

DEZINFORMAREA ÎN VIAȚA POLITICĂ RECENTĂ. O NORMALITATE STABILĂ?

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Scenariul ideal într-un regim democratic, mai ales în perioadele preelectorale, ar fi o confruntare sănătoasă de opinii cu argumente bazate pe evenimente adevărate, cu conținut care preocupă publicul larg. Astfel, cetățenii ar dezvolta o gândire critică mai pronunțată și ar fi mai înclinați spre decizii corecte și echilibrate, bazate pe interesele lor, dar și pentru a servi mai bine interesul public. Din păcate, aceasta pare a fi o utopie, așa cum demonstrează proliferarea fenomenului dezinformării și avalanșa știrilor false, utilizate de diverși actori din sfera publică, încercând să falsifice realitatea în lupta pentru propria lor supremație. Articolul vizează prezența dezinformării în viața publică a Statelor Unite ale Americii în timpul alegerilor prezidențiale din 2016, 2020 și evenimentele legate de demonstrații în Capitoliul Statelor Unite. La fel, este urmărită și prezența fenomenului în alegerile prezidențiale din Franța din 2017 și 2020, precum și în Nigeria din 2019. Este evidențiat, astfel, caracterul global al problemei.

Cuvinte-cheie: *știri false, alegeri, politică, dezinformare, viață politică.*

DISINFORMATION IN RECENT POLITICAL LIFE. AN ESTABLISHED NORMALITY?

The ideal scenario in a democratic constitution, especially when it is in the pre-election period, would be a healthy confrontation of opinions with arguments based on true events, with content that will concern the general public. Thus, the citizens would have a clearer critical thinking and would make it easier to make the right decision on the basis of their interests, but also to better serve the public interest. Unfortunately, this seems to be a utopia, as misinformation and fake news seems to be used by various actors in the public sphere, trying to falsify reality in the struggle for their own dominance. In the article we look at the presence of misinformation in the public life of the United States during the 2016, the 2020 presidential election and the events of demonstrations in Capitol. We also see the presence of the phenomenon in France's presidential election in 2017 and 2020 as well as Nigeria in 2019. This is how the global character of the problem is highlighted.

Keywords: *fake news, elections, politics, disinformation, political life.*

DÉSINFORMATION DANS LA VIE POLITIQUE RÉCENTE. UNE NORMALITÉ ÉTABLIE?

Le scénario idéal dans un régime démocratique, en particulier en période préélectorale, serait une saine confrontation des opinions avec des arguments basés sur des événements réels, avec un contenu qui concerne le grand public. Ainsi, les citoyens développeraient une pensée critique plus prononcée et seraient plus enclins à prendre des décisions justes et équilibrées en fonction de leurs intérêts, mais aussi à mieux servir l'intérêt public. Malheureusement, cela semble être une utopie, comme en témoigne la prolifération du phénomène de désinformation et l'avalanche de fausses nouvelles,

utilisées par divers acteurs de la sphère publique, essayant de falsifier la réalité dans la lutte pour leur propre suprématie. L'article traite de la présence de désinformation dans la vie publique des États-Unis lors des élections présidentielles de 2016, 2020 et des événements liés aux manifestations au Capitole des États-Unis. De même, la présence du phénomène lors des élections présidentielles en France en 2017 et 2020, ainsi qu'au Nigeria en 2019, est également suivie. Le caractère global du problème est ainsi mis en évidence.

Mots- clés: fausses nouvelles, élections, politique, désinformation, vie politique.

ДЕЗИНФОРМАЦИЯ В СЕГОДНЯШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ ЖИЗНИ. УСТАНОВЛЕННАЯ НОРМА?

Идеальным сценарием при демократическом режиме, особенно в предвыборный период, было бы здоровое сопоставление мнений с аргументами, основанными на реальных событиях, с содержанием, волнующим широкую общественность. Таким образом, граждане разовьют более выраженное критическое мышление и будут более склонны к правильным и взвешанным решениям, исходя из своих интересов, а также лучше служить общественным интересам. К сожалению, это кажется утопией, о чем свидетельствует распространение феномена дезинформации и лавина фейковых новостей, используемых различными субъектами публичной сферы, пытающимися фальсифицировать реальность в борьбе за собственное превосходство. В статье акцентируется внимание на наличии дезинформации в общественной жизни США во время президентских выборов 2016, 2020 годов и событий, связанных с демонстрациями в Капитолии США. Таким же образом отслеживается наличие данного феномена на президентских выборах во Франции в 2017 и 2020 гг., а также в Нигерии в 2019 г. Таким образом, подчеркивается глобальный характер проблемы.

