

# THE GLOBAL PHENOMENON OF FAKE NEWS: ONLINE DISINFORMATION DURING CRISIS

**Urusova N. A.**

Senior Lecturer at the HSE University  
(St. Petersburg, Russia)  
[urusova308@gmail.com](mailto:urusova308@gmail.com)

## Abstract:

The article discusses the proliferation of fake news as a pressing global concern, especially during times of crisis, and explores the concept of epistemic vigilance, a cognitive mechanism aimed at assessing the validity and reliability of information, and its role in navigating the complexities of fact and fiction in the digital age. Online disinformation poses significant challenges to individuals and society, necessitating robust interventions to combat its impact. These could involve empowering individuals with fact-checking tools and internet platform-based measures. However, while these interventions show potential, evaluating the long-term effectiveness of such efforts in harnessing dissemination of fakes and their impact on information assessment remains an area of ongoing research.

**Keywords:** disinformation, fake news, post-truth, epistemic vigilance, fact-checking, interventions

## Introduction

The advancement of the internet and the increasing popularity of social media networks have modified the information ecosystem. It has become incredibly more effortless for a person to not only get access to news stories but also respond, interact and communicate with others. The interactive nature of consciousness and communication has certain side effects, such as producing so-called “unfair (unethical) communication”: disinformation, fake news, post-truth, conspiracy theories, and pranking. The volume of this kind of communication has become so critical that during the world pandemic of COVID-19 the worldwide phenomenon of mis- / dis-information (mis/disinformation) led to the coinage of a new term ‘infodemic’ (Andersen, Goboy, 2020) with the meaning that while one contaminates the body, the other contaminates ideas.

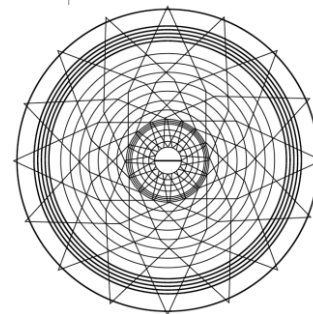
The UNICEF report points out that the rapid proliferation of mis/disinformation online has emerged as a critical public concern in the 21st century, impacting both online users and offline communities alike. These digital information disorders can be disseminated through various channels, including individuals, bots, and coordinated groups like troll

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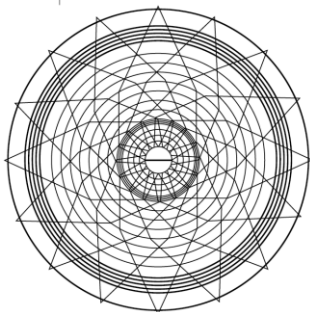
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factories, with motives ranging from intentional deception and harm to gaining political influence, financial gain or the inadvertent sharing of information seeking approval and popularity (Howard et al., 2021, p. 4). Misinformation, which involves false or misleading information, and disinformation, which entails false information deliberately spread to deceive people, are closely related to fake news.

The phenomenon of ‘fake news’ is set into a more general scientific multi-disciplinary discussion of what fact and fiction are. The search for the criteria of fiction that would allow defining a particular narrative (in our case, a news story) as fictional or factual led to the appearance of a separate scientific discipline – the theory of fiction, which stemmed from narratology in the 1980s. The pioneers of the narratological approach to fiction (E. Auerbach, K. Hamburger, D. Kohn) believed that fictionality is determined by the internal parameters of the text while others, in particular John Searle (1979), insisted that fiction is not marked only by linguistic textual means. Jean-Marie Schaeffer (1999), a proponent of the pragmatic approach, took the problem of fiction out of the verbal sphere into the virtual space, linking it with the concept of “games”. According to the French philosopher, fiction is "complicit gaming deception (feintise ludique partagée)" (p. 146). The other French researcher F. Lavocat (2016), combining semantic, ontological and pragmatic approaches to defining fiction, suggests that we could interpret it as “a cultural, most often non-referential artefact, which at the same time contains elements referring to the real world” (p. 4). Although in the modern theory of fiction, fiction means everything that belongs to the domain of the imaginary, the idea expressed by the French researcher that any fiction is based on some elements of the real world is worth considering. It could serve as one of the explanations why fakes look so true to life.

