PhDr. Michał Szyszka, PhD.
WSB University
Faculty of Applied Sciences
Cieplaka street 1c
Dąbrowa Górnicza, 41-300, Poland
mszyszka@wsb.edu.pl
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-7407-9183

Cultural studies scholar and historian, PhD in cultural sciences, passionate about new technologies. The main axis of research interests are media and media communication in education and social policy, and especially the areas of the interface between aid activities (the social welfare system, the functioning of aid institutions) and social communication (media narratives on aid and helping, public relations of social policy institutions, communication about aid and in aid activities). The author or co-author of 4 monographic studies and over 50 scientific papers.

Assoc. Prof. PhDr. Arkadiusz Wąsiński, PhD.
Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Lodz
Pomorska 46/48
Łódź, 91-408, Poland
arkadiusz.wasinski@now.uni.lodz.pl
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-1867-8541

University professor in the research and teaching staff group at the Faculty of Education Sciences at the University of Lodz, PhD with a habilitation in social sciences in the discipline of pedagogy. His research interests concern the family as a space for self-creation and upbringing with particular emphasis on the issues of adult self-creation, the educational aspects of intra-family communication and the reality created by network media. The author or co-author of 4 monographic studies and over 80 scientific papers.

Assoc. Prof. PhDr. Artur Fabiś, PhD.
WSB University
Faculty of Applied Sciences
Cieplaka street 1c
Dąbrowa Górnicza, 41-300, Poland
Artur.fabis@wsb.edu.pl
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5624-6232

Professor at the WSB Academy in Dąbrowa Górnicza. PhD with a habilitation in social sciences, in the discipline of pedagogy, specialisation: gerontology and andragogy. Research interests focus on learning processes in adulthood, especially in old age. The central issue is the process of preparing for developmental tasks and fulfilling roles in adulthood. Founder and Editor-in-Chief of the journal Exlibris Library of Social Gerontology. Initiator and manager of many local, national and international scientific conferences.

PhDr. Paweł Buchwald, PhD.
WSB University
Faculty of Applied Sciences
Cieplaka street 1c
Dąbrowa Górnicza, 41-300, Poland
pbuchwald@wsb.edu.pl
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2537-7085

Specialist in computer science and ICT systems security engineering, deputy head of the Department of Transportation and Computer Science. His research interests include ICT systems security engineering, distributed data processing and acquisition systems, computer graphics, as well as the application of mobile devices and computer management systems. He works actively with IT companies in the areas of design, implementation and deployment of modern software for business, industry and education.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS FAKE NEWS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE EXPERIENCE OF ADULT POLES

Michał SZYSZKA – Arkadiusz WĄSIŃSKI – Artur FABIŚ – Paweł BUCHWALD

ABSTRACT:

Falsification and manipulation of information, using it for image, material or political gain, is a significant phenomenon of contemporary social communication, and no doubt, its scale and significance have made fake news the subject of numerous studies. The purpose of this article is to analyse the attitudes of adult Poles toward fake news, based on the results of a qualitative study conducted as part of the national Infostrateg programme. The study was designed to identify respondents' knowledge and attitudes about fake news, their awareness of the dangers of information manipulation and how they deal with disinformation. A semi-structured individual interview method was used, which made it possible to capture subtle aspects of the respondents' experiences. Data analysis was carried out according to a semi-inductive model, using open coding and comparative analysis. Sampling was based on the criterion of maximum variation, which made it possible to capture a variety of perspectives on fake news. The results indicate that fake news is perceived as an integral part of the modern infosphere, and its presence is widely accepted, although it evokes distrust and caution. Respondents consider them a tool of social disintegration, manipulation of worldviews and network marketing. They show negative emotions toward the phenomenon, while declaring high resistance to information manipulation. The meaning attributed to fake news is reduced to four coherent categories: FN as the creation of a falsified image of reality; as a tool of social disintegration; as a tool for changing or strengthening worldviews; and as a tool of network marketing.

1 Introduction

Falsification of information, manipulation of information, making information a category intended to bring various kinds of benefits, most often of an image, material, political nature, is not a new phenomenon (Burkhardt, 2017). It is based on a peculiar pragmatism realised in the sphere of social communication. What counts in it is not the principle of creating a message with consistency of its content with the facts, but the desired psychological effect produced in the attitudes of its recipients (Aldwairi & Alwahedi, 2018). Information that has been falsified to some extent then becomes a message that can take on many alternative variants depending on the sender's stated goals. Its content can be partially or completely fabricated, the important thing is that it gives the impression of a credible representation of the fact and its circumstances (Pennycook et al., 2018). Making information a weapon in achieving one's goals would probably not be the subject of widespread social debate, were it not for the scale of this phenomenon, which is nowadays global in scope. Understood in this way, information as a tool for effective manipulation of the recipient is used on a macro scale to intentionally disinform, shaping a false picture of events, phenomena and social processes, creating social divisions that destabilise the functioning of states and international organisations (Van Der Linden et al., 2020; Himma-Kadakas, 2017).

Although the phenomenon of using information for the partisan purposes of the sender is not new, it should be noted that today it has taken on qualitatively new forms and possibilities of influencing audiences who do not distinguish between true and falsified news. In order to build a false picture of reality, so-called "troll farms" are now being used, whose task is not only to manipulate information about actual events, but also to create crafted information of events that in fact did not happen at all (Boese, 2018). The new possibilities for the pragmatics of information exploitation understood in this way are becoming increasingly challenging for the so-called ordinary recipient, who, in the face of mass disinformation, is becoming increasingly helpless and vulnerable to manipulative influences. They are confronted with the real difficulty of recognising which information is true, partly manipulated and completely fabricated. Their form and content are usually so realistic that recognising factual information from falsified information becomes a difficult task, requiring good factual training and self-distance (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018). Credibility is added by social media platforms and traditional media that disseminate them, giving them the status of media fact in the viewer's mind. From the viewer's perspective, the line between news and fake news, not so much blurs, but simply becomes unrecognisable (Rosińska, 2021).

