

**Karina Stasiuk-Krajewska**

SWPS University

ORCID: 0000-0001-8261-7335

## **Disinformation. An attempt at a discursive approach<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The categories of disinformation and fake news are among the more frequently invoked concepts in the context of discussions about modernity. On the one hand, there is widespread agreement on the special (negative) role of media phenomena defined in this way, while on the other hand, a lot of research is being conducted to shed light on their nature and principles of operation. Meanwhile, there is a fundamental – at least from the point of view of the social sciences – problem with these concepts. Namely, we do not have their precise definitions. The presented text has the task of analysing the state of affairs in this regard and proposing an adequate approach. This approach, in fact, identifies the category of disinformation with the category of fake news (in the broader sense), while pointing out the constitutive features of both these phenomena, related to the categories of truth, intention and media format. These features are analysed in the context of the category of the media genre of information (more specifically, the information function understood in a pragmatic way) and the discursive framework of journalism, into which, as will be shown in the text, disinformation attempts to intrude.

**Keywords:** disinformation, fake news, media, journalism, discourse.

### **Introduction**

Since the British Collins Dictionary announced ‘fake news’ as the word of the year (arguing that its use had increased by 365% in the previous 12 months)<sup>2</sup>, interest in this phenomenon (at various levels of public debate and in various contexts – political, social, media, geopolitical) has not waned, but has even intensified. This is certainly influenced both by the growing sense of destabilization of the world (starting with

---

<sup>1</sup> The text has been prepared within the framework of an international project co-financed by the European Union (Action No. 2020-EU-IA-0267) and by the Polish Ministry of Education and Science within the framework of the programme of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education entitled ‘PMW’ in 2021-2024 (Contract No. 5213/CEF/2021/2). However, the views and opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

<sup>2</sup> N. Sauer, ‘Fake news’ declared word of the year 2017, Politico, 2.11.2017, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/fake-news-ogloszone-slowem-roku-2017/ztm0l8b> (accessed 20.01.2023).

the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>3</sup>, and ending with Russia's aggression in Ukraine), and by media mechanisms – those related to the functioning of social media, as well as those affecting the standards of editorial work in the so-called institutional media. For although framing disinformation<sup>4</sup> as a phenomenon present only in social media<sup>5</sup> seems debatable<sup>6</sup>, it is worth noting that it is the specific characteristics of digital objects commonly present in the contemporary world, such as edibility, openness, interactivity or high distributability<sup>7</sup>, that makes disinformation such a significant and expansive phenomenon. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that – in view of the digitalization of media – digital objects are definitely not only objects that function in social media. What is interesting and important from the point of view of educational activities in this area: at the same time, awareness of the existence of the phenomenon and its (negative) social role is growing among media consumers. “More than 80% of Poles have encountered disinformation and false information about Poland and the world. According to 84% of Poles, too much deceitful information on the Internet divides society and affects democratic elections”<sup>8</sup> – reads a report by the Digital Poland Foundation.

The trends briefly characterized are, of course, accompanied by a tremendous increase in interest in disinformation among researchers, both those in the social sciences and humanities and those involved in the modelling and design of processes involving artificial intelligence. The general perception is that there is no doubt that disinformation is a phenomenon that is not only complex, dynamic and global in its nature (which directly translates into the difficulties associated with its scientific study),

---

<sup>3</sup> Usually, the beginning of widespread interest in the phenomenon of fake news is associated with the political activity of Donald Trump, but it is worth noting that it was the COVID-19 pandemic and related public behavior that gave rise to organized and intensified activities of international institutions, especially the WHO or the European Commission, aimed at countering the so-called infodemia ([https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1), accessed 20.01.2023). Also in Poland, the onset of the pandemic was a time of increased and incomparable to earlier presence of the term in the public debate (cf. First wave of COVID-19 intensified the media discussion on post-truth, Institute for Media Monitoring, 9.03.2021, <https://www.imm.com.pl/pierwsza-fala-covid-19-nasilila-medialna-dyskusje-o-postprawdzie/>, accessed 20.01.2023).

<sup>4</sup> In this text, I consider that the category relevant to the phenomena in question is the category of disinformation. Given the trends present in the literature on the subject, as well as in media practice and public debate, I consider it to be identical to the category of fake news (in the broader sense, which for the purposes of this text I will call general), which will be explained in detail later in the text. The category of fake news is used if this is what was used in the source to which I refer.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. A. Khan, K. Brohman, S. Addas, *The anatomy of 'fake news': Studying false messages as digital objects*, Journal of Information Technology 2022, Vol. 37, pp. 122-143, pp. 132 et seq.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *The Disinformation Age. Politics, Technology over Disruptive Communication in the United States*, ed. by W. L. Bennet, S. Livingston, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> A. Khan, K. Brohman, S. Addas, *The anatomy of 'fake news'*, p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> *Disinformation through the eyes of Poles 2022*, Digital Poland Foundation, <https://digitalpoland.org/publikacje/pobierz?id=4f2e2116-82a6-47b5-a984-801b5e704b56> (accessed 15.01.2023).

but also particularly relevant to the shape of contemporary democratic societies and, consequently, to the quality, stability and security of individuals' lives.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to analyze existing ways of defining the category 'disinformation' in the literature. The analysis is conducted using the *desk research* method. The main research questions concern what are the ways of defining disinformation; what are the difficulties in this area and what do they result from; what are the possibilities of capturing the specificity of this category in the context of relevant theoretical concepts of contemporary social sciences. The hypothesis I put forward points to the fact that existing definitions are imprecise, as well as the possibility of defining the title category in the context of the notion of journalistic discourse.

