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Opinions of Internet users on fake news (research report)

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to present the results of a survey conducted in March and April 2022 on a sample of 110 internet users concerning the attitude of internet users towards fake news. Fake news is a major issue in contemporary mass media, having a substantial impact on the opinions and attitudes of the audience and, consequently, on their behaviour. One of the examples is the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw the mass media flooded with an overabundance of news (both real and fake) which made it difficult for people to find reliable sources of information. World Health Organisation (WHO) experts qualified that phenomenon as an infodemic (WHO, 2020, p. 2). An infodemic proved a substrate for diverse conspiracy theories that undermined the authority of scientists and trust in medical services and public health institutions, severely hampering the fight against the pandemic, as people were reluctant to comply with the recommended measures to protect their health (Oleksy et al., 2021a, pp. 1–7; Oleksy et al., 2021b, pp. 1–9)¹. In consequence, anti-vaccine movements based

¹ According to conspiracy theories, the coronavirus does not exist, being an invention of the pharmaceutical companies or a new biological weapon.

on false and anti-scientific information emerged, opposing vaccinations, which, as they maintained, weakened the body and constituted a violation of human rights (Wronski, 2021, p. 13). Adherents of such movements organised marches against the introduced restrictions in European capitals (Warsaw, Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris, and Brussels).

Since the start of the armed aggression in Ukraine, disinformation campaigns have intensified as part of the so-called “information war” waged by Russia against NATO countries. According to the Institute for Internet and Social Media Studies (IBIMS), more than 120,000 disinformation attempts relating to the war in Ukraine and the armed aggression of Russia were recorded in Polish social media as of 2 March 2022. Compared to 1 February 2022, the number of incidents increased by 20,000%. Facebook is the main channel of disinformation, with 69% of incidents, followed by Twitter with 24% of such occurrences. According to IBIMS, that period also witnessed a drastic radicalisation of anti-refugee groups which operate in the news feeds of vaccination skeptics (including the opponents of COVID-19 vaccinations). The essential goal of those activities is to sow chaos and foster the notion of an internal threat within Poland (Snoch, 2022).

Poland is a country saturated with false information. A report entitled *Dezinformacja oczami Polaków [Disinformation in Polish Eyes]*, developed by the Digital Poland Foundation on the basis of representative surveys², shows that 8 out of 10 adult Poles have experienced disinformation, while young people, who trust social media and cannot discern between truth and falsehood on their own, are most susceptible to fake news. The same research shows that three-quarters of Poles cite deliberate action as the main source of false information; at the same time, a fairly large group of respondents believe such information. Furthermore, according to the authors of the report, fake news has, on average, a 70% higher chance of being passed on, propagating up to six times faster than true news (Digital Poland, 2022). The multiplicity of information and the speed at which it reaches the public often prevents one from critically selecting all viewed content on an ongoing basis. Awareness of fake news is, therefore, crucial to be able to filter it effectively and protect oneself from it. Fake news is quite often exploited by politicians with a view to discrediting an opponent. At the same time, fake news is proof of the tremendous social influence of information and the ease with which the masses can be manipulated.

Fake news: the essence of the phenomenon

Although fake news in the mediatic space is not a novel phenomenon (Podlecki, 2017, p. 125), it has become a popular issue in public discourse in recent years, becoming a subject of reflection concerning the condition of the

² The research was conducted in October 2021 by GFK Polonia using an online method (CAWI), on a representative sample of 1,000 Poles aged 18–64.

contemporary mass media. The English term fake news may be rendered in Polish as *falszywe informacje* [false information] or *podrobione wiadomości* [fake news], which, according to Klaudia Rosińska (2021, pp. 20–21), is a more accurate translation as in Polish information is connoted with truth. The concept of fake news does not have a conclusive definition, and the term is analysed using narrower and broader approaches. The narrow approach most often relies on two aspects: the falsehood of the content in question and the intention, i.e. the purpose of putting false information into circulation, usually in order to achieve certain gains (Rosińska, 2021, pp. 25–32). As an example of a narrow definition, one could quote Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow (2017, p. 213), who define fake news as intentionally false news articles that mislead their readers but may be verified. The broad view of fake news also takes into account other false or misleading content (such as satire or journalistic errors), which means that fake news does not have to be created deliberately but may become so only when particular content is repeatedly reproduced, as a result of which the original context is lost. However, the transmission of false news remains the common denominator.