While one can look for historical aspects of the phenomenon of creating fake news in order to intentionally use it to manipulate the attitudes of the audience, it should be emphasised that today it is not a duplication of what is already well known. The phenomenon has gained a new quality thanks to the egalitarization of access to information and the associated possibility of active participation in the process of its reception and transmission, but also its processing and commenting (Moravec et al., 2019). It involves the reversal of the mechanisms of the dissemination of fake news, carried out with the participation of the audience, unaware of its own role. By accepting a given message as credible and consistent with their worldview and attitudes, the recipients take on the role of individual actors both disseminating and promoting it by posting their own comments, having discussions about it, creating memes, etc. online activities. Thus, they perpetuate the manipulated message contained in this information as a media fact in the minds of other audiences (Moravec et al., 2019).

Today, fake news has become a widespread and seemingly permanent phenomenon of social communication. Participation in it boils down to being a more or less conscious recipient, colporteur or (co-)creator of fake news in both the social media and mainstream media spheres. In this context, fake news represents an interesting area of research exploration for the authors of this article. This is because it involves qualitatively different properties that cannot be reduced to mere opposition to news. These properties are revealed both in terms of "what is fake news?" and "what is the purpose of its creation and dissemination in the infosphere?". The search for answers to these questions reveals the sense of investigating the attitude of the viewer toward fake news, expressed in their reflexive attitude as a participant in the infosphere.

Helpful in recognising "what is fake news" is the metaphor of a news item infected with a "virus of falsehood." The non-obvious nature of fake news is expressed in the fact that the symptoms of its infection are not visible to the

viewer. Seemingly, it is news like any other, but depending on the degree of infection, its content reflects less and less the reality presented in favour of creating a more or less falsified image of it. In this sense, defining what is fake news escapes simple associations with news. Thus, the content of fake news consists of everything that proves useful for an inconsistent representation of a given fact and its circumstances in such a way that this interference with the content of the message is not recognisable by the recipient (Shu et al., 2020). The effect of hiding intentional infecting of news includes various manipulation techniques, which consist of, among others: inadequate exposure of selected aspects of a fact, omission of selected information that has a connection with it, changing the context of the presented fact, combining it with other facts that have no connection with it or created fictitious information (events, persons, organisations, contexts) (Morgan, 2018; Wardle, 2017). The effectiveness of "infecting" a news story depends on the effectiveness of hiding this action from the viewer. What gives it "life" in the infosphere is making it credible through repeated multiplication in both social media and traditional mainstream media. In the process of repeatedly passing on and commenting on fake news, there is a process of introducing it into media circulation as information that is no longer perceived as anonymous and therefore uncertain. Its credibility seems to be evidenced by participants in the infosphere spontaneously and exponentially multiplying it (individuals, organisations, institutional media entities). With each sharing and comment, fake news gains news status (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

The purpose of creating fake news is to manipulate the viewer's perception of a fact and its circumstances (Gelfert, 2021). What is important in this context is the scale and intensity of the "infecting" news activity. Recognition of a single piece of fake news seems to be a relatively simple task to catch by comparing it with other news on the topic and its sources. The situation changes in the case of recognising a multiplied piece of fake news reaching the recipient from multiple sources of the infosphere (Burshtein, 2017). However, it should be noted that the functioning in the infosphere of a single piece of fake news does not occur in practice due to the ease of its multiplication in the infosphere (Wardle, 2017). Thus, recognising a given message as fake news becomes a very difficult task for the recipient, if at all, feasible. The power of fake news to produce a disinformation effect on a social scale is determined not by the mechanisms of fake news multiplication itself, but by the related mechanisms of its mutation, usually occurring on the basis of intentional action (Cunningham, 2017). The ease with which fake news can be modified and put online in the form of multiple mutations of it circulating in parallel enhances the viewer's sense of its credibility, and thus recognition that it is news. While recognising a colony of multiplied fake news is not an easy task for a viewer bombarded with dozens or more new news stories every day, it is much more difficult to recognise a colony of multiplied and simultaneously mutated fake news.

The multiplicity, parallelism, continuity and dynamism of intervening disinformation events in the infosphere shapes the consciousness of the audience with regard to the given facts and circumstances, due to the recognition of fake news as credible news. This translates into the emotional attitude of recipients, who, accepting false information as truthful, open themselves to further information that confirms their belief that it is true. This, in turn, triggers their readiness to express their opinions on a given topic and to protect other users of the infosphere from other information portraying a given fact and its circumstances differently, which they believe to be false. The mechanism of information bubble formation is then triggered, gathering users who have similar opinions on a topic and fuelling in them the conviction that they are right (Rhodes, 2022; Spohr, 2017). The substrate of these mechanisms is psychosocial in nature. Identifying with the content of fake news treated as credible information fosters the formation of personal beliefs consistent with its message. This, in turn, promotes the mental unification of the audience with the increasingly broad spectrum of events, phenomena and processes presented in successive instalments of fake news ostensibly explaining various aspects of the functioning of social reality. Their "trademark" is the creation of simple and appealing myths as unanswerable explanations of selected aspects of reality. The ostensibility of these explanations is bound up in simplifications that appeal to stereotypes to which specific audiences respond, as well as in the selective and uncritical presentation of content and its biased interpretation. Fake news serves in this context to impose an "only right" narrative describing a biased representation of reality within a given information bubble. Over time, these bubbles become enclaves of indoctrinated thinking, which is based on the preparation of "personalised" fake news to specific groups of users of the infosphere (Spohr, 2017).

The psychosocial underpinning of fake news is thus manifested in a key characteristic of news bubbles, identified with the mechanism of mental "blending" of audiences uncritically identifying with the dominant narrative

in them. This relies on the fact that these audiences do not question the validity of the image of reality promoted in the bubble, which over time is subject to a mechanism of increasing contrast with the perception of reality by audiences identifying with other information bubbles (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Thus, the target effect of disinformation is the deliberate shaping of the attitudes of recipients of fake news in such a way that it triggers processes of social polarisation between recipients identifying with specific information bubbles. These processes are aimed at the constant confrontation of views and the pursuit of exclusive status as the only true explanations justifying the validity of their vision of the world. They gradually lead to the mental ideologization of groups identifying themselves with specific bubbles, involving the manifestation of hostility towards differently thinking participants in the infosphere. The emanation of such mental confinement to the information bubble is intolerance of other views and hate speech as a way of discouraging opponents from participating in social debate (Bakir & McStay, 2018). The extreme manifestation of antagonising participants in information bubbles is to take it outside the infosphere in the form of acts of symbolic and/or physical violence carried out in social reality.

