

IDENTIFYING MISLEADING INFORMATION AND TYPES OF FAKES

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Summary

The aim of this paper is to prove that people in an age of new media formats and media technologies should be media literate persons. The authors give the definitions of “media and information literacy” (knowledge, skills and abilities to effectively interact with the media and other information services and develop critical thinking) and “digital literacy” (the ability to use digital technologies to discover, evaluate, use, and create information). Different types of misleading information, such as: misinformation, disinformation and malinformation are analyzed in this paper. We want our students to be aware of such misleading information, to have the ability to use information from a variety of sources and effectively solve problems in an electronic environment. It is rather important to understand the varied kinds of the misleading information: satire or parody, false connection, misleading content, false context, imposter content, manipulated content and fabricated content which can be less or more harmful. The authors give examples of five fact-checking rules which are not no universal but can be basic principles.

Key words: media and information literacy, digital literacy, misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, content.

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1. Introduction

We live in an age of rapid development of new media formats and media technologies. Today, it is important for each of us to be able to consciously consume information, as well as to have the skills to create media content – to be a media literate person.

Oxford Reference defines media literacy as “knowledge, understanding, and experience of various media forms, in some definitions the concept includes literacy and numeracy; Competence in using various media and the ability to think critically about them; Levels of skill and competence in using media devices” (*Oxford Reference, 2023*). The term “media and information literacy” refers to the main characteristics (knowledge, skills and abilities) that allow citizens to effectively interact with the media and other information services and develop critical thinking and lifelong learning skills – for communication and the implementation of active citizenship. Media and information literacy involves the ability to work with any sources of information (oral and written; analog and electronic/digital).

UNESCO, in addition to the definition of “media and information literacy”, proposes to use the term “digital literacy”. Digital literacy is the ability to use digital technologies to discover, evaluate, use, and create information; the ability to use information from a variety of sources and effectively solve problems in an electronic environment. Digital literacy includes

the ability to read and interpret digital media, reproduce data and images using electronic devices, and evaluate and apply new knowledge gained from the electronic environment. In the member countries of UNESCO, projects aimed at improving the level of all types of media literacy are actively developing (Law N., Woo D., J. de la Torre, Wong G., 2018).

One of the main competencies of a media literate person is the ability to think critically. According to UNESCO's definition, critical thinking is the ability not just to take all suggestions on faith, but to study and analyze information and ideas for the purpose of understanding and evaluation. Critical thinking is considered one of the "flexible" skills (soft skills), which must be developed regardless of the field of professional activity.

2. The way publications build trust and loyalty

In addition to legislation, for the most part the media adhere to ethical principles: reliability, objectivity, independence, impartiality. This is how publications build trust and loyalty and how they implement news “an operational information message that contains socially important and relevant information related to a certain sphere of life of society as a whole or its individual groups.” (Wikipedia: *The Free Encyclopedia*, 2022). It is unlikely that a newspaper or magazine will be trusted, bought and read if the publication publishes fakes “a fake or imitation of news (manipulative distortion of facts; disinformation), which was created with disregard for editorial norms, rules, processes adopted in the media to ensure compliance and verification, and which does not withstand any, even superficial, checks for compliance and reality, but, despite this, has a powerful impact on the consciousness of a large number of people” (Wikipedia: *The Free Encyclopedia*, 2022).

Major publications such as the BBC, The Guardian, The New York Times, The Times, The Washington Post adhere not only to ethical principles, but also take seriously what and how they publish, and most importantly, whether the information they were told is reliable. Therefore, there are fact-checking units in the editorial office, where specialists thoroughly check every fact and all the data that support this fact.

The employees of these departments bear enormous responsibility. Therefore, the facts are checked several times and through different sources. In this profession, the conditions are very strict. Not every publication can afford such a fact-checking unit, so journalists often manage on their own. Although in any case, at the first stage – the acceptance of information – journalists are simply obliged to check both the source and the message itself.

In addition to the publications themselves, there are more than a hundred fact-checking organizations in the world that check and double-check published news from various media. Here are some Ukrainian examples: Stop-Fake, Checkregion-ua, VoxCheck. Each organization, after checking the news, makes a verdict – whether the news is true or not. And each organization has its own rating scale, the most common: truth, manipulation, fake (untrue).

3. Types of misleading information

At our course “Media Literacy and Critical Thinking” students should know the differences of fake information. There are three types of misleading information: misinformation, disinformation and malinformation, which become a serious concern for consumers and organizations.

The Canadian Centre for Cyber Security gives such identifications of these types:

“**Misinformation** refers to false information that is not intended to cause harm.

Disinformation refers to false information that is intended to manipulate, cause damage, or guide people, organizations, and countries in the wrong direction.

Malinformation refers to information that stems from the truth but is often exaggerated in a way that misleads and causes potential harm” (*Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, 2022*).

Media Defence defines false information in that way:

“Misinformation is information that is false, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true.

Disinformation is information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false. “It is a deliberate, intentional lie, and points to people being actively disinformed by malicious actors”.

Malinformation is information that is based on reality but is used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country” (*UNESCO, 2018: 44*).

So, we can give our students the generalized definitions that:

Misinformation is a false information, unintentional mistakes such as inaccurate dates, statistics, translations or even satire, which is not intended to cause harm.

Disinformation is fabricated or deliberately manipulated content to cause damage, or guide people, organizations, and countries in the wrong direction. It is often motivated by the desire to make money, have greater political influence, or sow chaos for chaos’s sake.

Malinformation is a deliberate publication of true information, the sharing of it is meant to cause harm on a person, organisation or country.