## **Defining the semantic field of disinformation – the main challenges**

However, the problem associated with the study of disinformation is much deeper and – in fact – more serious, if we want to adopt the point of view of science, especially of disciplines in the social sciences. In fact, the category of disinformation (and related categories, which will be discussed further on) is not precisely defined, as a result of which it is difficult not only to indicate the area of research, but also to identify the artefacts (texts in the broad sense of the word) that should be analyzed. It is to this issue that this text will be devoted – an attempt to clarify the concepts located in the semantic area of disinformation and to indicate the theoretical and methodological contexts that can be adopted in the study of this area. This is a particularly important task if we are looking for a basis for polemicizing with the extreme, albeit worryingly accurate, judgement of David Coady, who states:

In discussions, some people interpret me as someone who claims that the problem of fake news has been exaggerated. This is an insufficient statement. I claim that the problem of fake news does not exist because the term 'fake news' as such has no legitimizing meaning. The term corresponds neither to any new phenomenon nor to any phenomenon at all that we cannot talk or think about without using this neologism. In short, it has no valuable function<sup>9</sup>.

But why, contrary to the suggestion of the cited author, is it worth seeking the boundaries and characteristics of the semantic field of the category of disinformation (or fake news)? The fundamental answer to this question refers to the, already mentioned, observation of the particular presence of this category not only in the scientific debate, but also in the political or media debate. What are the reasons for this popularity? Why is fake news considered one of the main problems of the modern world, although, after

<sup>9</sup> D. Coady, *The Fake News about Fake News* [in:] *The Epistemology of Fake News*, ed. S. Bernecker, M.K. Flowerree, T. Grundman, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021, pp. 80-81. Similar views are also expressed by: S. Vosoughi, D. Roy, S. Aral, 'The spread of true and false news online', *Science* 2018, Vol. 359, No. 6380, pp. 1146-1151.

all, it is difficult not to agree with the thesis that “disinformation, biased information, advertising or information used to discredit certain values or beliefs have always been part of society”<sup>10</sup>.

## Disinformation and fake news – too narrow or too broad

First of all, it is worth pointing out that the aforementioned semantic area is either considered too broadly or, on the contrary, too narrowly. The first tendency is clearly evidenced by various classifications of fake news, referred to in the literature as “broader” classifications, which include, apart from false or manipulated content, among others: satire, parody, image manipulation, public relations, advertising, propaganda<sup>11</sup>; gossip, conspiracy theories, but also urban legend<sup>12</sup>; and even commentary, polarized content, persuasive information or citizen journalism<sup>13</sup>.

To begin with, it is necessary to reject the assumption that disinformation can be equated with manipulation or propaganda in the broadest sense (or even to consider propaganda as a type of fake news). It is undoubtedly true that disinformation uses the tools of manipulation, that it is sometimes used in the function of propaganda, but such an identification of the terms (in fact, a broadening of the category of disinformation) makes this category – as such – meaningless, as it does not refer to any new phenomenon, area of social life (or the functioning of media communication – which is basically the same thing in contemporary societies). Therefore, if we want to maintain the conviction of the necessity of research and debate on disinformation as an important and specific (for various reasons) phenomenon characterizing modernity, it is necessary to look for its characteristic features, linked either to the broadly understood mechanics of the political/social processes we observe today; or – more promisingly, in my opinion, yet in no way incompatible with the previous one – to the mechanics of the processes of medialized communication.

Undoubtedly, individuals and societies throughout human history have been (and continue to be) disinformed (manipulated) for a variety of purposes and historical contexts, using a variety of tools and at the initiative of diverse social actors. However, the question of disinformation – as it is understood in the discussion and research carried

---

<sup>10</sup> J.P. Baptista, A. Gradim, *Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review. Social Science & Medicine* 2020, No. 9, p. 185. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9100185>, p. 4. Cf. also: J.W. Cortada, W. Aspray, *Fake News Nation. The Long History of Misinformation and Lies in America*, Rowman & Littlefield, New York 2019.

<sup>11</sup> A. Khan, K. Brohman, S. Addas, *The anatomy of 'fake news'*: p. 125;

<sup>12</sup> *Detecting Fake News on Social Media*, ed. by K. Shu, H. Liu, Morgan & Claypool Publishers, Kentfield 2019, p. 2. An interesting catalogue of over 20 types of misinformation is brought to you by the document: Code of Good Practice. Together against disinformation, adopted by representatives of ten organizations involved in countering disinformation in Poland (A Code of Good Practices on Disinformation – News – NASK, accessed 20.12.2022).

<sup>13</sup> M.D. Molina, S.S. Sundar, T. Le, D. Lee, “*Fake news' is not simply false information: a conceptual explication and taxonomy of online content*,” *The American Behavioral Scientist* (Beverly Hills). 2021, Vol. 65(2), pp. 180-212.

out today – is not so much a general question about these (nowadays both historically and contemporarily) social mechanisms as it is about the specifics of a particular phenomenon, which – if we want these studies and discussions to be meaningful – needs to be defined precisely (as far as possible) or at least to indicate its limits.

## Disinformation – mis-information – mal-information

Let us therefore look at the semantic field of the category of disinformation. It became popular in 2017, as one of a triad of terms that make up the phenomenon known as *information disorder*<sup>14</sup>, although it had been around before – in the first half of the 20th century, when it was used to describe the actions of secret services whose aim was to harm another state; and since the 1980s in a broader sense (when Ronald Reagan used it to refer to the Gaddafi regime in Libya<sup>15</sup>). In contemporary parlance, information chaos is constituted by three categories of phenomena:

- the aforementioned *disinformation (disinformation)* – false or inaccurate information that has been produced intentionally to mislead;
- *mis-information (misinformation)* – content that is false but is disseminated without any intention to harm someone and without awareness that it is untrue;
- *mal-information (malinformation)* – communication of information that is true but with the intention of harming someone.

