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MEDIA LITERACY AND FACT CHECKING: PART ONE

Abstract. The modern media field is increasingly filled with false information. The term “fake news” today includes a wide range of manipulative technologies: “computational propaganda”, “puppet networks”, “troll armies”, anonymous source, alternative fact, gossip, deceit, rumors, false context, etc. Problems are exacerbated at a high pace. The development of technological processes and the shift in global communication discourse to social networks and the Internet.

The purpose of the article is to study the history and evolution of the disinformation crisis, which is a serious threat to open societies around the world. The author proposes to activate critical thinking among young people, to teach the audience to intellectually recognize and process fake news, to understand the need for a critical and independent analysis of incoming news and background information.

The author also believes that media literacy helps to understand the role of the media in society, as well as the acquisition of important research and expression skills needed by the audience. Media literacy skills also include the ability to access media, analyze content, evaluate messages, and create media for communication and expression. Learning how to verify facts is an important component of media literacy training, a way to protect against manipulation and fake news. This issue publishes the first part of the author’s study.

Key words: media literacy, fact-checking, manipulation, propaganda, misinformation.

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Медиа сауаттылық және фактілерді тексеру: бірінші бөлім

Аңдатпа. Қазіргі медиа күннен-күнге жалған ақпаратпен толыға түсуде. Бүгінгі күні «жалған жаңалықтар» термині көптеген манипуляциялық технологияларды қамтиды: «есептік насихат», «жасанды желілер», «тролльдік топ», белгісіз дереккөз, балама факт, өсек, алдау, қауесет, жалған контекст және т.б. Бұл мәселе технологиялық үдерістердің дамуы мен ғаламдық коммуникациялық дискурстың әлеуметтік желілер мен Интернетке ауысуы нәтижесінде қордалана түсуде.

Мақаланың мақсаты – бүкіл әлемде ашық қоғамға қауіп төндіретін дезинформациялық дағдарыстың тарихы мен эволюциясын зерттеу. Автор жастар арасында сыни ойлауды күшейтуді, көрермендерге жалған жаңалықтарды интеллектуалды тануды және өңдеуді үйретуді, берілетін жаңалықтар мен негізгі ақпараттарды сыни тұрғыда және тәуелсіз талдау қажеттілігін түсінуді ұсынады. Сондай-ақ, автор медиасауаттылық қоғамдағы бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарының рөлін түсінуге, сонымен қатар аудиторияға қажетті маңызды зерттеулер мен экспрессивті дағдыларды игеруге көмектеседі деп санайды. Медиа сауаттылықты игеру дағдыларына ақпарат құралдарына қол жетімділік, мазмұнды талдау, хабарламаларды бағалау және байланыс пен пікір білдіруді қамтиды. Фактілерді растауды үйрену медиа сауаттылықты оқытудың маңызды құрамдас бөлігі, бұл жалған жаңалықтардан, манипуляциядан қорғанудың ең басты әдісі болып табылады. Бұл ғылыми мақала авторлық зерттеудің бірінші бөлімі, жалғасы келесі номерде жарияланады.

Түйін сөздер: медиа сауаттылық, факт-чекинг, манипуляция, пропаганда, жалған ақпарат.

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Медийная грамотность и проверка фактов: часть первая

Аннотация. Современное медиаполе все больше заполняется недостоверной информацией. Термин «поддельные новости» сегодня включает в себя широкий спектр манипулятивных технологий: «вычислительную пропаганду», «марионеточные сети», «армии троллей», анонимный источник, альтернативный факт, сплетни, обман, слухи, ложный контекст и др. Проблемы усугубляются высокими темпами развития технологических процессов и смещением глобального коммуникационного дискурса в социальные сети и интернет.

Цель статьи – изучить историю и эволюцию дезинформационного кризиса, представляющего собой серьезную угрозу открытым обществам по всему миру. Автор предлагает активизировать критическое мышление у молодежи, научить аудиторию интеллектуально распознавать и обрабатывать фальшивые новости, понимать необходимость критичного и независимого анализа поступающих новостей и фоновой информации.

Также автор считает, что медийная грамотность способствует пониманию роли СМИ в обществе, а также приобретению важных навыков исследования и самовыражения, необходимых аудитории. Навыки медиа грамотности также включают способность получать доступ к медиа, анализировать контент, оценивать сообщения и создавать медиа для общения и самовыражения. Обучение тому, как проверять факты, является важным компонентом обучения медиаграмотности, способом защиты от манипуляций и фальшивых новостей. В данном выпуске публикуется первая часть исследования автора.

Ключевые слова: медийная грамотность, факт-чекинг, манипуляция, пропаганда, дезинформация.

