

Contemporary Economy



Contemporary Economy
Electronic Scientific Journal
<http://en.wspolczesnagospodarka.pl/>

Vol. 10 Issue 4 (2019) 1-10
ISSN2082-677X
DOI [10.26881/wg.2019.4.01](https://doi.org/10.26881/wg.2019.4.01)

FUTURE OF THE FAKE NEWS SOCIETY

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Abstract

The fact that fake news is the most influential aspect of the modern world and that it can dictate opinions that have a big impact on the economy is what makes this topic very important in the current and future world situation. The methods used in the article include induction and deduction, as well as comparison of statistics and data. The article confirms the fact that fake news is inevitable but the education of the society and equipping it with the tools to help recognise what is false and what is true is the way of making media more truthful and sharing less propaganda content.

Keywords: fake news, false news, Facebook, information society

JEL classification: I290, K100, Z130

Introduction

Fake news is a phenomenon extremely common in the contemporary world. Every person who is a mass media recipient is exposed lies. There are many reasons for using *fake news*; some is used as a joke, while other is aimed at large-scale manipulations, e.g. concerning politics or property ownership.

Bearing in mind the developed information society, including rapid development of technology, a statement should be made that each of the Internet users can be a kind of a journalist or a reporter putting any reports on the net that do not necessarily provide reliable content.

The purpose of this article is to define methods preventing the spread of false information in the current state of information society development and to propose innovative solutions in the context of a defined concept of *fake news society*.

1. Fake news society

The term *information society* has been used since the second half of the 20th century; it defines a civilization for which information is the primary value. In contrast, the *network society* is a concept proposed by Manuel Castells, according to whom the development of technology is so important that it not only affects the society, but becomes part of it (Maigret,

2012). Given the fact that the information passed is more and more frequently falsified, and nevertheless it does not lose its popularity, the authors of the article decided that it is right to name the modern society the *fake news society*. Any media recipient is able to notice how easily the false information is implemented in the minds of those who receive it. Political propaganda manipulates the minds of the voters, and the attempts to make people aware of the falsehoods fed to them, supported by representative statistics or scientific research, can be ineffective. One can get the impression that *fake news society* operates without major obstacles without time limits as to the future.

To present the perspective of the *fake news* phenomenon, it is worth considering who uses the Internet most often. Table 1 presents the percentage share of people regularly using the network, divided according to their employment situation.

Table 1: Regular Internet users by employment situation. Based on research of Polish Central Statistical Office on information society in Poland in years 2014-2018.

Specification	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
	% share of the total number of people in a given group				
Pensioners and other economically inactive	31.5	32.2	36.9	40.6	43.1
Unemployed	56.7	57.3	64.1	63.9	65.7
Employed	75.7	78.3	81.3	83.7	84.9
Farmers	40.3	45.6	49.6	50.8	57.8
Self-employed	85.0	86.4	86.5	91.0	92.6
Wage workers	78.5	80.6	84.2	86.8	88.7
Pupils and students	98.6	99.0	98.6	99.9	99.6

Source: Central Statistical Office [1]

Analyzing the data contained in Table 1, one should notice an upward trend in the popularity of Internet usage within each of the listed social groups. The dominant communities in terms of popularity of using the network are pupils and students, self-employed workers and wage workers. Such a high percentage is undoubtedly associated with the popularity of such tools as *social media*. Social media is certainly one of the areas where *fake news* is spread most often. Therefore, those social groups are by far the largest recipients of false information.

Observing the habits of the Internet users, it should be noted that a phenomenon that can be called a *fake news culture* is developing. It is associated with an increasingly critical approach to the received information. This is undoubtedly an important advantage and, at the same time, a source of strengthening of the society as a community focused on the goal, which is preserving the truthfulness of the message.

Reporters Without Borders organization presented the *World Press Freedom Index*. Its size illustrates the freedom of the media in particular countries. The index was created taking

into account violations and violence in the media and towards the media, a questionnaire among media professionals, lawyers and sociologists. The questionnaire referred to above takes into account the following factors [II]:

- pluralism - the number of opinions found in the media,
- media independence - dependence on politicians, government, religion, or business,
- environment and self-censorship - the impact of the environment on media censorship,
- legislative framework - the impact of law,
- transparency,
- infrastructure abuses.

