

LACK OF FACT CHECKING IN MASS MEDIA IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT. The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the situation with fact checking, the way the journalists follow the principles of ethical codes while providing information to the mass, whether they choose to be led by information published in online platforms by ordinary people, or, on the contrary, to be the frontrunner source of information to the mass, by providing correct information not fake news. For this we analyze the general role of the media in society, the challenges the journalism faces in the digital age, the role of social networks as source of information, situation with breaking news, ethical challenges journalism is facing in the digital age, cases of fake news with harmful impact, the role of journalists in the digital age. And as a result of analyzed we came to the opinion that these days it is very important for the society to see the quality news written by professional journalists with true fact.

Keywords: Digital age, digital media, fake news, disinformation, fact checking, journalist ethic, news

1. Introduction

Mass media is the powerful system of institutions which could be provided to the mass by telling the word with a positive or negative impact. That is why journalists are carrying a lot of responsibilities by providing the information to the society and have to be careful with the facts, with the words in order not to provide harmful effect

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to the mass, to the one person individually, to the communities, to the countries and to the world as a whole. These responsibilities mostly are reflected in the journalistic codes of ethical principles, such as - fact-checking, objectivity, truthfulness, accuracy, impartiality, etc. It has always been hard to follow all the principles, mostly to check the fact before publishing, and now in the digital age in the period of social networks, blogging and citizen journalism it has become harder for mainstream journalists to provide hot news with a checked fact. In the last years journalists have faced problems with lack of fact checking and not following the ethical professional normative in the process of providing information to the public. This phenomenon had taken place before and caused harmful reactions with in the society. But now with the technology development, with appearing online platforms, social networks., when information from different countries all over the world is available for every person who has access to the internet via smartphone or notebook, this problem starts to be large and uncontrolled. For fact checking organizations it is so difficult to identify fake news within the wide range news. This problem started to be a global one after the presidential elections in the USA and is now, like a new way of disinformation and black PR, spreading all over the world. A lot of fact checking companies started their activities in the last years, but even with them it is so difficult for journalists to select. And the main problem of a lot of mistakes made by the journalists is the willing to publish hot breaking news. But in these times when every minute users of social networks are publishing millions of news through Facebook, Twitter etc. it is so difficult for journalist to be the first source of information

Moreover, now Facebook and Instagram provide Live Video content, that increase the possibility of ordinary people to spread information nonstop.

The purpose of this paper is to understand what role journalists have to play in order to provide correct information to the public, what is more important for journalists - immediacy or truth, what role play the breaking news in the lives of journalists and should they

still focus on it in the professional process. Another point will be the ethical codes of journalists face reality in the digital age. Based on examples we will look at the impact fake news had on people's lives, how the lack of fact checking and lack of ethics in mainstream news cause the tragedy. This analysis could provide us with a better understanding of the image of today's journalists and the kind of journalist the audience is expecting to see in the future.

2. The role of the media in society

What is journalism? Who is a journalist? What is news? Is all news we are reading all true, written based on real fact, not false? In this period of time in digital age answers to these questions are not so clear. By answering these questions we are trying to understand the main functions and performances of a journalist and then proceeding from this knowledge to continue analyzing what kind of challenges a journalist faces and how it impacts his professional activities.

Journalism in traditional theories is considered as the way of providing factual, correct information of the event happened in society by using different forms – written, audio, visual. The model of communication with audience used by traditional media is linear, that means by using monologue, journalists provide a message to the society, which is influenced by the minds and work as guideline for the people in their lives. (Robinson, S. (2012) page 60)

By providing the society with information, mass media have duties towards the public which they have to implement by following ethical principles. Between these duties we could mention to be watchdog, provide images of civil real life, be respectful to society and individually to each person and their rights, meet informational and cultural requirements of the public. (Jakubowicz, K. (2009) page 10)

Journalist perform as watchdogs working for the society in the interest of the audience, audience who are paying journalists and media for assistance in receiving correct and accurate information. (Deuze, M. (2005) page 7)

A lot of common and abundant functions mass media carry, between them we could mention information, interpretation, instruction, bonding, and diversion. Moreover journalists have a gatekeeper function, in other words they regulate the information that addresses the public. The gatekeeping function includes the following elements - transmission, confining, broaden and provide new interpretation. (<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-realworldcomm/chapter/15-2-functions-and-theories-of-mass-communication/>)