Our time is often referred to as the “post-truth era” (Keyes, 2004), where the concept of “truth” has undergone significant deviations, with facts becoming relative and emotional factors outweighing objective information. V. M. Khrul’ (2022) highlights the attribute ‘relativity’ of this post-truth phenomenon and expresses a deep concern about its public and scientific legitimization: if post-truth denotes a new information reality, where the truth is relative and does not matter, it means “capitulation to lies” and leads to a distortion of the world picture (p. 16). People increasingly rely on mass media to verify facts and opinions, and, as a consequence, the reliability of information becomes uncertain (d’Ancona, 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Tulupov, 2020). Belief no longer has to follow fact. Many people believe against the evidence. Many believe against the evidence that man-made climate change is not real; many believe that organic food is better for your health – the list is endless. Post-truthfulness has become a characteristic feature within political, media, and communication cultures, with a specific mode of argumentation where emotions often supersede sound reasoning. This phenomenon is marked by discourse practices that blur



the distinction between honesty and dishonesty (Bermúdez, 2018). All of these factors give rise to the dissemination of fakes. Fake news, a prevalent manifestation of misinformation, spreads rapidly due to authors' adept use of emotional manipulation techniques to captivate attention, establish credibility, and encourage a desire to share information (Ershov, 2018; Zelinskiy, 2018). Fake news goes viral on social networks every day, and even after fake news stories are debunked, people hold on to the opinions they have formed on fake grounds.

Consequently, the issues of the post-truth phenomenon, mis-/ dis-information, media manipulations, propaganda, and fake news have garnered significant attention in scientific research, and global concern over this issue persists. However, there still exist substantial knowledge gaps concerning the vulnerabilities of individuals, institutions, and society at large to manipulations orchestrated by malicious actors. The ascendancy of fake news in the digital landscape has brought to light the erosion of traditional institutional safeguards against online misinformation, necessitating the development of a new system of protection.

So, the following chapters will proceed to a more detailed definition of fake news, highlighting social and cognitive mechanisms involved, and then to a discussion of some ideas about this new system of interventions a society could call for.

### What Is Fake News?

Fake news can be defined in different ways, but one common understanding is that it involves completely, or partially false information intentionally presented as genuine news to mislead the audience (Kalsnes, 2018). Another perspective describes fake news as fabricated information that imitates the visual appearance and structure of traditional news media content but lacks the organisational processes and intent associated with credible journalism. When assessing the prevalence of fake news, some researchers recommend to direct attention towards the original sources, specifically the publishers, rather than individual stories. This approach acknowledges that the intent and processes employed by publishers are the defining elements of fake news (Lazer et al., 2018). In contrast to legitimate news outlets, fake-news sources lack the rigorous editorial norms and verification processes that ensure the accuracy and credibility of information before dissemination (Lazer et al., 2018). What makes fake news particularly harmful is its parasitic nature, as it takes advantage of the credibility of standard news outlets while simultaneously undermining their trustworthiness.

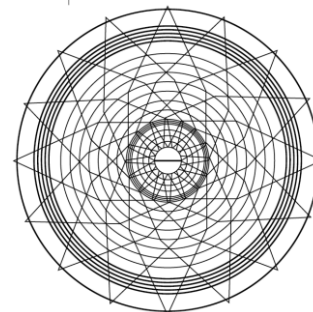
Though fake news primarily attracted attention in political contexts, it has extended its influence on information published on various other topics, including the personal life of celebrities, vaccination and health issues, nutrition, and finances and stock values.

