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# The construction of fake war news. Specificities of disinformation in social media during the first six months of the Russia-Ukraine war (March-September 2022)

**Konstrukcja fałszywych wiadomości wojennych. Specyfika dezinformacji w mediach społecznościowych w pierwszym półroczu wojny ukraińsko-rosyjskiej (III-IX 2022)**

**Abstract:** Modern warfare, including the Russia-Ukraine war, relies heavily on disinformation. Fake news on social media is an integral part of this. At the same time, each conflict is characterised by distinct communication specificities and in the context of the complex effects of fake news, questions arise about their specificity for a given conflict. The aim of the presented research was to answer the question of what the various fake news about the Russian-Ukrainian war disseminated in Polish-language social media have in common and what narrative they generate. The analysis covered the construction of the messages as well as their contexts: social, cultural, historical, and political. For this purpose, a three-stage analysis of ten fake news cases disseminated between March and September 2022 was conducted, applying a three-element analytical matrix. The research made it possible to identify the properties of fake news, generated narratives, and their possible effects.

**Keywords:** disinformation, fake news, Ukraine, Russia, war, social media

**Streszczenie:** Współczesne działania wojenne, w tym wojna ukraińsko-rosyjska, w znacznej mierze opierają się na dezinformacji. Fake newsy w mediach społecznościowych stanowią jej integralną część. Jednocześnie każdy konflikt charakteryzuje się odrębną specyfiką komunikacyjną. W kontekście złożonych skutków fake newsów pojawiają się pytania o ich osobliwość dla

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danego konfliktu. Celem prezentowanych badań była odpowiedź na pytanie, co łączy różne fake newsy dotyczące wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej rozpowszechniane w polskojęzycznych mediach społecznościowych i jaką narrację generują. Analizie poddano konstrukcję przekazów, jak również ich konteksty: społeczny, kulturowy, historyczny i polityczny. W tym celu przeprowadzono trzypiętą analizę dziesięciu fake newsów rozpowszechnianych w okresie III-X 2022 r., stosując trzyelementową matrycę analityczną. Badanie pozwoliło zidentyfikować właściwości fake newsów i generowanych narracji oraz ich możliwe skutki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dezinformacja, fake newsy, Ukraina, Rosja, wojna, media społecznościowe

## Introduction

Information warfare<sup>1</sup>, hybrid warfare<sup>2</sup>, and digital warfare<sup>3</sup> are terms describing the importance of online communication in the conduct of modern warfare. At the same time, disinformation<sup>4</sup> is a key tool of warfare, not only in the communication dimension. A catch-all term is becoming fake news<sup>5</sup>, which has firmly established itself in the social media space<sup>6</sup>. Fabricated news<sup>7</sup> has universal properties by which the recipient – human or machine – can expose a message as false. It also has unique properties specific to a particular topic or event and distribution channel, which is mainly social media<sup>8</sup>.

This also applies to the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war since March 2022, which relies heavily on disinformation and propaganda<sup>9</sup>. Fake news is an indispensable part of the activities on both sides of the con-

- 1 E. Lucas, P. Pomeranzen, *Winning the information war*, [in:] *Techniques and Counter-strategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe*, The Center for European Policy Analysis, Washington 2016, pp.1-66.
- 2 B. Renz, *Russia and hybrid warfare*, "Contemporary Politics" 2016, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 283-300.
- 3 W. Merrin, *Digital war: A critical introduction*, Abington 2018.
- 4 P. Mihailidis, S. Viotty, *Spreadable spectacle in digital culture: Civic expression, fake news, and the role of media literacies in 'post-fact' society*, "American Behavioral Scientist" 2017, vol. 61, no. 4, pp. 441-454.
- 5 D. Lazer, M.A. Baum, Y. Benkler et al., *The science of fake news*, "Science" 2018, vol. 6380, no. 359, pp. 1094-1096.
- 6 G. Pennycook, D.G. Rand, *The psychology of fake news*, "Trends in Cognitive Sciences" 2021, vol. 25, no. 5, pp. 388-402.
- 7 J. Mingers, C. Standing, *What is information? Toward a theory of information as objective and veridical*, "Journal of Information Technology" 2018, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 85-104.
- 8 V. Bakir, A. McStay, *Fake news and the economy of emotions: problems, causes, solutions*, "Digital Journalism" 2018, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 154-175.
- 9 G. Stănescu, *Ukraine conflict: the challenge of informational war*, "Social Sciences and Education Research Review" 2022, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 146-148.

flict<sup>10</sup>. This raises the question of the fake news characteristics concerning this war propagated on social media, the consequences arising from its specificity, and the narrative pursued.