Ключевые слова: фейковые новости, выборы, политика, дезинформация, политическая жизнь.

Introduction

The events on misinformation in the 2016 American elections made it a landmark year for fake news. That is why, one year later, the term „fake news” became a Word of the Year for 2017 [1], as, according to Collins Dictionary, at that time its use increased by 365%. Donald Trump himself in an interview in TBN [2] said that „the media is fake” and „one of the greatest of all terms I have come up with is *fake*” and „they really hurt the country, because they take away the spirit of the country” and „the stock market today hit an all time high, unemployment is the lowest it’s been in almost 17 years – car companies are moving plans back to Michigan, so many things are happening and the media doesn’t want to talk about it”. From the words of the President, we understand that misinformation was a subject of discussion and it was treated as an important part of the public agenda and political confrontation.

Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, in their research estimate that an average adult in US read at least one fake news article in the pre-election period, with higher exposure to pro-Trump than pro-Clinton articles. Someone could say that Trump played efficiently the attention-game [3]. Jayeon Lee and Weiai Xu write that in the „Twitterverse” Trump was more successful getting his issue agenda across to voters and lead voter engagement [4]. The authors of Nature Communications, Stephan Lewandowsky et al. assume that, intentionally or not, Trump exploited social media to divert the attention of mainstream media [5, p. 10]. Various false news stories were launched that period, like, for example the fact that Hillary Clinton sold weapons to ISIS [6], that she had health problems [7], or that Pope Francis endorsed D. Trump [8]. These stories were used in a post-election survey. Gunther et al. noting regarding this [9, p. 4] that „citizens’ exposure to fake news had a significant impact on voting decisions”. Of course,

they are not talking about winning elections and this is not our point of view too. They are talking about the function of fake news to influence the public and the possibility that it gives an advantage to a candidate. The elections of 2016 were also the landmark of official investigations.

US American elections of 2016, of 2020 and the Capitol riots

In spring of 2019, the U.S. Department of Justice and Special Counsel launched the Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election [10]. The report says that there was „a social media campaign designed to provoke and amplify political and social discord in the United States” and also „to undermine the U.S. electoral system, to a targeted operation that by early 2016 favored candidate Trump and disparaged candidate Clinton”. They write that they came across with cyber intrusions (hacking) and the dissemination of hacked materials, such as DCLeaks, Guccifer 2.0 and the use of Wikileaks. They conclude that „although the investigation established that the Russian government perceived it would benefit from a Trump presidency and worked to secure that outcome...; the investigation did not establish that members of the Trump Campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities”. Albeit, the “Trump Campaign showed interest in certain releases of documents and welcomed their potential to damage candidate Clinton”. According to another report, made by the Senate Intelligence Committee in 2020 [11], there were some findings, among them was the Russian aggressive, multi-faced effort to influence the outcome of 2016 presidential elections, the intent to help the Trump Campaign and undermine the US democratic process. The Department of Homeland Security made a statement, saying that these cyber-operations were intended to interfere with the US election process

and that similar tactics have been used across Europe and Eurasia to influence public opinion [12]. The Intelligence Community Assessment notes that: „Since the Cold War, Russian intelligence efforts related to US elections have primarily focused on foreign intelligence collection. For decades, Russian and Soviet intelligence services have sought to collect insider information from US political parties that could help Russian leaders understand a new US administration’s plans and priorities” [13, p. 5].

The Assessment also writes about „new normal” in influence operations and about possible „future influence efforts in the United States and worldwide” because of „their perceived ability to impact public discussion”. This fits very much our point. We don’t focus on the dispute between countries or nations (USA, Russia or other). We focus on the ability of disinformation to affect public sphere.

The disinformation rampage doesn’t end there. Richard Rogers says that in the early months in 2020 the proportion of user engagement with fake news to mainstream news stories is 1:3.5, compared to 1:4 during the same period in 2016 [14, p. 2]. Also, the researchers reveals that there were discovered hundreds of websites forming a network of news organizations, distributing thousands of algorithmically generated articles and she reports that, in a later research, this network had “received funding from multiple dark money groups, as well as collaborated with advocacy groups to cover prior to the 2020 election” [15]. We observe a continuity of false news during several election events. Thus, we meet a quite similar situation in presidential elections of 2020, as they were conducted in the shadow of election fraud. There were false narratives about fraud during the 2020 presidential race, with some posts noting that Republicans won big in Florida after the state enacted new voting restrictions and claimed that the lack of similar laws in other States resulted in fraud [16]. In a research for Berkman Klein Center for Internet

and Society at Harvard [17], has been analyzed more than 55.000 online media stories, 5 million tweets and 75.000 posts on public Facebook pages.