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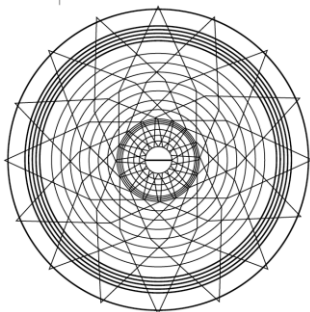


A significant surge of fake news and other unreliable information is usually observed during times of crises and any major social upheavals, with the recent example of the world pandemic of COVID-19. S. Shomova (2023) reported three types of fake news stories on Russian social networks: deterrent fakes, conspiracy fakes, and expert fakes. It is important to note that due to the unique cultural contexts and technological landscapes of various nations, the types of fake news related to COVID-19 can vary significantly (Sadykov, Akhmetianova, 2020). For example, in Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Ukraine, there was a popular message circulating on social networks and messengers that a person can get infected with coronavirus through bananas or other fruits. It went like this: “At Xinhua Hospital, 23 people who were infected with coronavirus n7n9 died last night. The oldest was 35 years old, the youngest was a year old, and the doctors who contacted them are in quarantine now. On the news program of our main channel, they strongly recommended not to eat bananas now, especially those brought from the south.”<sup>1</sup> As it was discussed above, this message clearly exploits emotions (fear, stress, concern about the loved ones) simultaneously referring to the official news outlet. It also dwells on some true facts, naming the real hospital located in Wuhan. Another example gives an illustration of how the level of technological development of the country modifies the content of fakes. In the US and Western Europe, where the adoption of new 5G networks was widespread, false theories linking the virus to the 5G technology emerged. These theories took advantage of the fear and uncertainty surrounding the pandemic and exploited the novelty and perceived potential health risks of the 5G technology. Conversely, a different version of the fake story appeared in Russia, connecting the coronavirus with AliExpress. In this case, the fake news propagated the notion that the virus could be transmitted through parcels from this popular Chinese online retail service, leveraging existing concerns about international trade and the potential of the virus spreading through imported goods. These examples demonstrate how fake news can adapt and take on different forms based on the technological landscape and awareness of the population.

In the modern context, people tend to view the internet as a more reliable source of information compared to traditional media, particularly television. This perception is influenced by the belief that television is primarily a form of entertainment and that it may have negative effects on mental well-being and even potentially manipulate mass consciousness. With a little flashback in history, we can see that the situation has turned upside down.

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<sup>1</sup> BBC Russian Service (2020, January 29) Banany, posylki i letuchie myshi. Samye populyarnye mify o koronavirusu. [Bananas, parcels and bats. The most popular myths about the coronavirus]. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-51282123> This media is Included in the register of foreign mass media agents.



### **The Historical Background**

The emergence of journalistic norms centred around objectivity and balance can be traced back to a reaction among journalists against the rampant use of propaganda during World War I, including their own involvement in disseminating it. Additionally, the rise of corporate public relations in the 1920s further fueled the adoption of these norms. Furthermore, throughout the 20th century, the dominance of print and broadcast technologies of information distribution led to the creation of local and national oligopolies, which also helped sustain these norms.

However, the advent of the internet has disrupted this status quo. It has significantly reduced the barriers to entry for new competitors in the media landscape, some of whom have chosen to reject traditional journalistic norms. Simultaneously, this technological shift has undermined the business models of established news sources that previously enjoyed high levels of credibility. As a result, overall trust in traditional mass media (print, radio, television) diminished. The situation was further intensified by the widespread presence of homogeneous social networks, which limited the openness to diverse viewpoints, magnified attitude polarisation, and heightened the probability of accepting news that aligns with existing ideologies while simultaneously promoting resistance to new information. This was paralleled by an upsurge in emotional polarisation, defined by an intense aversion towards the "opposing side." These trends have cultivated a context in which fake news can discover a scalable and receptive audience.

M. Azzimonti and M. Fernandes (2023) point out that the news stories distributed through social media are crafted with the intent to influence or manipulate users' opinions on specific topics, often aligning with particular objectives. Although the concept of propaganda is not novel, social media has revolutionised the speed and scalability of idea dissemination, making it easier for propaganda material to reach a broader audience. Compared to conventional methods of spreading propaganda, identifying fake news has become considerably challenging, presenting a formidable task for social media users, moderators, and governmental agencies seeking to control its dissemination.

Thus, the trust placed in mass media today stems from the contemporary perception of mass media as social media, which entails a two-sided process involving the transfer of information, communication, and feedback (Nenasheva, 2018). The fundamental distinction between modern "fake news" and old "newspaper ducks" can be attributed to their circulation methods: the ease of disseminating information through reposts and social media allows for fakes to spread widely and quickly.