There is a map on the *Reporters Without Borders* website, where the assigned colour (and associated index size) defines the freedom of media in a given country. The darker the colour, the more unfavourable situation of media in a given country. The index ranges from 0 to 100, where 0 is an excellent situation, and 100 the least favourable one. A fragment of the detailed breakdown is as follows:

- from 0 to 15 points - good situation (e.g. Norway, Finland, Sweden);
- from 15.01 to 25 points - satisfactory situation (e.g. Canada, Australia, France);
- from 25.01 to 35 points - problematic situation (e.g. USA, Japan, Brazil);
- from 35.01 to 55 points - difficult situation (e.g. Russia, Belarus, Mexico),
- from 55.01 to 100 points - very serious situation (e.g. China, Egypt, Cuba).

According to *Reporter Without Borders*, the popularity of hate speech is growing in Poland, supported by the conservative government. Public media currently represent national media spreading propaganda. After the brutal murder of Paweł Adamowicz, the Mayor of Gdańsk, many people accused TVP (Polish Television) of hate speech spread in public media, which encouraged the perpetrator to commit the murder [III].

The graph in Figure 1 illustrates how the freedom of media is distributed across global regions. The region with the media enjoying the greatest freedom is UE Balkans, then America, Africa, Asia, EECA (East Europe Central Asia) and finally MENA (Middle East North Africa).