In their gatekeeping role journalists choose confident images and words in order to provide and preserve specific remembrance of the society. The journalist is laying stress on reliability of the recap of information by using their skillfulness by being viewer of the occurrence and by reporting. (Robinson, S. (2009) page 167)

Every news consists of some aspects, that is why a journalist providing information has to think not just about the events but also has to try to present it as a story. The main purpose is to put the events in consequent order so that the public would be able to easily read and understand the event that occurred. For the journalist it has to be significant in a huge information flow to stress more valuable actual facts and then build the news around it. (Phillips, A. (2014) page 6)

Balance of opinions in providing the news is an important part of mainstream journalist work, they have to get two or more views on the event, in order to let the public see the situation from all angles. (Lule, J. (2014) page 514-515)

With ongoing globalization, the way of producing the news changes. Journalists nowadays cover more the events that occur globally but have also to deal with a culturally more diverse society in their immediate environment. (Deuze, M. (2009) page 23)

Moreover, globalization and web technology evaluation, mostly the internet features as multimedia and interactivity, impact the journalistic role and function. In the digital age when the public takes part in news providing, journalists in the opinion of some theories start to be "gate watchers". (Robinson, S. (2012) page 59)

3. The challenges the journalism faces in the digital age

Journalism starts to be more difficult because of digitalization. The amount of information has increased, and the spread of production has risen which is why the journalist working time starts to be longer and has caused the necessity of new skills. In online networks journalists have to not just write an article, but also take videos and images, and, the main thing in my opinion, to manage information that is spreading through social media by ordinary people. (Dragomir, M., & Thompson, M. (2014) page 109)

The modifications of journalist practice have taken place not only in daily work process but also have an impact on the way of communication with the audience, mostly with the blogs users. At the same time starts to be more significant than ever the question of accurate work of journalists based on ethical codes in order to ensure the society receives clear faithful information and not to undermine the confidence of the public. One example of incorrect ethical work could be the incident with ex Washington Post journalist Janet Cook, who provided a fake story, resulting in the loss of her Pulitzer prize and eventually her job. (Bailey, O. G., & Marques, F. P. J. (2012) page 404)

The digital age provides opportunity for collaboration and active involvement to each person in the journalistic sphere, everyone who has access to the internet could be a journalist by spreading information. Blogs, social networks such as Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, different types of sites are providing information, even information that has local value. (Fenton, N. (2012) page 129-130)

Nowadays we could see that readers and users and the citizen journalist, bloggers have potential due to interactivity provided by online platforms to correct weaknesses of mainstream journalism and spread information which is more convenient to life realities and illustrate events that concern the society. (O'Sullivan, J. (2012) page 47)

Internet with its variety of platforms has developed the democratic culture in a new way, has transformed the role of gatekeepers, has increased pluralism of opinions and views, has provided information

from all parts of the world, has changed the role of citizens by involving them in the collaboration. At the same time, it has provided wide control of the online communication process of different organizations with different political, cultural and religious perspectives that could cause a bad impact on the public. (Giannakouloupoulos, A., Varlamis, I., & Kouloglou, S. (2012) page 294)

3.1 Social networks become source of information

Online platforms have become a source of information for the journalist. Mass media consider the public as an extra news source, from which they could receive audio visual information directly from the scene. BBC's user-generated content tells that one hour before they get information from their recourses, they already will have access to the information from the public who are witnesses of the event, and such kind of source could consider the fasters one. (Hermida, A. (2012) page 313)

Online platforms, mostly social networks, allow the public, to be more independent from the news provided by elite that in itself is changing the way of creating, interpreting and distributing the information. The communication and collaboration provided by social networks and online platforms allows to think that mass media are starting to be more social. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Myspace are the social networks that make it easier to socialize, through Flickr, YouTube, Uncut Video, and Jumpcut users can share multimedia content. (Meraz, S. (2009) page 123-124)

The appearance of Facebook social network changed the way the public gets information. Based on PEW research held in 2016 in USA and Australia we can conclude that social networks and blogs have a good reach of audience interested in news. 62% of Americans adults are reading news in online platforms, mostly from Facebook (62% from this 64%)(?). In Australia this percentage is low, however it is still more than the half (52, 2%). One interesting fact is that the users not searching for a news in social networks, they are receiving it through posts published by their friends. (Pangrazio, L. (2018) page 10)

