

# MANIPULATION AND DISINFORMATION; FAKE NEWS AND DEEPPAKE

## Introduction

Modern media offer the world a rapid exchange of information. This process was only available in the field of science fiction a few decades ago, but today – to give an example – it can be compared to the speed of light. News, for which recipients used to wait several hours or days, is now available in a matter of seconds - and with the highest quality of picture and sound. The speed and technology of news dissemination has also led to many attempts to distort or even professionally misrepresent reality. Many news stories contain partially or completely distorted elements, and the facts often take a back seat.<sup>1</sup>

Fake news and deepfakes, as they are called, are a significant feature of the so-called post-truth, i.e. a partially media-created reality that causes misunderstandings in the public sphere. For younger generations it is particularly difficult to distinguish between fiction and falsehood. "Digital natives" are excellent at using social media, but when it comes to assessing the veracity of the information flowing through these channels, they are easily misled.<sup>2</sup> Even mature consumers of media messages find it difficult to distinguish lies and falsehoods from the truth, as manipulative behaviour is evolving and becoming increasingly sophisticated (various types of manipulation using artificial intelligence).

## Fake news

The development of the Internet has meant that in today's world the user can find most of the facts online, but also a lot of false information, or fake news. Fake news is deliberately prepared material that, in principle, is intended to mislead the recipient; it is untrue, inaccurate and does not correspond to the facts. Fake news as misinformation negatively affects public confidence in a given media outlet.<sup>3</sup>

The Newseria report provides the following definition of fake news: "(...) information published by the media, which gives the impression of being verified and describes facts, but which actually deceives the public by giving credence to the unconfirmed information, data and unverified sources contained therein".<sup>4</sup>

Researchers Johnny Botha and Heloise Pieterse distinguish the following types of fake news<sup>5</sup>:

Clickbait: includes messages that are deliberately invented to get more visitors to the website and increase advertising revenue for websites.

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Le Duc, *Catholic Church Communication in the Post-Truth Era: Intra-Religious and Inter-Religious Dimensions*, 2019, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3335641>, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Marek Chyliński, Fałszywe wiadomości – antydobra w ekosystemie informacji, „Com.press. Pismo naukowe. Komunikacja i nauki o mediach. Journal of communication and media science”, 4 (2018), 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> Raport Newseria, Fake news, czyli jak kłamstwo rządzi światem, Wrzesień 2017, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Johnny Botha, Heloise Pieterse, *Fake News and Deepfakes: A Dangerous Threat for 21st Century Information Security*, 2020.

*Satire/parody*: Messages created for the sole purpose of entertainment, without the intention of causing any harm, which may deceive the reader.

*false connection/misleading headings*: refers to news or articles that contain true and accurate content, but use misleading or sensational headings.

*Propaganda*: Refers to news deliberately created to mislead the public or promote a partisan point of view.

*Biased/slanted news*: They include news that is based on the prejudices and beliefs of the recipients.

*Sloppy journalism/error*: includes news created using unreliable information or unreliable sources that may mislead consumers.

*Manipulated news*: refers to news that manipulates the content of true, factual stories to deceive readers.

*Fabricated news*: includes news with 100 per cent false content, created to deceive and cause harm.

*Sponsored content*: this is news or advertising disguised as editorial content that can mislead users.

Fake news is spread through traditional and Internet-related media. This type of content sometimes becomes very dangerous, as it influences entire societies and forms the basis for bad decisions. Hence the importance of education in the correct use of the media and the ability to evaluate information. Critical thinking, the verification of sources or the promotion of digital literacy are the basis for exposing fake news, which is becoming increasingly sophisticated thanks to technological developments.

## Deepfake

Artificial intelligence-generated fake, or deepfake, video content is becoming increasingly common and compelling. Deepfake is a development of fake news that uses artificial intelligence. The new techniques also allow unqualified people to create deepfakes by presenting videos and the voices of famous people. Deepfake was born in 2017 within pornographic videos. At the re are advanced algorithms that learn the similarities between a real and fake face or voice, reduce the whole thing to common features, and create a fake.<sup>6</sup> The term deepfake comes from the acronym of Deep Learning and Fake.

Deepfake is a technique used in video content to edit videos, the end result of which is to be considered false. In many situations, the image of famous people (celebrities, politicians) is used, for example Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin, Nancy Pelosi or Mark Zuckerberg.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> Ian Sample, What are deepfakes – and how can you spot them?, The Guardian, <https://tiny.pl/cwbrc>.

<sup>7</sup> Inesdi, Deep Fake y la manipulación de procesos, <https://tiny.pl/cwbrl>.

result is the creation of video content, based on existing content already available on the Internet. With the help of artificial intelligence and thanks to the production of videos of the person in question, it is possible to generate new video content of that person who says what he wants. More and more such videos can be found on YouTube<sup>8</sup>.

The available deepfake films can be placed in one of the following groups<sup>9</sup>

*Technology demonstration (technology demonstration)*: includes deepfake videos created as examples to demonstrate how the technology works.

*Satirical/meme*: refers to deepfake films that are humorous or ridiculous, created as a form of political or social commentary.

*Pornographic*: refers to deepfake films that often feature celebrity faces on the bodies of pornographic actors.

*Deceptive deepfakes*: fake videos starring politicians or other authority figures with the intention of causing a scandal.

