

Fake News Domination and Threats on Democratic Systems

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Abstract : The public space all over the world is currently confronted with the aggressive assault of fake news that have lately impacted public agenda setting, collective decisions and social attitudes. Top leaders constantly call out most mainstream news as “fake news” and the public opinion get more confused. “Fake news” are generally defined as false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting and has been declared the word of the year 2017 by Collins Dictionary and it also has been one of the most debated socio-political topics of recent years. Websites which, deliberately or not, publish misleading information are often shared on social media where they essentially increase their reach and influence. According to international reports, the exposure to fake news is an undeniable reality all over the world as the exposure to completely invented information goes up to the 31 percent in the US, and it is even bigger in Eastern Europe countries, such as Hungary (42%) and Romania (38%) or in Mediterranean countries, such as Greece (44%) or Turkey (49%), and lower in Northern and Western Europe countries – Germany (9%), Denmark (9%) or Holland (10%). While the study of fake news (mechanism and effects) is still in its infancy, it has become truly relevant as the phenomenon seems to have a growing impact on democratic systems. Studies conducted by the European Commission show that 83% of respondents out of a total of 26,576 interviewees consider the existence of news that misrepresent reality as a threat for democracy. Studies recently conducted at Arizona State University show that people with higher education can more easily spot fake headlines, but over 30 percent of them can still be trapped by fake information. If we were to refer only to some of the most recent situations in Romania, fake news issues and hidden agenda suspicions related to the massive and extremely violent public demonstrations held on August 10th, 2018 with a strong participation of the Romanian diaspora have been massively reflected by the international media and generated serious debates within the European Commission. Considering the above framework, the study raises four main research questions: 1. Is fake news a problem or just a natural consequence of mainstream media decline and the abundance of sources of information? 2. What are the implications for democracy? 3. Can fake news be controlled without restricting fundamental human rights? 4. How could the public be properly educated to detect fake news? The research uses mostly qualitative but also quantitative methods, content analysis of studies, websites and media content, official reports and interviews. The study will prove the real threat fake news represent and also the need for proper media literacy education and will draw basic guidelines for developing a new and essential skill: that of detecting fake in news in a society overwhelmed by sources of information that constantly roll massive amounts of information increasing the risk of misinformation and leading to inadequate public decisions that could affect democratic stability.

Keywords : agenda setting democracy, fake news, journalism, media literacy

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