

Is Fake News (Disinformation) the Biggest Enemy of Ethics in Professional Journalism in Kosovo?

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Abstract

To understand exactly what fake news is and what is real news, we definitely need to understand how accurate and real news is written. There are many definitions about what is actually called fake news. However, the terms "Disinformation" and/or "Misinformation" dominate. Fake news remains a challenge and a very serious problem for the online media in Kosovo, including the part of ethics, which is has not recovered and it is still a problem. Kosovar portals, I believe most of them have insufficient staff and non-professional editors. They are being influenced by the phenomenon of fake news, without wasting time to verify whether the news, the event, the chronicle, the video or photo, is true or fake. It is painful from a professional and ethical point of view when you see fake news, when you see news circulating unverified by Kosovar newsrooms. Unfortunately, fake news in Kosovo is spread even by the online media, which call themselves credible and influential in the Kosovar public opinion. This phenomenon must be stopped, we must do our best to make the editors of these portals understand that fake news damages the public's health, puts mental and emotional pressure on a layer of the public that is almost influenced and victimized by this (unverified) fake news. Newsrooms that spread fake news must first understand the importance of how real news is produced. Without knowing how real news is created, they find it difficult to identify or distinguish it from the fake news.

Keywords: Fake News, Ethics, Disinformation, Misinformation, Verified Information

Introduction

Verified information is the basis of the credibility of journalism, and based on this principle, professional standards for ethical and responsible journalism are effective protection against misinformation and disinformation. Unfortunately, in this whole war against disinformation and on the other hand in the just war to implement ethics, the media and journalists who do not submit to various manipulations suffer.

The professional media must work in the best interests of the public by providing accurate, objective, useful, even responsible information based on facts and evidence. Manipulation must be stopped and the alarm raised with the responsible institutions [1].

Online media in Kosovo is still unstable and cannot be trusted and it will be even worse if in future we are attacked as disinformation carriers. In reality, there is a large extent and influence of fake news on the Internet, which has caused and is causing a new crisis, creating implications of the most diverse in general for journalists.

Considering me, it is important that in the professional and ethical aspect the portals become aware, create groups of journalists and experts to stop the phenomenon of false photos, videos and other materials which severely damage accurate journalism.

There are portals and online media that are well on the way to building a truly professional journalism, a journalism where ethics dominates, the codes of ethics and decency are respected and the right of feedback is respected. An agenda with some criteria and enough material on what fake news is, it will be welcomed by every Kosovar newsroom. It is time for young and experienced journalists to read and study more about this phenomenon, which has reached global proportions and has a great impact on society. Kosovo is no exception to this phenomenon and to this "deadly" virus for professional journalism [2]. Online media in Kosovo must understand the seriousness and damage that fake news does to the public and readers.

The Council of the Written Media of Kosovo (KMSHK) in its report presented in July 2022 named: "Misinformation, disinformation and fake news in the online media in Kosovo", emphasized the lack of professional staff in the editorial office and non-cooperation with verifiers of facts on the spot. This report of the KMSHK reflected the state of newsrooms in Kosovo in general and was dealing with the issue of publishing fake news and disinformation [3]. According to the report, in the answers to the questionnaire, the method used for this research, it appears that the newsrooms have a lack of editors, lecturers, and unclear practices of respecting the Code of Ethics of Journalism [4]. It is emphasized in the report and based on the answers to the questionnaire, the media does not take any real measures against a journalist who has been found to have committed a violation, and producing fake news, based on the report [5].

Furthermore, it is said in the report that the fact that the surveyed media have never mentioned any real cooperation by verifying facts. "However, the fact verification is done by the medium itself or by an unprofessional staff complicating the authenticity of a news or statement published by other media", it is hereby highlighted in the report of the KMSHK. Some of the recommendations drawn from the reports emphasize that the media in the country must deny the disinformation or misinformation that circulates on the Internet and that journalists must consider that their work is to discover misinformation and fight information disorders.

In the main principles of the Media Code of Ethics, it is clearly written that journalists should report on the basis of factual data and not on their perceptions of the facts. (SPJ) In order to block the spread of fake news, as well as to avoid a situation where Kosovo reaches the level of the region in terms of disinformation and media control, it is extremely important that various links of society undertake immediate actions [6].

Institutional leaders should continue the tradition of regular conferences for the media, with question-and-answer sessions, in which space is given for more questions from different media, and not only from those considered close to the government. This would have an impact on mutual trust between institutions and the media, this is vital for the sake of democracy.

In order to contribute to the right information of the public, the institutions should also consider taking teams of journalists on visits abroad, a practice well-known in all democratic countries.