Yochay Benkler team examined Trump's claim that mail-voting during the pandemic of 2020 was a subject of mass election fraud and his campaign against the expansion of the phenomenon. They concluded that „the disinformation campaign was elite-driven and waged primarily through mass media responding to false assertions from President Trump, his campaign and the RNC (Republican National Committee)” [18, p. 47] with social media playing only a supportive role. The Election Integrity Partnership, an ensemble of organizations (Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika, & Stanford Internet Observatory) added that there were also bottom-up false and misleading narratives started with individual identifying real-world or one-off incidents and posting them to social media [19]. Among other things, from the above we understand that mass media still plays an important role in the dispersion of misinformation and in some cases prove to be more valuable than social media. Of course, social media also play a prominent role and are the second head of „Lerna Hydra” in the problem of False News. Characteristic was the „Stop the Count” [20] of D. Trump's post on Twitter with uppercase letters, as part of the “Stop the Steal” campaign and in the context of the rudiments of a new strain of Republican politics: history, faith, crime, retribution [21]. It seems that the information falseness about the reliability of the electoral result had a great deal of appeal to a number of citizens who reacted and made protests, which ended up in Capitol siege [22]. Election fraud misinformation was a reason for the Capitol riots, but there was also misinformation about the riots itself, as reported by journalists siege [23].

According to „Washington Post”, the President's

election lies radicalized his supporters in real time and mobilized them to plot violent acts, with discussions that researchers watched unfold online siege [24]. An Ipsos/NPR survey siege [25] found that even two months after the elections, 39% of Americans agree there is a „deep state” working to undermine Trump, with the percentage rising to 49% for white men and rural residents. Prof. R. Pape [26], in another several surveys, found that 47 million American adults agree with the statement that „the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump and Joe Biden is an illegitimate president” and 21 million of those, also agree that „use of force is justified to restore Donald J. Trump to the presidency”. (Pennycook & Rand, 2021) say that despite a lack of any meaningful evidence, a majority of Trump voters believed that fraud is common in U.S. elections (>77%), and that Trump won the 2020 election (>65%) [27, p. 2]. So, we have citizens saying that the elections were affected by shady factors. Maybe, someone could agree with this, but the question is: the elections were affected by an uneven electoral system or by disinformation?

The arguments and speculations about electoral fraud and unreliable election system have proved to be unfounded by official lips of US government agencies. The National Intelligence Council gave to the public an unclassified Assessment, drafted also by CIA, FBI, Department of Homeland Security, Department of State and National Security Agency [28], making notable conclusions about the recent events and some of them are:

Judgement 1: „no indications that any foreign actor attempted to alter any technical aspect of the voting process in the 2020 US elections, including voter registration, casting ballots, vote tabulation, or reporting results”.

Judgement 2: they „assess that a range of Russian government organizations conducted, influence operations aimed at denigrating President Biden's

candidacy and the Democratic Party, supporting former President Trump, undermining public confidence in the electoral process, and exacerbating sociopolitical divisions in the US. Unlike in 2016, we did not see persistent Russian cyber efforts to gain access to election infrastructure”.

Judgement 3: they „assess that Iran carried out a multi-pronged covert influence campaign intended to undercut former President Trump’s reelection prospects, undermine public confidence in the electoral process and US institutions, and sow division and exacerbate societal tensions in the US”.

Judgement 4: „China did not deploy interference efforts”

So, according to the Assessment, there were foreign actors trying to support Trump, there were foreign actors trying to undermine Trump (supporting Joe Biden) and there were no foreign actors intervening in the voting system at technical level (no issue of fraud). The main motives were to cultivate public political mistrust and social unrest. The Election Integrity Partnership also concluded in their report [29, p. 240], that both foreign and domestic actors weaponized false and misleading narratives to undermine confidence in the US electoral system and erode faith in democracy. The US House of Representatives characterizes disinformation as a „exhausting and dangerous” and makes a Majority Staff Report talking about disinformation campaigns carried out by malicious domestic actors that try to undermine elections and about the federal failure to counter lies due to lack of sufficient resources and funding. They also conclude that: „The risk of subversion of future elections remains high. Local election officials are on the frontlines of this crisis. Now more than ever, they need the resources and support that only the federal government can provide. A federal whole-of-government response to this growing crisis is an urgent necessity” [30, p. 5].

