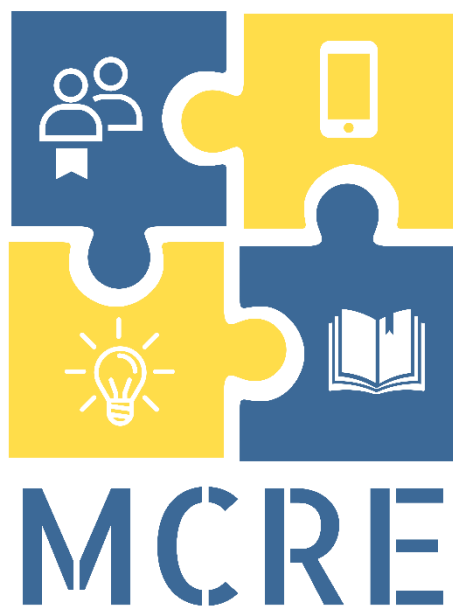




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MODULE 7: #fake news – analysing popular social media news

Developed by TUCEP

within the project

MCRE - Media literacy, critical viewing and CREative vision as effective learning
approach for people with fewer opportunities

THE PARTNERSHIP:





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1. AIM AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1.1. AIM OF THE MODULE

The module aims to support people with fewer opportunities (low-skilled adults, unemployed people, adults at poverty risks) to **identify** and **analyse popular fake news** circulating via **social platforms** and the **Internet**. In order to facilitate adults to achieve the module's objective, an overview on the different types of social media, as well as the benefits and risks from their use are presented.

Moreover, the module is focused on the main fields where fake news circulate on social networks and platforms providing some examples of popular fake news.

Finally, the module intends to analyse **how to spot fake news on social media** providing practical tips and explaining how to improve the needed skills to identify popular fake news.

1.2. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of the module, the learner should be able to:

- o be aware of the social media benefits and risks
- o identify whether the news circulating on social media are true or fake
- o analyse popular social media fake news
- o understand how to deal with popular fake news on social media

2. LEARNING CONTENT

Social media as a news source is the use of online social media platforms rather than moreover traditional media platforms to obtain news. Just as television turned people who listened to media content into watchers of media content in the period 1950s to 1980s, the emergence of social media has created a generation of media content creators.

As a participatory platform that allows for user-generated content and sharing content within one's own virtual network, using social media as a news source allows users to engage with news in a variety of ways, including:

- o Consume news
- o Discover news
- o Share or repost news
- o Post their own photos, videos, or reports of news
- o Comment on news



Using social media as a news source has become an increasingly more popular way for old and young adults alike to obtain information. There are ways that social media positively affects the world of news and journalism but it is important to acknowledge that there are also ways social media negatively affect the news that people consume such as fake news, biased news, and disturbing content.

For that reason, it is essential to be able to identify the nature of the news circulating on the social media and, in case you come across a fake news, understand how to deal with it.

2.1. SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS: IS IT TRUE OR FAKE?

Before learning how to distinguish real news from fake ones circulating on social media, it is worth spending few words on the potential, opportunities and risks of social media use as well as on the role of the news in the different types of social media.

2.1.1. Potential, opportunities, and risks of social media use

Based on the best known and accredited definition provided by Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, social media is “*a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content*”¹.

We can simplify the **concept** saying that social media are interactive technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks.

The main characteristic is therefore their **horizontality** in the creation and spread of content, which stands in contrast to the verticality of classic mass media. Unlike traditional media, indeed, in social media all involved people can create content and spread it being on the same level.

The widespread use of social media has brought about changes not only in the roles of communication, but also in the ways of communication: it is no longer a unilateral message of 'one to many' type, but a multidirectional message of 'many to many' or 'peer to peer' type. The 'monologue' becomes a 'dialogue' between users and, therefore, the sender and receiver switch in a continuous flow of roles, without hierarchies.

We can say that the different types of social media have the following common **characteristics**:

1. interactive Web 2.0 Internet-based applications
2. User-generated content, such as text posts or comments, digital photos or videos, and data generated through all online interactions.

