

”#FAKENEWS. THE NEW ARMS RACE”, A BOOK REVIEW

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Abstract

The present intervention represents a review of the most significant book about fake news phenomena published in Romania so far. Within the limits of a meta-analytical reading, this review presents the subject, the thesis, the issue and the ideology of the study. We emphasize the theoretical and practical merits of the book. Among the theoretical merits, we can mention: a) the realistic presentation of the geopolitical, socio-economic, demographic and technological changes which form the background of the fake news phenomenon; b) the clarifications of the fake news concept; c) the development of the 2.0 disinformation concept. Among practical merits, we can mention the author’s proposal for finding a solution to defend ourselves from fake news, 2.0 disinformation, digital disinformation.

Keywords: fake news, disinformation, communication, new arms race

1. Introduction

Professor Alina Bârgăoanu is the most important Romanian researcher in the domain of fake news, 2.0 disinformation. On the other hand, she is a member of High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation,

initiated by the European Commission. As a member of this group, she participated to the elaboration of the group report entitled “A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation. Report of the independent High level Group on fake news and online disinformation”(2018) (<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>). Thus, she is a reputed specialist, and, as a result, her book about fake news was anticipated and it represents a publishing event and a moment of theoretical research (“#Fakenews. Noua cursă a înarmării” - “#Fakenews. The new arms race”, Bucharest, Evrika, 2018).

2. Title, thesis, structure, issues

As it is mentioned (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, p. 194) the title of the volume was inspired by Mark Zuckerberg’s statement: “It is an ongoing arms race”.

The academic structure of the book respects the general principles of the scientific research. The Observation Area is represented by “the Romanian public space, online and offline, Facebook, online news sites, TVs” (2018, p. 234). The subject is clear and representative for the investigated field.

The subject of the study is that “the reflection regarding the fake news, in fact regarding the whole phenomenon of information disorder, must be placed in the context of the changes that are taking place all over the world nowadays” (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, p. 21). Additionally, we have to keep in mind that “the term of fake news imposed itself (...), but the realities which it refers to represents only the tip of the iceberg; the omnipresence of the digital technologies, the computerization, the algorithms, the capping of our lives and of the ecosystem which we live in represent the iceberg” (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, pp. 21-22).

The book is structured in five chapters (Chapter 1: The Technology is our Destiny”, “Chapter 2: We vs. They. Digital Metropolis and analogical peripheries”, “Chapter 3: The New Global Tyrants”, “Chapter 4: 2.0. Disinformation. New Generation Disinformation”, “Chapter 5: The People are not put in motion by other people”, “Chapter 6: The Digital Dining Room”) and

an argument ("Instead of Argument, a short autobiography. I haven't thought that I would ever post something"), an introduction ("Introduction: At Time Crossroads") and conclusions (The Intellectual Leadership- shapes the future").

In Introduction, the author demonstrates that "The period we live is tumultuous, paradoxical, revolutionary because the global order is changing"; the author describes the four ideas that guide the research: a) "the processes triggered by technology are irreversible", b) "the dominant technologies, the communication technologies included, must be valorized and used", c) "the communication technologies – digital platforms – have fundamentally changed the current informational ecosystem, emotionally and symbolically", d) "the phenomena gathered together superficially and in wrong order under the general term of fake news are new, being associated with the development and the spread of the digital platforms" (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, pp. 31-33). The author emphasizes that the major role of "the digital platforms (especially Facebook and Twitter)" was noticed during "two events that shook the European Union first, and then the whole world – the Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as president of the U.S.A." (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, p. 36).

As the academic research rules require, the methodological elements of the research are presented: "social psychology, mass media effects, public opinion", "the bias of confirmation", the analytical perspective (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, pp. 35-36).

Then, the author speaks about the four types of today's world's changes: in introduction and in the first chapter, the geopolitical changes are discussed, in the second chapter the demographic and socio-economic changes are analysed, and in the fourth, fifth and sixth chapters the technological changes are discussed.

The changes represent a part of the unseen iceberg that let the fake news on the surface. Beyond this metaphor, the pertinent observation that the term "fake news" appeared in the worldwide public space since 2016", Donald Trump being the one that "introduced this term in the global political discussions" (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, p. 134) makes us understand that the major merits of this

book are on the top part of the iceberg, the one that can be seen. There are four major merits of this book in direct connection with its title: a) its contribution to the clarification of the “fake news”; b) the development of the 2.0 disinformation; c) the discussion about the fake news incidence in Romania and d) the suggestions regarding the protection against fake news. Without going into further details, we emphasize that, for example, the author explains “why fake does not mean false” (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, p. 137) and she searches for the identification of the “50 shades of fake” (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, p. 155). The term of 2.0 disinformation was proposed previously: “In order to reflect what is new about the contemporary communication, information and persuasion ecosystem, we propose the term disinformation 2.0” (Bârgăoanu & Radu, 2018a, p. 26; Bârgăoanu, 2018b); “The leap from 1.0 disinformation to 2.0 disinformation was made as a result to the appearance and the development of social networks/platforms, of the possibilities offered by technologies” (Bârgăoanu, 2018a). The term is now clarified: 2.0 disinformation is the match between “the old generation disinformation (...) and the technological factor” (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, p. 133). Moreover, after explaining it, the term seems to the author “with a vague shade of fake”: “I think we have to deal with a digital, algorithmic content, created, distributed and amplified by the meta-data. But, in order to keep this discussion clear, I will stick with the term “2.0 disinformation” (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, p. 133).

On the other hand, the author states that “Romania has fake news for all of us” (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, p. 234). The following solution is proposed: “The defense against fake news, against 2.0 disinformation will firstly come from a new solidarity, articulated less around some hyper-emotions and more around some hyper-ideas” (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, p. 238).

Apart from a well-delimited field of facts, a clear subject and a cohesive system of ideas, the present book uses a vast up-dated bibliography whose books, articles and the Internet sources being analysed and interpreted critically, some of being from 2017 and 2018.

3. Conclusions

The author evaluates her book as “atypical, non-academic” and estimates that some readers will consider it “too journalistic” (Bârgăoanu, 2018c, p. 233). The book is very well structured; the arguments are coherent and rigorous, deeply methodologically argued and proving a good understanding of the basic concepts and of the most advanced and up-dated theories regarding the investigated field; the presentation is nice, fresh, rapid, having a benefic journalistic style. The book is presently the most serious and valuable book about fake news and on-line disinformation.

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