The aim of the presented research was to identify the multifaceted characteristics of the various fake news present on social media concerning the ongoing conflict and to answer the question of what they have in common, both in terms of message construction and social, cultural, historical, and political contexts as well as possible narrative effects.

# 1. State of the art

## Definition and meaning of fake news

Fake news is defined as deliberately misleading, untrue, or partially untrue information disseminated on the internet or in the mainstream media<sup>11</sup>. The differences between fake news are at the levels of intention<sup>12</sup> and structure<sup>13</sup>, allowing an assessment of the factuality of the information disseminated. The purpose of spreading fake news can be financial, political, war-related, or to create controversy<sup>14</sup>.

From a media and communication studies perspective,<sup>15</sup> fake news is divided into:

- total falsehood (deliberately falsified facts);
- questionable truth (incomplete facts, fragmentary, lack of context, misleading by selective coverage of the subject);

10 K. Babacan, M.S. Tam, *The information warfare role of social media: Fake news in the Russia-Ukraine war*, "Erciyes İletişim Dergisi" 2022, vol. 3, pp. 75-92.

11 A. Gryczuk, *Fake news, trolls, bots and cyborgs in social media*, "BAS Analyses" 2021, vol. 152, no. 1, p. 2.

12 M. Haigh, T. Haigh, *Fighting and Framing Fake News*, [in:] *The Sage Handbook of Propaganda*, P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy, N. Snow (eds.), London 2019, pp. 303-323.

13 D.M.J. Lazer, M.A. Baum, Y. Benkler et al., *The science of fake news...*, pp. 1094-1096.

14 M. Palczewski, *Fake news and freedom of speech*, Staszic Institute, 11 January 2019, <http://instytutstaszica.org/2019/02/11/fake-news-a-wolnosc-slowa/> [5.04.2023].

15 P. Bylicki, K. Borkowska, *Public Dialog K, Report: Fake News from a Polish Perspective Journalists*, 2017, [https://publicdialog.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Raport\\_Badaniefake-news-23-05-2017.pdf](https://publicdialog.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Raport_Badaniefake-news-23-05-2017.pdf) [5.04.2023].

- manipulation of quotation or textual content (changing the meaning of the message, presenting it in the wrong context)<sup>16</sup>.

Fake news plays an important role from the perspective of the war narrative. Articles with war or terrorist content are among the most engaging and reach almost every social population<sup>17</sup>. Disinformation posted on social media influences public awareness, interpretation of war events, optics, and evaluation of the conflict. It can lead to involvement in the conflict as well as to prejudice, discrimination, or violence<sup>18</sup>. One of the primary objectives of fake news during information warfare is the long-term construction of propaganda based on a given narrative<sup>19</sup> as well as its defence.

With the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022, the topic of disinformation in this conflict has become crucial from an academic and practical point of view. So far, disinformation during the Russian-Ukrainian war spread by traditional media, social media<sup>20</sup> and fake news has been examined, among others, from the perspective of regional social and historical conditions<sup>21</sup>. The power of social media in creating social attitudes and capturing important news was also identified and explained<sup>22</sup>. Four contexts of this disinformation were identified: cultural, social, political, and historical<sup>23</sup>.

### **The role of social media in the creation and dissemination of fake news**

In wartime, social media becomes a tool for fighting the enemy<sup>24</sup>. The deliberate spread of disinformation on social media is evident in the

16 K.A. Rosińska, *Disinformation in Poland: Thematic classification based on content analysis of fake news from 2019*, "Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace" 2022, vol. 15, no. 4, article 5.

