobile journalism, it has become a practice for classic televisions to pay lots of money for such images captured by amateurs and posted on various social networks. Thus penetrating professional journalism, these networks move the accent on the emotional dimension of information, leaving the rational dimension aside, forgetting that true journalism means to keep a balance between sense and sensibility, to observe a cognitive, general humane, structure. Lakoff¹ explains how emotions are built around certain metaphors, images and narrative structures which help us orientate ourselves semantically, give meaning to the reality we are living in, the sense and the emotional sphere being deeply interconnected. But when pseudo-journalists produce and furnish us information on websites, blogs and social networks, ethics is no longer involved. Any such "author" becomes a performer: "...individul performează și pune în scenă spectacolul <<în beneficiul altor oameni>>. [...] La o extremă, descoperim că performerul este complet implicat în propriul său act; el poate fi sincer convins că impresia de realitate pe care o pune în scenă este chiar realitatea adevărată" (Erving Goffman translated by Simona Drăgan and Laura Albulescu).²

But, „la cealaltă extremă, descoperim că performerul poate să nu fie deloc implicat în rolul său zilnic” and „îl putem numi cinic, păstrând termenul <<sincer>> pentru indivizi care cred în impresia stărnită de propria lor performare.”³

¹ George Lakoff; Marc Johson, *Les métaphores de la vie quotidienne*, Paris, Minuit, 1985.

² "...the individual performs and sets off the show <<for other people's benefit>>. [...] At one extreme, we discover that the performer is completely involved in his own act; he/she can be honestly convinced that the impression of reality he/she is staging is reality itself" (Erving Goffman, *Viața cotidiană ca spectacol*, trans. Simona Drăgan and Laura Albulescu, Bucharest, comunicare.ro, 2003, p.45-46 – my translation).

³ "At the other extreme, we discover that the performer may not be involved in his/her daily role at all" and „we may call him/her a cynic, keeping the term <<honest>> for individuals who believe in the impression caused by their own performance.” (Erving Goffman, *Viața cotidiană ca spectacol*, trans. Simona Drăgan and Laura Albulescu, Bucharest, comunicare.ro, 2003, p.45-46 – my translation).

And yet the mechanism is not that new. In fact, it is the basis of the rumor, defined by Jean-Noël Kapferer as, "zvonul este un produs social spontan, lipsit de scop și strategie" (translated by Marina Vazaca)¹. Exception are those situations when the rumor is created deliberately and reflects the political and socio-economic interests of the source that produces it. The effects the rumor has on the masses and the manipulative force of its emotional constituent can be exemplified in many ways. Two famous examples will suffice here. The first refers to Orson Wells's radio version, in 1938, of H. G. Well's *The War of the Worlds*, a version in the form of a news bulletin announcing that Martians had invaded two big American cities, New York and New Jersey. The panic felt by the population was hard to control, although more recent sources say that we are dealing with a myth.² The second famous example refers to the entertainment show, "Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson" broadcasted in the evening of December 19, 1973, on the NBC channel. As a result of taking over, as gags, a piece of news according to which the American government had been criticized by a congressman for failing to provide an adequate supply of toilet paper, Carson launched a true hysteria of purchasing and forming of personal stocks. The hysteria could not be stopped either by subsequent official declarations, or by Carson's explanation that it had been a joke, everyone being convinced that there was a true toilet paper crisis.³ As a production mechanism that exploits the so-called contemporary citizen journalism's social activism, the rumor does not differ from today's false news, such as: someone posted on a social network a video in which he was driving without his hands on the steering wheel, on the first lane, the speedometer indicated 140 km/hour and the driver was very proud of himself. The press, the *quality* press included, rushed upon that post to make it news, drawing people's attention to the driver's irresponsibility and to the consequences of such a way of driving. The public interest, first and foremost! And yet, a minimum professional common sense and some perceptive faculty would have made people notice

¹ "the rumor is a spontaneous social product without a purpose and a strategy" (Jean-Noël Kapferer, *Zvonurile*, traducere Marina Vazaca, București, Humanitas, 1993, p.45. – my translation).

² M. Chilton, "The war of the Worlds panic was a myth", *The Telegraph*, 6 mai 2016, *apud* Marian Voicu, *Matrioșka mincinoșilor. Fake news, manipulare, populism*, București, Humanitas, 2018, p. 385.