Input data can be used by the relevant algorithms and software in various ways when creating deepfakes. Examples include: Face swapping – transferring a person's face to another person's face in the video; attribute editing – changing a person's characteristics; face reenactment - transferring facial expressions from a person's face to a person in the target video; fully synthetic material - the actual footage is used to train the software, but the resulting footage is completely new.<sup>10</sup>

Deepfake is a hyper-realistic video that has been digitally manipulated to depict people saying or doing things that did not really happen. This type of content, generated using computer techniques based on artificial intelligence (AI), represents a serious threat to privacy and where the risks arising from identity theft are increasing.<sup>11</sup>

Educating the public on how to recognise deepfakes is critical with the evolution of technology, to avoid misinformation. It is worth explaining to the public the process of creating this type of content, giving examples and promoting responsible and critical use of the media, as deepfake poses a real cyber threat to users. At the same time, it is important to remember that this technology is also used in a positive, entertaining or educational form<sup>12</sup>.

## Francis - fake news and deepfake

Fake news and deepfakes are contents that are completely or partially false, but nevertheless published on the Internet and other media for purposes that are often characterised by

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<sup>8</sup> Deepfake Videos Are Getting Terrifyingly Real, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T76bK2t2r8g>.

<sup>9</sup> Johnny Botha, Heloise Pieterse, Fake News and Deepfakes...

<sup>10</sup> Europol (2022), Facing reality? Law enforcement and the challenge of deepfakes, an observatory report from the Europol Innovation Lab, Publications Office of the European Union, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Francisco José García-Ull, Deepfakes: el próximo reto en la detección de noticias falsas, *Anàlisi: Quaderns de Comunicació i Cultura*, 64 (2021), 103.

<sup>12</sup> Museum creates deepfake Salvador Dalí to greet visitors, <https://tiny.pl/cwbrq>.

deliberate manipulation. It is not uncommon for them to be disseminated for political, financial or entertainment reasons and sometimes they are so broad as to widely falsify the reality or image of a company, an institution or a person. Even information about the Church is not exempt from this type of content.

Pope Francis has referred to this issue on several occasions. In 2018, he dedicated a message to the 52nd World Day of Social Communications to the phenomenon of fake news. "What is at stake is our greed. *Fake news* often goes viral, spreading so fast that it is hard to stop, not because of the sense of sharing that inspires the social media, but because it appeals to the insatiable greed so easily aroused in human beings."<sup>13</sup>

Francis encouraged educational and legal initiatives to counter disinformation in the new communicative context. "Praiseworthy efforts are being made to create educational programmes aimed at helping people to interpret and assess information provided by the media, and teaching them to take an active part in unmasking falsehoods, rather than unwittingly contributing to the spread of disinformation. Praiseworthy too are those institutional and legal initiatives aimed at developing regulations for curbing the phenomenon (...)"<sup>14</sup>. The Pope also inspired the promotion of a journalism of peace that is free from fictions, falsehoods and verbal violence, seeking to understand the phenomena and disclose the translation of ongoing processes<sup>15</sup>.

In his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, Francis in turn drew attention to the dangers of fake news and the misuse of modern media, which can cause loneliness, manipulation, violence, isolation, progressive lack of contact with reality, difficulties in relationships or cyberbullying. "The proliferation of fake news is the expression of a culture that has lost its sense of truth and bends the facts to suit particular interests. The reputation of individuals is put in jeopardy through summary trials conducted online. The Church and her pastors are not exempt from this phenomenon."<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, in his Message for World Communications Day 2020, the Pope referred to a communication network in which destructive stories can be created that lead to the destruction of relationships. At the same time, he used the term deepfake, which is becoming increasingly popular, reaching an intimidating level and bringing with it a sophisticated level of image and sound manipulation<sup>17</sup>.

In 2022, during an audience for the international Catholic media consortium "Catholic fact-checking", Francis spoke of fake news in the context of Covid-19. Introducing the topic, he mentioned that "infodemia", a fear-based distortion of reality, is spreading along with the pandemic. It is a human right to receive verified information based on scientific data and not disseminated as fake news. He also encouraged media workers to never tire of fact-checking and searching for the truth.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Message of the Holy Father Francis for the 52nd World Communications Day, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 89.

<sup>17</sup> Message of the Holy Father Francis for the 54th World Communications Day.

<sup>18</sup> Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to participants in the meeting promoted by the international consortium of Catholic Media "Catholic fact-checking", Vatican 2022, <https://tiny.pl/cwbr7>.

In the same year, the Pope addressed a message to the participants of the meeting of the international organisation SIGNIS, which operates in 140 countries around the world. The theme of the meeting was peace in the digital world. Francis recalled that sometimes digital media become toxic places, an area of hate speech and fake news. He encouraged proper media education and the development of a critical sense, so that society can counter lies and misinformation.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

Fake news and deepfakes are relatively new pieces of the global communication puzzle, and professionals in the field of manipulation are keen to use these tools. The end result of these activities is disinformation, which sometimes assumes gigantic proportions, misleading not only individuals but entire societies. According to the ITAL Communications 2023 - CENSIS report, 76.5 per cent of Italians believe that fake news is increasingly sophisticated and difficult to detect, 20.2 per cent believe they do not have the necessary skills to expose it and 61.1 per cent believe they have only some of these skills. Only a minority (18.7%) are convinced that they are able to immediately recognise a fake.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, artificial intelligence brings many advantages in the world of marketing and media, while its use to manipulate videos represents a new challenge for the world of communication. The inappropriate and unethical use of this tool can lead to enormous confusion among the viewers of media messages. In addition, artificial intelligence brings a paradigm shift and changes processes in many sectors (education, health, finance, technology, shopping). Therefore, it is very important to deepen the understanding of the phenomena of fake news and deepfake and to pursue the truth in informational messages. The Church is also taking concrete measures to prevent the negative effects of these processes; media education is therefore becoming a huge challenge.

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<sup>19</sup> Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Participants in The Signis World Congress, Vatican 2022, <https://tiny.pl/cwbr7>.

<sup>20</sup> Disinformazione e fake news in Italia, Terzo rapporto ITAL Communications – CENSIS, 2023, 5-6.

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