The first area is, of course, ‘classic’ fake news; the second is, for example, the widespread medical advice practised by social media users in the comments; the third is hate speech, but also dishonest image-blaming activities against competitors (often wrongly referred to as black PR), but also – at least in part – marketing and advertising (especially of the native advertising variety).

The focus of my interest will be on the first area, with the assumption that the characteristics attributed to fake news (the category most frequently cited and most precisely defined in the literature on the subject) can be considered identical to those attributed to disinformation. On the other hand – formally speaking – fake news is a specific (genre and pragmatically a type of media communication) and therefore refers to a narrower phenomenon than disinformation. It is indeed possible, therefore, to speak of a narrower and broader understanding of the category of fake news – in a different sense, however, than is usually done. I will therefore use the category ‘fake news in the general sense’ in my discussion. Thus, ‘fake news in the broader sense’, according to the existing definition, is an activity that also includes satire, parody or public relations, among

<sup>14</sup> Cf. C. Wardle, H. Derakhshan H., *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*, ref. 162317GBR, 27 September. Council of Europe, 2017, <https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html>(accessed; 12.01.2023); E.C. Tandoc, Z.W. Lim, R. Ling, *Defining ‘Fake News’: A typology of scholarly definitions*, *Digital Journalism* 2018, Vol. 6(2), pp. 137-153.

<sup>15</sup> R. Cover, A. Haw, J.D. Thompson, *Fake News in Digital Cultures. Technology, Populism and Digital Misinformation*, Emerald Publishing, Bingley 2022, pp. 22 et seq.

others. Such an understanding of the category is, in my opinion (which has been mentioned before and to which I will return in a moment), too broad.

In the approach proposed here:

- fake news in the general sense is the same as disinformation (this is also how the term functions in much of the literature on the subject – as equated with disinformation<sup>16</sup>);
- In the narrow sense, fake news in the narrow sense is a specific media genre, imitating information, whose characteristic feature is that it presents a false image of reality, which can be unambiguously assessed as such (this is how the category of fake news seems to be understood by fact-checkers, who label the fake news they verify with the unambiguous category: true or false)<sup>17</sup>.

When we look at the classification of the three areas of information chaos, we see that the criterion for classification here is actually two aspects: factuality and intention (to mislead). Both criteria are difficult to apply in analytical practice. Theories from the field of semiotics and pragmatics of communication, among others, offer an interesting opportunity to clarify the cited categories. Adopting, for example, after Searl and Austin, the category of the propositional content of signs (i.e.: what is stated; what is asked for; what is commanded or promised<sup>18</sup>), we can say that in the case of disinformation, the propositional content of signs falsifies (misrepresents) reality with the intention to mislead; mis-information does the same in terms of falsifying reality, but without the intention to mislead; mal-information, on the other hand, offers the propositional content of signs truthfully representing reality, but with the intention to mislead.

Of the areas indicated, the third area raises the most doubts. As it seems, it should be excluded from the semantic scope of the category of disinformation, as a different decision would make it necessary to analyze a broad spectrum of phenomena related

---

<sup>16</sup> Let us note that such an identification is only possible if we take into account the evolution of the phenomenon termed 'fake news' and, consequently, the evolution of its understanding in the literature on the subject. The report on the recognition of the term 'fake news' as word of the year, cited above, reads: "Collins Dictionary explains that it refers, for example, to news stories such as 'according to experts, the Atlantic Ocean is 75 per cent too wet' or that 'pole dancing has been declared an Olympic sport'." News that 'the cosmos is actually smaller than some people think' and 'cheese and sausage sandwiches have declared a strike' also qualify." (N. Sauer, *'Fake news' declared word of the year 2017...*). Such a framing is completely inadequate for what is now referred to as fake news or disinformation.

<sup>17</sup> The acronym FIMI, or *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference*, has recently gained popularity in European Commission documents, defined as *a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory* ([https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tackling-disinformation-foreign-information-manipulation-interference\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tackling-disinformation-foreign-information-manipulation-interference_en), accessed 5.02.2023). This category and the way it is defined are obviously a reaction to the current political situation related to Russian and Chinese disinformation. So far, however, it has not been popularized in academic research; moreover, its usefulness in this context may be reasonably questionable.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. A. Chudzinski, *John R. Searle's Theory of Intentionality and Mind*, *Philosophical Review* – New Series 1995, z. 4.

to the, more or less ethical, image communication of brands or entities. It would be an abuse to consider advertising, marketing or public relations activities as similar to what we observe in the context of, for example, Russian propaganda or the narration of anti-vaccination movements, although – undoubtedly – in the context of such communication practices one can sometimes speak of manipulation, and certainly of persuasion.

A more difficult issue remains mis-information, i.e. – messages that falsify reality, which do not realize the intention to mislead. If we take a look at the category of fake news in general (which, as already mentioned, I equate with disinformation), it should be noted that in the vast majority of analyses and attempts to define this phenomenon, the intention to mislead is considered an inalienable defining element. Fake news (disinformation) is a message that intentionally misleads, so its (its) ontological status is determined by its relation to truth, on the one hand, and by its relation to the sender's intention, on the other.

## The problem of intentions

Let us look at the question of intention. If we assume that disinformation can be defined as “a strategic narrative aimed at creating divisions between individuals based on their individual beliefs and their identities, which can be used as a communication tool to achieve political goals”<sup>19</sup>, it should be noted that this intention should be linked not only to misrepresentation, but also to the pursuit, through misrepresentation, of more complex, abstract and deferred goals. These objectives are pursued through the use of several characteristic mechanisms, often referred to as disinformation narratives, which are, by the way, perfectly evident, for example, in Russian disinformation related to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees<sup>20</sup>. This mentions, for example:

1. To create, sustain and reinforce divisions between rival political parties or the government and the opposition (in this sense, disinformation is a strategy of political control).
2. The creation, maintenance and reinforcement of divisions in the international arena. Disinformation here appears as a national strategic tool aimed at sabotaging international consensus, thus becoming a method of gaining advantage in international relations.
3. Sowing confusion with the intention of creating confusion and the belief that nothing is credible anymore, which is a prelude to achieving a state of political and social paralysis by negating the principle of public trust.