Due to the divergent definitions of the term, the definition adopted here was formulated by Rosińska, who combines various aspects of the concept and approaches it in a broad sense. Thus, fake news is construed as follows:

untrue mediatic communications presented in the media as news, but which do not constitute actual information. They may either be intentionally created by the authors or become fake news in the process of dissemination through social media beyond the control of the original author. Fake news can also vary in the degree of untruthfulness. This includes news that is thoroughly fabricated, partly fabricated or news that is based on facts, but its arrangement, and thus the message, is false. The purpose of creating fake news may vary as well. Fake news can be created for financial motives, political motives, to focus or distract attention and for ludic purposes (Rosińska, 2021, pp. 31–32).

The concept of fake news has a long history³. Analyses of Google searches indicate that prior to 2016, the term “fake news” was used to find satirical news releases through *The Onion*, a printed magazine, and *The Daily Show*, a television show. In late 2016, the use of the term shifted to searches relating to the US presidential election, Donald Trump, Twitter and CNN (Cunha et al., 2018, after Greifeneder et al., 2021, p. 3). Similar conclusions were advanced by Edson C. Tandoc, Zheng Wei Lim and Richard Ling (2018, p. 137), who analysed 34 scientific publications that featured the term “fake news” between 2003 and 2017. The authors observed that it served to describe a wide variety of phenomena, such as news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising and propaganda. Later on, “fake news” would be employed by politicians worldwide to refer to media information that showed them in an unfavourable light. It is also worth noting that the notion of fake news and its visual derivatives

³ In the paper, the English phrase “fake news” is used interchangeably with its Polish translation, i.e. “fałszywe wiadomości” (lit. “false news”).

(e.g. the red “FAKE” stamp) are more readily utilised online by all kinds of organisations and figures in the media/political domain to undermine the communications of the opposing news outlets (Haigh et al., 2017, p. 23). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the sign was used to alert internet users to false information disseminated online (e.g. regarding coronavirus vaccines), which had been verified by scientists based on reliable scientific findings.

According to the position formulated by the Council of Europe, the public debate on fake news should distinguish between the following categories of information: misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. Disinformation denotes false information created with the intention of causing harm to a person, social group, organisation or state, whereas misinformation is simply untrue but does not aim to cause harm to anyone. Since the latter intention is often difficult to ascertain, the term “misinformation” is also generally categorised as false information. Naturally, harm may also ensue as a result of propagating information which is factually correct but involves negative consequences (e.g. disclosure of someone’s private information), which qualifies as malinformation (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017, p. 20). As regards their form, fake news is indeed diverse. Most often, it involves articles that deceptively resemble their true equivalents, but they can also have the form of reworked visual material (photomontages of photographs and screenshots from social media) or videos (Grycuk, 2021, p. 2). Images can be manipulated in a variety of ways: they can be added to fake articles to enhance the reception of a particular piece of information or to attract audience attention; alternatively, images can be processed. Video footage can also be fake news because when a particular fragment is edited out, the context of the entire communication it captures may change. The media not infrequently feature videos of politicians making their statements, but they are often cropped to fit the narrative. According to Katarzyna Bąkiewicz (2019, p. 284), audiences are usually drawn to sensational headlines aimed at the highest sales and tabloid-like titles of news outlets so as to draw more clicks.

The design behind publishing false content is an important component of fake news, which is why it may be worthwhile to examine the motives of those who distribute news of that kind. The media should be a trusted source of information, which follows from the principles of journalistic ethics; the latter explicitly assert that journalists should check every piece of information and carefully separate fact from opinion (SDP, 2019). The rationale for spreading fake news varies, but it largely boils down to manipulating the audience in order to achieve certain gains. Financial profit is one of the leading incentives: entire websites are created to disseminate fake news and earn money from the advertisements displayed there. Alternatively, one can pursue political objectives in a manner which involves a range of actions, depending on the envisioned effect (e.g. to denigrate a political opponent). They are also used for ideological purposes, with the purpose of spreading one’s views and beliefs or as part of unfair competition in the private sector. It may happen that the motive for posting fake news online is entertainment, in which case it can take

the form of user-generated memes (Gu et al., 2017, p. 8; Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017, p. 217; Alvi and Saraswat, 2021, pp. 43–44; Grycuk, 2021, pp. 2–3).