¹ “Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media”, 2010, Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein.



3. Users create service-specific profiles for the website or app that are designed and maintained by the social media organization.
4. development of online social networks by connecting a user's profile with those of other individuals or groups.



Image 1 - Created by TUCEP



Overall, we can summarise the figures for the most popular social media websites as of January 2022² as follows:

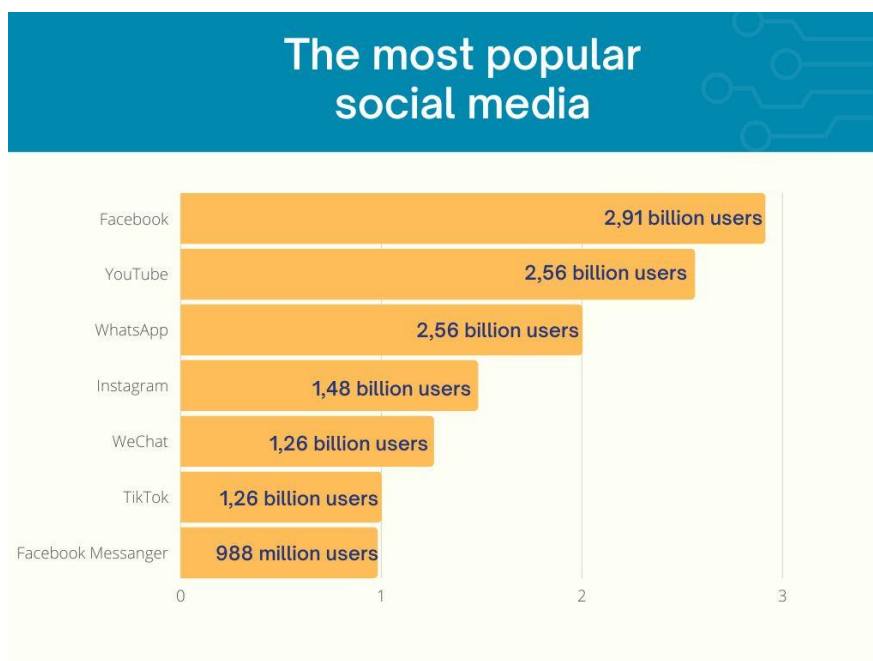


Image 2 - Created by TUCEP

² "Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2022, ranked by number of monthly active users" - <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>