---

<sup>19</sup> A.D. Sutherland, T.A. Dykstra-DeVette, *Constructing Identification and Division through Fake News Reports of Refugees*, in *Language, Discours & Society* 2018, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> *Disinformation around war: global narratives and trends*, Demagogue, 19.03.2022, [https://demagog.org.pl/analizy\\_i\\_raporty/dezinformacja-wokol-wojny-w-ukrainie-swiatowe-narracje-i-trendy/](https://demagog.org.pl/analizy_i_raporty/dezinformacja-wokol-wojny-w-ukrainie-swiatowe-narracje-i-trendy/) (20.11.2022).

4. Raising doubts, which is a very effective tool of disinformation because, as will be discussed later, even reliable facts can rarely be proven absolutely (when it comes to scientific research, for example)<sup>21</sup>.

Such a broad definition of the intentions involved in the implementation of disinformation activities leads to the inclusion in the field of disinformation research of the perspective of the so-called impact of disinformation on the recipient and society. The inclusion of this perspective seems unavoidable, all the more so because it completes the research triad classic for media studies: sender-message-receiver. For let us ask a seemingly simple question: does fake news that is not received as truth remain fake news? It seems that this is where the important boundary runs – fake news **read** as a joke or satire **is** (functionally) a joke or satire.

However, the inclusion of the perspective of the recipient, while necessary, entails problems typical of this type of analysis. On the one hand, much of the research in this area is concerned with individual cognitive processes that are associated with greater or lesser susceptibility to disinformation<sup>22</sup>. This, in turn, leads to the question of the correlation between demographic characteristics, certain political views, life-style or media use and susceptibility to disinformation messages. In the context of this research, concepts and theories previously known from the field of social psychology (e.g. regarding ways of assimilating and estimating the credibility of information or cognitive mechanisms favoring susceptibility to such messages) are usually updated<sup>23</sup>. However, it is difficult to disagree with W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, who write: “Observing how individuals process (dis)information seems to fit better with approaches from the fields of *media literacy* and fact-checking than with broader systems approaches”<sup>24</sup>. Especially since a key assumption of the literature focusing on individual effects seems to be that people act in relative isolation.

## The social impact of disinformation – a media studies perspective

Media studies of disinformation, on the other hand, make use of assumptions and methods close to those in the field of classical *media effects* theories. In this context, references are made in particular to *agenda-setting theory*, *cultivation theory* and *framing theory*.

---

<sup>21</sup> N. O’Shaughnessy, *From Disinformation to Fake News: Forward into the Past* [in:] *The Sage Handbook of Propaganda*, eds P. Baines, N. O’Shaughnessy, N. Snow, Sage, London 2020, pp. 58-59.

<sup>22</sup> W.L. Bennett, S. Livingston, *A Brief History of the Disinformation Age*..., pp. 28 and n.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *The Psychology of Fake News. Accepting, Sharing and Correcting Misinformation*, ed. R. Greifender et al, Taylor & Francis 2021.

<sup>24</sup> W. L. Bennett, S. Livingston, *A Brief History of the Disinformation Age*..., p. 28.



*Agenda setting* theory often appears in *reverse agenda setting* form, the assumption here is that public discussion on social media sets the agenda for traditional media. This process is of course sensitive to the disinformation content circulating on social media<sup>25</sup>.

Cultivation theory, which in its classical version focused on how televised images of crime influenced the social construction of crime, now refers to the relationship between the user and digitized media, including social media<sup>26</sup>. There are also references to *media dependency theory* in research on fake news, particularly in the context of the thesis that viewer reliance on disinformation content increases as social instability increases<sup>27</sup>. With declining levels of trust in traditional media and traditional journalism<sup>28</sup>, perceived as biased and partisan, this mechanism is applied to the viewer's relationship with fake news<sup>29</sup>.

References to framing theories, which analyze the accessibility, applicability and activation of cognitive schemas when exposed to disinformative media messages, are also alive<sup>30</sup>.

In analyzing the social impact of disinformation, the *uses and gratification theory* (UGT), which assumes that the recipient is active when interacting with the media, proves particularly useful. This activity consists in the fact that the recipient, when interacting with the media, seeks the satisfaction of various needs, such as informational or social needs, but also emotional needs. The UGT model is operationalized in a great deal of research on differentiated online behavior<sup>31</sup>. The theme of satisfaction of emotional needs addressed in the context of UGT theory may be particularly relevant to the study of audience attitudes towards fake news and the impact of such messages on the interpretation of social reality. Originally, this type of approach focused on the reception of entertainment in the media, but nowadays – as the boundary between information and entertainment (*infotainment*) has been crossed – it is also

<sup>25</sup> Cf. e.g.: D.A. Scheufele, *Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing Revisited: Another Look at Cognitive Effects of Political Communication*, 'Mass Communication & Society' 2000, No. 3, pp. 297-316; L. Guo, C. Vargo, 'Fake News' and Emerging Online Media Ecosystem: An Integrated Intermedia Agenda-Setting Analysis of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, 'Communication Research' 2020, No. 47(2), pp. 178-200.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. e.g.: M. Morgan, J. Shanahan, *The State of Cultivation*, Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 2010, Vol. 54(2), pp. 337-355.