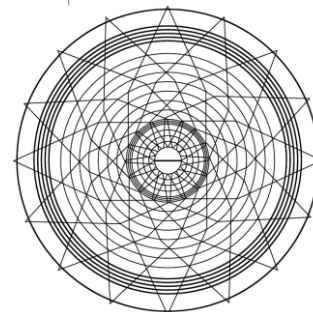
### **The Impact of Fake News**

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The frequency of fake news and its impact on individuals pose fundamental questions that lack comprehensive scientific answers.

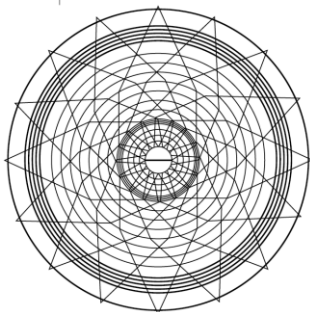
Research examining the spread of notable fake news stories has indicated that false information shared on Twitter tends to be retweeted by a significantly larger number of people and at a faster rate than true information, particularly in the realm of politics (Vosoughi et al., 2018). A Brazilian researcher studied the published fake news about the coronavirus in the Ministry of Health's program named "Health without fake news", and among 84 pieces on the coronavirus topic, 79 fake news pieces were found. So, only five publications (6%) were classified as true, demonstrating the alarming amount of fake news that is shared with the population. (de Matos, 2020).

The issue of fake news is further exacerbated by the response it receives. Through actions like liking, sharing, and searching for information, social bots (automated accounts impersonating humans) can significantly amplify the spread of fake news. According to D. M. J Lazer et al. (2018), between 9 and 15% of active Twitter accounts are estimated to be bots based on observable features such as sharing behaviour, number of connections, and linguistic characteristics. Additionally, it is believed that Facebook<sup>2</sup> may be infested with as many as 60 million bots. Bots are deployed to manipulate algorithms that determine potential content engagement, which, in turn, drive personalized news feeds, search results, and recommendations based on individual profiles developed through user tracking. Algorithms sometimes prioritise misleading, sensationalist, and conspiratorial content over factual information, playing a significant role in the spread of mis/disinformation (Howard et al., 2021). However, estimating the prevalence of bots and humans on a given platform is challenging due to the lack of representative sampling methods. Any assessment regarding the commonness of bots should be interpreted cautiously, as a large number of humanlike bots may remain undetected. At the same time, determining the number of individuals who encountered or shared such content does not necessarily reflect the number of people who read or were influenced by it. There is limited evaluation of the specific effects of fake news in these aspects.

Another important issue which remains unclear to researchers is the short- and long-term cognitive effects of fake news, that is the cognitive load of false or intentionally misleading information, disseminated to achieve an economic, political, or ideological goal. There is a dichotomy in today's information consumption landscape. Some researchers suggest that blind trust in information can lead to deception, while excessive distrust hinders the ability to discern among multiple sources that may appear unreliable (Sperber

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<sup>2</sup> The activity of the social media is recognized as extremist and prohibited on the territory of the Russian Federation, the data here and further are used for research purposes and are not aimed at approving extremist activities.



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et al., 2010). Consequently, individuals' capacity to think critically and identify fake news diminishes. The following factors contribute to the difficulty in identifying fake news:

1. Reluctance to abandon existing beliefs and attitudes that align with the narratives propagated by fake news.
2. Personal rigidity and coping mechanisms that maintain a familiar order and worldview.
3. Insufficient competence or awareness of how important fact-checking is.
4. The impact of "information warfare", which comprises the dissemination of fake news and mutual accusations regarding the production of deceptive content (Tkhostov et al., 2022).

The incoming information today imposes substantial requirements on the interpretative competencies of an individual. Direct public access to an exponential volume of content makes it challenging to distinguish accurate information from low-quality, fake, editorial, and satirical content. A person must be able to identify manipulative techniques, interpret the communicated content as valuable/invaluable, credible/incredible, and predict emotional, cognitive and behavioural consequences of this interpretation (Szegőfi, Heintz, 2022).

