

CORONAVIRUS REPORTING AND FAKE NEWS ABOUT THE PANDEMIC IN SLOVAK ONLINE MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Many people use the digital space as a primary source of information, which has undoubtedly been reinforced by the global pandemic caused by the coronavirus COVID-19. Restrictive measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus and the subsequent lockdown have caused people to limit their social contacts and to work and learn from their homes. News disseminated in the online space, on the web, social media or social networks, became their primary sources of information, not only about the coronavirus, but also about social events at home and abroad. The online media and social networks have been flooded with information on the subject of the coronavirus, which has also been exploited by the spreaders of fake news. During the pandemic, we witnessed a massive wave of disinformation, and the identification of fake news and hoaxes by recipients became a serious problem. The aim of this paper is to use the theoretical background and research results to identify differences in reporting on the topic of coronavirus in the typologically different online media Denník N and Zem & Vek. We focused on the form in which the selected websites report on the topic of coronavirus and whether there is a suspicion of the presence of false information and hoaxes in the published journalistic speeches.

Keywords: *fake news, hoax, COVID-19 pandemic, online news, online portal*

INTRODUCTION

We live in an era of a digital revolution, characterized by easy access to both the acquisition and dissemination of information in a global context. In addition to the large media houses, alternative or opposition media are trying to gain the attention of the audience. While, on the one hand, there is constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression and the right to information in developed democracies, in today's primarily online media and social networks, we are faced with a phenomenon that threatens fundamental human rights and freedoms [1]. This is the dissemination of fake news, disinformation, hoaxes and hate speech, particularly in the environment of the Internet and social networks. The emergence of the global digital space is shaping the world of information and bringing with it numerous challenges, but also risks. In September 2019, twenty countries around the world endorsed an initiative by Reporters Without Borders

to stop the spread of fake news and to make internet providers more accountable in terms of content credibility and information plurality, with the aim of avoiding information chaos. In the fight against fake news, the spread of disinformation and propaganda on social networks, Twitter and Facebook have also joined the fight by shutting down thousands of fake accounts in China, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. The authorities of the European Union and its Member States, non-governmental organisations and other actors are also taking their own initiatives and actions.

Whereas in the past the world was influenced by the industrial revolution, we are now witnessing an information revolution. A specific feature of today's times is the ubiquitous information overload [2]. This makes it easy for the recipients of news to obtain information, but difficult for them to filter it, interpret it and draw conclusions from it. This phenomenon is reinforced by the use of multimedia devices, especially smartphones and tablets with internet connection, which allow the previously passive recipient to engage in the creation and publication of media content. The passive recipient has thus become an active recipient.

FAKE NEWS, HOAXES AND JOURNALISM

When the phrase 'fake news' was declared the word of the year in 2017 by the *Collins English Dictionary*, it referred primarily to the public statements and statuses of the US ex-president Donald Trump, who used the term with particular popularity and very frequently in his tweets [3]. Although we were already familiar with the term fake news, due to Trump's efforts to label unfavourable, usually critical reactions to his statuses with fake news, as well as the very presence of fake news and half-truths in his presidential campaign, the phrase was particularly resonant in the media space and in the public sphere. According to the *Collins English Dictionary*, use of the phrase fake news in the media has increased by more than 365% since 2016. However, it cannot be said to have disappeared from contemporary public discourse. It is no less frequently heard from the lips of politicians and is also heard in statements by national and supranational institutions or non-profit organisations.

According to T. Škarba, fake news is published information that mimics news and other journalistic formats. Fake news is deliberately and demonstrably untrue and is intended to manipulate, mislead, gain financial profit or entertain the recipient. Fake news does not include unintentional reporting errors that have been published as a result of human error [4]. Fake news, like hoaxes, also focuses extensively on health topics. Their aim is usually to sell alternative medicine products or to gain advertising revenue. In order to reduce the income of the end-users of the benefits of the disinformation scene, an initiative *www.konspiratori.sk* was set up in Slovakia, which has created a list of websites with disinformation and questionable content. It warns advertisers to be careful where their advertising is displayed, not to support the creation of misinformation with their funding and not to associate their brand with questionable content.