<sup>27</sup> K. Carillo, E. Scornavacca, S. Za, 'The role of media dependency in predicting continuance intention to use ubiquitous media systems', 'Information & Management' 2017, Vol. 54, No. 3, pp. 317-335.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Digital News Report 2022*, Reuters Institute, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022> (accessed 20.01.2023).

<sup>29</sup> A. Ardèvol-Abreu, *Influence of Fake News Exposure on Perceived Media Bias: The Moderating Role of Party Identity*, 'International Journal of Communication' 2022 [S.l.], vol. 16, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. e.g. D. Chong, J.N. Druckman, *A theory of framing and opinion formation in competitive elite environments*, Journal of Communication 2007, Vol. 57(1), pp. 99-118.

<sup>31</sup> B. Sampat, S. Raj, *Fake or real news? Understanding the gratifications and personality traits of individuals sharing fake news on social media platforms*, 'Aslib Journal of Information Management' 2022; S. Kamboj, *applying uses and gratifications theory to understand customer participation in social media brand communities: Perspective of media technology*, 'Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics' 2020, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 205-231.

used to analyze the behavior of audiences towards messages of an informational (or quasi-informational) nature

The *selective media exposure theory*, which combines elements of both the *media effect and UGT* theories, has been particularly widely applied in the context under analysis, based on the assumption that *exposure is always selective*. Thus, audiences, on the one hand, make active choices about the interactions they have with media, while, on the other hand, they are influenced by them to an extent that they do not necessarily subject to conscious control. Importantly in the context of disinformation, this theory places particular emphasis on the role of emotions in the perception of media messages. Decisions about the media exposure to which a viewer is subjected are, of course, also linked to cognitive biases<sup>32</sup>.

## The problem of truth and the discourse of journalism

The second category constitutive for defining disinformation (besides the intention correlated with – one way or another analyzed – the impact on the recipient), is the category of truth.

This is a very important point. For let us note that this type of definition presupposes above all the possibility of communicative reporting of the truth about reality. Such a possibility, in a theoretical sense, is highly questionable due to the peculiarities of communication as such (not to mention the mechanisms that regulate the functioning of media systems). This does not mean, however, that defining disinformation by negative reference to the category of truth is irrelevant to attempts to theorize the phenomenon. On the contrary – it is constitutive for it.

The issue of how media messages relate to (the truth about) reality is linked not only to the ontology of communication, but also to the ontology of truth as such. In the considerations contained in this text, however, I would like to omit considerations of this kind – also because what is important is the situation of disinformation in relation to the category of truth (as a social construct) rather than what definition of truth we adopt. From the point of view of my considerations, it is instead essential to point out the relationship between the category of truth and journalism, as it assumes that the category of truth (and the related factual pact<sup>33</sup>) are constitutive elements of defining (discourse) journalism.

---

<sup>32</sup> Cf. e.g.: S. Knobloch-Westerwick, *The Selective Exposure Self- and Affect-Management (SESAM) Model: Applications in the Realms of Race, Politics, and Health*, "Communication Research" 2015, Vol. 42(7), pp. 959-985; S. Knobloch, D. Zillmann, *Mood Management via the Digital Jukebox*, "Journal of Communication" 2002, Vol. 52, No. 2, pp. 351-366; S. Knobloch-Westerwick, N. Sharma, D. L. Hansen, S. Alter, *Impact of Popularity Indications on Readers' Selective Exposure to Online News*, "Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media" 2005, Vol. 49(3), pp. 296-313; S. Knobloch-Westerwick, M.R. Hastall, *Please Your Self: Social Identity Effects on Selective Exposure to News About in- and Out-Groups*, "Journal of Communication" 2010, Vol. 60, No. 3, pp. 515-535.

<sup>33</sup> Z. Bauer, *Gatunki dziennikarskie...*

I understand the invoked category of discourse – following Michel Foucault as well as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe – as a chain of interrelated semantics (meanings/interpretations) constituting a given phenomenon as meaningful and definable in a broader discursive field (the *episteme* of the epoch). In this view, the discourse of journalism denotes the set of semantics to which journalism refers in its discursive practices (e.g. typical genres) and in its self-description (e.g. codes of ethics), which semantics allow it to define itself and distinguish itself from other types of (also professional) activity<sup>34</sup>.

The definition of disinformation as a message that misrepresents the truth (or is intentionally misleading) necessarily also raises the question of how we define true knowledge about the world – what (originating) knowledge we consider true and therefore valid. At the same time, it must be knowledge that is considered objectively true, for it is definitely not a question of whether or not the recipient will recognize a disinformation message as true, but that we can – on some basis – judge that this knowledge is objectively true. The discovery and presentation of true (verified and objective) knowledge about the world is, as is well known, the constitutive semantics and function of the discourse of science. This in turn, like the discourse of journalism, is one of the essential elements of the discursive field of modernism – a modernity that defines itself through trust in science and rational (scientific) thinking. However, journalism and science have something else in common – journalism constitutes itself discursively, like science, through the category of truth: as one that reports the truth about the world.

It is thus evident that if we define disinformation through the category of truth, although we do not necessarily obtain a clarification of the concept, we can certainly show that it is located at the discursive center of modernity, which in turn provides an interesting aspersio to explain the reasons for such a wide and emotional debate on the phenomenon. To put it somewhat simplistically, disinformation represents a significant disruption of the discursive field of modernism, a discursive practice that ‘impersonates’, ‘pretends’, ‘imitates’ the media discursive practices constitutive of the discourse of modernism, which legitimize themselves by reference to the category of truth. Disinformation ‘pretends’ to be true knowledge – often scientific knowledge, but especially journalistic knowledge (also true, although in a sense somewhat different from scientific knowledge).