Although social media platforms mean low cost, easy access and rapid dissemination of information, they are also an ideal venue for the creation and instantaneous spread of fake news (Shu et al., 2017, p. 1; Stahl, 2018, p. 1). Seemingly harmless falsification of the truth and distortion of the facts may lead to serious consequences, both for individuals and for society as a whole. Fake news affects audience perception and interpersonal trust, moulds the views of other people and influences opinions concerning current news and political debates (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006; Moy et al., 2006; Tsfati et al., 2009; Landreville et al., 2010; Holton and Lewis, 2011; Balmas, 2014; Lee, 2014, after Torres et al., 2018, p. 3977). All of this makes it a powerful instrument for manipulating the public.

Methodological foundations of own research

The goal of the empirical study was to gain insights into how internet users view fake news⁴. The principal research problem was formulated as follows: What is the attitude of internet users towards fake news? Detailed research problems focused on the following:

1. Do the respondents know what fake news is? What associations does the term elicit?
2. What forms of fake news are most frequently encountered by the respondents?
3. What dangers do respondents see in fake news?
4. How do respondents verify information from the mass media?
5. Have respondents ever passed on fake news to others via social media?

The empirical research was conducted from 22 March to 12 April 2022, with 110 people taking part. Due to the difficulties occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to maintain social distancing, the survey was conducted in online mode (Computer-Assisted Web Interview). The link to the survey questionnaire was made available on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram. Highly popular among internet users, both websites see a vast amount of information posted daily, including fake news. The algorithms utilised by the websites select the displayed content, often based on the popularity of given posts, making them visible to an increasing number of users. This study relied on a non-random sample selection method contingent on the availability of respondents (Babbie, 2003, p. 204). This sampling method does not provide any grounds for extrapolating the results of the study to the entire population of internet users. Most respondents were women (65.5%), while men made up

⁴ The paper draws on the results of empirical research carried out by Małgorzata Solarska as part of the thesis entitled *Stosunek internautów do fake newsów* [Attitudes of Internet Users Towards Fake News], written under the supervision of dr Elżbieta Subocz at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn.

a third of the respondents (33.6%). Only one respondent declared that he or she did not identify with any gender. The vast majority of the respondents were young people aged 18–25 (88.2%). Persons in the 26–35 and 36–45 age brackets (3.6% and 5.5%, respectively) were much fewer. The remaining age groups were represented by single individuals, each of whom accounted for 0.9% of all respondents. The sample also included one respondent under the age of 18 (the survey was made available on social networking sites which apply the age limit of 13). The majority of the respondents – as many as four out of five (79.1%) – are urban residents. The remainder live in villages and account for 20.9% of respondents. Most respondents stated having secondary education (66.4%), and one in four respondents had obtained an academic degree (24.5%). Primary education was declared by 8.2% and vocational education by 0.9% of the respondents. More than half (55.5%) identify with centrist views. Left-wing views were declared by one in three respondents (35.5%), and right-wing views by only 9.1% of the respondents.

Selected results of own research

All internet users participating in the survey declared that they had encountered the term “fake news” in the media space, which is due to the increasingly broader use of the term in recent years, particularly in the context of warning audiences of the presence of fake news in the media. Interestingly, exposure to the expression was also noted among people in the older age group, who are more likely to be unfamiliar with the English language. Respondents were asked about their associations with the term “fake news”. The distribution of responses is shown in Table 1.