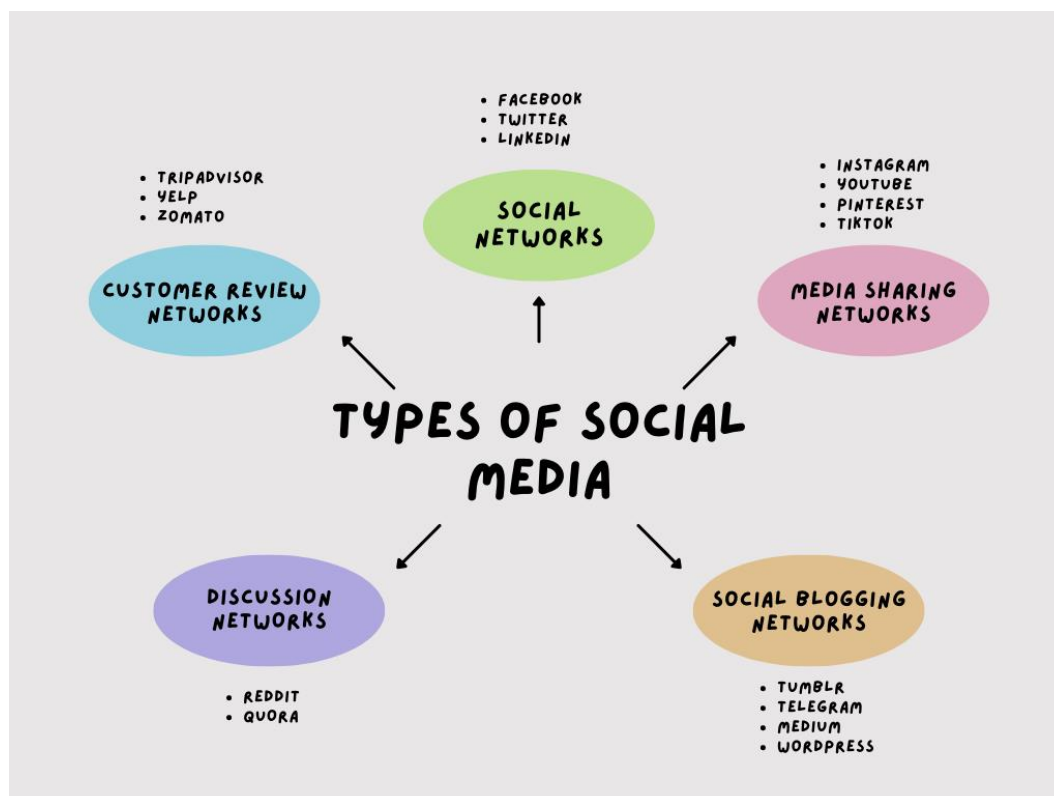


Image 3 - Created by TUCEP

A breakdown of social media can be made according to the services they offer. The most common are listed below with some examples:

➤ **SOCIAL NETWORKS**

The aim is sharing ideas, opinions and contents with other users. Facebook and Twitter are the best examples as well as LinkedIn, although it is for more professional use and therefore has features that make it more complicated to use. Below, a short description of the most common social networks is provided:

- **FACEBOOK:** many people use this platform to connect with family, friends and brands. You can share status updates, photos, videos, links to content and polls.
- **TWITTER:** similarly to Facebook, this platform is used to post photos, videos, links, polls and more promoting a concise and direct communication. The most relevant difference is represented by the size of the message: unlike other social networks, you can use only 280 characters for each message.
- **LINKEDIN:** it is a great place for professionals to connect and building professional relationships, sharing information, finding new jobs, and recruiting new candidates.



➤ MEDIA SHARING NETWORKS

This type of social media is used by people to **share multimedia contents** such as images, videos and other content with one another. The best examples of media networks are:

- **INSTAGRAM:** is a free and online multimedia-sharing application where people can upload photos and videos sharing them with a select group of friends. This application allows friends to interact by posting comments and likes to the photo or videos shared.
- **YOUTUBE:** is the second-largest search engine in the world as well as one of the most used to search and watch videos covering a wide range of topics.
- **PINTEREST:** is a visually-focused site for sharing creative ideas and products.
- **TIKTOK:** is a social media platform for creating, sharing and discovering videos up to 60 seconds long. It is a platform used especially by young people to express themselves through singing, dancing, comedy, and lip-syncing.

➤ SOCIAL BLOGGING NETWORKS

These social networks allow people to **share information** about **news, events, and timely or relevant topics**. They also address themes that matter to their target audience. Social blogs let you share information in real-time, a feature they have in common with social media. Social blogging networks are one of the more unique types of social media because they require creating constant content to publish and a regular user's involvement requiring more work than other social platforms.

Two examples of social blogging networks are:

- **TUMBLR:** is a virtual blogging and microblogging tool that allows users share short text content with multimedia elements such as links, images, quotations, drawings, etc.
- **TELEGRAM:** Besides a messaging app, Telegram is one of the emerging tools for creating public or private channels where live audio/video and text on a wide range of topics can be broadcast.
- **MEDIUM:** is a blogging platform created by the co-founders of Twitter, with the same structure but where ideas and stories are shared without the limit of characters and not only for friends, even though the access is only through invitation.
- **WORDPRESS:** is an open-source content management system that makes easy to create and manage a website or a blog covering a wide range of topics used by whoever wants to keep the online presence in the web sharing news and information.