## **The problem of form – disinformation versus information function**

In this context, it is worth noting that another defining feature of fake news (this time in a narrower sense) is considered to be the imitation of information (news) as a journalistic (media) genre. We can speak of fake news as a falsification of information,

---

<sup>34</sup> Cf. K. Stasiuk-Krajewska, *Media and journalism. Discourse structures and hegemony*, Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, Warsaw 2019.

just as we can speak of a falsification of a work of art<sup>35</sup>. The classic definition puts things as follows: “fake news is fabricated information that mimics the informational content of the media in its form, but not in its organizational process or intent”<sup>36</sup>. And although many sources refer in this context to the three characteristics of fake news in the narrower sense (falsity, intention and form), let us note that on the grounds of media genre theory, intention and form can in principle be considered identical or very closely coupled. If we define genre as a phenomenon of a discursive nature, it must be assumed that it is “a shared space of sense-making between sender and receiver, and the effectiveness of this interaction is determined by the repertoire of textual strategies that facilitate the interpretation of messages and orientation in the world”<sup>37</sup>. Understood in this way, genre functions as a horizon – an expectation for the recipient and a realization opportunity for the author. What is more, as Danuta Kępa-Figura writes, “the success of the sender formulating a given utterance should be said not only at the moment when it evokes an appropriate perlocutionary effect [i.e. precisely when the recipient recognizes the text as informative and feels informed], but also when the condition of the recipient’s recognition and acceptance of the communicative intention realized through a given text is fulfilled”<sup>38</sup>. Given the cited definitions of genre as a kind of contract regulating the relationship between the sender and the receiver, it should be noted that information as a media genre involves a specific intention (in this case to inform about reality), which in turn is regulated by the mentioned contract between the sender and the receiver (who assumes the veracity of the message). Thus, “information is rather a function of the text published through the media, envisaged for it by the author. Those genres in which it is dominant are precisely what we call informative”<sup>39</sup>.

This is a very important assumption – as it makes it possible to finally justify replacing the category of fake news in the general sense with the category of disinformation and to remodel the definition of the phenomenon in a significant way. For disinformation would here be a discursive practice which, among other things, through its structure, but also through media circulation, imitates the discursive practices of journalism, appealing to the truth constitutive for journalism (in this case – apparent truth) and imitating the relationship (of telling the truth about the world, revealing the hidden, explaining the world) that journalists enter into with their audiences, which relations result from the pragmatic definition of the genre with the dominant informative function. Thus, functionally, disinformation potentially replaces journalism, in a way ragging it from the discursive fields that traditionally belong to it.

<sup>35</sup> J.P. Baptista, João, A. Gradim, *Who Believes in Fake News? Identification of Political (A) Symmetries*, Social Sciences 2022, Vol. 11(460), p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> D.M. Lazer, M.A. Baum, Y. Benkler, A.J. Berinsky, K.M. Greenhill, F. Menczer, F., et al, *The science of fake news*, ‘Science’ 2018, vol. 359, pp. 1094-1096.

<sup>37</sup> T. Piekot, *Dyskurs polskich wiadomości prasowych*, Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych „Universitas”, Kraków 2006, p. 39.

<sup>38</sup> D. Kępa-Figura, *Pragmatic aspects of...*, p. 100.

<sup>39</sup> Z. Bauer, *Gatunki dziennikarskie...*, pp. 150-151.

Therefore – in this perspective – disinformation is not only texts that imitate information (fake news in the narrower sense), but all those media messages that – according to the intention and/or conviction – of the author (also in the institutional sense) and the expectation of the recipient perform the functions traditionally attributed to journalism, and thus – refer (apparently) to values such as truth or rationality, constituting the relationship between the sender and the recipient in the field of journalism (institutional media). Such an approach allows the category of disinformation to be broadened to include textual productions that are formally close to, for example, documentary reports, reports or rational (credible) opinions. At the same time, it makes it possible to definitively exclude from its scope what is often included in the so-called broad definition of fake news: satire, jokes, advertising, gossip, etc., as these are not discursive practices. – for these are not discursive practices embedded within the frame of communication adequate to disinformation (in the discourse of quasi-journalism).

Such an approach also opens up another perspective for analyzing the problem of sender intent. In the classic, somewhat colloquial understanding (which is largely correct), the sender's intentions, motivated by geopolitical reasons (as in the case of Russia or China), political reasons (as in the case of disinformation spread not necessarily by states, but still by political actors) or economic reasons (as in the context of anti-vaccine narratives), are associated with deliberately misleading the recipient. In the proposed view, the intention of the sender of disinformation messages would not be to mislead about the truth of the world, but rather to build a false communication relationship with the recipient – false because it refers to discursive and professional practices (e.g. checking information in multiple sources) that are not actually realized, and values whose realization is only apparent (such as truth, responsibility or the good of the recipient). Disinformation messages present themselves as truthful, credible, socially responsible (working for the social good) and realizing the recipient's right to information. This is, let us note, the same set of values that constitute the semantic chain of journalism. "Appearance" of these values is not necessarily due to the intention of the sender (although this is of course possible), but rather to the fact that the texts produced do not realize the basic requirements of the professional discursive practices of journalism, but at the same time present themselves to the audience as such practices.

## **Disinformation and the crisis of modernism. Summary**

It is no coincidence that the proliferation of disinformation is sometimes associated in an ontological sense with a crisis of truth (the famous term post-truth, which appears in this context), and in a social sense with a total and all-encompassing crisis of modernity. Most often, it is a crisis of democracy and journalism. Such a juxtaposition is not surprising. Journalism, as has already been mentioned, is one of the most important discursive practices that legitimize modernism<sup>40</sup>, thus legitimizing the political idea

---

<sup>40</sup> K. Stasiuk-Krajewska, *Media and journalism ...*

of democracy (based, after all, on the idea of freedom of speech and an equal right to information). The unsettling of the discourse of journalism (referred to by observers as a crisis of journalism) is therefore also the unsettling of the discourse of democracy (referred to – analogously – as a crisis of democracy). Fake news “as a concept and form of expression or articulation is the antithesis of democracy and a force that disrupts democracy”<sup>41</sup>.