The term “fake news” does not have a homogeneous definition and may therefore denote distinct types of false content. Almost all respondents (99.1%) associate the term “fake news” with false information. A great majority, 93.6%, identify it with manipulation. This coincides with the most widespread definitions of fake news, which often reduce its meaning to untrue or manipulated content

Table 1
Respondents’ associations with the term “fake news”

Specification	N	%
False information	109	99.1
Manipulation	103	93.6
Humorous content	8	7.3
Advertisements	6	5.5
Hard to say	1	0.9
Other	1	0.9

Note: Responses do not add up to 100%, as the respondents could check more than one answer.
Source: own research.

in the media. Several respondents equated fake news with humorous content (7.3%) and advertising (5.5%). One respondent indicated “hard to say” (0.9%). One non-standard response also drew attention to the specificity of fake news, i.e. that it relies on the truth to some extent. Specifically, it read: “A misrepresented truth, harbouring a grain of the real for better traffic/views.” The respondents were also asked about the most frequent forms of fake news that they had encountered (Table 2).

Table 2

Forms of fake news most frequently encountered by the respondents

Specification	N	%
Manipulated information in the media	75	89.3
Online article	62	73.8
Manipulated or out-of-context video material	61	72.6
Manipulated post (e.g. altered content)	53	63.1
Manipulated image	45	53.6
Newspaper article	20	23.8
Other	2	2.4

Notes: 1) Responses do not add up to 100% as the respondents could check more than one answer;
2) This question was answered by 84 respondents who had encountered fake news in the media.

Source: own research.

The respondents most often encounter manipulated information in the media (89.3%). Other popular forms of fake news include articles published online (73.8%) and manipulated or out-of-context video footage (72.6%). Nearly two-thirds of the respondents (63.1%) encounter fake news in the shape of manipulated social media posts, and more than half (53.6%) come across manipulated images. The rarest form of fake news, declared by one in four respondents, is a newspaper article (23.8%), which may be attributed to the minor popularity of newspapers among the respondents. Non-standard answers were also in evidence (2.4%), including: “social media posts” and “article topics geared towards attracting readers often deviate strongly from the content of the article. A person who does not read the content will only remember the fake title.” The respondent probably had in mind those articles which integrate fake news in their titles in order to manipulate an audience who confined themselves to reading the headlines. In other words, content creators want to “catch” a particular audience who refrain from delving into the content. Another device used online is clickbait, often manifesting as headlines users see when they are shared on social media. They are designed to entice users to click a particular link but frequently happen to have nothing to do with the actual substance, which can be misleading. In an open-ended question, the respondents were asked to list the risks that fake news may entail. A summary of the responses is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Threats posed by fake news as perceived by the respondents

Threats	N	%
Sows disinformation, manipulation, propaganda, stupefies and confuses the public; conveys an erroneous and falsified representation of reality; contributes to diminished credibility of the media, information warfare, unthinking reception of information from the media	61	55.4
Instils panic, fear, the sense of threat	27	24.5
Prompts criticism, aggression, hatred towards individuals or organisations, increases anti-refugee sentiment, may "ruin someone's life"	24	21.8
Making decisions in the light of untrue information	12	10.9
Causes misunderstandings and conflicts, divide society, create chaos	11	10.0
Prolongation of the pandemic, propagation of health-threatening information, threat to life, protests (e.g. anti-vaccination), mental disorders	7	6.3
Other (evolution of fake news, new ones arise based on the previous, unlawful action, failure to see the actual issues)	4	3.6
No answer	4	3.6

Note: Responses do not add up to 100%, as the respondents could check several answers.

Source: own research.

The data in Table 3 shows that the respondents are aware of the dangers of fake news in the mass media. More than half of the respondents (55.4%) presumed that fake news might involve such threats as disinformation, manipulation, propaganda, stupefying and confusing the public, and erroneous and falsified representation of reality. They also contribute to diminished media credibility, information warfare and unreflective reception of the information provided by the media. Fake news may cause the public to be misinformed, thus distorting reality. Fake news also affects the emotions of the audience, resulting in widespread panic among the public because the discrepancy between what they read and what politicians say fuels their uncertainty. One in four respondents (24.5%) declares that fake news elicits panic, fear and a sense of danger. One in five respondents (21.8%), on the other hand, believes that it provokes criticism, aggression and hatred towards individuals or organisations, increasing anti-refugee sentiment and may even "ruin someone's life". One's views may be radicalised by algorithms (in the case of social media) that supply content which supports the notions of the viewer, whose convictions are thus reasserted. The effect is achieved in a similar fashion with traditional media, as the viewer or reader themselves selects the content which is consistent with their worldview. One in nine respondents notes that decision-making based on false information represents such a threat (10.9%). Anti-vaxxers are a good example, in that by deciding not to be vaccinated, they put themselves at increased risk of coronavirus infection and a possible severe course of the disease. Every tenth respondent is of the opinion that fake news also contributes to misunderstandings and conflicts, dividing society and creating chaos (10%).