17 W. Nowak, *Fake News in Times of Contagion*, "Discourse & Dialogue" 2020, no. 1, pp. 105-117.

18 T.A. Knopf, *Rumors, race and riots*, New Brunswick 1975.

19 J. Prier, *Commanding the trend: Social media as information warfare*, "Strategic Studies Quarterly" 2017, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 50-85.

20 A. Kuzminski, *The methods of disinformation in the Russia-Ukraine war*, "Rhetoric and Communications" 2022, vol. 53, pp. 167-171.

21 J. Kreft, J.M. Boguszewicz-Kreft, M.D. Hliebova, *Under the fire of disinformation. Attitudes towards fake news in the Ukrainian frozen war*, "Journalism Practice" 2023, pp. 1-21.

22 E. Perez, *Strategic Disinformation: Russia, Ukraine and Crisis Communication in Digital Era*, "On Research" 2022, pp. 8-18.

23 Ibid.

24 J. Prier, *Commanding the trend...*

actions of both sides in the Russian-Ukrainian information war<sup>25</sup>. Social media fosters the creation, editing, and distribution of false content<sup>26</sup> and is often the only source of information for recipients<sup>27</sup>. It is very difficult for audiences to distinguish between true information and false information, which is why researchers are focusing on developing tools to “filter” false content as well as creating new security systems<sup>28</sup>.

The architecture of social media (editability, openness, interactivity, and distributedness<sup>29</sup>), which allows for audience engagement, is particularly used by senders of fraudulent content to achieve a variety of goals<sup>30</sup>. Research has shown that social media bots are used to amplify and disseminate false information<sup>31</sup>, although humans are still primarily behind driving them<sup>32</sup>. Both bots and the architecture of social media itself foster the repetition of the same information, making it more credible in the public perception<sup>33</sup>.

## Deconstructing false information

Capturing the characteristics of fake content is a step that facilitates the resolution of what is real information and what is not. Molina et al. point to a set of attributable characteristics of fake news<sup>34</sup>. In the process of determining the trustworthiness of a message, researchers also draw, among other things, on research from Teun van Dijk’s discourse theory, based on macrostructure (related to the overall meaning of a text) and superstructure (to capture the global meaning of

25 N.J. Shallcross, *Social media and information operations in the 21st century*, “Journal of Information Warfare” 2017, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 1-12.

26 V. Bakir, A. McStay, *Fake news and the economy of emotions...*, pp. 154-175.

27 J. Gottfried, E. Shearer, *News use across social media platforms 2016*, Pew Research Center, <https://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms2016> [05.04.2023].

28 D.M.J. Lazer, M.A. Baum, Y. Benkler et al., *The science of fake news...*

29 A. Khan, K. Brohman, S. Addas, *The anatomy of ‘fake news’: Studying false messages as digital objects*, “Journal of Information Technology” 2022, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 122-143.

30 M.D. Molina et al., *Fake news is not simply false information: A concept explication and taxonomy of online content*, “American Behavioral Scientist” 2019, p. 12.

31 C. Shao et al., *The spread of low-credibility content by social bots*, “Nature Communications” 2018, no. 9, pp. 1-9.

32 S. Vosoughi, D. Roy, S. Aral, *The spread of true and false news online*, “Science” 2018, vol. 6380, no. 359, pp. 1146-1151.

33 G. Pennycook, D.G. Rand, *The psychology of fake news...*, pp. 388-402.

34 M.D. Molina et al., *Fake news is not simply false information...*

a text)<sup>35</sup>. The linguistic approach makes it possible to identify specific linguistic patterns<sup>36</sup> and assess the syntax of the analysed content. A multimodal multi-image system is also used, combining information from different modalities and consisting of three components: visual, textual, and semantic<sup>37</sup>.

## 2. Methods

### Design

For the purpose of this study, a three-level analysis of ten selected examples of fake news disseminated in Polish on diverse social media platforms was conducted. For this purpose, an analysis matrix was constructed based on three pillars: 1) models of machine recognition of fabricated news<sup>38</sup>; 2) analysis of selected elements of social media architecture<sup>39</sup>; 3) analysis of contexts and potential narrative effects of disinformation<sup>40</sup>.

