



Monika Hossová

Fake News and Disinformation: Phenomenons of Post-Factual Society

ABSTRACT

The theoretical study deals with fake news, disinformation and hoaxes. These phenomena are a major problem for contemporary society. We call it post-factual society. This expression is explained as falling confidence in objective facts and, on the contrary, increasing confidence in information with an emotional connotation, based on personal belief and conviction. The author in the study discusses the concepts of fake news, misinformation, hoaxes, their types, properties, and analyses several known fake news that appear primarily on the Internet. The author further analyses the current situation and interprets the results of the Media Literacy Index 2018, which deals with the resistance of the countries to the aforementioned negative phenomena. Last, but not least, the author focuses on the possibilities of prevention, education in this field and increasing media literacy. The study presents a theoretical view of the problem that has resonated in recent years in society and requires preventive measures and activities in the field of education and media literacy of the population of countries (not only) of the European Union.

KEY WORDS

Postfactual. Post-truth. Fake news. Hoax. Media literacy. Critical thinking. Media Literacy Index 2018.

1. Fake news, misinformation, hoaxes and post-factual times

According to The Collins English Dictionary the phrase of the year 2017 was fake news. It is information of a sensational nature that can provoke outrage, fear, hatred, or mobilize the audience to a certain activity. However, this information is untrue, fictitious or distorted. The most important issue is that it spreads at great speed and is often perceived as accurate information. False messages and disinformation often generate hoaxes that are fraudulent reports, alarm messages, fictional information, lies, unverifiable information, rumours or chain reports.¹ Although we can clearly define these concepts, it turns out that society often has a significant problem in tackling these negative phenomena.

This problem is mainly related to the state of current post-factual society (post-factual post-truth). The term post-factual refers to a period characterized by the fact that objective facts have less influence on the formation of public opinion than information based on personal conviction, belief, and emotions. The creators and distributors of misinformation, hoax and fake news consciously use emotional pressure on the recipient. In the news, we are talking about required criteria so that it can be included in the news and presented to the public. A. Kačincová Predmerská summarizes the theoretical approaches and defines the following news criteria: *novelty (up-to-date information)*, *proximity*, *continuity (event persistence and development)*, *personalization (identification of the recipient with the particular person shown in the report)*, *surprise (shocking information)*, *entertainment (presentation of curiosities, scandalous information, celebrity, sex)*, *relationship to elite nations (information on events in strong, elite countries - USA, Russia, China, Germany, etc.)* *important people such as the president, often celebrities*.² The more of these criteria are met, the greater the chance it will be presented to the audience through the media. Even in the case of fake news, misinformation and hoaxes, we can talk about some features or functions that make (mass) spreading and capturing this information in society. The most common pursuit of the originator is the induction of regret, compassion, anger, fear, or even hatred. The endeavour of a person who spreads such information is to cause the recipient to respond, to be dismayed or mobilized to spread it further in their vicinity, penetrating a larger number of recipients. As with hoax, misinformation and fake news, there are several forms of these messages depending on their function. Typical examples are: Chain messages asking for help and sharing requests; alerting global organizations about dangers (e.g. FBI, Microsoft, WHO, etc.); messages spreading leaked secret information or invented petitions.³ In addition, frauds and fake reports are increasingly appearing (fake contests and counterfeit products).

Currently the most common fake news are those that try to get money from the user. Companies or individuals who are behind such reports are often referred to as trusted businesses (business chains, state-owned companies, travel agencies, banks, etc.), most often organizing exclusive prize competitions or offering various discount coupons. In the case of bank entities, it is phishing - password hunting by e-mail or sms. The problem arises when the winner-user wants to claim his prize in the competition and this step is conditional, for example, sms notification, paying an administrative fee and sharing. In the last year, fake news has appeared in connection with well-known companies in Slovakia - Slovak Post, Lidl, Tesco, Tatralandia, Audi or BMW (Picture 1). The danger lies primarily in the fact that the user recognizes and trusts the companies. The maker of such a fraudulent report or competition violates the law, exploits the logos and corporate colours of companies, and unreasonably enriches himself.