This can be observed not only in societies in their entirety but also within small social groups, as conflicts arise in the family or a circle of friends. A minor proportion of respondents (6.3%) claim that fake news poses a health risk, which may be linked to the previously described phenomenon of infodemic: the prolongation of the pandemic, the perpetuation of information which may put health at risk, the threat to life, protests (e.g. against vaccination) and even mental disorders. Thus, false information appearing in the mass media may have prolonged the pandemic because instead of complying with the restrictions in place, some people preferred to follow unverified content. The survey participants expressed concern about the growth of fake news, which is often based on prior false information, as well as the spread of illegal activities, and the failure to address real problems (3.6%). Awareness of the presence of fake news in the media space should prompt the public to verify information more thoroughly. There are many ways to find out whether the given content is credible or not. However, many people rely on their preferred information sources in the conviction that they are reliable; they are more likely to choose media that are close to their worldview rather than the media that will be diametrically opposed to it.

Table 4

Verification of information by respondents

Specification	N	%
Yes	86	78.2
No	5	4.5
Hard to say	19	17.3
Total	110	100

Source: own research.

The vast majority of the respondents declared that they verify the information they come across; this is practiced by more than three-thirds of the respondents (78.2%). The research sample also included those who do not check the news they have heard or read, with 4.5% of the respondents. The answer “hard to say” was chosen by 17.3% of the respondents. The data shows that most people are aware of the existence of fake news and the dangers it may involve; hence they try to verify the content, bearing in mind that it may turn out to be untrue. Those who choose not to do so are most likely to trust their sources of information and see no need to verify it further.

Fake news often matches the profile of the mass media in which it is published, as evidenced, e.g. by the use of clickbait, which is the first to display when a link is shared on social media. Verification of content whose credibility is questionable follows the same pattern in an attempt to counteract the spread of misinformation. The respondents who verified their information were therefore asked how they had done so (Table 5).

Table 5

Methods used by the respondents to verify information

Specification	N	%
I verify the same information in several sources	82	95.3
I watch complete statements to see if they have been edited (if a fragment is published in the media)	53	61.6
I verify the sources on which the information is based	51	59.3
I verify the scientific sources	42	48.8
I verify whether a post or article is sponsored	30	34.9
I use fact-checking websites (which validate the veracity of information in the media)	28	32.6
I verify the website address	28	32.6
Other	4	4.7

Note: Answers do not add up to 100%, as the respondents could check more than one answer.
Source: own research.

The most popular means of verifying the truthfulness of information is to examine the same information in several sources, as declared by 95.3% of the respondents. Knowing that the media often manipulate information by editing a part of the footage out or showing only a fragment, the respondents try to watch the entire statements and recordings (61.6%). More than half of the respondents (59.3%) look at the sources on which an article was based. Nearly half of the respondents (48.8%) confirm the information from scientific sources. One in three respondents (34.9%) finds out whether an article or a post is sponsored, as this may indicate advertising or writing for the benefit of the sponsor. Moreover, online resources now feature fact-checking websites dedicated exclusively to verifying information published in the mass media; these are used by one in three respondents (32.6%). The same proportion of the respondents check website addresses, as it happens that special sites – deceptively similar to popular news outlets – are created to spread fake news. Thus, by verifying the correctness of the website address, internet users can identify whether they are visiting the right website. There were also non-standard answers (4.7%), which indicate that information can be verified by talking to relatives, as declared by two people. One person cited memes as a method of verifying information. The last non-standard response somewhat mockingly confirms that an individual with a social media account may be an authority with respect to information. It reads as follows: “If it hasn’t been shared by Łukasz bok then it’s not true.” Respondents are aware of the presence of false information in the media space, so they do take action to prevent disinformation and appear to know a fair number of methods to verify information.