When the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic hit the world in 2020, society and media discourse also began to talk about a pandemic of misinformation, hoaxes, half-truths and propaganda. The Dutch media theorist M. Deuze stated: “It is perhaps also not surprising, from this point of view, that most of the debates and discussions about the pandemic do not just concern the virus and its impact, but focus especially on the roles of expert information provision, news coverage, government communications, and social media. It is clear that the coronavirus pandemic is a mediatized event as much as it is a virus that infects millions of people around the world.” [5] On the other hand, as J. Višňovský and J. Radošinská stated, “the moment when the COVID-19 pandemic became a global problem can be seen as a breaking point – suddenly, journalists and other media professionals realised it was necessary to seek new heroes and create new types of stories; all that while trying to process what was happening in a comprehensible manner. Of course, their not-so-professional counterparts, while still making their profit by spreading fake news and disinformation, started to explore the quickly worsening situation in accordance with their own agendas. As a result, a COVID-19 'infodemic' was born.” [6].

One of the first fake news stories regarding the coronavirus that spread on social media was that wearing protective gear such as face shields and respirators slowed reflexes and dulled the senses due to inhaling carbon dioxide. Another unconfirmed piece of information was that the virus was artificially created in laboratories. The United States blamed China for its escape from the laboratories, while Russian and Iranian officials in turn blamed the Americans. Other hoaxes have claimed that the coronavirus is spread by 5G networks and killed by alcohol, or that testing is a covert method of creating a gateway of infection to the brain, or that the coronavirus does not exist at all. There are hundreds of misinformation and hoaxes about the coronavirus. Similarly, the development of the coronavirus vaccine and its application has triggered another wave of misinformation, spread primarily through social networks, which has resulted in a lower uptake of vaccination in some countries. Back in January 2021, the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic set up a web portal www.slovenskoproticovidu.sk to provide information on vaccination, vaccines, their benefits, but also possible side effects. The website also features personalities who have decided to support the information campaign with the central theme “vaccine is freedom” [7]. Publicly known authorities, including the President of the Slovak Republic, Zuzana Čaputová, are taking part in the campaign. The Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic has also joined the fight against vaccination-related hoaxes through its Facebook account, which has more than 185 000 followers to date.

Social media, especially social networks, are an extremely effective means of spreading disinformation and hoaxes and a prerequisite for their further spread [8]. There are several reasons for this. Social networks are an extremely popular medium for the young and middle generation, who use them not only as a tool for disseminating information, but also as an information source. The level of critical thinking and the willingness to verify information from multiple sources are

relatively low, which makes the recipient prone to trust misinformation and conspiracies and spread them – either consciously or unconsciously further. In his research, P. Krajčovič focused on whether Slovak Internet users had encountered hoaxes related to COVID-19, whether they were able to identify these messages and how they affected them. The results showed that almost 80% of the 429 respondents had encountered fake news about the coronavirus. According to the survey, only half of the respondents (52%) were able to detect the hoaxes, 38% of the respondents did not know that they were reading a fake news report and 10% of the respondents did not know that they were reading a hoax at all. They only found out later. The survey also showed that almost half of the respondents (47%) were concerned after reading the hoax. Based on the results of the survey, we can assess that Internet users have a problem deciphering fake news in the digital space, and we expect this situation to get worse [9].

During the pandemic, interest in online and television news increased; on the other hand, the weaknesses of media organizations were revealed during this time. For example, incompetence and unpreparedness in reporting on medical issues due to the absence of specialised reporters, as well as the publication of misinformation and hoaxes, which have contributed to a decline in the credibility of the news media as a whole. According to the Reuters Institute – Digital News Report 2020 survey, 28% of respondents in Slovakia trust the news, with trust falling by 5% year-on-year. This was not only the case in Slovakia, but also in other European countries [10].

GOALS AND METHODOLOGY

Based on theoretical background and empirical findings, the aim of the research was to investigate differences in reporting on coronavirus in selected online media. We were interested in the extent to which and in what way the topic of COVID-19 was reported in the online media *www.dennikn.sk* compared to the website *www.zemavek.sk* in the selected time period.

The daily *Denník N* was established in 2014. Its establishment was preceded by the departure of disgruntled journalists from the daily *SME* following the entry of the financial group Penta into the ownership structure of the publishing house Petit Press, a. s., which also publishes the national daily *SME*. and of which the portal *www.dennikn.sk* was visited by 1,763,131 real users in March 2021 [11].