The purpose of this article is to identify the phenomenon of fake news from the perspective of the media experience of its recipients in the context of the attitudes they manifest towards fake news and their individual ways of dealing with it.

2 Materials and Methods

The results presented here were collected in the course of a survey conducted as part of an R&D project under the national Polish Infostrateg programme.[1] One of the main objectives of the social dimension of this study was to identify, on the basis of personal experiences of participation in the infosphere, the attitudes of the surveyed adult Poles towards fake news. The attitudes of the people surveyed reveal: a) their knowledge of fake news and the dangers identified with vulnerability to the manipulative influence of fake news, b) their awareness of the importance of fake news for the quality of interpersonal relations in the practice of everyday life, c) the ways in which they individually relate to fake news and the mechanisms they use to protect themselves from it.

The research was carried out using a qualitative approach due to the desire to gain in-depth insight into the research issue at hand from the perspective of the individual experiences and reflections of participants in the infosphere who are aware of fake news and, at the same time, the need to confront it personally. The qualitative approach was conducive to capturing the subtle aspects of the individual experiences of the people surveyed related to: recognition of fake news and the types of threats identified with fake news, the specifics of personal reference to fake news in the context of its relevance in daily life, ways of dealing with fake news and assessing the effectiveness of its protective function.

The study at the qualitative data collection stage used the individual qualitative semi-structured interview method (Gudkova, 2012). Its value is that it is a life-world oriented interview "serves to understand the main themes of the daily life world as seen from the perspective of the subjects themselves" (Kvale, 2010, p. 42). The interview dispositions consisted of questions/questions that were modified and expanded during the course of the interviews to include further themes initiated by the narrator(s). Their order and arrangement, the way they were formulated, were treated by the researchers as suggestions for conducting a focused study in the area of interest. However, they were not treated by the researchers as a set of structured and to some extent standardised questions with sets of answer cafeterias, obliging them to ask each narrator in a predetermined sequence and linguistic form. After completing five interviews, a list of 25 questions/problem questions crystallised as part of the interview instructions.

The interviews were conducted alternately in front of two researchers (with the passive participation of one of them) or together, which should be considered a form of researcher triangulation (Flick, 2011). All interviews were

compiled in the form of transcriptions faithfully reproducing the narrators' statements (Rapley, 2013). The analysis of qualitative data was carried out in a semi-inductive model, allowing the derivation of general conclusions from premises that are particular instances of these conclusions from simultaneous ones. Constructing the structure of codes and categories was realised in several stages. The first involves open coding of the texts of all. The second involves organising thematic codes (Patton, 1992). The third is the so-called modification phase involving the creation of an initial list of descriptive categories using in-depth comparative analysis. This approach makes it possible to link the process of data analysis with the process of simultaneous data collection (Strumińska-Kutra & Koładkiewicz, 2012). In the study conducted, this was all the more important because, applying the triangulation of the method, the method of focused interviews (focus groups) was used in parallel. This allowed for continuous correction of the individual interview questionnaire, through the data collected in the focus groups.

The analytical procedure was implemented in accordance with M. Lichtman's "3K" concept. It involves moving from raw data to meaningful descriptions or statements through the use of codes, categories and concepts (Lichtman, 2014). The path of analytical conduct outlined in this concept involves a gradual move away from simplistic descriptions of statements, which are some replications of other narrators' statements, toward an increasingly in-depth analytical level of coding and theorising, in a form abstracted from the specific statements of research participants and their interpretations (Gibbs, 2011) aiming at a higher-order synthesis (Tesch, 2013).

The people participating in the study came from different backgrounds and age groups, and differed significantly in terms of life experiences and media competence. The selection of people for the study was dictated by the criterion of maximum variability differentiating the ways in which the subjects relate to fake news. This is conducive to the identification of critical cases, in which the processes under study reveal themselves in a particularly transparent way (Patton, 2002). The selection of people for the study involved ensuring their diversity in terms of gender, age, education level, occupational specialisation, social roles played, life experience, as well as involvement in various spheres of social, professional and family life. The selection of people for the study was therefore purposeful and iterative. "As one gains a better understanding of the research area, more and more knowledge is gained about the people present. As a result, the procedure for selecting individuals may change over the course of the research process as new knowledge is gained about who may be best informed and who may present a different point of view from the others in the area." (Flick, 2010, p. 63). All research participants were informed that their data would be anonymised, and that any participant could stop the research and withdraw from the project at any time.

The interviews were conducted from February to September 2022 with 14 people aged 21 to 74, residing in the Silesian and Malopolska provinces. The duration of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to an hour and 45 minutes.

Anonymisation of the presented narrators' data was carried out according to the scheme: WKi90/MKa20, where the first uppercase letter W/M stands for the narrator's gender, the second uppercase and third lowercase letters Ki/Ka stand for the first two letters of the narrator(s)' first name, and the number 90/20 stands for his/her age.

3 Results

Table 1: Components of attitudes towards fake news

Concept	Categories	Subcategories
Components of attitudes toward fake news	I. Meanings attributed to fake news	a. Fake news as an integral component of the modern infosphere
		b. Fake news as the creation of a falsified image of reality
		c. Fake news as a tool of social disintegration
		d. Fake news as a tool for changing or reinforcing worldviews
		e. Fake news as a tool of network marketing
	II. The emotional basis of attitudes toward fake news	a. Aversion to fake news related to negative experiences
		b. Distrust of fake news
		c. A sense of resilience against the negative impact of fake news
	III. Strategies for confronting fake news	a. Not commenting on fake news
		b. Not creating or sharing your own fake news
		c. Responding to fake news in special situations
		d. Verifying the content and origin of fake news

Source: Own processing, 2024

I. Meanings Attributed to Fake News

a. Fake News as an Integral Component of the Modern Infosphere

Fake news is seen by narrators as an integral component of the modern infosphere. They occur in every social space, and are an element that can no longer be excluded. Particularly significant places for their deliberate use are open spaces for the clash of views, exchange of ideas and communication. Above all, attention was paid to social networks, forums and information platforms. In such networks, manipulated information spreads most effectively, encounters good ground, is replicated, transmitted and provokes widespread reactions, which fuels the circle of disinformation. Fake news is therefore a common phenomenon for the participants of the study, even a natural part of modern life. Although, at the same time, the question of giving a specific example from one's own experience posed some difficulties, and the context of the coronavirus and anti-vaccine movements was cited most often. However, there was a consensus that the phenomenon of the ubiquitous spread of false information should be treated as part of the information ecosystem in the modern world, tolerated and accustomed to it, although at the same time the phenomenon should be approached with distrust and caution.