“The effective decentralization of journalism as a key arbiter of truth and authority and the concomitant rise of fake news as an everyday communication practice are creating a new communicative framework through which media content flows,” write the authors of *Fake News in Digital Cultures*. And further: ‘fake news [...] emerges as the far end of a continuum of news and content production practices that have increasingly and problematically introduced bias, exclusion and distortion, taken ultimately to extremes’<sup>42</sup>.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that disinformation (referred to as fake news in the passages quoted above) should not be regarded as a marginal, crisis and declining form of journalism. It is also clear that the practice of journalism has never in fact fully realized (because it could not) the discursive postulates of “ideal journalism”, and both its history (in the form of, for example, the *yellow press*) and the present day (to cite, for example, the tabloids, but also identity journalism strongly present in the so-called serious media) offer many examples – more or less intentional and better or worse justified – of a far-reaching departure from the model constituted by the hegemonic (dominant) discourse.

Rather, what is at stake is a situation in which disinformation ascribes to itself the functions and discursive characteristics of journalism, or, more precisely, these functions are ascribed to it by the recipients of disinformation messages in the interpretative practices they perform (effective disinformation is read, shared, passed on, commented on, etc. as the TRUTH about the world). This discursive appropriation of information as a genre (or information function of the media) is probably possible, among other things, because of a peculiar rupture in the characterization of the discursive practice that is information (i.e. news). For, on the one hand, information is characterized by a set of previously repeatedly indicated functions resulting directly from the discursive positioning of journalism (it should therefore be exclusively based on facts, reliable, true, in terms of style – clear and precise), but on the other hand, the category of *news values* often appears in this context, including, among others, such values as: consonance (i.e. stereotypicality, typicality), elitism (high status or fame), impact (significant consequences), negativity (and possibly positivity), personalization (individual, human face), proximity (geographical or cultural), high intensity, appropriate timing (novelty) and surprise<sup>43</sup>.

---

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>42</sup> R. Cover, A. Haw, J.D. Thompson, *Fake News in Digital Cultures...* p. 25 and 21-22.

<sup>43</sup> M. Bednarek, H. Caple, *The Discourse of News Values. How News Organisations Create Newsworthiness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

Let us note – a significant part of the values located in the field of *news values* is completely incompatible with disinformation practices, and one can even risk the thesis that these practices exploit them in a strongly developed and, we can assume, effective way. Disinformation thus correlates to a certain extent with what is used to describe the lowering of journalistic standards, but it is definitely not identical with this phenomenon. Interestingly – the discourse and functions of ‘real journalism’ seem to be entering the field of a new media profession – fact-checking. The analysis of documents produced within this symbolic community and conversations with its representatives<sup>44</sup> clearly indicate that there are points of inflection (essential semantics) of discourse that coincide with those that could be (were?) observed in the discourse of journalism understood as a practice that gives meaning and credibility to the discursive field of modernism (based on the semantics of truth as science-tested and journalism-provided knowledge about the world, democracy as a rational system of governance or equality, among other things, in access to information). In fact-checking, therefore, we find the factual pact in its full form, but also demands for independence, objectivity and social responsibility.

## Bibliography

- Ardèvol-Abreu A., *Influence of Fake News Exposure on Perceived Media Bias: The Moderating Role of Party Identity*, ‘International Journal of Communication’ 2022 [S.l.], Vol. 16, p. 22.
- Baptista J.P., Gradim A., *Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review*, *Social Science & Medicine* 2020, No. 9, p. 185.
- Baptista J.P., Gradim A., *Who Believes in Fake News? Identification of Political (A)Symmetries*, *Social Sciences* 2022, No. 11, p. 460.
- Bauer Z., *Gatunki dziennikarskie* [in:] *Dziennikarstwo i świat mediów*, red. Z. Bauer, E. Chudziński, Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych „Universitas”, Kraków 2008.
- Bednarek M., Caple H., *The Discourse of News Values. How News Organisations Create Newsworthiness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.
- Bennett W.L., Livingston S., *A Brief History of the Disinformation Age: Information Wars and the Decline of Institutional Authority* [in:] *The Disinformation Age*, eds W.L. Bennett, S. Livingston, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020, pp. 3-40.
- Carillo K., Scornavacca E., Za S., *The role of media dependency in predicting continuance intention to use ubiquitous media systems*, “Information & Management”, 2017, Vol. 54, No. 3, pp. 317-335.
- Cegięła A., *Mowa nienawiści (Hate speech)*, ‘Poradnik językowy’ 2020, no. 44, pp. 60-70.
- Chong D., Druckman J. N., *A theory of framing and opinion formation in competitive elite environments*, *Journal of Communication* 2007, Vol. 57(1), pp. 99-118.
- Chrudzinski A., *John R. Searle’s Theory of Intentionality and Mind*, *Philosophical Review – New Series* 1995, z. 4.
- Coady D., *The Fake News about Fake News* [in:] *The Epistemology of Fake News*, ed. S. Bernecker, M. K. Flowerree, T. Grundman, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Activities undertaken by me as part of an as yet unfinished research project on the self-reporting of fact-checkers as a professional community.

