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WHAT IS FAKE NEWS? AND HOW DO WE TEACH STUDENTS ABOUT IT?

Today, we are “surfing” on various social networks or newspapers, such as Facebook and Twitter, on television and on the radio. We keep in touch with letters of our friends or conversations, or by phone with our neighbors and colleagues. Prior to that, we suspected that some of this news and information was wrong, which is misinformation. We called it “propaganda” or “gossip” or “false messages”. Therefore, the fact that information is false is the main problem that created the information age. In this article, the authors argue that the general term “false news” that we use today is that for ordinary citizens, and even for professional journalists, are becoming more and more difficult to determine the truth, since today’s sources of information are becoming more and more. In addition, there is a manipulation of information. Although there are facts about these events, the content may be false. The authors of the article argue that these problems have become similar in nature. The article presents examples of information verification in Kazakhstan and Georgia.

Key words: fake news, information, disinformation, misinformation, new technology, social media.

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Жалған жаңалықтар дегеніміз не? Бұл туралы студенттерді қалай үйретеміз?

Біз бүгінгі таңда Facebook және Twitter секілді әлеуметтік желілерде немесе газеттерде, теледидарда және радиодан берілетін әр түрлі жаңалықтар мен ақпараттар айдынында жүзудеміз. Достарымыздың жіберген хаттары немесе әңгімелесу арқылы, не болмаса көршілерімізбен және әріптестерімізбен телефон арқылы ақпарат алмасып отырамыз. Осыған дейін біз осы жаңалықтар мен ақпараттардың кейбірі дұрыс емес-ау деп күмәнданатынбыз, бұл – дезинформация. Біз оны «насихат» немесе «өсек» немесе «жалған» не болмаса «хабарлама» деп атаймыз.

Сондықтан, ақпараттардың ақиқат, не болмаса жалған екенін анықтау ақпараттық ғасыр тудырған негізгі мәселеге айналып отыр. Осы мақалада авторлар бүгінде біз қолданатын «жалған жаңалықтар» жалпы терминін қарапайым азаматтар, тіпті кәсіби журналистердің өзі де ақиқатты анықтаудың күрделеніп бара жатқанын айтады, өйткені бүгінде ақпарат тарату дереккөздері көбейген. Сонымен қатар, ақпарат арқылы манипуляциялауды да атауға тура келеді. Бұл оқиғалардың фактілері бар болғанымен, мазмұны жалған болуы мүмкін. Яғни, мұндай мәселелер өзара ұқсас келеді деп түйіндейді мақала авторлары. Жалпы мақалада Қазақстан мен Грузияда орын алған жалған ақпараттарға қатысты ғылыми негіздегі талдаулар ұсынылады.

Түйін сөздер: жалған жаңалықтар, ақпарат, дезинформация, жаңа технологиялар, әлеуметтік медиа.

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Что такое фейковые новости? Как мы учим студентов проверять информацию?

Сегодня мы занимаемся своеобразным «серфингом» в различных социальных сетях, таких как Facebook и Twitter, в газетах, по телевидению и радио. Мы поддерживаем

разнообразные коммуникации с нашими друзьями, соседями и коллегами, распространяем и делимся информацией. Очевидно, что некоторые из полученных новостей могут быть неверными, иными словами, являться дезинформацией. Мы называем это «пропагандой» или «сплетнями», или «ложными сообщениями». Сам факт, что информация может быть ложной, является основной проблемой, которую создал век информации. Авторы статьи утверждают, что определить однозначно смысл общего термина «ложные новости», который мы используем сегодня, для обычных граждан и даже для профессиональных журналистов, становится все более сложно, поскольку увеличивается количество источников информации. Кроме того, встречается манипулирование информацией. Хотя есть факты о произошедших событиях, контент может быть ложным. Авторы рассматривают эти проблемы как схожие по своему характеру. В статье представлены примеры проверки достоверности информации в Казахстане и Грузии.

Ключевые слова: ложные новости, информация, дезинформация, новые технологии, социальные медиа.

Introduction

I've been living in Tbilisi for the past three months, teaching journalism at Caucasus University and doing research about environmental journalism in the Republic of Georgia. Recently I interviewed the editor of FactCheck, a Georgian NGO that monitors both 'fake news' from the media and the accuracy – or falsity – of statements by elected officials such as the prime minister of Georgia, the mayor of Tbilisi and members of Parliament. FactCheck.ge is similar to Factcheck.kz, which does similar analysis and exposes lies and manipulations in Kazakhstan.