"I would like to be sure of it. I would like to be sure of it, but I don't have that certainty. I try to always think through every move, especially if it's information that's being redirected to me so this already sets off a red light for me here." (MKr42)

"(…) I have a very neutral attitude to it, because I just know that well it is inevitable." (WMa25)

"(…) despite the fact that I consider myself a person who can look for information, reliable sources well I went with the flow and well it seems to me that it is quite dangerous but well in the age of social media and all that is happening in the twenty-first century, well unfortunately I guess we can't." (WWi22)

"It's circulating somewhere online and there's wide access to it and everyone can read it and take it as the truth, which it is not." (WJu32)

"(…) such fake news very much penetrates this social fabric that uses the Internet." (MKr42)

"If some news appears to me, well now it's massively, so to speak, coming on all smartphones. (…) This phenomenon is not going to disappear from our space so soon." (MMa29)

"I mean, well often on such portals where there are biased people." (WJu32)

"So it will spread in such a field where it will do well, so a particular fake news, if it hits a good ground for that its place..." (MMa23)

b. Fake News as the Creation of a Falsified Picture of Reality

Fake news is not the truth, it is a construct produced on the basis of distorted information, based on specific data that is deliberately overinterpreted, misread or manipulated. By this they create an untrue, abbreviated and cognitively attractive picture of reality, but at the same time they get into circulation, are read and passed on, and live their lives.

"It is created on the basis of false information, that is, maybe there is a grain of truth somewhere, but this information is built and expanded in such a way that the end is information that is untrue, but it is somewhere not strongly spread." (WWi22).

"For me, fake news is information that gets circulated, is spread, but has no coverage in reality." (MMi36)

"Bad news, a lie like hmm... telling people something that is not true or is not in line with the facts that are proven and convincing people of its truth." (MLe48)

c. Fake News as a Tool of Social Disintegration

The ambiguity of the narrators' statements is particularly evident in the characterisation of fake news as an effective tool of disintegration: polarising and mutually antagonising society. Moreover, it is not only about disinformation and its social effect, i.e., fragmentation (internal divisions) and dividing society. Respondents agree that the perception (reception) of falsified information has a significant emotional and psychological impact, causing emotional arousal, fear, anxiety, nervousness and even aggression. And, as they point out, this is what they are created for. The disintegration of society will include not only divisiveness, but also the induction or intensification of a sense of threat. Fake news thus becomes an intentionally used, often professionally prepared tool for social influence engineering.

"I think it was such an internal irritation of ours, because if the information (...) turns out to be false information, I think it somehow affects us so negatively internally." (Wal29)

"They divide us into tribes. I mean they deepen these bubbles we're in." (MJa25)

"...In my opinion, fake news creates social conflicts in a sense, and at the professional level at the private level. I think they create a lot of risks for society." (WJu32)

"For the community, it's such an even bigger attitude, a hostile attitude of one against the other, and I think that's the main goal." (MKr42)

"Well precisely [in] economic areas, for example, political areas, they can cause panic of some kind among the public." (MTo51).

d. Fake News as a Tool for Changing or Reinforcing Worldviews

One of the key goals of disseminating fake news is to shape the worldview of the audience - both by changing it and reinforcing already existing beliefs. On the one hand, disinformation can be used to modify the way audiences think about certain phenomena, while on the other hand, it can be used to consolidate desired attitudes, opinions and values among those already convinced. Respondents mostly indicate that it is a strategy with a clear political character, aimed at mobilising and consolidating supporters by reinforcing their beliefs and affiliation with a particular ideological group. At the same time, fake news can be used to destabilise the attitudes of opponents - by sowing doubt and uncertainty, it can prompt them to revise their views or weaken their existing certainty. Also, the mere provocation of controversy and debate around a given topic can be an end in itself and carry the potential to change or strengthen worldviews. Fake news often provokes engagement in discussion, forcing audiences to take a stand – whether in defence of their own beliefs or in response to the content presented. In this way, disinformation not only shapes the narrative around certain phenomena, but also strengthens the dynamics of public discussion or debate.

"They are meant to lead people to redirect their thinking." (MMa29)

"If he is convinced of a certain option, he will take it positively the one who is of a different opinion, well, he will criticise it." (MBo68)

"If we come across some fake news, which, well, goes somewhere to the heart of some communities, well, then they are able to, well, unite, build somehow, I don't know, their identity more, stronger, well, they don't check this information, well, and this fake news circulates among them, it circulates, well, and in addition to the fact that this whole machine of fake news drives it, well, it's also this kind of, well, the whole community has fuel to continue to be alive and to be united, so I think this can be such an effect." (WWi22)

"...all of this has a link somewhere in there to a greater or lesser extent to the issue of political views in order to convince some part, a social group of some environment to the vision of a particular group, politicians or the political environment more broadly." (MMa29)

e. Fake News as a Network Marketing Tool

Misrepresentation is not only ideologically and politically motivated, but also economically motivated, being an effective tool of network marketing. It is a simple and effective way to manipulate customers by creating fears, creating artificial needs and suggesting that they can only be satisfied by buying a particular product or using a particular service. Fake news, according to those surveyed, is intentionally used to create an atmosphere of uncertainty, which sellers and marketers then exploit by offering "solutions" tailored to the alleged threats. The dissemination of false information often goes hand in hand with the distribution of related advertising content - both directly related to the topic of misinformation and unrelated but exposed in the same message. In this way, fake news can serve as an indirect tool for generating financial gains, which frustrates the narrators surveyed - most of whom declare that they are aware of the manipulation mechanisms invoked.