The greater the emotional response prompted by fake news in the reader/viewer, the more likely they are to want to share the information with others by means of social media. The respondents were therefore asked whether they had ever shared fake news with others (Table 6).

Table 6

Transmission of fake news to others via social media

Specification	N	%
Yes, I have shared it knowingly in order to advise others that the information is untrue	27	32.1
Yes, I have shared it unknowingly	36	42.9
I have not shared it	33	39.3
Hard to say	8	9.5

Note: Responses do not add up to 100% as the respondents could check more than one answer.
Source: own research.

The respondents who shared fake news unknowingly represent as many as 42.9% of those who encountered fake news in the media space. One in three respondents (32.1%) shared fake news in order to inform others that the news is false. Almost 40 % of respondents declared they had not shared fake news, and 9.5 % found it “hard to say”. Sharing various types of information on social media is a straightforward and quick form of sharing with other users, which is why it is much easier to send a particular communication without any thought or verification.

Conclusions

Fake news is becoming ubiquitous and poses a real threat to society in multiple aspects: individual, political, economic, cultural and health-related. In this day and age, it is therefore important to be aware of the consequences that the spread of fake news may have and how to counteract it. The respondents were well aware of what fake news is and the forms it may assume. They were also aware of the dangers that may arise directly from trusting false information and were capable of listing actual and hypothetical risks. The vast majority of the respondents make an effort to verify the information they are exposed to on a daily basis, using various methods to do so, most often by comparing it across several sources. Overall, the attitude of the internet users surveyed towards fake news is therefore negative and, by and large, they try to carefully examine the information they receive (read or hear). The respondents also admitted that fake news had elicited an emotional response, causing them to pass on fake news via social media.

Fake news is often compared to a virus that infects the media and people’s minds. The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine show the consequences that disinformation can produce in the real world. Its effects were most tangible at the outset when the information was fresh and aroused the most emotion. In a panic, people started to buy excessive amounts of hygiene products and fuel, thus making them scarce or massively withdraw savings from cash machines. The surfeit of information and the fast pace of life often make it impossible

to sift out fake news, and even when one practices scrupulous verification, they may inadvertently trust false information. Providing the public with truthful information should be a primary concern of journalists, but the multitude of sources and the pursuit of viewer- or readership means that the content does not have to be true but attractive, which often takes place at the expense of truth.

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Summary

Fake news is becoming increasingly prevalent in mass media and poses a significant threat to various aspects of society, including individual, political, economic, cultural, and health domains. Current events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, demonstrate the harmful effects of disinformation on the real world. This article presents the findings of an empirical study conducted on a sample of 110 internet users to understand their attitudes towards fake news. The study aimed to explore how internet users perceive fake news, its forms, and the risks associated with believing false information. The research results demonstrate that the respondents had a good understanding of the concept of fake news and its dangers. Most of the respondents reported attempting to verify the information they read by cross-checking it with multiple sources of information.

Opinie internautów na temat *fake newsów* (komunikat z badań)

Streszczenie

Fake newsy stają się coraz powszechniejsze w mediach masowych i stanowią realne zagrożenie dla społeczeństwa w wielu aspektach: jednostkowym, politycznym, gospodarczym, kulturowym oraz zdrowotnym. Aktualne wydarzenia, takie jak pandemia COVID-19 oraz wojna w Ukrainie, pokazują, do jakich skutków w realnym świecie może doprowadzić dezinformacja. W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badań empirycznych zrealizowanych na próbie 110 internautów. Problem główny został sformułowany następująco: jaki jest stosunek internautów do *fake newsów*? Wyniki badań dowiodły, iż respondenci doskonale znają wyrażenie „fake news”, jego formy oraz zagrożenia płynące z uwierzenia w nieprawdziwe informacje. Większość badanych stara się weryfikować czytane wiadomości poprzez sprawdzanie kilku źródeł informacji.