### Instruments

The analysis was based on a matrix considering eight main analytical categories, based on the fabricated news model<sup>41</sup>, but in a modified version, extended to include categories adapted to the social media architecture.

The matrix included an analysis of the following elements: 1) language and discourse; 2) factuality; 3) modality, transmediality, and

35 M. Palczewski, *The discourse of fake news*, "Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Cultura" 2019, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 15-31.

36 H. Rashkin et al., *Truth of varying shades: Analyzing Language in Fake News and Political Fact Checking*, [in:] *Proceedings of the 2017 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*, M. Palmer, R. Hwa, S. Riedel (eds.), EMNLP '17, Copenhagen 2017, pp. 2931-2937.

37 A. Giachanou, G. Zhang, P. Rosso, *Multimodal multi-image fake news detection*, 2020 IEEE 7th International Conference on Data Science and Advanced Analytics (DSAA), Sydney 2020, pp. 647-654.

38 M.D. Molina et al., *Fake news is not simply false information...*

39 R. Thornton, *Social media, crisis communication and community-led response and recovery*, <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1711562/social-media-crisis-communication-and-community-led-response-and-recovery/2443211/> [20.05.2022].

40 J.H. Fetzer, *Disinformation: The use of false information*, "Minds and Machines" 2004, no. 14, pp. 231-240.

41 M.D. Molina et al., *Fake news is not simply false information...*

integration; 4) architecture and metadata; 5) uncommon practices; 6) import<sup>42</sup>; 7) contexts: social, historical, cultural, and political; 8) narrative effects.

**Table 1. Categories of the analytical matrix with an explanation of the range of issues and areas analysed**

Analytical categories	Scope of issues and areas analysed
Language and discourse	Determining the textual content and quality of a text by analysing its grammar, spelling, punctuation, and stylistic correctness; genre or genre hybrid; rhetoric; communication style and the atmosphere built around it
Factuality	Determining the degree of truthfulness of the text based on the data and conclusions of the investigations carried out by the fact-checkers; identifying the sources of data and information indicated and used in the message
Modality, transmediality, and integration	Identifying the specificity and quality of the message in terms of the mode of communication: textual, audio, visual, audio-visual, multimodal as well as transmediality and inclusivity characteristics at the level of the message, the profile of the author, social media platforms, and sometimes mainstream media
Architecture and metadata	Determining the technical construction of the message and additional message components such as author/publisher information, redirects (links) and determining the importance of transmediality and cross-platformity
Uncommon practices	Identifying any unusual treatments, actions, measures, techniques, attitudes, and behaviours identifiable in the communication
Imports	Determining the main meaning the message may convey to the recipient's mind
Contexts	Identifying the importance of the contexts referred to or in which the message is located: historical, socio-cultural, political
Narrative effects	Identifying the key possible narrative effects to be achieved through the publication of such a message

## Selection of cases

The selection of cases for analysis was purposeful, based on the selection of fake news unmasked in at least one of the three Polish fact-checking platforms demagog.pl, fakenews.pl, and fakehunter.pap.pl, and in 8 cases out of 10, also additionally present in Fact Check Explorer<sup>43</sup>.

A review of articles verifying fake news about the war in the above sites from March to September 2022 was carried out. The predominant thematic categories were identified, and 10 fake news stories were

42 J. Mingers, C. Standing, *What is information...*, pp. 85-104.

43 Google's tool for finding and classifying fake news, <https://toolbox.google.com/factcheck/about> [24.03.2023].

selected, corresponding to different categories, in order to maximise the diversity of the fake news stories analysed in terms of:

- distribution platforms (using, e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Twitter),
- the degree of online and offline “popularity” (including the presence of fake news also in mainstream media and/or the degree of spread of fake news as determined by fact-checking platforms),
- the degree of seriousness of the problem (from very dramatic and serious to trivial and humorous), and
- thematic category.