¹ *Koncepcia mediálnej výchovy v Slovenskej republike v kontexte celoživotného vzdelávania*. Bratislava : Ministerstvo kultúry SR, 2009, p. 17.

² KAČINCOVÁ PREDMERSKÁ, A.: *Žurnalistické žánre: Spravodajstvo v periodickej tlači*. Trnava : UCM, 2017, p. 44.

³ ĎZUBÁK, J.: *Co je to hoax*. [online]. [2018-10-23]. Available at: <<http://hoax.cz/hoax/co-je-to-hoax>>.



PICTURE 1: Examples of fraudulent misrepresentation of trusted companies

Source: own processing, By: Hoax.sk. [online]. [2018-10-24]. Available at: <<https://hoax.sk/>>.

The main purpose of the above examples of fake news is the enrichment of the creator. Although it is an unfair process and a scam, this type of fake news is not “the worst”. There are also those who offer nutritional supplements or medication. For the credibility of invented products, fraudsters abuse the position and credibility of the medical profession, using photos of physicians from internet-based photos. Again, it is an unjust enrichment of the creator and an unlawful action. This group of fake news can also include conspiracy theories and “recommendations” appearing mainly in alternative media that promote alternative approaches to health care (e.g. spreading fuss about vaccination and autism, the treatment of cancer with disinfectants, etc.) (Picture 2). Web sites that provide this information often offer guides for the production of such household drugs and directly encourage recipients to life-threatening behaviour.⁴

People hazard. They want to treat cancer using disinfectant

Some cancer patients believe that chlorine dioxide which is also used to purify water in pools is more effective than chemotherapy. Both oncologists and medics are outraged.



PICTURE 2: An example of a fake report encouraging the use and production of “alternative drugs” - People gamble. They want to cure cancer with disinfectant.

Source: Ľudia hazardujú. Rakovinu si chcú liečiť dezinfekčným prostriedkom. [online]. [2018-10-24]. Available at: <<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/270385/ludia-hazarduju-rakovinu-si-chcu-liecit-dezinfekcnym-prostriedkom/>>.

As we mentioned above, fake news tries to provoke anger, hatred and fear. False reports, which could be partly true, but are usually distorted and out of the context, appear frequently. On the other hand, there are also completely fabricated reports in this category. An example of absolute deception is the report that

⁴ A list of conspiracy websites and sites with dubious and untrustworthy content is available at www.konspiratori.sk.

the Romani community in Slovakia is exempt from paying for medicines and receives them free of charge. This false message or hoax has been repeatedly spread through the Slovak Internet for several years. It is massively shared and raises a great deal of outrage for recipients who trust it. Sharing such messages is then associated with hateful user behaviour. Misinformation and false reports on migrants, on the other hand, cause fear. From the beginning, the migrant crisis has brought a lot of misinformation and fake news about attacks and disruptions of migrants, their financial advantages in Slovakia and abroad. This type of misinformation spreads extremely quickly and raises anger. In the case of false information about attacks, rapes or riots, they even spread fear. Creators of these fake news often use photographs as evidence. However, there are photos of different events, cities, countries or even continents. (Picture 3)



PICTURE 3: An example of a fake report of fear and hatred - A hoax of arriving migrants in Prague by train. People did not notice they shared a video from England

Source: ŠNÍDL, V.: Širil sa hoax, ako migranti vlakom dorazili do Prahy. Ľudia si nevšimli, že zdieľajú video z Anglicka. [online]. [2018-10-24]. Available at: <<https://dennikn.sk/1168189/siril-sa-hoax-ako-migranti-vlakom-dorazili-do-prahy-ludia-si-nevsimli-ze-zdielaju-video-z-anglicka/>>.

Based on the examples and general characteristics of the terms, we can say that current society is fighting fundamental issues such as fake news, misinformation and hoaxes (but also online political propaganda). These, undoubtedly negative, phenomena are often responsible for polarizing society, mistrusting public institutions, spreading hatred and criminality. It is therefore necessary to monitor the state of this issue in individual countries and to implement preventive and corrective measures to improve it.