3.2 *Breaking News*

Timeliness ‘right here, right now’ this is one of the qualities of journalists that is challenged by multimedia and a multicultural approach to journalistic work. (Deuze, M. (2005) page 457)

The evolution of the online platforms has a significant impact on how the media obtain information –given the open and short-term availability of the news. All traditional media (Radio, Newspaper, TV) were forced to familiarize and modify the way of production and reporting in order to be competitive and get the reach and share of the media market. Now when the online newspaper has tools provided by the Internet, it could compete with broadcasters by providing audio video content on an equal basis with articles by doing it operative. Internet provides changes to the audience too, to the means how they are receiving information. New consumers of the media products want information on time and from different sources. Yahoo! News and Google News have become the platform where users could immediately get a list of information with connection to the different media websites. (Lule, J. (2014) page 626)

Reporting the news is the duty of journalist, here with the immediate action is very important with regard to the events in order not to lose newness of news. Due to this fact decision making, quality and timeliness, rushing, real time effort are necessary qualities of the journalist profession. Surveys show that journalists in USA and other countries are suffering from the lack of sufficient time, for them it is so valuable to provide information as fast as possible. If before the question was about the speed of providing information now it is about providing news nonstop. From the point of view of journalists, speed can be considered as a primary one and similarly complicated by-effect of news work. (Deuze, M. (2005) page 449)

The completion by delivering information to the public as quickly as possible to be faster than other news platforms causes a situation in which immediacy leads to the worst impact on accuracy. The journalistic practice changed due to speed delivery and as the result came along the

problem of lack of fact checking and to the forefront came the tendency to produce news without checking, just providing in the format of press releases. (Dragomir, M., & Thompson, M. (2014) page 109)

Presently, the substance of journalism is "feeling of the rate". Online journalist studies mention "promptness" as the basic requirement of professionalism. Journalists describe their job as "real time news delivery". Based on surveys from Europe, USA and Latin America "24/7 always on news culture" is the result of technology development. Technology and the transformation of news work: Are labor conditions in online journalism changing. (Paulussen, S. (2012) page 201-202)

4. Ethical challenges journalism is facing in the digital age

Based on ethical principles for a democratic society the main element of news reporting is providing accurate information that will be valuable for a well-functioning society. Journalists have to check the fact before spreading to the public. The Committee of Concerned Journalists mention that accuracy is the core element of news around which everything is constructed - "context, interpretation, comment, criticism, analysis and debate". That is why it is so important for the public to have a credible information source. The journalists have to understand and be accurate with this that the main for them being the society, not the advertisers and shareholders, journalist responsible facing the audience. In other words journalists have to provide clear information based on facts, and not to think about profit. (Lule, J. (2014) page 628)

Journalists in their job follow strong standards and ethical codes and have the ability to evaluate the more important aspects of the events, that is why professional journalists enjoy great respect and credibility therefore have to be more accurate in his reporting. (Siapera, E., & Spyridou, L. P. (2012) page 80)

In the digital age when every person could provide information through online platforms it is so important for both professional journalists and ordinary users to remember ethical principles, such as:

- Thoroughness
- Accuracy
- Fairness
- Independence
- Transparency

Before the existence of the internet with its different instruments journalists haven't had the opportunities and tools to clarify information that fast and without problems, but at the same time journalists never faced the problem of necessarily fighting for following the principals of accuracy and credibility. (Paulussen, S. (2012) page 202)

In the time when social networks and online platforms acting as resource of breaking news and when information spreading faster than ever the role of journalists as fact checkers is being questioned. (Hermida, A. (2012) page 320)

It is important for a journalist even after publishing to check the fact, whether it is true or not, for example news website The Huffington Post is the biggest online platform linked with blogs (over 2000 bloggers) put the requirement on the authors to check the fact within 24 hours after it was published, otherwise the writer would lose the position on the blog. Besides providing the truth, ethical codes mention another very important principle as loyalty to the public. Loyalty means that journalists have to understand that they work for the society, not for financial benefit. Journalist have to always remember that "media products are not just economic», they have to be responsible in the face of the public, because they are carrying out the society's interest while providing news, in order not to cause harmful impact. (Lule, J. (2014) page 631)