"There is certainly very good money to be made on fear, and we know this not from today." (MMi36)

"well if it's possible to make money on TikTok, well if we have more watchers or there are more likes on our videos, that's how we benefit financially, because before our video they can share an ad. These ads pay us for the fact that they share before our video." (MLe48)

"It very often comes down to the fact that targets are very often either dictated by economic, financial or political reasons." (MMa29)

II. The Emotional Basis of Attitudes toward Fake News
a. Aversion to Fake News Related to Negative Experiences

Narrators have many negative experiences resulting from confronting fake news. These include personal events directly relating to themselves, as well as those of broader scope relating to some thought, event, view or group, but which also evoke negative emotions. These experiences are the reason for the narrators' unequivocally declared aversion to fake news. The obvious fact is that it would be better if their creation and dissemination could be limited. There are also people among the narrators whose aversion to fake news motivates them to act (e.g., discussing, commenting, these attitudes are discussed in pt. III), but most remain passive in the face of the phenomenon, do not see the possibility of opposing it, and do not believe in the possibility of implementing solutions (e.g., ICT) that will effectively curb its scale and scope.

"(...) and that was such a sobering such a moment for me, where I thought to myself, wow, I actually let myself get screwed by this, because it wasn't until later that I got to know the whole backstory of this thing, I read, I scammed the information on the Internet, and it really was just to increase his popularity and probably a lot more viewership of his programme." (MKr42)

"I happened to duplicate information that was untrue and well afterwards there was a certain amount of shame associated with it, but I always try to break through in such situations, to admit my mistakes, to write that I was wrong." (MJa25)

"I mean, I wish they weren't this. I think it's obvious." (MMa29)

"Sometimes by virtue of the fact that I hold public office (...) and there were times when some information untrue about me was made public, (...) or I had to rectify, in the sense of clarifying, (...) it was obviously untrue to my activities or to me." (MMa29)

b. Distrust of Fake News

Narrators show great caution and declare distrust of fake news. This attitude is manifested primarily by distance and indifference to information that has the hallmarks of being manipulated. they say in order not to be manipulated one must be constantly vigilant. Recognizing those obviously manipulated causes them to be rejected, even if they are not verified by the narrators. One of the most common methods indicated by respondents is to avoid media outlets, services and sources of information where, according to their beliefs, hypocritical information may appear.

"I'll say this: well, on the one hand, as a viewer and reader, it's a bit irritating and annoying, well, because we actually expect information that is reliable and true, but on the other hand, I'm also aware of how the media works, and in fact they have to somehow stretch and bend all this information, let's say partially true, in order to have readers". (WMa25)

"Indeed, when I see, some images that somehow on the one hand seemingly catch my attention, but seem to me some kind of total absurdity, I just move on and don't focus at all. I don't stop any longer, I just dwell on them." (WAl29)

c. A Sense of Resilience against the Negative Impact of Fake News

Distrust, caution and declared bad experiences with fake news make the people surveyed feel immune to the impact of falsified information. When discussing the dangers of confronting fake news, the study's participants perceived them only in relation to other people. Although they are usually active in the media space, they see themselves as bystanders in the communication process. They attribute to themselves the roles of recipients, in addition to being cautious, having proven methods of verifying information, not allowing themselves to be manipulated, sometimes even exposing the falsified information. Some express very authoritarian assessments, opinions on the gullibility, credulity of other media users, most point to the "general" poor preparation of other audiences to confront fake news. Significantly, harsh criticism of the credulity of other media users is voiced by those about whose prudence in selecting verification sources and accepting justifications as credible the researchers have very strong doubts. However, narrators, although aware of the danger that fake news can cause, feel immune to it. They justify this immunity by their own experience, reason, knowledge of the specifics of how the phenomenon works, and ability to verify information (proven ways, information and communication competence, ability to "check online"). Significantly, only one person admitted that they perceive in themselves vulnerability to manipulation.

"This can be understood in two ways, because on the one hand, yes, I feel immune to them for the reason that what I wouldn't read on the Internet, well ninety-nine percent of the time, I don't take it personally whatever it concerns, so in no way do they directly sort of affect me mentally, psychologically." (WMa25)

"...although very often I define to myself somewhere that I know that this is hypocritical information based on, well, at least the experience of life, previous years and activities." (MMa38)

"I have yet to encounter such a thing, that I would be able to believe something and that it would cause some kind of disadvantage to me." (MLe48)

"Somehow this harm never affects me personally" (MMa23)

III. Strategies for Confronting Fake News
a. Not Commenting on Fake News

A passive attitude toward fake news prevails among narrators. Some declare that they occasionally engage in discussion or comment, but the prevailing belief is that such activity is devoid of much point. As a rule, the main exception to this rule, are situations in which there are certain relationships between those discussing. This occurs mainly among friends, colleagues or in specific online communities (e.g., thematic, hobby, local or regional, etc.). What is important here is the specific dimension of relationship or proximity and the fact that the exchange of opinions is not shattered by the veil of anonymity.

"I cut myself off from commenting on social media so generally, because I think there is absolutely no point in doing so." (MMi36)

"No, no. To be honest, I don't think it's ever happened to me, other than pictures of close friends, to comment on anything online." (WMa25)

"No, I don't entertain comments. Very much not, then I don't even know when I did it last time to comment on a post because I get the impression that I would lose too much time doing it so often on such already fake news that appears. It's not like I would have any room to manoeuvre anyway." (MKr42)

b. Not Creating or Sharing Their Own Fake News

Narrators firmly reject the possibility of creating fake news. The statements testify that they do not engage in manipulating the truth, although minor episodes with the creation of false information cannot be ruled out (some respondents admitted that they were unconsciously produced in the past). To the conscious, intentional creation of fake news, none of the respondents admit. They indicate that the possible dissemination of disinformation could only be the result of an accidental, unintentional act of theirs, and assume that these would be incidental situations.