➤ DISCUSSION NETWORKS

Through these social platforms people worldwide have the opportunity to discuss news, information, and opinions about a wide range of topics or problems from finance to politics to funny news. People see content discussions and join them to



see what people are commenting or saying. The best known examples of discussion networks are:

- **REDDIT**: is a social news website and forum where content is socially cared and promoted by site members through voting. Indeed, the name comes from the words “I read it” because it is assumed that people read the opinions, thoughts, information and experiences posted in and provide their feedback participating in the discussion.
- **QUORA**: is a global online platform for asking questions and providing answers related to a wide range of topics. The content is generated by users as the people using this platform create, edit and organize the answers.

➤ **CUSTOMER REVIEW NETWORKS:**

Through this category of social media, users can find out, share and review different information about a variety of products, **services or brands**. When a business has positive reviews on these networks, their claims turn more credible because reviews on these networks means the social proof. These networks offer a place to users for reviewing different kinds of products and services that they have used. The best review networks are TripAdvisor, Yelp or Zomato.

In a nutshell, a summary of the variety of social media categorised *by purpose* is presented in the table below:

PURPOSE	TYPE OF SOCIAL MEDIA	EXAMPLES
Debate and discuss a topic and share opinions on Internet-related topics	Discussion forums	Reddit Quora
Watch videos	Video platforms	YouTube TikTok Facebook Instagram stories and reels
Forming communities	Community platforms	Facebook groups Slack
Sharing short messages both privately and public lasting 24 h	Disappearing content	Instagram stories Snapchat Facebook stories
Listen to live talks about several topics	Audio platforms	Twitter Spotify Clubhouse
Broadcasting live videos organised either by a single person or in the form of conferences with numerous speakers	Live streams	YouTube, Instagram live rooms Facebook live TikTok Twitch



PURPOSE	TYPE OF SOCIAL MEDIA	EXAMPLES
Collaborating with professionals	Business platforms	LinkedIn Twitter
Seeking information and inspiration for a wide range of things (shopping, travel, sports, food, weather, etc.).	Inspirational Platforms	Pinterest, YouTube Instagram Blogs
Broadcasting news and information	Informative platforms	Telegram

2.1.2. What are the benefits from social media use?

It is undeniable that nowadays everyone is on some social media platform, regardless of age, gender, social and cultural background or education and employment status. Teenagers on TikTok, influencers, adults and small businesses on Instagram and Facebook, or professionals on LinkedIn: social media is the first option that comes to mind when looking for opportunities for connection as well as information in any field.

Generally, people use social media at personal level to keep in touch with friends and extended family. Some people use various social media applications to network career opportunities, find people across the globe with like-minded interests, and share their thoughts, feelings, insights, and emotions. Those who engage in these activities are part of a virtual social network.

Social media is also an indispensable tool for businesses that use the platforms to find and engage with customers, drive sales through advertising and promotion, assess consumer trends, and offer customer service or support.

Social media, if used intelligently, can bring many benefits. Being the best form of direct contact with the target audience, these platforms have all the credentials to improve anyone's life.



Image 4 - Created by TUCEP

Here are **some benefits** of using various social media intelligently:

- **Building relationships and staying connected.** Social media make it easy to find groups of like-minded people or make new friends. Finding a friendly community can help us feel valued and accepted. Social media is also an easy way to maintain existing relationships with family and friends who are far away from us, by sending messages, sharing photos, making phone calls or video calls to stay in touch. On social media, you can reach out to new connections and start developing relationships with them as well. This level of connectedness is a unique advantage of digital media.
- **Knowledge growth.** A variety of topics, old and new, are discussed in social media. Reading or participating in conversations can bring up important topics to pay attention to and to discuss with people you trust. In addition, social media gives us the opportunity to join sector-specific groups to participate in discussions, learn and grow.
- **Spreading news.** Social media is one of the fastest means of spreading news from all over the world. On the one hand this can be overwhelming, but on the other hand it keeps us informed about important events. Moreover, social media provides the opportunity for any person to quickly promote and spread the news of an event or happening both locally and globally.
- **Learning and education.** Social media is a great place for all people to find experts, professionals, tutorials and training programmes to learn new skills and knowledge as well as to improve your competences through the free online courses, content and webinars offered on the web. Many influencers openly share



their knowledge to help others grow. It is also an ideal space for companies to advertise their services and products.