Five main thematic categories were identified, and between 1 and 3 pieces of fake news from each were selected for analysis: refugees (1); politicians (1); weapons and military aid (2); war events; (3) Ukrainian “nationalism”; (1) protection of Polish interests and culture (2).

### Mode of analysis

The material was coded independently by the three researchers using the analysis matrix. For the analysis of language and discourse, a system of visual, textual, and semantic components was used<sup>44</sup>. The factuality analysis relied on investigations, the results of which were presented on fact-checking platforms. The analysis of modality, transmediality, and integration as well as architecture, metadata, and uncommon practices was based on the assumptions of the Molina et al. model<sup>45</sup>. In contrast, imports were analysed based on the findings of Mingers and Standing<sup>46</sup>. Contexts were extracted independently based on the basic categories historical, cultural-social, domestic political, and international political, based on, among others, the findings of E. Perez<sup>47</sup>, including the identification of potential narrative effects.

After individual analyses were completed, joint discussions were made for each case, creating consensus syntheses of the data. At the final stage, a meta-analysis of all ten cases was conducted to identify the characteristics of fake news about the Russian-Ukrainian war in the Polish-language social media sphere and its possible narrative effects.

44 A. Giachanou, G. Zhang, P. Rosso, *Multimodal multi-image fake news detection...*

45 M.D. Molina et al., *Fake news is not simply false information...*

46 J. Mingers, C. Standing, *What is information...*, pp. 85-104.

47 E. Perez, *Strategic Disinformation...*, pp. 8-18.

## 3. Results

### Content of the cases analysed

The research sample included the cases presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Topics and content of analysed fake news**

	The subject of fake news	Main message
1.	Sinking of the "Moskva" warship	The video allegedly shows the sinking Russian warship "Moskva". In reality, it shows the ship "USS Buchanan"
2.	Destruction of Mariupol by Ukrainians	The entry shows a video containing claims of deliberate destruction of Mariupol by Ukrainians
3.	Secret American laboratories in Ukraine	The video centres around the recently "discovered" secret laboratories of biological weapons in Ukraine, which serves to point to the real reason for Russia's attack
4.	Signs with the names of Polish localities in Ukrainian	The description of the photo of the sign with the name of the Polish locality in a foreign language suggests that Ukrainian was used, whereas it is the regional Lemko language
5.	Zelenski fled the country	The message says that the President of Ukraine is not in the country, which is supposed to be indicated by a photo of him while recording video footage in a studio on the "green screen"
6.	The West supplies weak helmets to Ukrainians	The video shows a small projectile piercing a helmet that Ukraine allegedly received from Western countries
7.	Drones as Ukrainian chemical weapons carriers	The video shows Ukrainian drones allegedly carrying chemical weapons
8.	McDonald's in Norway has withdrawn the Bandera sandwich	The video claims that McDonald's in Norway is promoting Stephan Bandera by selling a sandwich called "Homestyle Bandera".
9.	Forced housing of Ukrainian refugees in Polish homes	The recording reports that forced accommodation of the Ukrainian population is planned in a province neighbouring Ukraine
10.	The brutal murder of Polish children by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in the 1940s	The entry contains photographs of murdered children with a description indicating that this crime was committed by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. In fact, it shows children killed by their own mother

### Design of the fake news analysed

#### Language and discourse

Despite the considerable variety of cases analysed, most of them are characterised by clear features of linguistic incorrectness. We also note numerous syntactic and stylistic errors. These affect both written and oral statements. In the case of the latter, this not only applies to the

utterances of the bystanders of the interlocutors but to the authors/speakers themselves, who are most often persons styling themselves as journalists or editors.

The predominant feature of the language of the analysed cases is the occurrence of colloquialisms and, in four out of ten cases, also vulgar expressions or swearing. The language is emotionally charged either directly and/or through the use of emoticons, by which the authors try to give validity to their statements. In some cases, speakers express themselves in a pompous or exalted manner, which sometimes sounds grotesque.