"I rather shy away from such things. Well, of course, like any person, I happen to hear a rumour somewhere from someone physically and pass it on. When it comes to such online stuff I don't, I don't, for example, I don't, I don't know, post on Facebook on a board, I don't post information that I got from someone somewhere, unverified. It's just pointless in my opinion." (WMa25)

"I wouldn't call it fake news, but, well, sure, somewhere I happened to let some rumour loose among my friends out of ignorance, but it was more like that middle school period, where one talked rather a lot and thought little. Now I rather try not to do that." (WJu32)

"While information seen on the Internet posted by some external portals, sources, accounts and the like I don't click at all. I don't click 'Share on' due to the fact that we just may not be fully aware and know whether, or not, this information posted is true or not." (Wal29)

"Well, I don't know, if an article came to me somewhere that, well, contradicts my views, well, I guess that, well, then I wouldn't share it, you know." (WWi22)

"Because I don't like to spread untrue information and rumours, because I wouldn't want anyone to accuse me of such things either, so definitely if I do share something further, I verify it, read it carefully and send the link or just personally write an abbreviated version of the information I obtained." (WMa25)

c. Responding to Fake News in Special Situations

There are situations that motivate narrators to be proactive and oppose the spread of untruths. Individuals have attempted to engage in discussions with the authors/repeaters of news they considered untrue. The goal was to clarify, to correct, although rarely succeed in achieving the desired effect. As the narrators unanimously emphasise, there is little point in responding online to fake news, but if they do attempt to do so, their actions focus solely on commenting and providing feedback. At the same time, the narrators point out that a constructive exchange of opinions on social media causes numerous difficulties, and is often impossible. Therefore, they consider it safer, more comfortable and effective to be active among real friends.

"If such things happen, whether in a tweet or with people with whom I have at least this illusory impression of contact, with whom I am able to exchange at least a given opinion on the subject, and I see that there is also feedback, then in such situations I try, but it is very sporadic." (MKr42)

"I have such a character that I like to discuss and argue, and I do it and in person and on Facebook and with strangers. What are the reactions? Well I've noticed that it's harder to talk on Facebook, but it's not that one-on-one conversations are always easier. Sometimes they aren't, because once again, when someone tells me simply Russian propaganda, in conversation it's already hard to simply control myself, although well some of my friends really like my discussions on Facebook, they make popcorn for themselves, they watch." (MJa25)

"If these are people I know somewhere, with whom I have contact and share such things, rather, if I am able to rectify it in some way, well most often here I think of parents, who sometimes thoughtlessly share some things that can even lead to some kind of virus, already here I am talking about such cases, well it is known that this kind of thing, we try to level out on an ongoing basis." (WJu32)

"I'm just trying to straighten out the thinking as someone approaches me directly with this fake news. Somehow, I will individually straighten up, but no, I guess I can be ashamed of myself for that, but when I see fake news, I don't react to it." (MMa23)

d. Verifying the Content and Origin of Fake News

The best strategy for defending against disinformation, according to respondents, is "reliable verification of suspicious content." Such an, albeit rather general and often even ephemeral, solution is recommended by the narrators as a postulated element of education, which should be included in the universal education system. The interviewees themselves, when in doubt, declare that they try to learn about and authenticate the source of information. It is best to obtain knowledge from verified sites, portals or magazines, and if this is not possible, they suggest reaching out to an alternative source and verifying the data. A small number of interviewees indicated that they incidentally reach for scientific studies and foreign sources. At the same time, none of the interviewees directly indicated the use of fact-checking solutions (or projects oriented to combat misinformation), or the use of the sequence of guidelines (instruction) proposed by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions.

"Also, somewhere in there I think that this is first of all for me such the biggest signal: whether the source is given, where the information is from, or whether it is not there." (WWi22)

"The first thing is the source, because if we are dealing with a portal on the principle of "unreliable.pl" or something like that, I'm saying because I don't even know if there is such a portal, I immediately take a large margin for, for the fact that something here may be wrong and in addition, that there is some information I later, for example, enter myself, of course, where everyone, that is, in Google whether such a thing took place." (MMi36)

"Because it's also the case that mostly when there's some journalism, it seems to me that there must be, like, a reference to [scientific sources,] statistics, information and so on, and then I reach for it, in the sense of the source that the author gives, so in that way maybe." (WJu32)

4 Discussion

The analysis of the components of the attitudes of the surveyed people towards fake news led to an analytical separation of the structure of the subjects with direct and indirect participation in the process of their media creation in the infosphere (Table 2). An interesting aspect of the statements of the surveyed people shaping the structure of the components of attitudes towards fake news is their distancing from it. The issue of fake news as a permanent, indelible element of the infosphere resounds clearly in their statements. It has to be dealt with somehow, while at the same time it carries with it potential risks recognised on a personal and social level. The characteristic interpretive context of the statements is to view fake news in a negative light, as a harbinger of something that does not lead to positive consequences, but entails more or less severe nuisances. Caution, criticism, distancing oneself from unknown content, verifying its veracity and origin are among the basic ways to protect oneself from the negative consequences of mistaking fake news as news. Even people who ignore the importance of fake news, treating it as a way to make a name for themselves online, an effective network marketing tool, keep their distance from it. They see the phenomenon as part of the modern social game going on in the infosphere. The prerequisite for the apparent harmlessness of fake news is then the awareness of participation in this game. There is a major protective buffer for respondents against the unwanted effects of the message contained in them.

From the polyphony obtained in the research, which forms a mosaic of media experiences, insights and reflections on fake news, a rather clear distancing from it as something that is in the infosphere and which the people surveyed cannot effectively influence is resounding. Such distancing is tantamount to situating the surveyed individuals as subjects who see themselves as recipients of fake news or subjects who participate (more or less actively) in the multiplication of fake news. In virtually every statement, the people surveyed not only do not identify themselves as creators of fake news, nor do they aspire to such a role, as they indicate that such entities are media institutions, organisations and political parties or prominent individuals associated with them. The aforementioned plurality of people surveyed outlines the three-subject nature of the process of media creation of fake news, in which a clear gradation of the importance of the various groups of participants in the infosphere is outlined (Table 2).