2. The resistance of countries to fake news and misinformation

If we say that we live in the postfactual era, it means that individuals prefer such information (and trust more) that have an emotional connotation, are mediated by a close person, or are able to identify with their opinions and beliefs. But what is responsible for this state of society? We can talk about the informational overload of today's society as well as about the vast amount of information and data available to an individual, who is often not able to pick relevant information for his own needs and benefits. A great role is also played by the trust of individuals towards society and the media that surround them and thus constitute their primary sources of information. Other key factors may be the level of education in the country in which the individual lives, but also the level of media literacy of the individual, his / her education in the media area or the ability to critically perceive information and the media themselves.

The topic of European countries' resistance to fake news is addressed by the *Media Literacy Index 2018*, which is the result of the work of the *European Policies Initiative (EuPI)* of the *Open Society Institute in Sofia, Bulgaria*. The research report evaluates 35 European countries in terms of their ability to defend against postfacts and their negative impact. The report mainly deals with media literacy factors, which it considers to be key in measuring countries' resistance to post-factual phenomena. Among these weight-bearing factors are the freedom of the press, the results of PISA testing, the share of the population with tertiary education in the country, the confidence of society and the level of use of civic participation tools.

The following European countries were included in the research: *Albania, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Montenegro, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Holland, Croatia, Macedonia, Hungary, Malta, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Austria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, United Kingdom, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Italy, Turkey*. Based on country-specific media literacy scores (Figure 4) and country-specific indicators of the country's resistance to fake news and post-events, the Nordic countries - Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and Estonia - are the most resistant to this phenomenon. These countries are characterized by a higher ability to prevent false trafficking in society and a higher level of education. On the contrary, the worst are the South-East European countries, Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bulgaria, but also Turkey. The reason for the poor results of these countries is insufficient level of education, controlled or non-free media. As a result, these countries are more vulnerable to false reports.⁵ Slovakia ranks in the second half, among the countries with lower resilience, along with Italy, Malta, Croatia, Cyprus, Hungary, Greece and Romania.⁶ Only the aforementioned Southeast European countries are behind this group in the ranking of the resistance of European countries.