- Cortada J.W., Aspray W., *Fake News Nation. The Long History of Misinformation and Lies in America*, Rowman & Littlefield, New York 2019.
- Cover R., Haw A., Thompson J.D., *Fake News in Digital Cultures. Technology, Populism and Digital Misinformation*, Emerald Publishing, Bingley 2022.
- Cymanow-Sosin K., *Hate speech – an ethical framework for communication and subjective responsibility towards fighting words*, "Media Studies" 2018, no. 3, pp. 117-126.
- Detecting Fake News on Social Media*, eds K. Shu, H. Liu, Morgan & Claypool Publishers, Kentfield 2019.
- Disinformation through the eyes of Poles 2022*, Digital Poland Foundation, <https://digitalpoland.org/publikacje/pobierz?id=4f2e2116-82a6-47b5-a984-801b5e704b56> (accessed 21.05.2023).
- Disinformation around war: global narratives and trends*, Demagogue, 19.03.2022, [https://demagog.org.pl/analizy\\_i\\_raporty/dezinformacja-wokol-wojny-w-ukrainie-swiatowe-narracje-i-trendy/](https://demagog.org.pl/analizy_i_raporty/dezinformacja-wokol-wojny-w-ukrainie-swiatowe-narracje-i-trendy/) (accessed 21.05.2023).
- Digital News Report 2022*, Reuters Institute, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022> (accessed 21.05.2023).
- Guo L., Vargo C., 'Fake News' and Emerging Online Media Ecosystem: An Integrated Inter-media Agenda-Setting Analysis of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, in *Communication Research* 2020, no. 47(2), 178-200.
- Kamboj S., *Applying uses and gratifications theory to understand customer participation in social media brand communities: Perspective of media technology*, 'Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics' 2020, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 205-231.
- Kępa-Figura D., *Pragmatic aspects of genre (on the example of journalistic information) [in:] Contemporary media. Genres in the media. Prace dedykowane Profesor Maria Wojtak*, vol. 1: *Theoretical issues. Gatunki w mediach drukowanych*, ed. I. Hofman, D. Kępa-Figura, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2017.
- Khan A., Brohman K., Addas S., *The anatomy of 'fake news': Studying false messages as digital objects*, *Journal of Information Technology* 2022, Vol. 37, pp. 122-143.
- Knobloch-Westerwick S., *The Selective Exposure Self- and Affect-Management (SESAM) Model: Applications in the Realms of Race, Politics, and Health*, in *Communication Research* 2015, no. 42(7), 959-985.
- Knobloch-Westerwick S., Hastall M.R., *Please Your Self: Social Identity Effects on Selective Exposure to News About in- and Out-Groups*, *Journal of Communication* 2010, Vol. 60, Vol. 3, September 2010, pp. 515-535.
- Knobloch-Westerwick S., Sharma N., Hansen D.L., Alter S., *Impact of Popularity Indications on Readers' Selective Exposure to Online News*, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 2005, no. 49(3), pp. 296-313.
- Knobloch S., Zillmann D., *Mood Management via the Digital Jukebox*, *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 52, No. 2, June 2002, pp. 351-366.
- Lazer M.P., Baum M.A., Benkler Y., Berinsky A.J., Greenhill K.M., Menczer, F., et al, *The science of fake news*, 'Science' 2018, no. 359, pp. 1094-1096.
- Molina M.D., Sundar S.S., Le T., Lee D., "Fake news' is not simply false information: a conceptual explication and taxonomy of online content," *The American Behavioral Scientist* (Beverly Hills). 2021, Vol. 65(2), pp. 180-212.
- Morgan M., Shanahan J., *The State of Cultivation*, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 2010, Vol. 54(2), pp. 337-355.



- O'Shaughnessy N., *From Disinformation to Fake News: Forward into the Past* [in:] *The Sage Handbook of Propaganda*, eds P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy, N. Sno, Sage, London 2020, pp. 58-59.
- Piekot T., *Dyskurs polskich wiadomości prasowych*, Universitas, Kraków 2006.
- First wave of COVID-19 intensified media discussion of post-truth, Institute for Media Monitoring, 9.03.2021, <https://www.imm.com.pl/pierwsza-fala-covid-19-nasilila-medialna-dyskusje-o-postprawdzie/> (accessed 21.05.2023).
- Sampat B., Raj S., *Fake or real news? Understanding the gratifications and personality traits of individuals sharing fake news on social media platforms*, 'Aslib Journal of Information Management' 2022.
- Sauer N., *'Fake news' declared word of the year 2017*, Politico, 2.11.2017, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/fake-news-ogloszone-slowem-roku-2017/ztm0l8b> (accessed 21.05.2023).
- Scheufele D.A., *Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing Revisited: Another Look at Cognitive Effects of Political Communication*, 'Mass Communication & Society' 2000, no. 3, pp. 297-316.
- Stasiuk-Krajewska K., *Media i dziennikarstwo. Struktury dyskursu i hegemonia*, Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, Warsaw 2019.
- Sutherland A.D., Dykstra-DeVette T.A., *Constructing Identification and Division through Fake News Reports of Refugees*, 'Language, Discours & Society' 2018, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 19-31.
- Tandoc E.C., Lim Z.W., Ling R., *Defining 'Fake News': A typology of scholarly definitions*, Digital Journalism 2018, Vol. 6(2), pp. 137-153.
- The Disinformation Age. Politics, Technology over Disruptive Communication in the United States*, eds W.L. Bennet, S. Livingston, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021.
- The Psychology of Fake News. Accepting, Sharing and Correcting Misinfomration*, ed. R. Greifender, M. Jaffe, E. Newman, N. Schwarz, New York, Taylor & Francis 2021.
- Vosoughi S., Roy D., Aral S., *The spread of true and false news online*, Science 2018, Vol. 359, No. 6380, pp. 1146-1151.
- Wardle C., Derakhshan H., *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*, ref. 162317GBR, 27 September. Council of Europe, 2017, <https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-forresearch-and-policy-making.html> (accessed 12.01.2023).