Research provided in "Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2019" by Reuters institute gives information about Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the situation with "bad actors" on these platforms in 2018 "the banning of Info-Wars, first by Apple and then by other platforms marked a major shift in approach. But the scale and complexity of the task ahead is immense. Every week

new problems emerge – a bit like a game of ‘whack-a-mole’. By July the crisis spread to WhatsApp with false rumors about child abduction in India leading to a series of lynching’s. In Brazil, a coordinated disinformation campaign on WhatsApp played a part in the rise to power of far-right leader, Jair Bolsonaro. And by the end of the year attention had switched back to Facebook, where hundreds of self-organizing ‘anger groups’ laid out their demands and organized destructive ‘Gilets Jaune’ protests across France”. All these online platforms have started to work on resolving the problems with “bad actors” and objectionable content. (Newman, N. (2019))

Based on the information provided in Reuters institute survey 31% of news is fake news in the USA, in Romania it is 38%, in Hungary even higher at 42%, in Greece 44%, in Turkey 49%. The percentage is lower in the UK (15%), Germany (9%), Denmark (9%), and the Netherlands (10%). (Nic, N., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., Levy, D. A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2018) page 39)

The reasons of providing and type of disinformation to the mass could be different. Some of them are provided by European Association for Viewers Interests (EAVI). Based on their opinion the main misleading news are - propaganda, clickbait, sponsored content, satire and hoax, error, partisan, conspiracy theory, pseudoscience, misinformation, bogus. European Association for Viewers Interests classified partisan, conspiracy theory, pseudoscience, misinformation, bogus as the ones with high impact to the mass audience. They are considering money, politics/power, humor/fan, passion, mis(inform) as the main motivation for the publication of incorrect information. (Steinberg L. (2017))

As the result of the boom of spreading misinformation and fake news appeared a lot of facts checking projects, base Duke Reporters’ Lab survey made in 2017, in 51 countries around the world operated 137 fact checking projects.(Ireton, C., & Posetti, J. (2018)) And at the same time a lot of actions started to operate, among them is the “ethical standard setting mechanism” action which is a part of the program Journalism Trust Initiative that will start in June of 2019

organized by the EJN's leader Aidan White in cooperation with Reporters Without Borders with assistance of over 100 media organizations among which press councils in Europe has the purpose to counteract against disinformation as "media self-regulatory initiative" and as the comparison for analyzing the quality journalism, that could be a prototype for future models. (EJN Annual Report 2018/19).

How could we see a journalist firstly faced with the problem of fact checking, more than ever it started to be a big problem? Every second different types of news are publishing spreading through online platforms, and as we understand these online platforms start to be the source of information for journalist news. In this fuss it is very difficult to check fast the accuracy of the fact, of course journalists are using links to the source of information, but this does not reduce his accountability, because most people after reading the news on social networks and blogs, in order to be sure are looking forward to see the real situation through the news published by mainstream media, but as we could see in next passage journalists start to be more irresponsible.

And again a lot of organizations doing researches and providing recommendations, and as mentioned above media organization are working to strengthen the media self regulation process. If media self regulation is still good for journalist professional work to these question we could find answer in OSCE publication - The Online Media Self-Regulation Guidebook. According to the opinion of authors "Self-regulation is a way to prevent governments from interfering extensively with media content offline, as well as online" and as a reply to the critics of media self-regulation who "blame this system for being a kind of a "self-service" where the media industry protects its own interests instead of those of the public" they suggest to straight the transparency and efficiency. (Stone, M. (2013))

4.1 Cases of fake news with harmful impact

But the worst thing that happened with the appearance of online platforms and mostly the social networks, mainstream media start to do more and more mistakes. We could see a lot of lack of fact checking and lack of ethical principles that caused problem for businesses, the

political situation, and maybe most harmfully to the life of ordinary citizens. Now we are going to take a look at some of them and what they led to.