It is impossible to deny the existence of natural barriers to an adequate assessment of perceived information to be true and reliable. What are they? First, the critical volume of incoming information, which leads to information overload, plays its role in the inability to make an adequate assessment. Then, the audience does not always have the necessary competencies to form a judgment about the reliability of incoming data. Moreover, the target audience quite often does not have the necessary motivation to carry out such an assessment.

Another critical factor is different cognitive distortions (irrational beliefs) that manifest in two forms: 1) cognitive bias, which occurs when the brain deviates from logical thinking and falls into fallacies and often stems from common everyday epistemology; 2) general attitude shift towards knowledge, as the audience's trust to expert opinion has considerably reduced while the criteria for identifying truth have become variable (the post-truth phenomenon, which we've discussed earlier).

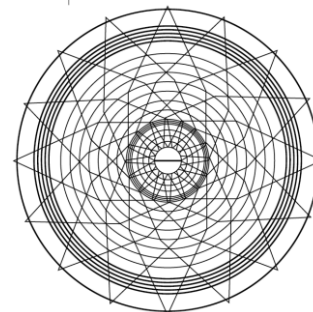
One more factor which impedes accurate perception and interpretation of information is the insufficiency of verbal and/or non-verbal data for instant and comprehensive assessment of the communicated content. It can be partially explained by the purely conventional and culturally-related connection between the linguistic sign (symbol) and the content. The verbal explication is often incomplete and expressed through understatements and omissions, hidden meanings and ambiguities, allusions and allegories. Certain formats of verbal representation (wordplay, irony, sarcasm, hinting, bluff,

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pranking) cause cognitive overload and thus interfere with the process of information verification.

Finally, last but not least group of factors is connected with the communicative setting. Here we could mention such unfavourable circumstances as the risk of deception and unethical communication when the communicator has the intention to induce false beliefs in their audience.

Engaging in communication with others presents significant benefits to individuals, but it also exposes them to the risk of being unintentionally or deliberately misinformed. This misinformation can potentially diminish, negate, or even reverse the advantages gained through communication. The nature of communication risks in unfair communication should be qualified not only from an ethical point of view but primarily from a cognitive one. It is known that human cognition is designed to solve complex interpretive problems to enable a human being to get out of difficult situations, and the instinct of self-preservation, the survival instinct as a combination of behavioural effects of interpretive processes, is an incentive to solve such problems (Klepikova, 2021). Any biological system is known to attempt to maintain a certain balance and remain viable, which allows us to assert that if the communicative system has developed mechanisms of deception, disinformation, or manipulation of various kinds, then it also has mechanisms for recognizing deception, disinformation, fake, and alike. Despite this inherent risk, the widespread prevalence of communication suggests that people possess the ability to assess and manage their trust reasonably, creating a mutually beneficial relationship between communicators and audiences (Sperber et al., 2010).

Thus, identifying fake news becomes a complex task that requires specific competencies with inconsistent methods of distinction between facts and fiction. As a result, the social cost of adequately identifying and verifying the authenticity of information is high, and the civilisational risks that society may encounter due to a failure in the work of the cognitive regulator of trust to information are pricey.

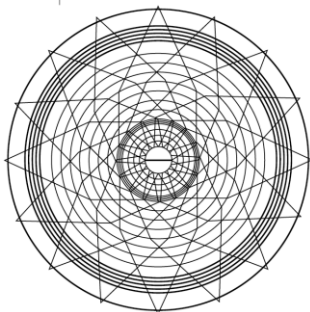
### **Possible Measures to Stem Fakes**

To address the flow and influence of fake news, two categories of interventions have been identified: (i) those focusing on empowering individuals to assess the fake news they encounter and (ii) structural changes intended to prevent individuals from exposure to fake news (Laser et al., 2018).