- **Offering/receiving support.** Social media is a great tool to raise awareness for an important cause or to support others pursuing important projects of public interest. In the private sphere, social media is a tool to offer and receive support for work you are doing, such as starting a new business or sharing projects. It is also a means to find contacts in your field of interest by sharing your knowledge and skills and acquiring new ones.
- **Fostering soft skills like empathy.** When people share personal or troubling things online, there is an opportunity to show empathy by supporting, encouraging others and showing interest in what is happening to them through messages and comments. Furthermore, observing how others overcome difficult circumstances can be inspiring and help us to see things from a new perspective.
- **Finding your voice.** Social media give people of all ages the opportunity to develop a platform open to a wide audience to share information, news and opinions. This helps people build self-confidence, acquire new communication skills and quickly spread important and positive messages.

2.1.3. ...and the risks?

The high accessibility, speed of information spreading and low costs make social media the fastest and most easily accessible means of communication and information for everyone. The arrival of new technologies for everyone and of an accessible Internet network, in fact, has transformed users from mere consumers of content to active producers of it: everyone can create new content that anyone can edit, share and distribute at will.

This is one of the main reasons why social media can become easy prey to fake news created and circulated by unscrupulous users.

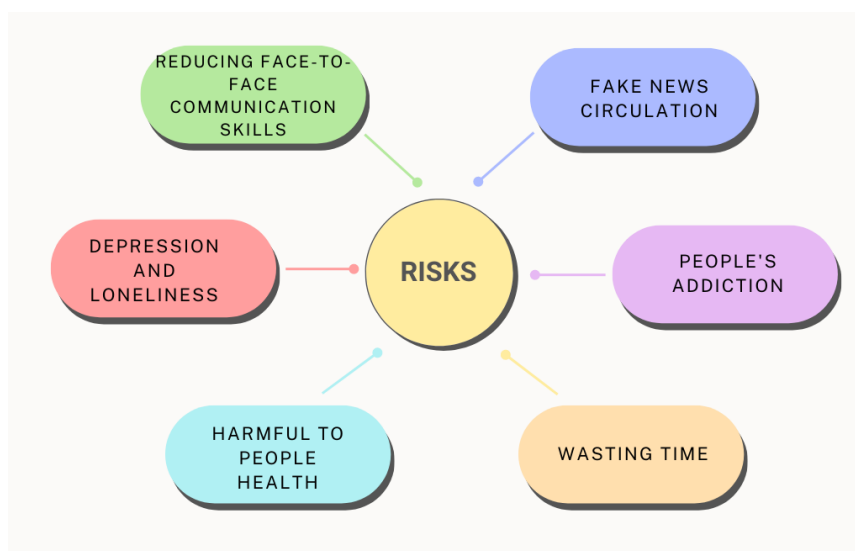


Image 5 - Created by TUCEP



While social media has its positive side, as explained above, there is also a negative side linked to several **risks**, as follows:

- **Reducing face-to-face communication skills.** As the majority of people use social media to communicate with others, One of the worst aspects is that it reduces the ability to communicate face to face. Everyone used social media to interact with others, and as a result, they gradually can damage their ability to interact in person, ability that includes a set of other personal skills. A lot of experiences show that people who communicated over social media did not learn how to interact face to face and, consequently, the physical communication became extremely difficult for them. Based on scientific studies, this can increase the chances of being affected by bipolar and other mental sufferings.
- **Fake news.** Social media plays a significant role in the spreading of fake news as people easily create false social media posts and share them with others worldwide, spreading them to groups. In addition, the lack of a verification system makes it even easier to produce fake news on several topics and post it on social media. Other people can also share and pass it on to other people and groups, spreading fake news around the globe.
- **People's addiction.** One of the worst aspects of social media is the ability to become addicted to it, and this represents a severe global risk of social media. Most individuals use social media so much that they become addicted to it. They are constantly browsing through their newsfeeds and contributing to them. Most individuals are constantly browsing through their newsfeeds developing a significant addiction to it, regardless their age. The introduction of social media into people's lives greatly promoted their exclusion from society and the natural world. Living like in a virtual bubble, many people take refuge in social media to avoid seeing what is happening in the real world around them, thinking they can escape the consequences.
- **Wasting time.** Many people use social media platforms for various reasons: to relax, for personal or professional purposes. However, this activity requires a certain amount of time, bearing in mind that when you start browsing or scrolling through social media, time passes so quickly that you do not realise it. Without demonising the use of social media, it is therefore clear that it would become so easy to waste valuable time on social media, time that could instead devote to more productive and healthy activities.
- **Harmful to people health.** Social media also damages people's health. The excessive use of social media platforms has been linked to a number of health problems in people. People become sedentary due to the constant use of social media platforms at all hours of the day and night. This encourages an increase in obesity, as more and more social media users prefer to spend time in front of mobile devices rather than walking outside or participating in physical activities and games. This causes a number of problems in their daily health routine and exposes them to various harmful disorders.
- **Depression and loneliness.** People who spend too much time on social media often become depressed and lonely. In fact, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, social media has become the main tool for interpersonal communication, fostering loneliness. Sometimes we believe we have a multitude



of friends based on the followers we have on social media, only to discover that, in reality, we are very lonely.

Furthermore, the amount of time we spend in front of devices has a significant impact on our brains: it generates not only depression but also other symptoms of poor mental health, from anxiety and insomnia to chronic stress and lack of self-esteem.

2.1.4. Social media and news

In order to be able to detect fake news in social media, it is important to know the meaning of '**news**' concept and to identify what can make it popular.

Potentially any event can be news and becomes news when it attracts the interest of the public: we can therefore say that **what makes an event news is its relationship with the audience.**

At this point, the question comes up: what are the characteristics that make news interesting, and therefore, popular in the eyes of the public?

There are **criteria**, called 'news values', that allow us to assess the ability of a news item to capture the interest and curiosity of the reader/listener. Let us look at some of these criteria:

- SOMETHING NEW: if an event is repeated with a certain frequency and the same characteristics, so that it is no longer new, it is unlikely to capture the public's interest and lose popularity.
- CURRENT events that have happened or have been discovered recently enough to create the curiosity of readers. It is an important concept on which the competitiveness of an editorial/media product is also based.
- CLOSELINESS: the closer an event is to the readers (in terms of geography, psychology, culture, etc.) the more likely it is to attract the public's attention and become potentially popular.
- SIZE: the larger the size of the event, the more effect it can have on the audience of readers/viewers
- DRAMATICITY: news that evokes strong emotions or impressions creates the public's curiosity much more than boring news.
- PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES: news that has a direct impact on people's everyday lives is potentially more popular than news that has no relation to everyday life (e.g., increase in the cost of living, new regulations that bring about changes in people's lives, economic crises).

Nowadays, social media play a key role in the spread of news. Indeed, one of the most characteristic aspects of today's society is **speed**, and this is also true in the field of information: social media have become so popular because the news they provide is spread so quickly, they are constantly being updated, and they are a perfect tool for keeping up to date with what is happening in every part of the world.



Although social media have brought about positive changes, we should not underestimate the negative consequences. The rapid and immediate spread of information is not only for content that is considered 'valid' or 'true', but also for fake news that makes people fall into the trap of misinformation.

A large amount of fake news circulates on social networks and, even if not all of it is intentional, for others, articles with invented or attractive titles are created to catch the user's interest to click and open the link (click-baiting phenomenon), thus generating audience and gaining visibility.

We can, therefore, state that the advent of social media in relation to information is a double-edged sword.

The advantage and disadvantage of news circulation in social media is its main characteristic, namely **disintermediation**. Information is posted and shared on the web in real time and without any filter or control, since every Internet user can potentially be a content producer.