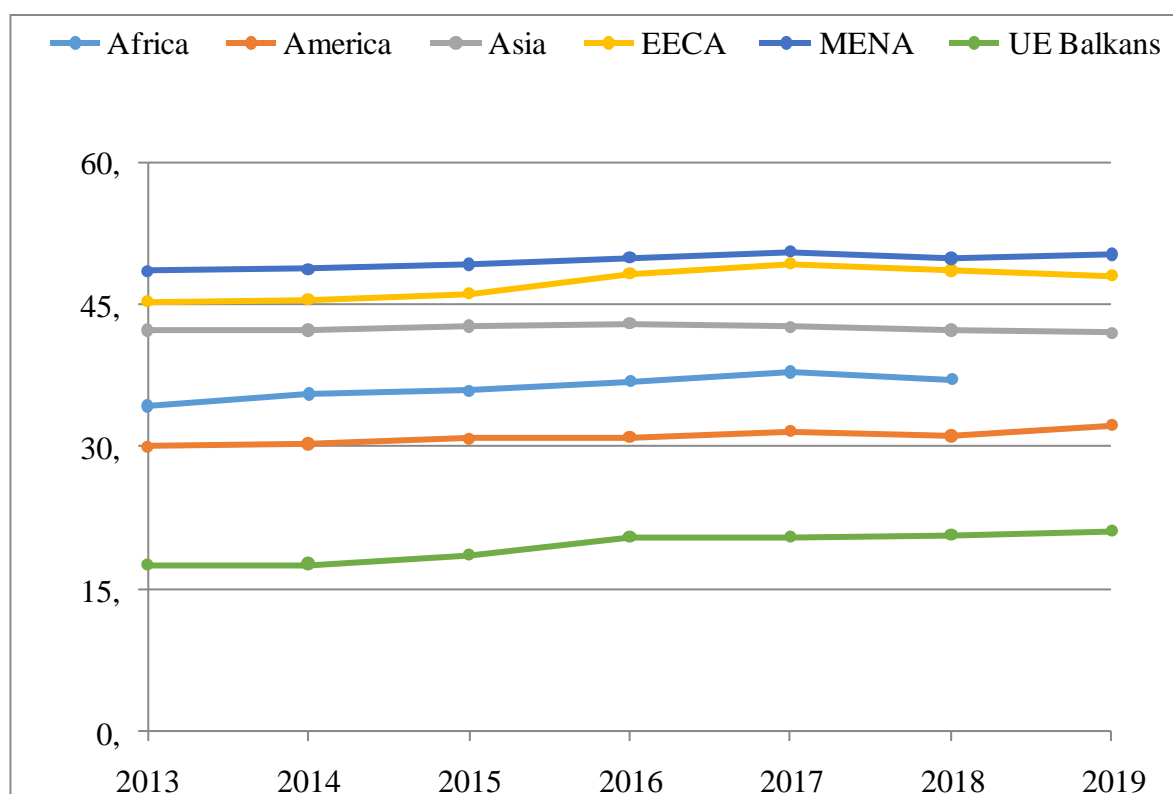


Figure 1: Visual representation of the World Press Freedom Index across the years in the world regions

Source of data: Reporters Without Borders, 2019.

Table 2 contains a list of 10 countries with the lowest index value, i.e. rated as the places with the highest level of media freedom, while in Table 3, 10 countries with the highest index value, i.e. those with the worst result. Poland ranks 59th in the world, with an index of 28.89, which, compared to 26.59 scored in the previous year, means an increase of 2.3. With an average of 35.02, this is not an alarming result, but taking into account other countries from the EU Balkans region (drawing 1) Poland is not doing very well compared to them.

Table 2: Ten countries with the best World Press Freedom Index in 2019

Country	Score	Zone
Norway	7.82	UE Balkans
Finland	7.9	UE Balkans
Sweden	8.31	UE Balkans
Netherlands	8.63	UE Balkans
Denmark	9.87	UE Balkans
Switzerland	10.52	UE Balkans
New Zealand	10.75	Pacific Asia

Country	Score	Zone
Jamaica	11.13	America
Belgium	12.07	UE Balkans
Costa Rica	12.24	America

Source of data: Reporters Without Borders, 2019.

Table 3: 10 countries with the worst World Press Freedom Index in 2019

Country	Score	Zone
Islamic Republic of Iran	64.41	MENA
Lao People's Democratic Republic	64.49	Pacific Asia
Saudi Arabia	65.88	MENA
Djibouti	71.36	Africa
Syrian Arab Republic	71.78	MENA
Sudan	72.45	Africa
Vietnam	74.93	Pacific Asia
China	78.92	Pacific Asia
Eritrea	80.26	Africa
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	83.4	Pacific Asia

Source of data: Reporters Without Borders, 2019.

2. Contemporary methods to prevent the generation and circulation of fake news

As far as viral spread of *fake news* is concerned, Facebook is undoubtedly the most important among the social networks. For this reason, it can be considered that the owners of this system are responsible for controlling the presented content. Additionally, it can be assumed that the informal duty of Facebook owners is to educate its users in the field of recognizing the truthfulness of information. It is also worth mentioning that Facebook Inc. replaced the phrase *fake news* by *false news* due to the popular belief that the term was appropriated by right-wing media, which used the term *fake news* in relation to reliable sources in order to undermine the truthfulness of the information provided to recipients [IV].

Functionally, Facebook is not equipped with tools that would administratively enable the control of *fake news* publication. In the Community Standards of the portal one can read

that the platform only minimizes the display of such content by limiting the reach. The excerpt referring this reads as follows:

“Reducing the spread of false news on Facebook is our responsibility that we take extremely seriously. We also realize that it is a difficult and sensitive issue. We want people to have access to information without compromising the quality of public debate. There is a fine line between false news and satire or a mere opinion. For these reasons, we do not remove false news from Facebook, but significantly reduce its distribution by showing it lower in the News.” [V]

As you can see in the quote above, the owners of Facebook are not interested in extreme solutions. At the same time, they sensitize their users to features that false information made available through the portal may have. Facebook lists the following elements as potential signals indicating a threat to the truth of the message:

- headings in capital letters, full of exclamation marks, surprising and shocking concepts and statements,
- a distorted URL supposed to look like the address of a real web page, but has some characters that distinguish it. Often, it is the addition of a period, dash, or swap of letters, e.g. "l" and "I",
- the date of page creation may indicate that the page was set up relatively recently so it could be created for the sole purpose of false information distribution,
- all kinds of unusual formatting, the presence of various types of errors (e.g. spelling and grammar mistakes), or a strange layout, different from the one usually seen,
- photos used in a different context and photomontages,
- the dates provided do not match the context,
- lack of sources or evidence to which the authors of the article refer,
- some posts have the format of the news but are only jokes; it is worth verifying if the page is not a parody or a comedy page.