As we all know, it is easy for wrong information – fake news – to spread like wildfire, thanks in large part to social media, including what David Kudize, the editor of FactCheck Georgia, described as the 'Facebook bubble'.

The falsity of some outrageous stories should be obvious, but in reality it is not obvious to many readers, viewers, or listeners. Here are two recent examples of absurd fake news that were widely believed. The first is from Georgia and the second from Kazakhstan.

Georgia hopes to join the European Union and NATO. Russia strongly opposes those moves. As Kutidze, the FactCheck editor, told me, 'We have a lot of websites, not only websites, also newspapers and TV backed by Russia to disseminate their propaganda messages to undermine our European and Western aspirations. It is very dangerous'.

As part of Russia's effort to drive Georgia away from stronger Western ties, it disseminates phony stories that supposedly show that EU membership would destroy Georgian culture and traditions. One of the most outrageous fake stories claimed that EU membership would prohibit children from being baptized. That fake news originated in Italy but was translated into Russian and disseminated in Georgia and Ukraine as well (FactCheck.ge, 2016).

The second example comes from June 2018 when some online news outlets in Kazakhstan published an article claiming the Chinese government was forcing Muslims to eat pork during the holy month of Ramadan and forcing them to drink alcohol. This fake news story also claimed Muslims who refuse the government's demands are sent to camps for reeducation (Сейт, 2018).

To you and me, both those stories sound hugely suspicious and illogical from the beginning. However, many people accepted them as true without checking or verification and passed on the false or manipulative stories to others.

Here is what the International Center for Journalists recently when it released a new study on the history of fake news:

'Fake news' is not new. In fact, the recorded history of 'disinformation wars' dates back to ancient Rome. But the 21st century has seen the weaponization of information on an unprecedented scale. Powerful new technology makes the manipulation and fabrication of content simple, and social networks dramatically amplify falsehoods peddled by anti-democratic governments, populist politicians and dishonest corporate entities.

We now inhabit a world where malicious actors and state propagandists can use 'computational propaganda', 'sock-puppet networks', 'troll armies', and technology that can mimic legitimate news websites and seamlessly manipulate audio and video to impersonate legitimate sources. Then, there are the profiteers making a living from creating fraudulent content for viral distribution on social platforms (Posetti and Matthews, 2018).

In recent years, hackers and foreign governments have used social media, phony websites and Twitter to influence elections in the U.S., Latin America, the Philippines and elsewhere, including the Brexit vote in the U.K. Most of them have not been caught.

However, in March 2018 the public learned how the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica got access to a huge amount of datadrawn from millions of Facebook users. The U.K. company, which specialized in psychological profiling and political messaging, misused the data to target voters with propaganda and misinformation in the run-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election – to promote Donald Trump and to weaken Hillary Clinton. Steve Bannon, the company's former vice president, was one of Trump's top political advisors. As *A Short Guide to the History of 'Fake' News and Misinformation* – a new report from the International Center for Journalists in Washington – notes, the company's nefarious political meddling took place around the world: 'Undercover reporters captured Cambridge Analytica's executives boasting that the company and its partners had worked on more than 200 international elections, including in Argentina, Nigeria, Kenya, India and the Czech Republic' (Posetti and Matthews, 2018).

Also in 2018, 13 Russian citizens and a Russian Internet agency were charged in the U.S. with conspiring to disrupt the 2016 presidential election. The conspiracy allegedly used false identification of U.S. citizens to post misinformation on social media accounts intended to help Trump win the election. The criminal charges described the Russians as 'people who adopted false online personalities to push divisive messages' (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018).

Some fake news stories have potentially deadly results. For example in 2016, after seeing an article on a false news site alleging that Israel threatened a nuclear attack on Pakistan, Pakistan's defense minister threatened retaliation. The defense minister warned in a tweet, 'Israel forgets Pakistan is a nuclear state too' (Goldman, 2016).

In the past, some people have worked to expose such lies – such disinformation – often at risk to themselves. During Soviet times, for example, underground *samizdat* – from the Russian meaning 'self-published' – were an important form of uncensored political expression and dissent in the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact nations. This was true especially between the Great Patriotic War and *Perestroika* when these communist governments tightly controlled their own media and citizens were largely cut off from Western news sources.