#### *1. Empowering individuals*

As suggested above, humans possess cognitive mechanisms for epistemic vigilance, which act as a cognitive-verbal tool for evaluating the validity and reliability of incoming information (Sperber et al., 2010). D. Sperber and his colleagues explain that when





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considering the acceptance or rejection of communicated information, two key factors come into play: the source of the information (who to believe) and the content of the information (what to believe). Judgments about the trustworthiness of the source of the information depend on the topic, audience, and context. Clearly, achieving such precise calibration of trust requires cognitive effort, and while individuals may be willing to invest this effort at times, they often resort to less demanding general impressions of competence, benevolence, and overall trustworthiness when identifying and verifying the authenticity of information. As for the content, research indicates that people have a preference for information that confirms their preexisting views (selective exposure), view information consistent with their beliefs as more persuasive than contradictory information (confirmation bias) and are inclined to accept information that aligns with their desires (desirability bias). Partisan and ideological beliefs held prior to fact-checking may hinder the acceptance of evidence refuting a specific fake news story (Laser et al., 2018; Tkhostov et al., 2022).

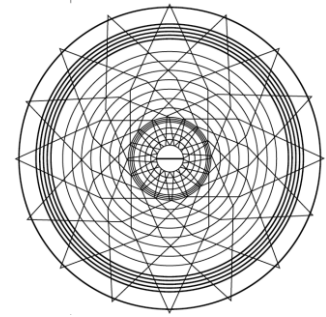
Empowering individuals with fact-checking techniques could enhance their ability to debunk fake news effectively. Fact-checking takes various forms, ranging from dedicated websites like Snopes, FactCheck, Lapsha.Media, or PolitiFact, which evaluate the accuracy of news claims, to credible news media outlets like the RIA Novosti, TASS or RBK, which conduct their assessments. Although fact-checking appears to be a sophisticated tool, the scientific evidence supporting its efficacy is still inconclusive. Its occasional ineffectiveness can be ascribed to the broader patterns, observable in collective cognition: individuals tend to accept information without questioning its credibility unless it directly contradicts their preexisting beliefs, or they have an incentive to scrutinize it. These psychological factors may undermine the impact of fact-checking efforts in dispelling fake news.

An alternative long-term approach aims to introduce various educational programmes, which develop an individual's digital literacy and ability to evaluate the quality of media information sources. However, the effectiveness of such endeavours in improving assessments of information credibility remains uncertain as well. A team of researchers published a teaching manual, rightfully emphasising the real challenge of being an independent and well-informed thinker in the digital world of the 21st century (Teaching..., 2021). The lack of Digital Media literacy worldwide has been identified as a critical factor contributing to the widespread acceptance of false information circulating online. Recent intergenerational studies conducted abroad and in Russia have given further evidence to these findings (Tkhostov et al., 2022; Trninic et al., 2022). The prevalence of mis/disinformation, particularly during the pandemic, has underscored the urgent need for an internet free of misleading information, and promoting education in the social media sphere could potentially offer a lasting solution in combating "fake news". Media literacy

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is believed to play a crucial role in fostering online safety, positivity, and respect, as this subject is designed to “evaluate ourselves and our communities, to activate critical thinking, intelligence, and cross-cultural awareness in the spirit of mutual respect and looking for common values and attitudes to unite people” (Fedorov, 2022, p. 42).

### *2. Structural changes: platform-based detection*

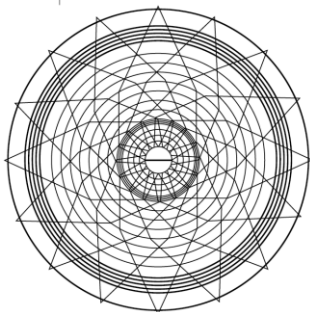
In addition to empowering individuals, structural changes are also essential in preventing exposure to fake news. These changes might involve redesigning internet platforms, which have become the leading facilitators and primary channels for spreading fake news. Setting up a website with the appearance of a professional news outlet is affordable and easily accessible. Additionally, content monetisation through online advertisements and social media dissemination has become straightforward. So, the internet not only serves as a platform for publishing fake news but also provides tools to promote its dissemination actively. Social media platforms, in particular, are often highlighted as key distribution channels of fake news sites (Laser et al., 2018).

The internet and social media platforms have the potential to aid in curbing the spread and impact of fake news. To achieve this, Google, Yandex, VKontakte, Telegram, and other platforms could provide consumers with signals of source quality, which can be integrated into the algorithmic content rankings. This measure would help users discern the reliability of information sources. Additionally, functions could be implemented to ensure the accuracy of currently trending content by excluding bot activity from influencing trending rankings. Furthermore, steps could be taken to limit the automated dissemination of news content by cyborgs that share news from specific sources automatically, sometimes without even reading the content, and bots.