Zem & Vek is a Slovak magazine published at monthly intervals. It was founded in 2013 under the publishing house Sofian s. r. o. and the editor-in-chief is Tibor Rostás. Both the magazine and the portal, together with its editor-in-chief, have been repeatedly criticised for spreading conspiracy theories, Russian propaganda, factual misrepresentation, unfair use of sources, as well as subliminal incitement to hatred against minorities. The portal *www.konspiratori.sk* included the online version of the *Zem & Vek* magazine in the ranking of sites with questionable content, with *www.zemavek.sk* ranking thirteenth [12]. It is therefore

not a traditional news portal, but we dare to assume that there is an awareness of it in society and that it has a spectrum of readers.

We have chosen the time period of February 1, 2021 to February 28, 2021 for our research. This is an available purposive sample. The two media outlets studied published 363 journalistic speeches related to the topic of COVID-19 during this interval. The portal *www.dennikn.sk* published 218 journalistic reports during this period, while the online media outlet *www.zemavek.sk* published 145 journalistic reports related to the topic of coronavirus.

We analyzed the published journalistic reports of the selected media in the specified time period through quantitative-qualitative content analysis. We recorded the following analytical categories:

- coronavirus-related press coverage and numbers,
- authorship of the journalistic report,
- the length of the headline (number of words) and the length of the journalistic report (number of words),
- the tone of the journalist's report - positive, negative, neutral,
- the presence of information graphics and audiovisual material on the websites studied,
- and the presence of fake news, misinformation or hoaxes.

We subjected all articles published during the period under study to the C.R.A.A.P test. We focused on five categories – timeliness, reliability, authority, intention and accuracy. The Czech portal for verifying facts and detecting fake news considers the “C.R.A.A.P test” as one of the simplest tools for verifying the objectivity of information [13].

RESULTS

Based on the results of our research, we can conclude that the news website *www.dennikn.sk* takes a more objective approach to information about the coronavirus pandemic and provides a greater amount of sources and information than the digital website *www.zemavek.sk*. The *Denník N* portal published more stories than *www.zemavek.sk* in the period under study. The outputs of *www.dennikn.sk* were also more credible because of the fact that, out of 218 published articles, only 22 outputs were recorded in which the author of the journalist's report was not mentioned. Of these 22 reports, 21 were published in the *Minute by Minute* section of the website, where the portal publishes short agency reports (TASR, SITA, CTK, AP). One report cited the US portal *www.washingtonpost.com* as the source. A considerably bigger problem regarding the attribution of journalistic reports was observed in the case of the digital website *www.zemavek.sk*. Out of 145 journalistic speeches, as many as 77 had no attribution, which is almost 50%.

Regarding the length of headlines, *www.dennikn.sk* had headlines with an average length of 14.5 words and *www.zemavek.sk* published headlines with an average length of 10.4 words in the period under review. Thus, *Dennik N* published longer headlines. The same was the case for the total length of the published journalistic reports. The average length of all published reports from the news website *www.dennikn.sk* was 1,753 words, while the average length of the journalistic reports from the digital website *www.zemavek.sk* was 672 words. Thus, the daily *Dennik N* published more journalistic reports in terms of scope than the *www.zemavek.sk* website.

In the research, we also focused on whether the author of the journalistic report focused on publishing positive, neutral, or negative information (the perception of the journalistic output) in relation to the topic of coronavirus. After evaluating the results, we found that the news website *www.dennikn.sk* published 100 journalistic reports with negative information related to the coronavirus, 79 with neutral information, and in 39 cases, the journalistic report was an attempt to deliver a positive message related to the topic of the coronavirus. The proportion of negative news out of the total was 46%. In the case of the website *www.zemavek.sk*, we found that out of a total of 145 journalistic reports, 99 were negative, 38 had neutral information, and only 8 were news stories that aimed to bring positive information on the topic of COVID-19. The proportion of negative news stories out of the total number of published stories was 68%.

Web publishing is characterised by the visualisation of information, in various forms. Whether it is photographs, illustrations, statistics or interactive information graphics. Audiovisual material and podcasts are no exception. In the case of *www.dennikn.sk*, one of the above-mentioned forms of graphical representation of information appeared in almost all the outputs examined. Only one journalistic report was published without any visual or audiovisual material. 210 journalistic outputs included a photograph, 65 included a graph and 6 pieces in the period under review included a table or statistics. Audiovisual material was included in 48 journalistic reports out of a total of 218, with 47 of the reports accompanied by a video and in one case the journalistic report was accompanied by a podcast. The digital website *www.zemavek.sk* published all the journalistic reports in the period under review, together with visual material, while out of 145 contributions, 143 included a photograph, in 6 cases a graph and only in one case did they use visual material in the form of a table. 15 journalistic reports were accompanied by a video. The podcast was not in any of the journalistic reports.