Vladimir Bukovsky, a Russian dissident in the 1960s-1970s, was an expert on Soviet use of psy-

chiatric prisons to silence critics of the communist regime. He spent 12 years in prisons, labor camps, and forced psychiatric confinement. He described *samizdat* this way:

*'I myself create it,
edit it,
censor it,
publish it,
distribute it, and ...
get imprisoned for it'* (Definitions.net, n.d.).

These illegal publications could be literary or openly anti-state and anti-party. Some reported on international events, fostered national cultures and traditions in the Soviet Union, and criticized communist propaganda. They were printed, copied, and distributed secretly, often at risk of arrest, the gulag, or execution.

In non-democratic parts of the world, citizens used shortwave radios to secretly listen to broadcasts from foreign news media such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Voice of America, Deutsche Welle, and BBC. Today in some countries, citizens still secretly listen to such broadcasts, except they do it through the Internet or satellite dishes instead of shortwave radio. Meanwhile, authoritarian governments like those in China, Vietnam, Iran, and Turkmenistan continue to block websites and monitor how citizens use the Internet.

In a recent study, the pro-democracy NGO Freedom House. 'Governments around the world are tightening control over citizens' data and using claims of "fake news" to suppress dissent, eroding trust in the Internet as well as the foundations of democracy'. Its study of 65 countries, *Freedom on the Net 2018*, found that Internet freedom globally has declined for the 8th year in a row. It said, 'Online propaganda and disinformation have increasingly poisoned the digital sphere, while the unbridled collection of personal data is breaking down traditional notions of privacy'. The report rated the Internet as 'not free' in Kazakhstan, 'not free' in Uzbekistan, and 'partly free' in Kyrgyzstan; the report did not rate Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (Freedom House, 2018).

Working with students

The important question for teachers is how they can help students recognize fake news and manipulation.

Students often say they got information 'from the Internet'. That is the same as saying they got their information 'from the library'. The library and the Internet are both venues, places where a huge

amount of information is available. Teachers need to know what specific websites students used and what books and articles they read. Students also often say they found data or other information on Wikipedia. Again, that's not good enough. Teachers need to know what sources were used to write the Wikipedia listing.

In other words, what evidence do students have that the information in their research assignments is accurate or inaccurate, or comes from a trustworthy source?

Here are five class or homework exercises that teachers can assign to help students become better informed consumers of news and to make them more skeptical and analytical as readers, listeners, and viewers. These exercises should also make them more sensitive to the importance of accuracy, fairness and balance in the news and information that they themselves create and disseminate.

Have them become familiar with FactCheck.kz, how it selects articles and political statements to review, and the methods of fact-checking it uses. Fact checking organizations like this one should also be committed to transparency of sources so readers can confirm their findings themselves. Assign them to carefully read 1 story or political statement on FactCheck.kz and write a short summary of what sources the fact-checkers used to try to verify the information.

Assign each student to monitor a 'news' website for questionable stories, altered photos, and fabricated videos. Each week the student should choose 1 of those stories and write a brief explanation of why it appears to be fake news, manipulation, or propaganda. Some common reasons for them to question an article is that it has no identified sources of information, that it is one-sided, or that it simply sounds impossible – like the stories about the EU

banning baptism and China forcing Muslims to eat pork and drink alcohol.

Give the class a fake news story and assign them to do their own fact-checking. They should attempt to verify every statement or so-called 'fact' in that story. Remind them to check names, people's titles, geographic locations, business names, and numbers for accuracy. Their report should list what sources they themselves used to do the fact-checking, such as Kazakhstan government statistics and databases, scientific studies, multinational organizations like the World Bank and World Health Organization, and websites of NGOs, foreign governments, and businesses. Wikipedia exercise: As I mentioned, many students rely unquestioningly on Wikipedia when doing research papers. Assign students to analyze specific Wikipedia entries by comparing what is written in them with what the References at the end of the entries actually say.

Have each student write a fake news story that sounds real and includes a mix of accurate information and made-up information. Then assign another student in the class to fact-check it.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the problems of fake news, manipulation, and propaganda will never disappear. I agree with a statement in the recent Freedom House (2018)'report that 'if democracy is to survive the digital age, technology companies, governments and civil society must work together to find real solutions to the problems of social media manipulation'. However, informed citizens are also essential to finding answers to the 'problems of social media manipulation'. Teachers can play an important role in preparing citizens to do that by helping students to intelligently recognize and deal with fake news.

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