4. Varied kinds of misleading information

Disinformation can become misinformation if something is proven wrong, but people keep posting. Malinformation can become disinformation with enough social media virality, shifting the initial narrative. It is rather important to understand the varied kinds of the misleading information: satire or parody, false connection, misleading content, false context, imposter content, manipulated content and fabricated content.

1. Satire and Parody. Satire and parody are funny and they frames the truth with comedic elements, allowing us to laugh at some unpleasant aspects of life. Satire and Parody use humour to criticize a subject but there is no intention to cause harm, but has the potential to fool.

2. False Connections. Many people are guilty of judging the article after just checking the headline without reading the entire content. False connections are most visible in clickbait headlines that elicit emotion from people. Clickbait titles are not in and of themselves dangerous but contribute to information overload that can overshadow consequential news stories. That is the case when headlines, visuals, or captions do not match the content but it is not rather harmful.

3. Misleading Content. Content is often misleading when the framing of a situation is misrepresented. Rather than sharing information to help people make up their own minds, misleading content often pretends to be objective while arguing a particular point of view, it aims to mislead the result of content, it is not rather harmful.

4. False Context. False context information might reflect a real situation but is purposely skew some context around the information. This is most often evident in image captions, based on the caption the post was meant to give good current press. Images are easy to manipulate and people judge articles depending on a particular interpretation of a photo. But the true content in this case is shared with false contextual information and it is harmful.

5. Imposter Content. Imposter content is meant to look like a real news source but the URL of credible news sites are altered to imitate them. This includes sites like abcnews.com.co, which is meant to look like the ABC News site but contains false or manipulated stories, the genuine sources are impersonated and it is rather harmful.

6. **Manipulated Content.** Manipulated content includes a multiplicity of fakes, ranging from photoshopped images to deep fake information. While the capture may be real, the image presented was never actually taken but created, the genuine information or imagery is manipulated to mislead that it really happened and it is rather harmful.

7. **Fabricated Content:** These stories are false.

Some Internet users are confiding to believe fake information because of their prejudices. This type of people would instantly believe information they see no matter how hilarious it is because their perception of truth is clouded. New content that is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm, and such people even help to spread it (*Iona University, 2023*).

Tactics for disseminating misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation information shift rapidly and occasionally outpace current evaluative tools. Develop a critical eye when reading internet stories and you will be less likely to share and believe mis-, dis-, and malinformation.

5. Five rules of checking news

The main weapon of the fact-checker is doubt. Professional distrust, reality testing for strength – that's what will help always and everywhere.

1. **Origin.**

Always look for the original source of the news (fact) or message: how the data appeared, who specifically commented, where the information came from.

And also look for confirmation of the fact or facts from the news in different media that you trust. If the news appeared in several publications at once, there is a chance that it was checked by each editorial office and the news is true. Before using a source for an assignment, or even sharing a link, we need to engage in a moment or two of investigation.

Trust in this or that media, in this situation, falls on your shoulders. Perhaps now is the best time to reconsider the level of trust in the media you trusted before.

2. **Opposite side**

The principle of journalism is objectivity. That is why it is important that the news consists of the opinions of different experts and parties. Especially if there is an accusation or doubt about any fact in the news.

This is the essence of journalism: it does not give a verdict, it only gives food for thought. Readers should draw their own conclusions.

3. **Date and name validation**

Perhaps this is the simplest, although in fact it turns out to be the most difficult, rule. Here you need to keep in mind the story about factual errors. They are not intentional, but still, once in the media field, they can give rise to real fakes.

When you read or hear about a research study or quote, follow up by checking into the actual study or quote source. Try to verify the information in multiple sources (you can even try traditional media and library databases)

4. **Fact is more important than sensation**

Everything that appears on social networks needs to be double-checked, especially photos or pictures. Do not forget: by right-clicking you can always send a picture (photo) to Google search. The Google images service often helps to find the original photo.

Exaggerated and provocative headlines or emotional language are serious emphasis. Headlines or video titles that don't accurately match the content also indicate front-pager. Hoaxers are often motivated by revenue and just want those clicks.

5. **Caution – social media**

World practice dictates new trends in inspections. Sometimes the media cannot verify the news, so they publish it on social networks with a postscript: “the information is checked, if you know something about it, write to us”.

This approach helps in the search for eyewitnesses or data, and also gives rise to public discussions. This is a positive method. The main thing is not to miss an important postscript that the news is being checked and not to post it as a real fact. Therefore, always try to separate emotions and facts.

There are no universal fact-checking rules, there are basic principles. It is important to remember them and try to apply them. Here is useful material that describes in more detail the methods of fact-checking and checking sources for reliability.

6. Conclusions

We can confirm that fact-checking is a central strategy to combat misinformation and it has increased in recent years due to the spread of false news and misinformation, and the need to debunk viral hoaxes. Media and Information Literacy strategies and campaigns, fact-checking and social media verification is becoming increasingly important in the fight against false news and misinformation. Media and Information Literacy strategies include: **human rights literacy** which relates to the fundamental rights to all persons, the right to freedom of expression and protection of rights; **news literacy** which refers to literacy about the news media, including journalistic standards and ethics; **advertising literacy** which relates to understanding how online advertising works and how income is implemented in the online economy; **computer literacy** which refers to basic IT usage and understanding the easy manner in which clickbaits, pictures, and, increasingly, videos can be manipulated to promote a particular narrative; **understanding the “attention economy”** which relates to one of the causes of misinformation and the need for journalists and editors to focus on click-bait headlines and misleading captures to grab the attention of users and get online advertising income; **privacy and intercultural literacy** which develops standards on the right to privacy and a broader understanding of how communications interact with individual identity and social developments (UNESCO, 2018).

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