We subjected journalistic reports in the time period under study to the C.R.A.A.P test, which is one of the tools for identifying fake news. Based on the results, we found that the news website *www.dennikn.sk* erred in 74 cases out of a total of 218. These were journalistic reports where we found a problem in at least one of the five categories examined, which were timeliness, reliability, authority, intent, and accuracy. We did not find any doubt in the category of timeliness, as the media published up-to-date information regarding the

coronavirus pandemic in Slovakia and abroad. In 22 cases, there was a fault in the reliability category, with a lack of balance and plurality of opinion in the journalistic statements. In 22 cases, the stories did not mention the author. In 34 cases, we noted a problem in the category of intention, with the publication of a subjective opinion in the news report. In 10 journalistic reports we found doubt in the category of accuracy, when emotions appeared in the stories. We also subjected the digital website *www.zemavek.sk* to the same C.R.A.A.P test. According to the results, we can conclude that we found flaws in the different categories examined in a total of 140 journalistic reports out of a total of 145. In one case, up-to-date information was not published (it should be noted, however, that *www.zemavek.sk* is not a standard news website), in 82 journalistic reports we found doubts in the reliability category, while the articles lacked balance and plurality of opinion. In 77 cases, the posts did not include the name of the author. We found the highest level of misconduct in the category of intention, with 94 journalistic reports containing subjective opinions. In 90 cases, in the case of the *www.zemavek.sk* website, we registered a problem in the attribute of accuracy, when the contributions contained emotional lexis and grammatical errors. During the period under study, the digital website *www.zemavek.sk* published 11 journalistic reports in the Czech language.

CONCLUSION

The results of the research showed that the media studied approached reporting on the topic of coronavirus differently. The portal *www.dennikn.sk* published a larger number of journalistic reports with a larger scope and longer headlines than the website *www.zemavek.sk*. At the same time, *Dennik N*'s outputs included more photographs, information graphics and audiovisual material than the texts published on *www.zemavek.sk*. As regards the evaluation of the C.R.A.A.P test, it can be concluded that the threat of fake news and misinformation is significantly higher in the outputs of the *www.zemavek.sk* portal than those of the *www.dennikn.sk* website. The news website *Dennik N*, as one of many digital media outlets, reported on the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on a daily basis. It provided its recipients with news and journalism through agency reports, extended reports, commentaries, interviews and reports related to the coronavirus pandemic, while making longer journalistic reports available to readers only upon payment of a subscription fee. At the end of the day, a comprehensive journalistic speech emerged from the *Minute by Minute* service.

The topic of the coronavirus is also covered by the typologically different digital website *www.zemavek.sk*, which published significantly fewer journalistic reports compared to the news website *Dennik N*. Based on the results of our research, we have to conclude that in most cases the digital site listed *Zem & Vek* as the author and we do not know the author's exact identity. Our analysis also revealed that there is a suspicion of fake information in the case of published articles during the period under study. Doubts about the veracity of the information in the case of this digital website are also held by the portal

www.konspiratori.sk, other media, institutions, civil society associations and NGOs.

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were forced to isolate ourselves in our own homes and limit our contacts, while education, work and communication with loved ones moved online. Many people use social networks and digital media as their main source of information, where the threat of false information spreading is increasing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we encountered a massive wave of misinformation, which in some cases can be very dangerous. With the increasing number of fake news and the more sophisticated methods used by those spreading disinformation, the average recipient has difficulty navigating the information and discerning whether it is fake news or not [14].

It is essential that Internet users are aware of the risk of fake news in the digital space and seek out verified sources of information for important topics. As stated by A. Kačincová Predmerská, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, we can consider the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic, the Office of Public Health of the Slovak Republic, the portal *www.corona.gov.sk* as relevant sources, or we can trust scientists, doctors and state institutions [15]. Additionally, we should obtain information from reputable media that we believe are drawing on relevant sources. At the same time, it is essential that Internet users develop critical thinking skills and are able to detect fake news, or at least to assess where fake news, disinformation or hoaxes are suspected.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study was elaborated within a national research project supported by the Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and the Slovak Academy of Sciences (VEGA) No. 1/0283/20, titled 'Synergy of the Media Industry Segments in the Context of Critical Political Economy of Media'.

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