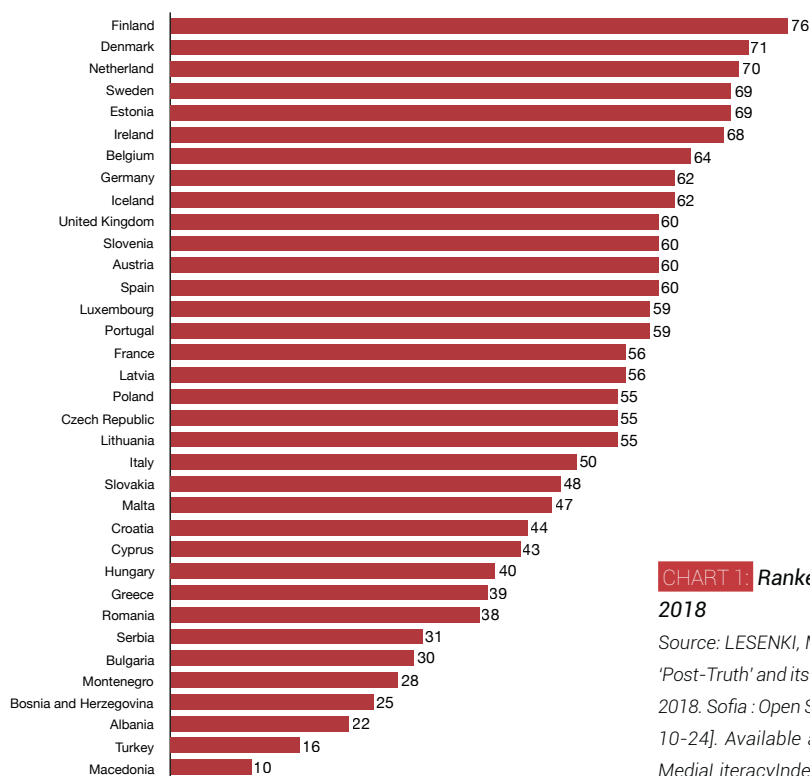


CHART 1: Ranked Countries by Media Literacy Index 2018

Source: LESENKI, M.: *Common Sense Wanted: Resilience to 'Post-Truth' and its Predictors in the New Media Literacy Index 2018*. Sofia : Open Society Institute Sofia, 2018. [online]. [2018-10-24]. Available at: <http://osi.bg/downloads/File/2018/MediaLiteracyIndex2018_publishENG.pdf>.

⁵ LESENKI, M.: *Common Sense Wanted: Resilience to 'Post-Truth' and its Predictors in the New Media Literacy Index 2018*. Sofia : Open Society Institute Sofia, 2018, p. 2. [online]. [2018-10-24]. Available at: <http://osi.bg/downloads/File/2018/MediaLiteracyIndex2018_publishENG.pdf>.

⁶ LESENKI, M.: *Common Sense Wanted: Resilience to 'Post-Truth' and its Predictors in the New Media Literacy Index 2018*. Sofia : Open Society Institute Sofia, 2018, p. 6. [online]. [2018-10-24]. Available at: <http://osi.bg/downloads/File/2018/MediaLiteracyIndex2018_publishENG.pdf>.

This research shows that countries with higher levels of education are more resistant to fake news penetration into their society. This is also confirmed by the *Study on Assessment Criteria for Media Literacy Levels*, which was attended by five major European educational institutions in 2009. The study defines the criteria by which we can measure and assess the level of media literacy in Europe. One of the criteria being evaluated is also a critical analysis of media content that is closely related to the individual's ability to withstand misinformation. This study includes a ranking of individual EU countries according to the level of media literacy. Similarly to the ranks of fake news, and in the context of media literacy, Nordic countries are known to have an innovative approach to education and a long tradition in media education: *Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, the UK and Ireland*. The worst rankings in the overall rating have, for example, *Romania, Portugal, Bulgaria, Greece or Slovakia*.⁷

3. Fake news prevention

The basic prerequisite of prevention in the fight against fake news and misinformation is the developed competence of critical thinking. This ability makes individuals able to critically approach media and their content. V. Kačínová defines critical media assessment as “critically evaluating the media processed and portrayed reality based on given criteria; verifying media-disseminated information, detecting irregularities, manipulation techniques of media and advertising,...”⁸ The *European Project on Media Education*, conducted in cooperation with the European Commission, shows that the strengths of media education in Europe (mainly Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and Romania) are in emphasizing the competence of critical thinking in relation to media and their content.⁹ The development of critical thinking and education focused on critical analysis of media and media content are also very important in the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Cyprus, Slovakia and Slovenia as part of their media education.¹⁰ European countries, even those with a lower level of education, therefore show a clear effort to implement critical thinking in their curricula. They are trying to educate their populations to become aware of media content, which should, of course, also improve the resilience of individual countries to fake news.

In addition to enhancing critical analysis competence, an important role is played by the recipients' instruments of protection against these negative phenomena. These are web portals that collect and publish fake news, hoaxes, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. In addition to specialized websites, Facebook, Google, an association of journalists, or journalists themselves are developing initiatives in this area as well.

Facebook as the most well-known social network has often been criticized in this area. It stems from the nature of the social network and freedom of expression. Despite the fact, that Facebook is, in essence, a space for the free sharing of information, the company is aware that various hoaxes, misinformation and false messages are often found on the social network site. Over the past period, the company has spent a lot of money on controlling fake accounts (“trolls”), often serving as propaganda tools in certain countries, or as a means of spreading alarm messages, hoaxes, and misinformation. By May 2018, social network workers have already removed 583 million fake accounts.¹¹ In addition, Facebook offers the ability to mark published posts as fake messages. Inappropriate content reporting also includes the ability to mark a post as “It's a fake news story”. This marked post is authenticated and, if it is really fake news, it is marked with a text to alert you of this fact.¹² Such a measure raises the question of the credibility of users reporting such content. That is why Facebook has begun to evaluate the credibility of individual users. If a regular Facebook user identifies a post as fake, the verifiers will assess its veracity. If the message is really a false message,

⁷ *Study on Assessment Criteria for Media Literacy Levels. Final Report*. Brussels : EAVI, 2009. [online]. [2018-10-26]. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/library/studies/literacy-criteria-report_en.pdf>.