The possible efficacy of platform-based policies raises questions about the appropriate approach to regulation, which can either involve government intervention or self-regulation by the platforms themselves. However, government regulation of news-related matters comes with inherent risks, including constitutional considerations and censorship concerns: “Structural interventions generally raise legitimate concerns about respecting private enterprise and human agency” (Laser et al., 2018, p. 1096). Striking the right balance between ensuring accuracy and combating fake news while preserving freedom of information and avoiding undue control remains a complex challenge.

### **Conclusion**

The pervasive spread of false information across diverse subjects presents a multifaceted challenge in today's digital era. The widespread dissemination of misinformation and disinformation through social media and internet platforms has significant implications for individuals, society, and democratic processes. While



empowering individuals with critical information skills and promoting media literacy are essential steps towards combating fake news, it is crucial to recognise the limitations of fact-checking and the impact of cognitive biases on information evaluation.

Addressing fake news requires a multi-pronged approach that involves collaboration between governments, technology platforms, media organisations, educators, and individuals. The platforms themselves play a crucial role in curbing the spread of fake news by prioritising quality information, implementing algorithms that minimise echo chambers and bot-driven content, and ensuring transparency in content ranking.

However, any intervention, whether through government regulation or self-regulation, must carefully balance the imperative to address misinformation with upholding freedom of expression and avoiding undue censorship. A rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of educational interventions and platform-based policies is necessary to refine strategies and identify the most effective measures in countering fake news.

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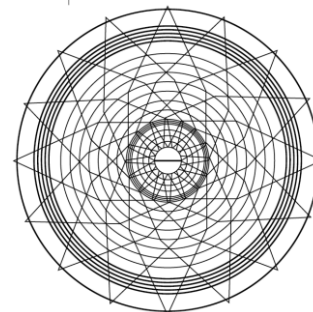
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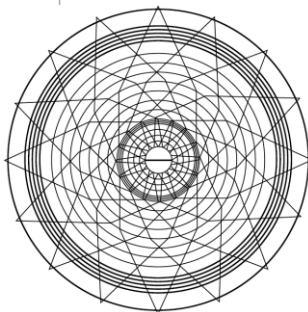
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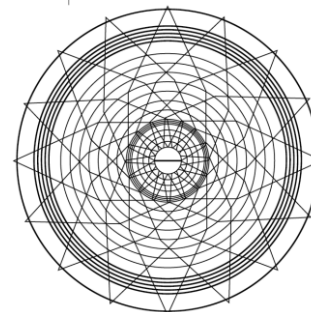
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# ГЛОБАЛЬНЫЙ ФЕНОМЕН ФЕЙКОВЫХ НОВОСТЕЙ: ОНЛАЙН-ДЕЗИНФОРМАЦИЯ В КРИЗИСНЫЕ ВРЕМЕНА

**Урусова Н. А.**

старший преподаватель

Национального исследовательского университета

«Высшая школа экономики»

(Санкт-Петербург, Россия)

[urusova308@gmail.com](mailto:urusova308@gmail.com)

## Аннотация:

Статья затрагивает проблематику широкого распространения фейковых новостей, актуальную в глобальном масштабе, в особенности в условиях кризиса. Анализируется идея эпистемической бдительности, когнитивного процесса, предназначенного для оценки истинности и надежности информации, и рассматривается его важность для формирования умения различать факты и вымысел в эпоху цифровых технологий. Фейковая информация создает значительные трудности как для индивидов, так и для общества, что обуславливает необходимость принятия действенных мер против ее влияния. Эти меры могут включать в себя обучение индивидов использованию различных техник проверки фактов и модификацию алгоритмов интернет-платформ. Однако, несмотря на большой потенциал, оценка долгосрочной эффективности описанных мер по противодействию дезинформации нуждается в дальнейшем исследовании.

**Ключевые слова:** дезинформация, фейки, пост-правда, эпистемическая бдительность, факт-чекинг