The utterance is often built on stylisation, e.g., into an expert utterance, or into a journalistic utterance, or the styles of utterance are mixed. Rhetorical tools such as direct addresses or rhetorical questions are the main tools for building the para-journalistic style and its credibility. Sloppy attempts to use specialised vocabulary and foreign words are often combined with simplifications.

Analysing the content of the posts in the context of the specific profiles on which they are posted, there is a tendency to fit in with the style prevailing in other posts, which may serve to respond to the habits and expectations of the audience, e.g., a satirical tone or stylisation as a TV diary. It also serves to build a certain atmosphere around the topics covered such as fear or seriousness. Sometimes, it leads to a call to action: the adoption of a specific stance or action, e.g., to defend Polishness and Polish interests or to oppose the authorities.

A characteristic feature of the entries analysed is their compilation. In genealogical terms, we observe hybrid creations such as an agitational column, a para-expert debate combined with a video presentation, and a reportage – *à la* “live” intervention programme. The statements combine various pieces of true and false information, attributed to different orders, e.g., political, historical, and legal, while at the same time, the presentation lacks specific sources of information and/or a lot of relevant data. Topics, themes, and contexts are also mixed, adding to the discursive chaos. Many authors do not shy away from clearly defined objectives of political or ideological agitation in the post or in the description on their profile.

### Modality, transmodality, and integration

The posts analysed are multimedia and are very diverse. Even if one modality dominates, other modalities are a kind of supplement, or the post is linked to the content of other modalities through links to other posts or other online sources. In these posts, written text is always present. There are never single images, silent videos, or graphics. Depending on the form dominating the post, we are confronted with different combinations of modalities.

**Table 3. Modalities of analysed fake news**

1. Video without sound, text, or emoticons	2. Video conference with the presentation of maps, photos, and screenshots	3. Video conference with screen sharing presentation and maps	4. Photo and text	5. Text and photo
6. Audio-video and text	7. Text and video	8. Video and text	9. Videoblog, banners, and information sidebars	10. Text and archive photos

The modalities used sometimes lead to an exaggeration of communication forms, e.g., the video in case no. 9 abounds in numerous banners, information bars, advertisements, and notifications, giving the impression of excess. This is also the case with the video in fake news no. 3. The entry in case no. 10, on the other hand, is saturated with macabre images in various styles and of various origins in order to “flood” the viewer with a multitude of visuals of the presented event and to reinforce the effect.

More often than not, however, multimodality does not just lead to variety in the delivery form, but to chaos. It is another tool for building excessive complexity – this time not at the level of content but of form, which indicates a lack of professionalism in this communication sphere as well.

Cross-communication or duplication of content is an essential feature of the fake news analysed. Cross-communication can occur at different levels:

- within the same fake news item (when other fake news items are directly or indirectly referred to in a given post)
- within the profile of the author publishing the fake news (when the author frequently publishes other fake news)
- between social media platforms (fake news is shaped in other social media)
- on the internet in the broadest sense, e.g., on private websites

- offline (e.g., on television or in the press).

Sometimes, fake news finds its way into the traditional mainstream media and, unverified, is presented as fact. This applies to both Russian media (such as “Russia Today” in the case of fake news no. 7) and Western media (CNN and BBC in the case of fake news no. 1).

In addition, the basis for the distribution of fake news is its multiplication, which occurs in other languages (in the cases analysed, mainly Russian) and involves literally the same content. It can also be an element of cross-posting with other fake news on similar profiles of non-public, poorly identifiable, relatively anonymous individuals. It can also find its way into political channels, such as the Twitter profile of a local politician (case no. 8).

In general, through comprehensive integration, there is a multi-modal and discursive multiplication of fake news that supports the construction of specific narratives which, by producing psychological and/or social effects, serve political and sometimes even warlike purposes<sup>48</sup>.

### **Message architecture, metadata, and unusual practices**

Analysing the message architecture and metadata allows a closer profile of the author and the technical layer of the message. Both of these elements facilitate content verification. Although the authors of the analysed fake news very rarely appear under a name or even a pseudonym, their profiles often lead to private websites of organisations, e.g., so-called patriotic ones. Above all, redirects are made to numerous profiles of the same or related authors on social media (Twitter, Facebook, or Telegram). In only one of the analysed cases did the speaker in the video give his telephone number, encouraging direct contact – this should be regarded as a rarity.