⁸ KAČINOVÁ, V.: Media Competence as a Cross-Curricular Competence. In *Communication Today*, 2018, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 47.

⁹ PAROLA, A., RANIERI, M.: The Practice of Media Education: International Research on Six European Countries. In *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 2011, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 98.

¹⁰ PETRANOVÁ, D., HOSSOVÁ, M., VELICKÝ, P.: Current Development Trends of Media Literacy in European Union Countries. In *Communication Today*, 2017, Vol. 8., No. 1, p. 63.

¹¹ *Facebook Publishes Enforcement Numbers for the First Time*. [online]. [2018-10-28]. Available at: <<https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/05/enforcement-numbers/>>.

¹² MOSSERI, A.: *Addressing Hoaxes and Fake News*. [online]. [2018-10-28]. Available at: <<https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2016/12/news-feed-fyi-addressing-hoaxes-and-fake-news/>>.

the user's credibility will be high. But if someone denotes a fake news post that is true, his credibility will drop. In this way, the company wants to fight internet trolls who can deliberately mark true information as fake in pursuit of their goals and spread their own ideology.¹³

An important initiative is also the portal *FactCheck.org*. The *International Fact-Checking Network* at *Poynter* has even declared International Fact-Checking Day on April 2, 2017. The *factcheckingday.com* website offers a series of articles focused on information issues, relevance and truthfulness. For example, tips are available for discovery of so-called urban legends or a website that shares false news. Exercises and lessons are available for teachers in English, Spanish, Polish, Italian, French or Ukrainian.¹⁴

The media themselves play a big role in the fight against fake news. In most cases, journalists themselves record a lot of fake news, trolls and hoaxes in discussions about published social networking reports. Good work in this area is carried out by the Slovak daily newspaper *Denník N*. Due to the increased interest and the visible spread of these negative phenomena, the editorial staff has begun to engage in education and has published several handbooks and publications dealing with media functioning, media manipulation, critical thinking, conspiracy, misinformation, hoax, fake news, and social networks. The first publication of the diary was the guide *Klamstvá a konšpirácie*¹⁵ (Lies and Conspiracies). The initiative continued with the publication of other publications: *Kritické myslenie*¹⁶ (Critical Thinking) *Ako fungujú médiá*¹⁷ (How Media Work) a *Pravda a lož na Facebooku* (The truth and a lie on Facebook). All of these publications are intended for secondary schools and are useful in teaching topics related to this issue or the subject of media education itself.

A similar example is the editorial board of the Slovak daily newspaper *SME*, which created a subcategory of their own web site – *Lovíme hoaxy* (Hunting down hoaxes portal).¹⁸ Journal editorial of *SME* discovers hoaxes and increases awareness of internet users and their readers in this area. In 2017, 37 French media in collaboration with Google launched a similar initiative, creating a *CrossCheck* project, primarily aimed at detecting misinformation, disinformation and verifying information related to the presidential election in the country.¹⁹

4. Conclusion

As we have already mentioned in the introductory section of the study, spreading false messages is faster if these messages are emotional, surprising, or outrageous. According to R. Meyer, this report is spread up to six times faster and affects a larger number of recipients. Attention is particularly attracted by its novelty, its distinctiveness and its negative character.²⁰ Research *Media Literacy Index 2018* analysis also points out that although fake news and misinformation are found mostly on the internet and in particular on social networks, citizens are aware that this medium cannot be considered the most trusted. So-called traditional media are more trusted than social networks: “radio (70 %), television (66 %) and printed newspapers and news magazines (63 %) have more trust than social networks and messaging apps (36 %).”²¹

¹³ HOSSOVÁ, M.: *Facebook bojuje proti fake news, používateľom pridáva skóre dôveryhodnosti*. [online]. [2018-10-28]. Available at: <<https://medialnavychova.sk/facebook-bojuje-proti-fake-news-pouzivatelom-prideluje-skore-doveryhodnosti/>>.