³ J. Dominick, *Dynamics of Mass Communication*, 1983, *apud* Coman, Mihai, *Introducere în sistemul mass-media*, Iași, Polirom, 1999, p.69.

that this was a joke since cars were running on the highway at breathtaking speed which must have meant many hundreds of kilometers per hour. The "speedy driver" must have had his speedometer broken and was making fun of it.¹ The need to make a show, since "the news is not information, but theater"², the battle against the clock, because what matters is who gives the news first, have won against some elementary professional values and qualities, such as the perceptive faculty and the information checking, more than enough to spot the fake in this case. The way we produce and disseminate information in these new media of communication leads us to Guy Debord³'s advice not to be a passive public, a mere information consumer, but to express ourselves emotionally through interaction. Of course, there is a long way from such an example to a true "professionalization" of the deliberate misleading and we do not propose here to define it as, "ansamblul procedurilor dialectice puse în joc în mod intenționat pentru a reuși <<manipularea>> perfidă a persoanelor, grupurilor sau a unei întregi societăți, în scopul de a le devia conduitele politice, de a le domina gândirea sau chiar de a le subjugă. Presupune disimularea surselor și scopurilor reale, precum și intenția de a face rău, printr-o reprezentare deformată sau printr-o interpretare tendențioasă a realității. Este o formă de agresiune care caută să treacă neobservată. Se înscrie în rândul acțiunilor psihologice subversive." (Henri-Pierre Cathala translated by Nicolae Bărbulescu)⁴

Besides the questions we have already asked, we have some more. May we treat any event as mobile journalism? Do we really need to be always connected to a video-mobile? Does the quality of information improve with

¹ See https://www.dcnnews.ro/fake-news-raluca-radu-metode-de-verificat-veridicitatea-tirilor-marea-minciuna-de-langa-romania_581406.html, accessed 09/21/2018

² James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, apud Marian Voicu, *op. cit.*, p.384.

³ Guy Debord, *Societatea spectacolului. Comentarii la societatea spectacolului*, traducere și note de Ciprian Mihali și Radu Stoenescu, Editura EST-Samuel Tastet Editeur, 2001.

⁴ "the entirety of the dialectic processes used deliberately in order to treacherously <<manipulate>> the persons, groups or a whole society, in order to deviate their political conduct, to dominate their thoughts, even to subjugate them. It implies the dissimulation of real sources and purposes, as well as the intention to harm someone, through a distorted representation or through a biased interpretation of reality. It is a form of aggression that tries to pass unnoticed. It belongs to the category of psychologic subversive actions." (Henri-Pierre Cathala, *Epoca dezinformării*, traducere de Nicolae Bărbulescu, București, Editura Militară, 1991, p.24. – my translation).

the mojo, or do we actually become addicted to information? What is the place and purpose of the public, the beneficiary of any type of journalism, in this new equation? How does the journalist answer to the public's agenda, assuring them that state of wellbeing? We are most probably talking about a young public, prone to instantaneous feedback, a public-product of the "www" culture. And thus our social construct will be made by images that are produced, broadcasted and formatted by the mobile phone.

And yet, they say, nothing is new under the sun. That significant something from a social point of view, that defined the event worthy of becoming news was about people and their needs: the ordinary individual is much more concerned, for example, about remaining without a nanny than about Brexit. People are bored if they are lectured about ideas and concepts, but they are interested in their fellow creatures. Does not participatory journalism represent precisely people's need to narrate themselves? And this is not the invention of the new technologies. Long time ago, *American Magazine* saw a spectacular increase in its circulation. This was due to John M. Siddal's ideas, the one in charge with the "Personalities" Department, who advocated educating people in a practical way, from caring about their teeth to obtaining better jobs, behaving at work, buying houses or improving their memory. As editor-in-chief, Siddall put his ideas into practice. The circulation reached 200,000 copies, then 300-400,000 up to 500,000. And so on until he made over two million copies! Siddal had satisfied his public's agenda.

Intentionality and non-intentionality in fake news and false news

So, what is the connection between fake news and all of the above? Fake news is the first to touch the public's ego! But, first of all, what is fake news? During Cătălin Ștefănescu's show *Garantata 100%*, at TVR 1, on May 28, 2018, journalists Marian Voicu and Mircea Toma tried to define this notion¹. They started, correctly, by distinguishing between false news and fake news, a distinction Romanian language does not often make. Mircea Toma also announced an would-be conference on the post-truth society organized by *Active Watch* under the aegis of the University of Bucharest. The televised discussion insisted on the intentional element of

¹ Cătălin Ștefănescu, TVR1, *Garantata 100%*, 28 mai 2018, ora 23.

the fake news and on possible recommendations to identify the error through educating the "decoding apparatus". They did not only refer to the public, but also to the mass-media which, more often than not, lack professionalism, except when they themselves produce the fake news (see Brexit, the Trump-Putin relationship, etc.) with the expected effect: manipulation with all its pejorative connotations.