This freedom to produce content through social media makes people feel free to express their thoughts, opinions, values and moods without having to suffer consequences. This leads to people informing themselves very lightly and believing that they have a very valid opinion on a certain topic that they actually know nothing about, simply because they have read articles on social media.

So, what is the credibility of a news story circulating on social media based on?

The **credibility** and reliability of an online content publisher is not given by his skills or experience as an editor or as a professional in the field to which the news refers, but by his visibility built through his ability to generate curiosity in potential readers.

What makes it difficult to check whether a news item on social media is reliable and comes from a credible source, is the great freedom of speech that allows a huge amount of content to be produced on the web.

Moreover, unlike the news published in traditional newspapers, the information circulating on the Web and social media is not required to follow journalistic deontology and is not even controlled by source verification systems.

All this corroborates the statement of the American poet and academic, Charles Simic, who defined the historical period in which we are living as 'the Age of Ignorance'¹³ where *we are surrounded by disinformation conveyed through tools such as the web and social media*.

2.1.5. How to identify a fake news circulating on the social media

As illustrated so far, it is uncontested that fake news finds fertile ground on social media for a number of reasons mentioned in the previous paragraphs. According to the Oxford

¹³ Age of ignorance, 2012, Charles Simic, New York Review of Books



University's 'Router Institute Digital news report 2021'⁴, which surveyed around 46 countries, the credibility of news read on social media remains high, and Facebook has been recognised as the main social media producer of fake news.

Although most people claim to know what fake news is and many think they are able to distinguish it from real news, the question arises as to why the phenomenon of misinformation is still widespread.

The answer lies in the fact that people are overconfident in their own abilities, but in reality not everyone can recognise true information from false information circulating on social media.

How, then, can we recognise fake news circulating on social media?

Since social media is a public platform where anyone can post anything without being responsible for fact-checking, it is up to users to distinguish misinformation from disinformation. **What makes misinformation different from disinformation is the intent of the person or channel sharing it.**

MISINFORMATION	DISINFORMATION
<p>Misinformation is false or inaccurate information.</p> <p>It is classified as 'false or misleading content, including hoaxes, conspiracy theories, fabricated news, click-baiting headlines and even satire'.</p> <p>Misinformation DOES NOT HAVE the deliberate purpose of misleading.</p> <p>Instead, it has the purpose of shaping or changing public opinion on a given topic.</p>	<p>Disinformation is false information which HAS the deliberate purpose of misleading by intentionally getting the facts wrong.</p> <p>It can be spread using many of the same tactics as misinformation: hoaxes, click-bait, made-up news. Disinformation is created to deceive.</p>

There are several reasons why social media accounts of individuals or even companies can spread misinformation. It could be to increase the effectiveness of social media marketing, increase online traffic, increase followers of one's page or company, provoke an emotional reaction or create a distraction.

Misinformation can be dangerous on social media because the enormous amount of information and the length of the readers' attention threshold allows fake news creators to be in control.

If you want to become more media literate and be able to identify fake news, there are questions you can ask yourself such as:

- ✓ Does the account that shared the post have emotional or professional interests in these claims?

⁴ https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf



- ✓ What does the content claim to focus on?
- ✓ Is the information reasonable?
- ✓ Is it reliable or does it mention reliable sources?
- ✓ Why is the news important to the owner of the account that shared it?

2.2. POPULAR SOCIAL MEDIA FAKE NEWS

Social media and the new forms of relationships associated with them have become the main space for exchanging information, opinions, establishing relationships, but also for working and learning. Through digital platforms, information is created and circulated by anyone, private and public relationships are transformed, and social and political phenomena are dominantly influenced.

At the same time, these tools have manifested their power in transmitting information and news of general interest, and in reporting facts of public relevance with extraordinary speed.

Over time, all this has facilitated the proliferation of popular fake news in different fields and spheres of public and private life.

2.2.1. Most popular fields

What are the fields where fake news is most frequent and consequently popular?