The fake news analysed draws attention to a lack of technical and, therefore, often aesthetic precision. They are sloppy and unreadable; they are characterised by low-quality images, sound, and processing of the media on many levels such as the lack of an official beginning and end of the video; no sound in the video; random emoticons added to the text, etc.

48 A. Khan, K. Brohman, S. Addas, *The anatomy of 'fake news'...*

In the cases analysed, there is mostly a lack of communication or technical practices that could be considered unusual. These could include the aforementioned giving of the speaker's phone number "live". All the cases analysed are based on a social media architecture that, through certain functionalities and affordances, fosters sharing, commenting, and engagement in discourse, making it more widespread.

### **Factuality of the message**

The factuality of the cases analysed is mixed. Five out of ten news are completely false, and five mix facts and false information, operating with so-called half-truths. Most often, we are dealing with a combination of information and its interpretation and opinion, sometimes also with agitation.

None of the content analysed contains information about the sources of the data, let alone how they were verified. The authors quote content without providing the names, surnames, or even the functions of the persons allegedly speaking. There is a lack of information about the time and place of the event, conversation, etc. Photographs and recordings are used without any indication of authorship. Own and other people's material is mixed, and even Creative Commons licences are broken when the authors make their text available under licence without having the right to other people's photos (case no. 10). Factuality, or rather the lack of it, is combined with the construction of a chaotic discourse and the disordered modality of the message. These processes support each other in a kind of techno-discursive process of defactualisation.

### **Imports**

The diagnosed imports can be divided into three main types: symbolic interpretation (nos. 1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10), manipulation (linguistic and/or factual) (nos. 2, 4, 5, 7), and agitation (nos. 4, 9, 10). The key imports concern the causes of the Russian-Ukrainian war; the course of the war and individual events; the consequences of the war and the political decisions that accompanied it; complex theories, mainly conspiracy theories; and broader political and socio-cultural narratives.

Thus, we have, among other things, symbolic failures and the suggestion of the causes of war and broad globalist plans, linking, among other things, war, the pandemic, and other catastrophes. The authors

try to convince the audience of the “harmful activities” of Western states and the “legitimate intervention” of Russia. We also observe warnings against the sinister Ukrainians as threats to state sovereignty and Polish culture. Authors also call for action: defence of the Polish state and culture or, on the contrary, social or individual defence against the “hostile” state system.

### Contexts

Import is conveyed by placing statements and narratives in a specific context. Historical contexts, both distant in time (e.g., World War I and World War II), less distant in time (e.g., the Chernobyl nuclear disaster), near-contemporary (the Odessa crime of 2014), and both more local (e.g., the Polish census) and international (the Vietnam War) dominate the sample.

Numerous events from general history and Polish-Ukrainian history are cited. In the first case, events from World War I (the battles of Ypres) and World War II (the German attack on Poland), the Cold War (the East-West conflict), and the Iraq War appear. In the second case, we see the use of historical themes such as the history of the Cossack state in Ukraine and the murder of St Andrew Bobola, the crimes of genocide in Volhynia, and the history of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army during World War II.

Fake news about this war also uses three other contexts: cultural, conspiracy theoretical, and ideological. The cultural context is primarily based on stereotypes (e.g., Ukrainian-Bandera), symbols (e.g., the name of a ship as the name of the Russian capital; *onuca*, i.e., a type of Russian footwear as a synonym for collaborator), and motifs (e.g., Russia as liberator). The conspiracy theoretical context, on the other hand, locates the narrative in the broader perspective of global and local events, linking, e.g., the Russian-Ukrainian war and other spectacular or imagined events such as a pandemic, the functioning of bio-labs in Ukraine, the activities of global freemasonry, the hidden goals of the Polish census, the activities of the global government. The third category consists of ideological contexts. These include Nazism, including analogies of fascist Nazism and Ukrainian Nazism; nationalism (mainly linked to the activities of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and Bandera); and anti-state-insurgency ideology, including incitement to activities against the authorities of one’s own state.