So, what is fake news? A form of yellow journalism, a piece of news fabricated through exaggeration, scandal, sensationalism, with the purpose of misleading in order to gain financial or political benefits. That is, a deliberate misinformation with the purpose to sell more copies or worse, to cause revolutions, wars, et cetera. Without many euphemisms, it means lie, propaganda, falsehood, imposture, lack of professionalism, non-ethics, hoax, false alarm, lack of facts and the string of synonyms may continue.

How can we identify it and distinguish it from the correct news? The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLAI)¹ which represents the interests of those who rely on libraries and professional information, makes some recommendations. People should analyze the source, read between the lines, check the authors (for credibility), evaluate the secondary sources, check the date, make sure it is not a joke, make a list of their own biases to make sure their objective judgement is not affected. That is how we are dealing with the voluntary constituent of the distorted reality.

There still is another side of the same coin: fake news, or the "non-intentional" false news, but with the same manipulative, misleading effect, this time out of ignorance and lack of professionalism. An Orwellian-like dystopia from 1984, people no longer able to see the truth, this happens in other areas besides political journalism, areas which become instruments to change regimes, ideologies, et cetera, or for the journalism with profit as its only purpose.

Specialized journalism, such as science journalism or cultural journalism, is not free of such dangers. Science, as the object of the specialized journalist, that goes hand in hand with technology, is ubiquitous on television and online. Facebook sophists and the specialized show guests are quick in broadcasting epochal discoveries, but does not science need a time to prove itself, to contradict opposite points of view, to obtain agreement through disagreement? Galileo and Newton did not even live to

¹ <https://www.ifla.org/>.

see the agreement! What does the science journalist do, or rather, the one popularizing science? He/She rushes, more often than not, on the scientific novelty and treats it as sensational, forgetting that final results are never final and they need to be proved by time. There are countless examples: global warming, climatic changes, travels through black holes, treatments for incurable diseases, colonization of other planets, et cetera. In many such cases, journalists forget that science means reproducible results and not ready-made answers, it means waiting, maybe disappointment, not mediatic triumphant speeches. How about the much disseminated pseudosciences: telepathy, astrology and others...?! And here we come again to the philosophers and the demarcation between science and pseudoscience. The differences are subtle, the borders unstable, since what once seemed to lack the fundamental elements of a true scientific research - testing, thinking and critical dialog on the work hypotheses, experiments, predictability and reproducibility - has led, more than once, to new sciences. The discussion is much more nuanced and requires a different approach.

The false news or maybe the fake news the press rushes to popularize and science journalism does not involve itself into, deliberately or not, may also do much harm. I am thinking here at the Law 143/2000¹ that prohibits the consume of *cannabis*. Neither the journalists nor the lawmaker thought to specify that the law referred to that plant whose scientific name is *cannabis indica*, the one with narcotic properties, different from *cannabis sativa*, the textile plant popularly called hemp. The differences are both morphologic and climatic. The hemp for texture grows as individual stalks, high and straight, it is adjusted to the Romanian climate and has a biologic cycle of 120 days, after which it can be harvested. The other one, the prohibited one, grows in the form of a bush, no higher than a meter and needs temperatures of over 30°C. The confusion fed by the press and maintained by the law had, besides some hilarious outcomes - peasants who had been growing hemp since for ever to fabricate tissues in their own houses saw the police in their yards, charging them with cultivating narcotics - some ill-fated consequences for the country's economy. From the fourth country in the world and the first in Europe in 1989 at hemp crops, we have destroyed much of what had been high quality industry and hemp stalk processing technology. The hemp crops, the retting ponds, the installations, the weaving mills have become memories, while out of

¹ Law 143/2000 against drug trafficking and unlawful drug consumption published in M.O., part I nr. 362 from 08/03/2000.

130,000 hectares cultivated in 1989, there have remained 1880, a large part being allotted to some agricultural research stations. Something the Japanese, to whose industry and technology in this field we compare ourselves, have not done¹. Ignorance, ill will, journalistic incompetence, fake news?

Cultural journalism is not free of false news either. The mission of the cultural journalist is to shape the reader's perception, to invite him/her to share cultural emotional-sensorial experiences, and to make him/her "see ideas". The reader should thus be able to compare, to totally enjoy the aesthetic reception, to identify a trend, the ideology of an era, especially when faced with certain aesthetic poliphonies that characterize the twentieth century and the one we have begun. To do that, cultural journalism needs all the necessary tools to listen to all the voices. The false news danger is waiting everywhere. When it is not intentional, it can take the shape of an imposture which may derive from the inability to master a piece of information that one cannot check, or worse, from the lack of criteria which turn the journalist into the involuntary newsmonger of false information, or at least of inaccurate information. To avoid this danger, the cultural journalist really needs to be a "smartjo" and not just a "mojo", that is, he/she needs to practise a second "prospective" profession prophesized by Umberto Eco, that of a "checker", of a competent judge who guarantees the authenticity of the material and makes the difference between real news and false/fake news obvious.