¹⁴ HOSSOVÁ, M.: *Medzinárodný deň overovania faktov 2017: Nenechajte sa oklamať, na faktoch záleží!* [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://medialnavychova.sk/nenechajte-sa-oklamať-na-faktoch-zalezi/>>.

¹⁵ See: *Klamstvá a konšpirácie: Príručka pre stredné školy*. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://a-static.projektn.sk/2017/04/dennikN-prirucka-konspiracie.pdf>>.

¹⁶ See: *Príručka pre stredné školy: Kritické myslenie*. In *N magazín*, 2017, Vol. 2, No. 1, 32 p. ISSN 2453-9597. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://a-static.projektn.sk/2017/11/casopis-kriticke-myslenie-low.pdf>>.

¹⁷ See: *Ako fungujú médiá*. In *N magazín*, 2018, Vol. 3., No. 4, 84 p. ISSN 2453-9597. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://a-static.projektn.sk/2018/04/n-magazin-media.pdf>>.

¹⁸ *Lovíme hoaxy*. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://hoax.sme.sk/?ref=tlogo-sek>>.

¹⁹ *French newsrooms unite to fight election misinformation with the launch of CrossCheck*. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <https://firstdraftnews.org/crosscheck-launches/?utm_content=buffer7dcd6&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer>.

²⁰ MEYER, R.: *The Grim Conclusions of the Largest-Ever Study of Fake News*. [online]. [2018-10-24]. Available at: <<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/03/largest-study-ever-fake-news-mit-twitter/555104/>>.

²¹ LESENKI, M.: *Common Sense Wanted: Resilience to 'Post-Truth' and its Predictors in the New Media Literacy Index 2018*. Sofia : Open Society Institute Sofia, 2018, p. 9. [online]. [2018-10-24]. Available at: <http://osi.bg/downloads/File/2018/MediaLiteracyIndex2018_publishENG.pdf>.

These findings suggest that the activities of different projects and initiatives realized in this area form awareness of the risks associated with the internet media and the post-factuality of the current society. It is also important to constantly develop the competence of critical thinking in the context of lifelong learning. According to the study *Why Education Predicts Decreased Belief in Conspiracy Theories*, a higher level of education means higher resilience to the reported negative phenomenon. In general, we can say that educated people have more analytical skills and have a lower tendency to believe in conspiracy theories and related fake news.²²

The key to success is therefore to increase the level of education and education itself. It is also necessary to build and increase the digital literacy of individuals, which is related to searching, processing, sorting and sharing information through new media and ICT. In addition to more specific digital literacy, it is necessary to increase media literacy itself and to improve the social status of media literacy as a set of technical, knowledge, civic and creative capabilities that allow access to and critical perception of the media.

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²² VAN PROOIJEN, J. W.: Why Education Predicts Decreased Belief in Conspiracy Theories. In *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 2017, Vol. 31, No. 1. p. 57. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: < <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/acp.3301> >.

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Author



Monika Hossová

Faculty of Mass Media Communication,
University of SS. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava
Nám. J. Herdu 2,
917 01 Trnava
Slovak Republic
monika.hossova@ucm.sk

Monika Hossová is a member of the Faculty of Mass Media Communication at the University of SS. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. She currently works at the Department of Media Education as an assistant professor and teaches in the Applied Media Studies program. In her research activities, she focuses on increasing media literacy, formal education in the field of media education in Slovakia and the use of new media and ICT in educational process. She is a member of the editorial board of the Media Literacy and Academic Research journal. She also participates as a lecturer in the project of The National Institute for Education in Slovakia.