Journalists should check the source of the information several times, and treat it from several different points before releasing the news.

In televised debates, there should be greater self-control on the part of the panelists as well as greater control on the part of the mediums, and not to contribute to the creation of false narratives. Citizens should verify the news on several different channels before taking it for granted. Citizens should report eventual fake news to the Independent Media Council (IMC) and the Kosovo Print Media Council.

Material and Methods

In the manual for Training and Formation of Journalists: "Journalism, 'Fake News' – Disinformation" it is said that the term 'fake news' does not have the direct meaning to which the general public refers. This is because the very term 'news' means verifiable information in the public interest, and any other type of information that does not meet these standards does not deserve to be called news. In this sense, the term 'fake news' is an antithesis (oxymoron), which also affects the devaluation of the reliability of information that really meets the standards of verification of authenticity and public interest - real news [7].

As editors Cherilyn Ireton and Julie Posetti say, 'Misinformation and disinformation don't just harm the reputation and safety of journalists. They put to the question mark even the mission itself and usefulness of their work, and lead to the degradation of journalism, which then leads to the impoverishment of public discourse [8].

However, journalists should understand that, although the richest area for disinformation is social media, nowadays there are also powerful factors that use companies that produce 'fake news' in order to attack the real news media. But new stricter laws are blaming news institutions as if they were to blame for the situation, or lumping all media into one group by forcing them to submit to new laws and regulations that limit all communication platforms without making any distinction between them [9]. How to behave and how to act in a very slippery terrain?

A question that is more important and power in present circumstances. How to act and what the media and especially the online media should do when faced with the fake news. First, all media, without exception, should respect professional standards and ethics, always avoiding the publication of unverified information, and distance themselves from information that may be of interest to a part of the public, but not serve the public interest [10].

"Most discussions of 'fake news' equate and confuse two notions: disinformation and misinformation. It may be appropriate to point out that misinformation is incorrect information, but the person spreading it thinks it is true [11]. On the other hand, disinformation is information that is incorrect, but the person spreading it clearly knows that it is fabricated. We are dealing with a deliberate and premeditated lie, which causes the public to be deceived by malicious factors [12, 13].

Social media in the world and in Kosovo, are the ones that are playing the key role in the great disorder of online information

distribution [14]. This information is then carried in the “copy-paste” style, even to serious media without passing through the filter of verification of the posted news [15].

"In these networks created by individuals who trusted each other, peer-to-peer sharing of information (especially on Facebook) began to challenge traditional methods of distributing materials. Users managed the flow of material and information themselves - including material from news agencies, journalists and other reliable sources of information - without intermediaries.

As a result of this distribution through 'trust networks' (users and friends), more and more inaccurate, false, malicious material, as well as propaganda material masquerading as news, began to spread [16]. Researchers have found that emotional content and material shared by a friend or relative are more likely to be re-shared on social media.

News literacy is a more specific ability to understand the language and characteristics of news, and how these characteristics can be misused for malicious purposes. While important, news education alone can hardly create immunity to misinformation that comes disguised as news. This is because people do not engage in communication only with their brains, but also with their hearts [17]. This paper on fake news is based on the facts presented by both Albanian and Serbian media. The comparative and analytical method of daily articles is also the essence of this work. Samples were taken from two newspapers: Kosovo and Serbia. From the Kosovar portals, we mainly based ourselves on the cryptometer of the Kallxo.com Portal, which has a special section that deals exclusively with fake news and this effort of theirs is truly worthy of every greed because it helps young journalists a lot to protect themselves and journalistic ethics. Meanwhile, from Serbia, the sample was taken from the “Politika Ekspres” In those samples, respect for professional and ethical standards was analyzed, based on unverified information and distancing from information that may be of interest to a part of the public, but that does not serve the public interest.

Results and Discussion

I have said several times that the biggest enemy of ethics is unverified or cracked news published as fabricated fake news. If we look at the various local and international portals for just a few minutes, we see that within their texts we come across many inaccuracies, we see and read fabricated news for likes, news posted and re-posted, with the only purpose of attracting attention.

Case One

The Kallxo.com portal has a special section that deals exclusively with fake news, and their effort is really for everyone because it helps young journalists to maintain themselves and journalistic ethics. Among the many fake news that the Kallxo.com team has found, we are highlighting the title: “The false finding that Vjosa Osmani did not invite anyone from the Government of Albania to the Forum for Women, Peace and Security”. In the course of reporting, information producers have distributed factual material that is untrue and taken out of context. The finding that no one has been invited by the Government of Edi Rama is untrue and this has been confirmed by three different sources from the Presidency and the Government of the Republic of Albania [18].