Because Facebook will undoubtedly be the main social communication platform in the future, and thus it will be a tool through which false information will be spread. Currently, Facebook cooperates with many *fact-checking* institutions, thanks to which this platform is able to recognize and limit the visibility of false information placed on it faster and more efficiently. *Fact-checking*, as the name suggests, is an activity consisting in verifying the accuracy of messages and checking whether the facts are actually the facts or just *fake news*. *Fact-checking* is an action that should be undertaken whenever any message is directed to the Internet recipients. This phenomenon is not limited only to verification of information already published, but it is also an action that should be completed before the publication of the text in order to confirm the information it contains.

There are many such organizations in the world with the *fact-checking* mission. In Poland, it is the Demagog Association which verifies political election promises and other information from the world of politics on its website. What is more, the Association provides education to the public through lectures and workshops organized for pupils and students. There are also many institutions dealing with *fake news* in selected fields only. There is so much fabricated information on the Internet that creating one general portal addressing all issues is virtually impossible, therefore developing websites devoted to a given topic or one field only is very important. For example, in Greece there is factchecker.gr website dealing with medical issues, in Israel - Thewistle addresses political issues, and in the USA the

Climate Feedback institution has been established, which handles climate issues as the very name suggests.

3. Suggestions for combating fake news

According to the authors, the most important area that should be taken into account in determining methods to combat the effects of *fake news* is the modification of applicable law. We need to find a solution that would codify the issues of combating *fake news* in modern media as completely as possible.

The first country to propose and implement practical legal solutions is Singapore. In April 2019, the *Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill Act* was adopted; its task is to effectively combat *fake news*, among others. The main purpose of the said codification aptly characterizes the fragment of the act cited below:

„The purpose of this Act is —

- a) to prevent the communication of false statements of fact in Singapore and to enable measures to be taken to counteract the effects of such communication;
- b) to suppress the financing, promotion and other support of online locations that repeatedly communicate false statements of fact in Singapore;
- c) to enable measures to be taken to detect, control and safeguard against coordinated inauthentic behaviour and other misuses of online accounts and bots; and
- d) to enable measures to be taken to enhance disclosure of information concerning paid content directed towards a political end.”

Source: Singapore Statutes Online [VI]

The solutions used in Singapore should become an example for the legal systems of other countries. The application of the above provisions will certainly allow the formulation of conclusions that will be the starting point for further amendment of the proposed solutions.

In Poland, legal modifications should take into account the possibility of disseminating and obtaining information without restrictions, as specified in Article 54 of the Polish Constitution:

Art. 54.

- 1) The freedom to express opinions, acquire and disseminate information shall be ensured to everyone.
- 2) Preventive censorship of the means of social communication and the licensing of the press shall be prohibited. The Law may require the receipt of a permit for the operation of a radio or television station.

Source: Constitution of the Republic of Poland [VII]

New codification solutions could be based on existing provisions of the Penal Code. The first element of the PC that is worth considering is Article 18 § 1 concerning the carrying out a prohibited act, directing a person carrying out a prohibited act and the use of another person's dependence. The following provision may be a source of legal initiatives in the case of *fake news*, encouraging certain behaviour, especially those in the field of pseudo medicine.

Art. 18. § 1.

Not only the person who has committed a prohibited act himself/herself or jointly and in agreement with another person shall be liable for perpetration, but also a person who directed the carrying out of a prohibited act by another person, or taking advantage of the dependence of another person from him/her orders such a person to commit such a prohibited act.

Source: Penal Code [VIII]

Article 270 § 1 concerns the counterfeiting of documents and their use as authentic ones. According to the authors of this text, this provision could be the basis for punishment for using photomontages to mislead recipients. In this case, the photos in the articles would be treated as documents. In such a situation, also counterfeiting and using photos as confirmation of the content of the article could be interpreted as punishable activities.