Introduction

Whatever we call it, it is spread primarily through social networks, social messaging and the Internet that are not regulated or only loosely regulated in most of the world. However, the governments that heavily regulate or restrict social networks, social messaging and the Internet are often themselves responsible for the most outrageous and inflammatory fake news and propaganda.

In addition, fast-emerging technologies are making it easier and easier for fraudsters to deceive and trick the public while making it harder and harder for the citizens to identify and counter fake news, propaganda and misinformation. To illustrate:

“Deepfakes” – the use of recent breakthroughs in artificial intelligence to create believable fakes in images, audio, and video – have raised concerns... This has been driven in part by a number of striking demonstrations that illustrate just how far the technology has come, from unsettling reproductions of presidential voices and the substitution of faces to create fake porn to the seamless deletion of objects in video. Policymakers and researchers, in turn, have worried that this technology will be applied to manipulate political discourse and for other harmful purposes.¹

A 2018 survey of more than 33,000 respondents in 28 countries found. ‘Globally, nearly seven in 10 respondents among the general population worry about fake news or false information being used as a weapon, and 59 percent say that it is getting harder to tell if a piece of news was produced by a respected media organization’.²

In addition, opponents of press freedom who disagree with a news story or who are embarrassed by a journalistic investigation misuse the ‘fake news’

term to attack the overall news media and individual press outlets. In doing so, they arrogantly dismiss any reporting – no matter how accurate – that annoys or criticizes them and label the press as ‘the enemy of the people’.

This chapter will explain media and information literacy, as well as key terms, theories and concepts. It will also introduce you to directions in media education and how youth have become a global media audience

Where we are now

An International Center for Journalists study about the history of fake news decried ‘the evolution of the disinformation crisis now threatening open societies around the world’. It said:

‘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.³

The idea

We believe media and information literacy plays an essential role in citizenship and transparency. That is why the goal is to empower citizens – from children and students to adults – to make informed

¹ Hwang, 2018.

² Edelman, ‘2018 Edelman Trust Barometer’, 2018.

³ Posetti & Matthews, p. 2 2018.

decisions when encountering information, whether in print, online or broadcast on radio or television, and to help them control the flow of information they receive.

EurasiaNet.org has reported that ‘digital mischief-making is commonplace in Kazakhstan, and the government has struggled to tackle it. Indeed, some believe that restrictive attitudes to media freedoms are causing the problem, by creating a climate in which people are more willing to believe unsubstantiated claims over the government’s incessant rosy accounts of purported improvements in the standards of living’. The EurasiaNet.org article continued:

The offending messages typically consist of a shocking piece of news, delivered through either text or audio. Regardless of the implausibility of the gossip, it quickly circulates as recipients share the news with all their contacts. Communications experts describe this as an unintended effect of the intensified level of digitization in Kazakhstan.

It quoted a public relations specialist who said, ‘Before, any fact had to be filtered through mass media, which sifted through the information. But today anybody with a mobile device loaded with WhatsApp or Facebook can perform the same operation’.⁴

Surveys and polls show that a crisis exists in the public’s mistrust of the news media and other established institutions. While there are variations from country to country, there are a number of common reasons, including an escalation in political partisanship, the spread of fake news and an overall decline in public trust in a range of institutions such as courts, police, parliaments, civil society organizations and business. In Kazakhstan, for instance, a Freedom House report on *Nations in Transit* noted ‘low public expectations and trust in the justice system’ and ‘public distrust of candidates and local governments’.⁵

Russia is using disinformation and hacking to adversely impact democratic processes. In Georgia, for example, the Kremlin is waging a sustained effort to undermine the country’s move toward the West, including prospective membership in the European Union and NATO. David Kutidze, the editor of the independent website Factcheck.ge, said, ‘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’. According to Kutidze, ‘Russia is trying to paint a picture

that Russia is not the enemy. Turkey or Iran with different religions are the enemies’ to persuade (the public that) ‘the image of Russia is our Orthodox brother’. As an example, he pointed to a fake news story in the Russian press that falsely claimed the EU was going to ban baptism in its member states. Factcheck.ga reported that the misinformation also appeared in Georgian online and generated an outcry on social networks.⁶

Material and methods

In recent years, hackers and foreign governments, including Russia, 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 2018 the public learned how the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica got access to a huge amount of data drawn 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. 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* said, 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.’⁷

In the EU, ‘the recent rise in cross-border online misinformation seems likely to result in a toxic mix. False stories have spread virally across member states, seeded by hyperpartisan actors and amplified by unwitting users or sloppy journalism’, according to the Poynter Institute, which trains journalists. It said recent ‘false stories about a staged refugee drowning video (actually a documentary on the Greek exodus from Asia Minor), George Soros-funded credit cards to cover refugees’ travel costs (a composite of real stories in a false narrative) and a xenophobic Photoshopped buzzer appeared in five or more EU countries within days or weeks from one another’.⁸

⁴ Kumenov, 2018.