Case Two

Another news that actually discredited the leader Ramush Haradinaj and it was published in some media and portals in Serbia. Albanian: Uncle Ramush, you killed my father, you raped me and then killed me too: Sensitive letter of the son Millovan, who would have turned 18 today.

- **Serbian:** ‘Čika Ramuše, ubio si mi tatu, mamu silovao spa me obesio: Potresno pismo dečaka Milovana, koji bi danas rapunio 18 godina’. (Uncle Ramush, you killed my dad, raped my mom and then hanged me: A sensitive letter from the boy of Milovan, who would have turned 18 today).
- **English:** The source of this article is a letter based on a fictional story written by a journalist on behalf of a child who was allegedly killed in the war. This letter written by the journalist is not a journalistic article and does not fulfill any criteria of news, but it is distributed as such by this portal. Before publishing the complete fictional story, the portal made a fake description of the profile of the former prime minister of Kosovo, Ramush Haradinaj. The "Politika Ekspres" portal describes Haradinaj as the organizer of violence and ethnic cleansing of Serbs in the riots of March 2004. However, this finding is false, as Haradinaj was not part of the organization of the protests and he was neither investigated nor accused for such things by the UN or the UNMIK mission [19].

Case Three

And another fake news was also discovered by Kallxo.com named “Lies for the 'discovery of the witness against former president Thaçi in The Hague” Statement: "Last minute, the witness against former president Thaçi is revealed in The Hague, says the former service agent". The title is fake. There is no witness discovered against former president Thaçi. The title is not verified anywhere in the text within the news. The text uses an old statement of the former ambassador of Kosovo in Shkup, Gjergj Dedaj, given in 2001, which is not related to The Hague and the special court. Furthermore, the news is illustrated with a fake photograph, which is elaborated in design and aims to create the impression that there is real material within the text [20]. In the publication on social networks, they used signs that show mourning and regret for the news, herewith they made the readers believe that was a terrible news. The website named ‘lajme.buzz’ has published this news [21-23].

The war in Ukraine and unverified news have also distracted many world media, especially publishing old photos or videos. An article titled: “Scary sight on the border with Ukraine, Russia” turns out to be fake news. False claim that photo of current Russian soldiers is false [24-26].

Case Four

The article “Breaking News/Scary scene on the border with Ukraine, Russia (Read the details) ...” is fake the views seen in the photographs were not recently taken, as presented in the article. Krypometër has found that the photo presented as photo news dates from February 2022. Also, no evidence or reference in reliable based on official sources has been presented that the soldiers were left without food supply.

Case Five

On 5 October 2022, the Publikos website published a news item with the title: “Latest News / Scary scene on the border with Ukraine, Russia” (Read the details). The same article, with the same description, has also been published on other sites such as: KonicaLajme (News), Albania, news.knews899.com.

The article states that this photo was taken recently and it is surprising the whole world, claiming that the soldiers have run out of food supplies. Krypometër has found that the presented photo as a photo news dates from February 2022.

The photo shows Russian troops at a railway station in Dolbino, Russia, not far from the border with Ukraine, showing the harsh conditions of the soldiers, this photo is from February 2022. In March this year, this photo was shared saying that the soldiers in the photo were killed.

The Krypometër also verified that statement, which turned out to be false. So, the photo of the front page of the news is not related to scary photos and it is not from the last few days, but it has been circulating on many sites and portals on the Internet for several months.

Conclusions

As the code requires, journalists' goal is to find the factual truth and therefore take all the necessary and possible steps to find out the truth. Based on unknown sources does not meet the requirements of the Media Code. As defined by the KMSHK Code, reporting must be done based on identifiable sources of information, always if necessary, preserving the source of information, but in any case, providing circumstantial information that makes it reliable and complements the published information. Don't be fooled by misinformation online, check the issues when searching through social networks Where is the source? Think and examine what is behind the scenes. Check the origin of the website or social network profile, check the basic data, first and last names.

The history. Does the source have an agenda? Find out what kind of topics does it usually cover and if it only promotes one perspective. Proof. Study the details of any confirmation and see if it based on confidential sources. Emotions. See if the source is based on any emotions to point out something particular.

Check for Sensational, Inflammatory or Divisive Rhetoric

Pictures are worth a thousand words. Check what message is illustrated or what the picture means, and if the source uses pictures to draw attention. Neither the media in Kosovo nor the media in Serbia are exempt from this phenomenon and from this “deadly” virus for professional journalism. Online media in these two countries must understand the seriousness and harm that fake news causes to the public and readers of different strata.

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