Art. 270. § 1.

Whoever, with the purpose of using it as authentic, forges, counterfeits, or alters a document, or uses such a document as authentic, shall be subject to a fine, the penalty of restriction of liberty or deprivation of liberty for a term from 3 months to 5 years.

Source: Penal Code [VIII]

Another Article from the Criminal Code proposed for analysis concerns public officials who certify untruth. This Article can be applied to e.g. politicians who manipulate and lie to voters. This provision is suitable for verifying and enforcing political promises made.

Art. 271. § 1.

A public official or other person authorised to issue a document, who certifies untruth therein, with regard to the circumstances having a legal significance, shall be subject to deprivation of liberty for a term of from 3 months to 5 years.

Source: Penal Code [VIII]

The next suggestion of the authors in the field of preventing the negative social effects of *fake news* interpreted as reliable content is the implementation of *reverse search* programming solutions permanently installed in web browsers. This solution would allow fast recognition of web pages that duplicate or manipulate graphics. An Internet user would be able to see the assessment of the degree of potential threat immediately after entering a given website.

The *reverse search* technology is based on image browsing. Its purpose is to verify whether a given photo (graphics) has appeared on the Internet earlier. The implementation of such tools includes Google Reverse Image Search and TinEye. TinEye is a plug-in that can be installed in the Google Chrome web browser. After activating it, just use the right mouse button by clicking on any photo on the selected website to get a redirection to the search results of the examined graphic object.

Recognition of photos used in violation of legal regulations is important due to the fact that it is the graphics that most often attract attention of Internet users first and thus prompts the reader to click on the link leading to the message. The picture often reflects the nature of the provided content. Although solutions such as *Google Reverse Image Search* or *TinEye* do work, unfortunately they are only able to find graphics identical to the searched image. Their effectiveness should be assessed as unsatisfactory - you can easily fool them - all you have to do is change the contrast of the photo, rotate or crop it, and then the implemented algorithms in those plug-ins will not be able to recognize the originality of the graphics used. In the area of image identification, there is still a need to implement further improvements to master the developed mechanisms, so that they could finally effectively identify graphic *fake news*.

Another suggestion is to build a plug-in in a web browser that would verify information on disseminated content, e.g. pseudoscientific. In cooperation with universities, it would be possible to create a scientific research database, thanks to which, with just a few clicks, verification of the truthfulness of research presented in any article on the Internet could be carried out.

Conclusion

In the light of the research results presented above, two main conclusions can be drawn. The first basic conclusion is that modern society becomes increasingly digitized and the Internet is used more and more frequently. The second conclusion states that, although the phenomenon of *fake news* is widespread, people using modern media become increasingly critical and aware of the dangers of unreflective perception of information.

Freedom of speech is one of the pillars of democratic systems. It should be emphasized that the content published in modern media is often permeated with hatred and propaganda. This phenomenon generates many complications. In such a situation, the suggestion to control shared messages is contrary to the idea of free media. This is a key problem of global reach and at the same time lacking the perspective of an effective solution.

Existing methods to combat *fake news* are for use only in the form of *post hoc*, i.e. verification of information after its publication, without checking its accuracy *ante hoc*, i.e. before publication. In such a situation, it seems reasonable to say that effective fight against *fake news* is pointless. Currently, this is true, because the publication of *fake news* cannot be systemically stopped without the use of the restrictive mechanisms such as censorship. The use of this type of solution is contrary to the idea of free speech and media freedom. The only way that can result in reducing the amount of *fake news* is to educate the public and equip it with tools for effective verification of information received.

To sum up, it should be stated that fighting *fake news* at the sources of their creation is currently impossible. However, it is necessary to increase the awareness of the information recipients and to develop tools enabling the detection of false messages. Consequently, such activities will lead to an increase in public awareness resulting in the situation that the manipulation process will become increasingly difficult. *Fake news* causes a lot of social damage and combating it is difficult, but possible. Ultimately, it should be stated that the future for the truth transmitted through the media looks positive.

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