Table 2: Three-sided nature of the process of media creation of fake news in the infosphere

Concept	Categories	Subcategories
Three-sided nature of the process of media creation of fake news in the infosphere	Recipients of fake news	a Relating with distance to fake news
		b Warning loved ones against fake news
		c Susceptible to fake news for reasons of ideological blindness
		d Susceptible to fake news due to intellectual sluggishness
		e Shying away from dialogue with trolls
		f Consciously withholding fake news
	Colporteurs of fake news	a Sharing fake news for fun
		b Sharing fake news unintentionally
		c Sharing fake news as part of an information bubble
		d Sharing fake news for worldview reasons
	(Co)Creators of fake news	a Mainstream media, niche media, tabloids
		b Online portals, social-media
		c Political parties
		d Professional manipulators
		e Private amateurs

Source: Own processing, 2024

The aforementioned gradation of the importance of actors runs in order from the entity with the highest status in initiating this process, i.e., the (co-)creators of fake news, through the colporteurs of fake news, to the recipients of fake news, as their proper addressees. Analysis of the collected material leads to the conclusion that in the statuses of the mentioned groups of actors lies the power of influence in the infosphere. Media outlets, organisations, political parties and related notables are cited in various statements as entities behind which personal, financial, technological and organisational resources lie. They confer on them the valence of real causality in the creation and promotion of information influence strategies. In the conviction of the people surveyed, they have significant opportunities to create fake news in the infosphere, performing a marginal or primary function in the goals they have adopted for shaping public awareness. Private amateurs, if taken into account at all, are treated as sources of fake news of marginal informational importance to the general participants in the infosphere. A characteristic aspect of the statements of the people surveyed is the sense of ambivalence or internal inconsistency of their attitudes toward the key, in their view, representatives of this group of actors. They declare a lack of full trust towards representatives of this 'influential' group, which they argue is due to their lack of political and/or business neutrality. In doing so, they show a tendency to be guided by worldview-political proximity in recognising on faith the credibility of selected entities as reliable sources of information, and depreciating the credibility of other entities they perceive as worldview-political distant. It is significant that in the group of creators/co-creators of disinformation, mainstream media were also indicated. This may come as a surprise, but it should be remembered that the survey was carried out in 2022-23, during which period there was a specific process of partisanship of the public media in Poland, whose role was reduced to the function of propaganda. The message strategy was subordinated to the interests and party in power, accompanied by a harsh reaction from parts of the private media. As a result, we had an extreme case of media polarisation, the same facts in different narratives were presented in different and often contradictory ways (Klepka, 2019). In addition, some of the right-wing boulevard media in a short period of time (thanks to, among other things, favourable economic

conditions and acquired subsidies) gained nationwide status and large audiences, so that they now define themselves as mainstream.

It is worth noting that while the concept of an "information bubble" is relatively often cited by those surveyed, it is always in a negative context. It refers to a group of entities whose information credibility is depreciated. The information bubble in the language of the respondents becomes synonymous with susceptibility to manipulation, openness to the influence of fake news. Thus, it is identified with a space of intentionally implemented and planned disinformation, the existence of which they are aware and therefore do not participate in.

The colporteurs appear in the statements of the people surveyed as a collective, dispersed entity, internally differentiated in terms of their media status and motivations for participating in the process of creating fake news. They are ascribed relatively little importance in terms of their ability to initiate this process and give it the desired direction from the perspective of disinformation goals. Nevertheless, the colporteurs are attributed significant importance in terms of the course, dynamics and scale of the disinformation process. A mechanism that determines the multiplication of fake news largely takes place here. The more attractive it is to the participants of the infosphere, the greater the likelihood of arousing interest and encouraging a larger group of media users to share it spontaneously, comment on it and modify it (e.g., in the form of memes or other media creations). The degree of attractiveness of fake news thus determines the level of activity of colporteurs, who consciously or unconsciously multiply them, giving credence to their origin through a large scale of sharing between personalised accounts. The multiplicity of sharing fake news, along with related comments and spontaneously created reworkings of it, fosters the formation of a colloquial conviction among participants in the infosphere that it is common knowledge and therefore credible.

The mechanism of multiplying fake news is thus related to the specificity of the colporteurs as a collective entity with unknown numbers, structure, interests, motives for action and willingness to engage. The colporteurs are, on the one hand, individuals showing a certain determination and constancy in the intentional sharing of fake news from worldly motives, as well as promoting fake news out of the need to appear and dominate others, and, on the other hand, individuals "seduced" by the content of fake news and, on impulse, spontaneously sharing it with other participants in the infosphere. The ephemeral nature of this collective entity is particularly evidenced by the latter group of people. Driven by impulse, they take the aforementioned action. However, they do not know whether they will share other fake news again, when they will do it, if any, for what content, how often and with what commitment they will do it in the future.

The complexity of this situation is related to the rather nefarious motives behind their actions. It involves the intentional sharing and commenting of information and involves the unintentional authentication of fake news. Many times, this situation involves information that the colporteurs do not identify as fake news, but credible information. In their minds, they disseminate news that is important to them, the veracity of which they have no doubt. These motives are: a) unreflective, almost reflexive transmission of information to acquaintances, without verifying the content, and therefore without discerning its credibility, b) intentional sharing and commenting within one's own information bubble on fake news considered as credible information, c) sharing of fake news treated as an activity that mocks the presented reality, maintained in the convention of pastiche, joke, thus paradoxically free from the negative effects of their promotion or even opposing them.

The group of recipients constitutes the most numerous subject in the process of media creation of fake news, being its target addressee, reviewer and at the same time its potential multiplier. The tri-subjective nature of this process is expressed in the fact that the existence of the recipients of fake news gives meaning to the entire process of its creation. Recipients constitute the most numerous group of participants in the infosphere, from which comes a much smaller group of colporteurs. The role of the recipient in the infosphere is to extract from the information noise those news items that will catch their attention. They will hold it in their thoughts at least for a while before judging it as attractive or worthless. Information judged as attractive consists of messages that are credible and manipulated, that is, correctly recognised as news and fake news, and information that is not recognised as fake news. The recipient makes a decision each time related to accepting or rejecting information initially assessed as attractive. They can remain in this role (that of a recipient) or enter the role of a colporteur in an incidental or more structured manner. At the same time, the colporteur does not cease to be a recipient of the entire spectrum of information that they do not intend to share.