⁵ Freedom House, *Nations in Transit*, 2018.

⁶ Kutidze, 2018.

⁷ Posetti & Matthews, 2018.

⁸ Funke & Mantzarlis, 2018.

A 2018 survey in the U.S. found that most Americans reported having lost trust in the news media in recent years. The respondents' explanations focused primarily on 'matters of accuracy or bias. Relatively few mentioned a news organization's partisan or ideological leaning as a factor'. However, the study by the Knight Foundation concluded that 'attempts to restore trust in the media among most Americans may be fruitful, particularly if those efforts are aimed at improving accuracy, enhancing transparency and reducing bias'.⁹

Yet interestingly, some recent surveys have found a decline in public trust and credibility of social media platforms and an increase in public trust of traditional media. The international public relations firm Edelman does an annual survey of trust in a variety of institutions and reported in 2018 reported, 'there has been a huge increase in trust in traditional media (61%), reaching levels not seen since 2012. Despite this, there are big structural issues for media in general, people are consuming less media and some are actively avoiding it altogether (19 percent)'. Edelman's data for the UK 'found that social media companies have lost the trust of most of the public, with only a quarter of the UK population now saying that they trust social media as a source for news and information. Where social media companies were once seen as champions of free speech and democracy, they are now seen as not taking enough responsibility for key issues including extremism, fake news, and cyberbullying. As a consequence, the majority of people are now calling for greater regulation in the sector'.¹⁰

We also believe that journalists and professional communicators should obey ethical standards. As Fatima Bahja of the International Center for Journalists explained, 'In an era of rampant disinformation and uncertainty for both journalists and their audiences, ethical journalism plays a critical role in helping journalists create effective newsroom structures and storytelling processes. It can address some of the most pressing challenges newsrooms face as they struggle to establish trust with citizens'.¹¹

As a U.S. political journalist has written: The media aren't blameless. Political journalism is now a festival of 'hot takes', where reporters agnostically report on something politicians do and decide if it's 'smart politics'. You can start to see why facts just don't have the cachet they used to. I do have to come

clean, though. I am a huge fan of facts, and I'm incredibly biased toward them. So it's distressing to discover that other people just aren't that into them. I'm still not ready to surrender to a fact-free campaign. And I hope other journalists feel the same way.¹²

Although she was referring specifically to the American press, American politicians and American elections, her comment is directly relevant to the news media, to politicians and to elections in many countries.

Unfortunately, the problems of fake news, manipulation a, misinformation, mal-information and propaganda will never disappear. As the NGO Freedom House stated in its 2018 *Freedom on the Net* report, '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'.¹³ Similarly, the Poynter Institute has predicted that 'fact-checkers will have to contend with the rise of government actions against misinformation around the world. They'll see even more attempts to undermine their debunking efforts — particularly when it comes to videos. Technology companies will be coaxed into implementing more projects addressing the spread of misinformation on their platforms'.¹⁴

Results and discussion

The falsity and manipulation of some outrageous 'news' stories should be obvious, but in reality that is not obvious to many readers, viewers and listeners. No matter how illogical a story, video or photo may be, too many people accept them as true without checking or verification, then pass on the false or manipulated stories to others. As we've seen, social media and other new technologies make that easy. 'It's not enough for youth to know how to use technology and to press the right buttons: It's critical thinking that counts!' as the Center for Media Literacy observed.¹⁵

Teachers at the primary, secondary and university levels can play an important role in preparing citizens to do that by helping students to intelligently recognize and deal with fake news, as the Freedom House report on Internet freedom observed.¹⁶ At the same time, we recognize how difficult that will be.

⁹ Knight Foundation, 2018.

¹⁰ Edelman, 'Edelman Trust Barometer 2018: UK Findings', 2018.

¹¹ Bahja.

¹² Demas, 2015.

¹³ Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net*, 2018.

¹⁴ Funke & Mantzarlis, 2018.

¹⁵ Center for Media Literacy.

¹⁶ Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net*, 2018.

Therefore, on a practical level, we hope this handbook will help you and your students:

Understand the need to be critical and independent recipients and users of news;

Analyze competing perspectives regarding mainstream and partisan media bias;

Understand the role of online platforms in creating, distributing and consuming misinformation, disinformation, mal-information and heavily partisan information;

Recognize ways that information can be manipulated, including clickbait, bias, propaganda, hoaxes, conspiracy theories and entertainment;

Learn how to engage relevantly in social networks;

Understand how propaganda and cyber war practices are spread;

Understand the motives behind different types of ‘fake news’ and heavily partisan stories and recognize that the negative effects on the audience and society may be the same regardless of whether it is deliberate or accidental;

Learn how to write simple texts with checked facts;

Learn to verify, fact-check and debunk misinformation, disinformation and mal-information, including the tools available to do so;

Develop a healthy and diversified media diet, obtaining news from a variety of sources.