### **Possible narrative effects**

Placed in a specific context, the import is to produce a specific narrative effect. An analysis of the construction of fake news does not make it possible to directly determine the intentions, purpose, and strategy of the author. It does, however, make it possible to outline the potential effects of a message constructed in terms of content, modality, and technology, which is also distributed in a specific way.

The analysed fake news serves to spread interpretations and manipulations that are based on suggestions, justifications, warnings, and encouragement. The primary narrative effects are the building of an atmosphere of dislike, hatred, and sometimes disgust towards Ukrainians. The narrative of concern, fear, and horror can result in the awakening or intensification of various individual and societal fears and suspicions, which can also give rise to active opposition to the war support being provided.

The exhortation to adopt certain attitudes or carry out actions can be an assumption to effects far beyond those narrative and discursive. Decreased sensitivity and empathy may translate into reduced assistance to victims of war. Decreased trust may result in reduced support for action to defend the attacked state and its people. New interpretations of events, repeatedly reproduced and reinforced, can lead to changes in views within society and at the level of government, which in turn can exacerbate internal and external polarisation. In some cases, there can also be a potential blurring of the sense of responsibility and thus guilt, with potential implications for the course of political events during and after hostilities (e.g., in the case of the crime of genocide).

## **4. Discussion and conclusions**

● Chaos predominates in the fake news analysed; both linguistic, especially stylistic, which is intended to give more meaning and credibility to the statement and its content, as well as discursive. The latter is based on understatement, lack of data and/or sources and, most often, a combination of very different information and topics. Communication is also chaotic, making it unclear what is the essence of the message. The bluntness and exaltation make these efforts inept. As a result, it can be said that the narrative being constructed is

multithreaded, multifaceted, and sometimes incoherent, but based on a few constant elements: blurring (of facts, interpretation, communication), chaos, building an atmosphere of uncertainty, fear, hatred, and declining trust.

The results of the study confirmed the existence of different types of fake news. The most common type appeared to be a construct based on complete untruth. This applied to both textual, visual and audiovisual messages. The lack of proper linguistic construction in some cases appears to be important. This issue may influence the unmasking of fake news already at the level of its initial reception.

As a consequence of social media, fake war news is constructed in this way, and there is a blurring of discourse. It is overly complex and often chaotic. Also, due to the mixed nature of facts and lies, it is difficult to identify elements that are definitely false and definitely true.

The second consequence is the construction of a specific narrative. In the case of the Russian-Ukrainian war, this narrative is three-fold: fear, polarisation, and hatred. Fear is primarily concerned with the unethical behaviour of the Ukrainians and the consequences of the war for Poland as a neighbouring country providing aid to an attacked country. Polarisation is primarily about dividing Ukraine's allies and non-allies, both inside and outside Poland. Finally, the dislike, lack of empathy, or even hatred applies directly to the Ukrainian people, who, because of their difficult historical relations with the Polish people, are not supposed to deserve support.

The third consequence of fake news constructed in this way is the development of broader narratives into which the analysed fake news fits at the expense of other narratives, usually alternative ones. This involves raising doubts, redirecting attention, or denying the issue altogether. The aim is to fill the discursive space with specific content and tone of speech to achieve short-term or long-term strategic goals<sup>49</sup>.

The research conducted is characterised by sample size limitations; however, the aim was not to quantify the dominant discourses, but to qualitatively characterise the specifics of fake news concerning this war present in the Polish-speaking social media sphere. Enlarging the

49 A.V. Svintsytskiy et al., *Countering fake information as a guarantee of state information security*, "Security Journal" 2002, pp. 1-16.

sample could have significantly broadened the perspective and perhaps allowed other narrative effects to be isolated. However, the first six months of the war in the Polish-speaking social media sphere were dominated precisely by the discourse presented. The research needs to be continued. Furthermore, it can be extended to analyse the psychological, social, economic, and political effects of such constructed narratives. This is an area that should also be analysed in greater depth in the future, leading not only to conclusions of a cognitive nature, but also to practical recommendations.

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