French Elections of 2017 - 2022

At the elections of 2017 in France we saw, in many cases, fake news targeting Emmanuel Macron, including mainly character assassination and leak of financial documents with offshore bank accounts. As New York Times reports [31], extremists in the United States started posting on social media sites in France in support of Marine Le Pen, using tactics that they deployed during 2016 American presidential elections. Though, those tactics didn’t seem to have much impact in France because they were „lost in translation” due to cultural gap between American and French electorate public. Emilio Ferrara in his study [32, p. 15], talks about the „presence of bots that existed during the 2016 US Presidential election period to support alt-right narratives” that „went dark after November 8 and came back into use in the run up days to the 2017 French presidential election”. He also explains that most of the audience in the general conversation about Macron Leaks was American alt-right community, a fact that brought more French voters in the defence of E. Macron and favored his candidacy. It was reported that Facebook has cracked down almost 30.000 fake accounts spreading disinformation during the pre-election period [33] and almost 40% of #MacronGate tweets came from automated accounts [34].

Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer writes a report for the Atlantic Council and the Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l’Ecole Militaire (IRSEM), describing a 3-dimension information operation, including: „1) a disinformation campaign consisting of rumors, fake news, and even forged documents; 2) a hack targeting the computers of his campaign staff; 3) a leak—15 GB of stolen data,10 including 21,075 emails „known as “Macron Leaks”, which was hyped by bots and trolls in social media. He also says that the disinformation operation was conducted by both American and Russian actors, referring to the

„Kremlin media and the American alt-right” [35, p. 3]. We see here that opinion influence operations or efforts can come from various actors worldwide and that referring to only one country could be incorrect. The tendency of western media referring to Russia is a possible scenario but it would be more precise if we try to see the whole picture. We saw the same thing above, in the US elections, where according to Assessment of the National Intelligence Council, a country of the Middle East had a possible involvement in the influence campaign at the US Elections of 2020. The actors involved could be multiple and the motives of each one could be even harder to find and to explain. We also notice, according to the references, that the alt-right community has targeted Macron, a politician considered as centrist [36], so we also talk about a battle of political ideologies (right, center, left etc).

A similar pattern of false news scaffold was encountered also in elections of 2022 at France. There were narratives about voting machines being used to help ensure a Macron victory and others saying that if there is not enough participation, the elections could be invalidated [37]. There was fake news claiming that Le Pen wants to withdraw France from the Paris Agreement, concerning the climate change [38]. There were claims about a massive election fraud, including the QR codes of „cartes électorales” being used to favor Macron or to discount votes of citizens who are not vaccinated [39]. As we have seen earlier, according to the literature, among the main objectives of misinformation and influence operations are to undermine democratic institutions, to lead citizens to politic mistrust, to reduce the credibility of political figures and to erode democracy in general. Here, it would be useful to do a correlation. According to a survey of *Fondation pour l’Innovation Politique* [40], prof. Dominique Reynié, her director presents that in the question about the reasons for voting abstention and blank voting at France, the

most popular answers were: „the different candidates do not appeal to me” and „the same policies are put in place regardless of the political party in power” and „I want to protest against the current political system”. Also, in the question about the high level of mistrust among citizens in political institutions, the three first answers were 1) political parties, 2) religious authorities, 3) unions, furthermore, most citizens recognized themselves in no political party.

Of course, we cannot say that this is due to misinformation, but it is an interesting reference. We make a correlation, not causation. Gérald Bronner and his team, made a report on account of the Presidency of the French Republic [41], with the purpose to inform general public and civil society about the impact of disinformation on citizens nowadays. The report indicates several possible domestic and foreign actors conducting influence operations with strategic context, suggests the creation of a crisis management mechanism on European Union level and asks for “coordinated responses, strategies and public policies with regard to defense, security and diplomacy” in order to enlighten the grey area of fake news cloud, which is “characterized by notions of competition, contestation and confrontation” and the “growing diversity of stakeholders”.

Nigeria Elections 2019

Disinformation seems to be a serious issue also in Africa. Fake news and propaganda in 2019 presidential election in Nigeria „has been on steroids” [42] and was used, as it is reported, by people who were close to both major political parties (President Buhari and opposition leader Abubakar). For example, there were claims that M. Buhari, of the All Progressives Congress (APC), was dead or clone, or unpatriotic by favoring foreigners and other claims that A. Abubakar, of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), was giving handouts of money and food in political gatherings, or that he was negotiating a deal

with Boko Haram Islamists in exchange for land and oil [43; 44]. It was noted also the presence of ethnic hate speech at the service of disinformation, due to the country's fertile ground to do so (over 250 ethnic groups and 500 languages) [45]. There was high level bot activity in social media platforms, which called for elections boycott and also high level of satire misconception with reality, thus misinformation, due to the deficit in media and information literacy [46].