In 2008 the iReport site by CNN reported that Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple «was rushed to the ER just a few hours ago after suffering a major heart attack». Within 10 minutes the Apple stock lost 10% of its value. (Hargreaves, S. (2008))

Boston Marathon Bomber was labeled Sunil Tripathi by Facebook and Twitter users, and even worse by journalists who have a lot of followers on Twitter. Journalist without checking information by breaking ethical standards did from the ordinary boy a guilty. Then only when NBC spread information that he is not the person responsible for the bombing, media stopped publishing information about his connection to this story. But harmful impact had been caused already as people started to attack his family. Even the company that was responsible for his finding rejects to help his parents because it could damage the image of their company. Several days later, on 23 of April Sunil was “found dead in the Providence River. The details surrounding his death remain unknown”. (ethicaljournalismnetwork.org)

Pizzagate is another story that had a bad impact on the life of a person. The story starts when with the support of far-right platforms like Breitbart and Info-Wars, the information that Hillary Clinton was a pedophile and is kidnapping, molesting and trafficking children in the restaurant Comet Ping Pong, was distributed through social networks like Facebook and Twitter, and then went viral. Firstly this fake news provide bad impact to Hillary Clinton personally, then to the restaurant owner and employers (they were receiving a lot of messages from social networks with content blaming them). The peak of the story was when the 29-year-old Edgar Maddison Welch come to the restaurant with 3 guns and started to shoot. (Fisher, M., Cox, J. W., & Hermann, P. (2016))

These stories show how important it is for journalists to follow ethical professional standards and to check the fact before publishing in order not to harm innocent people.

5. The role of journalists in the digital age

What could be the role of journalists in the digital age in order to improve the situation with lack of fact checking.

Blogger Tim Malbon of "Made by Many" described how his positive impression of the coverage on Twitter soon gave way to alarm: I was awestruck by the live feeds provided at #Mumbai and others (such as Twitter Grid). Having looked around elsewhere, my initial reaction was that the main old-school news agencies like Reuters, CNN, and the BBC just weren't providing the coverage, in contrast to the truly MASSIVE volume of tweeting going on. But as the evening continued my feelings changed about this, and I started to see an ugly side to Twitter, far from being a crowd-sourced version of the news it was actually an incoherent, rumor-fueled mob operating in a mad echo chamber of tweets, re-tweets and re-re-tweets. During the hour or so I followed on Twitter there were wildly differing estimates of the numbers killed and injured – ranging up to 1,000. Made by Many, November 27, 2008 (Allan, S. (2012) page 335)

Journalists have to understand that providing breaking news in the period of the digital age, when online platforms like social networks with their wide spectrum of tools give opportunity to the users to public all soft information immediately from the event and allow to them to be first in providing first information even earlier than in media, is not their main function. Nowadays, the role of journalists could be described as a filter which will check the news provided by online platforms for accuracy of the fact, is it real or not, true or not, contains disinformation or not, could have bad impact to the society or not, in order to provide to the audience credible, checked information. (Price, G. (2015) page 8)

Professional journalists are supposed to provide quality information transparent, accurate, that reflects the interests of the society, but nowadays not just do the informing function, at the same time journalists have to be open for conversation with the audience, allow the audience to participate in news content, in order to understand what the real need of the society is, and start to be competitive in the media market. (Van der Wurff, R. (2012) page 247)

6. Conclusion

The problem with fact checking is the huge problem which needs time and journalist professionalism to reduce it. For example Sambrook R. thinking that three principals could solve the problem – evidence, diversity, transparency and plus to them media literacy “can help us navigate in the new digital world of information abundance and deliver journalism that is trustworthy and fulfils its public purpose”. (Sambrook, R. (2012) page 40)

In conclusion it can be said that as the result of this paper in my opinion for journalists now it is so important to find a place between social networks and the public. Journalists don't need to chase after breaking news, most of the news are being published firstly in online platforms by bloggers and ordinary users anyway. That is why mainstream journalism has to find a different scope of work and at the same time should find the balance between business, ethics and accuracy.

Another point is to start to communicate with the audience in order to investigate what is necessary for them, in order to publish information that will be actual, and will reflect the interest and needs of audience and to improve media self regulation that will help to journalist force for good democratic society.

The main thing to be the filter of fake news, to provide information with accurate fact, try not to publish hot news where the fact is important, but come back to analytic and investigates genres, not just to information one.

By using analytics and investigative type of approach to the news, they provide to public accurate information with different opinions and the same time will increase the value of could journalist between the public.

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