This "new" profession is practised today by Academics, members of cultural institutions, of universities, running the risk that these honorable persons may have taken their own information from the internet and then everything becomes uncertain. Nothing new under the sun! It did happen before. Neither the collective memory, the culture, that which remains when everything else has been forgotten, nor the individual memory are faithful reproductions of what has really happened, but reconstitutions, image-constructs, filtered through a lot of subjectivity.

The internet obviously 'facilitates' the proliferation of certain false news that may mislead the uninformed reader, resulting in missing certain events or in misunderstanding. Take, for instance, an example from cultural journalism. The theater fans could read in *Dilema veche*, no. 683, 23-29 March 2017, „Despre jumătăți și alte obsesii” [„About Halves and Other Obsessions”], a review to the play „După ploaie” [„After the Rain”], staged

¹ <http://agroromania.manager.ro/articole/plante-textile/canepa-cultivarea-canepei-legislatie-si-avize-pentru-a-cultiva-canepa-301.html/>, 22.09.2017.

at Theater Apollo 11, a review written completely by the book, signed Oana Stoica¹. We learn who are the author, translator, director, scenographer, the actors, who is in charge with the stage movement, the subject and the key in which it is approached. We also know the relationship between the director's vision and the scenography, how the actors interpret the dramatic text, all well-balanced judgments, and a very important piece of information for our study, that it is the second performance directed by a film maker, in a program at Theater Apollo 11, in the season 2016-2017. So far, so good! So, what would be the problem here? One detail: the theater review addresses not only those spectators who have already seen the play and are looking for information and explanations to affirm or contradict their own convictions related to it, but also to those who have not seen it and may want to do it after reading that review.

In this context, the author has forgotten, there should be no suspicion of ill will here, to specify that certain theatrical projects copied after the western model, such as the Theater Apollo 11, which use movie directors to stage plays, replace that performance with another opening night after two months. The information may be found on the blog called *Spectator*, titled "Exercițiu de creație interdisciplinar" ["Interdisciplinary Creation Exercise"], signed Ileana Lucaci². A potential reader who imagines that after the opening night (the date of the opening night is not given by any of the sources, even though important in the context of the short life of such performance) has all the time he/she wants to see the play, may have the surprise not to have this opportunity anymore. To find out where exactly is one in the calendar, and what are one's chances to see the play, one needs to go online to *Adevărul.ro*, the number from January 26, 2017 which announces February 18, 2017 as the opening night. Neither this source is free of errors, Vali Ighigheanu, the woman signing the scenography, being taken for a man³. The same January 26, 2017 the website *HotNews.ro*⁴ announces the opening night for "După ploaie", and the information is taken, word by word, by *Cultural.bzi.ro*⁵. Neither *HotNews.ro*, nor *Cultural.bzi.ro*, nor *Adevărul.ro* specify that what we have here is an atypical theatrical project: a play is only staged for two months. The only place where one may find this information, although still incomplete,

¹ See dilemaveche.ro/, 12.04.2017.

² See ileanalucaci.blogspot.com/, 12.04.2017.

³ See <https://adevarul.ro/>, 12.04.2017.

⁴ See <https://www.hotnews.ro/>, 12.04.2017.

⁵ See <https://cultural.bzi.ro/>, 12.04.2017.

therefore failing to serve the public interest, since we do not know when these two months start, is the blog of professional theater critic Ileana Lucaciu. Therefore, in order to obtain a correct and useful information one needs to gather more sources and then to check them against reality. But should not a journalist do that instead of a spectator? And the examples may continue....

Regardless of the area in which fake news manifests itself, of the intention or lack of intention in producing and disseminating it, we are dealing with a phenomenon, something the European Commission proved for the 28 member states, in a study from February 2018, published in March. Out of over 26,000 citizens interviewed, a third declared they receive false news on a daily basis, 80% of the Europeans considering it quite an important problem for their home country and for democracy. In this context, the balance of trust leans towards the traditional media: radio 70%, TV 66%, print newspapers and magazines 63%, while the online makes only 47%. In Romania, the per cents are similar: radio and TV 66%, and just 37% for the online¹.

Conclusion

What could be done to save the public agenda from false news? I think there are no recipes. Only the professional common sense, the ethical-professional code and the permanent need to be equal to yourself. That is, the true journalism, the traditional one, even if with modern technology. If it observes the principle of honesty, the need to narrate and to be narrated for the public agenda. Last but not least, users and online content providers need to be educated, to develop their critical thinking, in order to be able to avoid the fake news and false news avalanche and start to put an end to this phenomenon.

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