Moreover, the country had its local edition of „spin doctors”. False information was spread through the „sojojin baci” (soldiers of the mouth), who are political consultants spreading information, in order to make political marketing and increase a politicians popularity [47]. There were also people as social media entrepreneurs, the „propaganda secretaries” who shape political narratives and spread falsehoods, with earnings less than 14 dollars a month [48]. Further studies [49] specify that if fake news and hate speech are weapons of „mass democratic destruction”, then Nigeria's democratic order is already under siege. Commonwealth Security [50] adds that disinformation is a direct threat to country's national security, because it ignites intracommunal violence, ethnic and sectarian animosity, mainly between Nigerian communities in areas of ethnic, linguistic and religious diversities. Koblowe Obono and Karimah Aminu, in their study [51], examined the impacts of digital disinformation on voting decisions in the elections of 2019. Among the findings was that the voter's decrease in interest was „high/great extent” by 47.5% and the degree of influence was „high” by 30.5%. We can say that this is an appreciable percentage and they state that it „still affected voter decisions”. Aboyade et al. in their research [52], talk about the consequences of fake news in the African country and count a) electoral violence fueled by the instrumentation of fabricated content, b) ethno/religious conflicts by poisoning ethnic groups

with emotions like fear, anxiety, suspicion, c) public mistrust by character assassination to muddle public perception of politicians, d) jungle justice, when citizens take the law in their own hands and proceed to hasty decisions.

Umaru A. Pate et al., in their study [53], talk about „post-truth era” in Nigeria, like the tip of the iceberg in a country plagued by poverty, weak institutions, marginalization, populism politics, extremism that threaten the democratic state. They oppose local reasons of fake news dissemination and some of them are „the general distrust of elites, leaders and politicians by majority of Nigerians”, the „desperate politicians, ethnic and religious jingoists, foreign interests and mischief makers” who „generate fake news for influence or to persuade the audience” and the “absence or most often late arrival of official information on issues” that „creates vacuum conveniently filled in by rumors and disinformation”. The Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) [54], made a case study about disinformation in five African countries including Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda, concluding that „authoritarianism remains the primary driver of disinformation in the region”, that some governments have utilized false information to hold in their position, shrink civic space and target rivals (including critic voices) and that political discourse is undermined „by limiting access to credible, factual and pluralistic information about candidates parties and issues, in order to make informed choices”.

In addition, Fredrick Wilson and Muhhamad A. Umar, in their study [55], conclude that fake news affect decision making in the country and that „democracy thrive well with peace and reliable and vibrant communication system”. Kofi Annan, in his speech at the National Electoral Institute of Mexico, poses disinformation as a serious problem for the public sovereignty, saluting policies to counter

false information and stating that: „People around the world aspire to greater freedom and demand a greater say in politics...; political systems have not kept up with economic developments, creating high levels of inequality and a growing sense of economic disenfranchisement...; as wealth is concentrated, so too is political power and influence. History teaches us that such an imbalance between the economic, social and political realms cannot be sustained for long...; We must make democratic systems more effective, and more responsive to the needs of average citizens” [56].

Conclusions

In the research we note that misinformation and fake news is an existing phenomenon in the public life of a country that is also used in political life by various actors. We have taken as an example and field of examination three different countries from three different continents, in order to highlight the global character of the phenomenon, but also the fact that it is an „established reality”, as we encountered it in all of their electoral clashes in recent years.

Certainly misinformation has existed in the past, but in recent years with the rise of the Internet and social media it seems to be evolving, making users more interactive with the sharing of news. We saw the influence of fake news on masses of citizens, such as social upheavals in Nigeria or conspiracy theories in the 2020 American elections, which cultivated a negative climate and partially played a role, resulting in the outburst of Capitol Riots. We have also seen in other countries, the exploitation of disinformation by a political persons, in order to influence public opinion and gain an advantage over some other political formation. Also, both in the United States and in France, we encountered a tendency to challenge the electoral result, due to the unreliable electoral system, a hacked electoral system etc, as

mentioned by several sources. On this basis, we observe that the news falseness is obstructing the smooth functioning of the democratic system and affects citizens in decision -making.

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