Think carefully about ways to balance freedom of expression with the desire to avoid harm from fake news, hate speech and other enemies of truth and accuracy.

There are two more ways we hope this handbook will prove valuable to students and citizens at large.

One way is the recognition that false and misleading information and news can cause serious harm such as provoking riots and violence. We have seen ‘fake news’ prompt violent street protests targeting migrants and asylum seekers, homosexuals and members of religious and ethnic minorities. Authoritarian governments have used fake news as a justification for restricting human rights and imprisoning critics of the regime.

A fraudulent medical ‘study’ written in the UK claimed that childhood vaccinations could cause autism. Even years after the so-called study was proven false and totally without a scientific basis, some parents still refuse to get their children vaccinated, thus leaving their children exposed to serious diseases such as mumps and measles.

In a 2016 incident in the U.S., a man brought a rifle into a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C., after reading fake news tweets. The bizarre tweets claimed the restaurant was the headquarters for a

child sex ring involving Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and members of her campaign staff. The shooter believed the tweets and said he wanted to rescue children he thought were being held captive in the restaurant. Fortunately, no one was hurt by his bullets but people could have died.

A second way this handbook may be valuable is making students and citizens aware of how political leaders may misuse the term “fake news” to attack their political enemies. The best-known illustration of that is U.S. President Donald Trump who repeatedly accused well-respected news organizations of ‘fake news’ because he disliked what they report, including investigative stories that expose wrongdoing and ethical violations or embarrass him, his government appointees, his family, and his business associates.

That is happening elsewhere too. For example, journalists covering violence between English-speaking separatists and the largely French-speaking government in Cameroon ‘are increasingly finding themselves behind bars on a surprising charge: “fake news”. A TV journalist there was arrested on a charge of publishing fake news online after her story ‘cited social media reports that claimed the Cameroonian military’ had shot and killed an American missionary. ‘Press advocates see a recent uptick in accusations of fake news as the government’s attempt to stifle journalists reporting on the growing internal crisis. However, the government claims the spread of deliberately inaccurate information has distorted and inflamed the conflict’.¹⁷

It is important to remember that the problem of fake news is not limited to what appears in the news media. It also includes false statements by political leaders, businesses and other institutions and organizations. For example, in 2017 the organization Factcheck.kz examined a statement by Minister of Labour and Social Protection Tamara Duisenova who disagreed with claims that there is gender-based pay discrimination in Kazakhstan. Based on research, Factcheck.kz concluded that Duisenova’s statement was false because the Committee for Statistics found that women on average earn only 69% of the salary that men earn ‘in almost every sphere of activities’.¹⁸

What do we mean by media and information literacy?

One traditional definition of *media literacy* is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms. However, as times and tech-

¹⁷ O’Grady, 2018.

¹⁸ Factcheck.kza, 2017.

nologies change, so do the ways we define the term. For example, the Center for Media Literacy, based in California, offers this updated and expanded definition: ‘Media literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy’. Media literacy skills include the ability to access media, analyze content, evaluate messages and create media for communication and self-expression. Training in how to fact-check is an essential component of media literacy education to equip citizens with knowledge to protect themselves against manipulation and fake news.

Now the term has expanded to encompass *information literacy* as another essential skill in pursuit

of knowledge. According to Wesleyan University, information literacy involves recognizing when information is needed and being able to efficiently locate, accurately evaluate, effectively use and clearly communicate information in various formats. It refers to the ability to navigate the rapidly growing information environment, which encompasses an increasing number of information suppliers as well as the amount supplied, and includes bodies of professional literature, popular media, libraries, the Internet and much more.¹⁹

The Center for Media Literacy²⁰ has identified 5 core concepts and 5 key questions for use in teaching media education. They relate to a message’s authorship, format, audience, content and purpose:

¹⁹ Wesleyan University.

²⁰ Center for Media Literacy, ‘Five Key Questions’.

	Keyword	Five Core Concepts	Five Key Questions
#1	Authorship	All media messages are «constructed.»	Who created this message?
#2	Format	Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.	What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
#3	Audience	Different people experience the same media message differently.	How might different people understand this message differently from me?
#4	Content	Media have embedded values and points of view.	What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in; or omitted from, this message?
#5	Purpose	Most media are organized to gain profit and/or power.	Why is this message being sent?

Another typology looks at these 3 elements of a false or misleading message:

The different types of content that are being created and shared aThe motivations of those who create this content aThe ways this content is being disseminated ainstances of deception that exploit

the format of news while violating professional standards of verifiability’. In addition, it says media and literacy education can fight stereotyping and encourage cross-cultural communication.²¹

²¹ UNESCO, 2018.

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