In light of the statements of the people surveyed, the recipients represent a subject showing an internal split at the level of awareness of the risks associated with the real coexistence of fake news in their information space. On the one hand, recipients are attributed with the awareness of: a) the high probability of encountering fake news and committing the misclassification of it into the news category, b) the need to protect friends from fake news by proactively alerting them to news of questionable credibility, as well as countering its multiplication by deliberately not sharing it with friends, c) the counter-effectiveness of entering into a discussion with trolls, which is used solely as a tactic to promote fake news to other participants in the infosphere. On the other hand, viewers are portrayed as accepting the content of fake news as credible information due to low intellectual capacity, little life experience, or ideological bias that limits the ability to rationally recognise low credibility content due to the manipulation techniques used in it.

Awareness of the risks associated with the misrecognition by the public of fake news is linked to an understanding of the fundamental difference with news. Its perception blocks the possibility of treating them as messages that supplement missing elements of the perceived world and deepen understanding of it because of the manipulative techniques contained in them that create alternative, fictional representations and explanations of it. Lack of awareness in this regard, in turn, is associated with the danger of mental deformation of the audience. It is based on the symbolic-interpretative narrative of fake news that presents reality in a cognitive schema abstracted from facts and circumstances.

The manipulative techniques used in fake news give it certain properties that can be interpreted as interpretive and narrative potential. On the basis of deliberately created understatements, silences, false associations, untrue statements, etc., the recipient fills in perceived information gaps, adds what has been suggested, independently interpreting the content that did not resonate directly, but logically closes the missing pieces of the "puzzle". Creating their own image of a given fact, they identify with it, arousing emotional attitudes towards the content of fake news, which gradually become their own view of a given fact and its related circumstances. Over time, they get carried away by the "allure" of the entire sequence of fake news, failing to recognise the power of their manipulation in reorienting directly or indirectly their own attitudes against someone (person, organisation, institution) or something (phenomenon, ideology). The narrative potential of fake news, on the other hand, is revealed in its usefulness for creating collective perceptions about a topic that provide simple answers and explanations to "information-infected" audiences.

The disinformative impact of fake news contributes to the creation of alternative images of the world to each other and the creation of non-interpenetrating subspaces in the infosphere, identified as so-called information bubbles. By disinforming, they deepen the differences and divisions between proponents of alternative to each other ways of representing and understanding the world. At the same time, they build bridges of unanimity between those who have allowed themselves to be seduced by one of the created alternatives. Thus, on a social scale, disinformation fosters the formation of an antagonistic, polarised image of the world, a disturbed sense of value and security, which can lead to hostile attitudes toward other participants marked by some stigma. At the same time, it leads to the mental dependence of the recipients on the so-called "information bubbles" that determine their attitude towards the other and the environment. In this sense, fake news has the power to change the world according to the vision of those who are its creators.

5 Conclusion

The survey revealed a tendency indicating in the declarative aspect of the people surveyed, regardless of age and gender, the use of various - in their opinion proven or reliable - methods, strategies or tools for verifying information. However, clarifying questions asked during the survey revealed an important regularity, that the verification mechanisms used when dealing with new information are intuitive in nature. The people surveyed are primarily guided by the first impression created by the information, based on emotional, not factual factors, as other studies also indicate (McGrew et al., 2018). They usually rely on simplified rules for verifying the credibility of information. These

rules, called heuristics, help people make quick decisions, and often boil down to simple, cognitive or verification mechanisms - behavioural patterns. Despite the fact that these heuristics are simplistic, respondents strongly and emphatically declare resistance to fake news and indicate the reliability of the "methods" used to verify information. In light of the interviews, the "validation effect" (looking for information that confirms one's beliefs) and the "accessibility effect" (relying on information that is easy to obtain, using established, repetitive verification methods that do not guarantee objectivity) are of particular importance.

The statements of the people surveyed correspond with the most important conclusions drawn from other, primarily broader studies carried out on larger samples, which focus on the typical ways in which recipients of new information react to the false content it contains (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). According to these studies, they tend to pass false information further online (e.g., using instant messaging), especially when it has certain formal characteristics: it is understandable, features an accessible form, and is emotionally engaging: shocking, strange or surprising (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Unfortunately, they confirm the disturbing conclusion (Guess et al., 2018) that it is easier to convince people of false information by taking advantage of the so-called "disinformation ecosystem" on the web, in which different messages confirm, complement and reinforce each other. This creates the impression that false information is true. Also, the course of the interviews reveals the great importance of anchoring respondents in specific circles or information bubbles. They expose the accuracy of the researchers' observation, according to which people tend to trust more information that comes from sources they trust or otherwise regard as very close to them (Newman & Zhang, 2020; Albarracín & Wyer 2000).

A distinctive aspect of the narrators' statements was their conviction about the premises that favour the multiplication of fake news. First, fake news spreads much faster in social media than through other forms of social communication. This is due to the nature and mechanisms of their functioning, oriented towards interaction and media content. One reason for this is the property of fake news: it is mostly more "attractive" than real information and attracts attention more easily. Secondly, the level of trust in the source of the information (e.g., the person or group making it available, and thus giving credence to or authorising the message) is an important factor in whether people consider a piece of information credible or not. Declared trust in scientists and experts is not conducive to a willingness to verify information before sharing it. It also seems that in practice, the dominant model is conditioned by the context of the economics of attention: the prevalence of "demand" over its "supply" (Bakir & McStay, 2018), contemporary media consumption models do not promote careful verification of sources and content.

Analysis of the research material leads to conclusions: 1) about the crucial importance of countering disinformation for the quality of the functioning of modern civil society, as confirmed by the research of Bak-Coleman et al. (2022) about the powerlessness of the participants of the infosphere in recognising the ever-increasing wave of fake news and the ineffectiveness of dealing with it; 3) about the ineffectiveness of methods of verifying fake news that assume separate checking of its sources, verification of information by different sources, checking the date of its publication or the credibility of the medium promoting it. It seems reasonable in this context to look for intermediate combined approaches, integrating the recognition of fake news into coherent models of anti-disinformation. Perhaps the right direction for change is outlined by Peters Michael's research, which shows that verifying the credibility of information coming from the web is much more effective when its recipients have access to a variety of tools and methods identified with the technical, but also social and educational spheres (Peters, 2017).

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