Based on the Country Report elaborated at transnational level by the MCRE partner organisations, focused on the analysis of fake news in six EU countries (Romania, Italy, Cyprus, Poland, Portugal, Spain), it was found out that the main fields where fake news circulate are as follows:

- politics and government
- health
- environment
- economy and business
- entertainment and sport.

2.2.2. Some examples

The continuous flow of information shared in real time has turned social media into a fundamental element of our society and a means of information on national and international current events. Thanks to the multitude of social platforms available, everyone has the opportunity to stay constantly updated in real time on news and trends in political events through content of all kinds, such as articles, posts, videos, live streams, tweets and messages shared by private citizens, journalists and government institutions. All this allows us to monitor the situation on the field and possible political developments.



In the field of **politics**, there are countless examples of fake news circulating at historic and crucial moments both local/national and global level.

Russia-Ukraine war

Definitely, the most current example concerns the role of social media in the Russia-Ukraine conflict: it is the first to be witnessed not only by the traditional media, but also by social media, which have a horizontal and multidirectional communication, where governments and bodies dialogue with the population and simultaneously citizens dialogue with them.

Since the beginning of the war, social media has become a means of both communication and information, and political propaganda in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The news shocked the world and, rightly, monopolised the headlines in newspapers, print media and on digital platforms.

The flow of information is no longer shaped as in the past exclusively through the traditional media (such as television, newspapers, or radio): there are no longer only pictures taken by photo-reporters or videos of reporters in the areas where the war is taking place, but every person who is inside the conflict can document what is happening simply through their smartphone and then share it with the rest of the world via Internet.

Indeed, platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and Telegram are used to tell the story and first-person experience of war. Sometimes it happens that citizens share the news even before the media arrive directly on the scene, so as to provide the facts even more in real time.

This feature represents a risk for the reliability of the news circulating on social media: on the one hand, the understanding of the war, and what is happening, is facilitated by social media; on the other hand, being a tool in the hands of anyone, it can be the object of propaganda and manipulation, as well as unintentional disinformation.

In fact, information, both true and false, is spread via digital platforms much faster and events are filmed in real time.

The war in Ukraine represents the moment when TikTok became, for the first time, a leading social media in shaping public discourse and opinion. This generated a stream of content that was shared and went viral, much of it even unverified. It is a chaos in which everything appears decontextualised and it is difficult to distinguish between fiction and reality. However, this is the way TikTok is structured: an endless stream of short videos, catchy but not particularly edited, where not only content from the profiles one has decided to follow appears, but everything that the platform's algorithm identifies as interesting to the user.



2016 U.S presidential elections

The 2016 US presidential election has well documented the impact of the ability to spread false information through the social platforms. This phenomenon takes advantage of the power of social media, allowing anyone to reach an audience of millions with content that is unchecked or fact-checked.

When it comes to finding breaking news, Twitter is the first place that comes to mind: this social media was, in fact, criticised for its role in the 2016 US presidential election. A study conducted by researchers at Oxford University claims that Twitter was full of polarising and conspiratorial content during the 2016 presidential election. The content included links from Russian, WikiLeaks and junk news sources. The content used misleading information to influence readers' understanding of public issues by divisive and inflammatory rhetoric.

Although social media users shared a lot of political content, the amount of political news and information written by professionals was consistently lower than the amount of extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, fake news and other forms of junk news.

As a result, the circulated fake news created considerable disorientation among readers who were pressured to respect or hate one candidate over another on the basis of often emotional appeals.

Covid-19

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of social media as a means of finding news increased considerably. A large percentage of the population looked for information about the pandemic through Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. People had both an urgency to understand what was going on in the unreal time they were experiencing and felt the need to be kept up-to-date. However, being unable to assess whether the news circulating on social media came from authoritative and reliable sources, they fell victim to the fake news and conspiracy theories that had found fertile ground on the many social platforms.

The spread of disinformation and misinformation about COVID-19 has very serious repercussions, putting public health at risk and directly affecting people's lives.

The fake news that has been circulating since the start of the pandemic, posing a serious danger to people's health, is essentially aimed at

- promoting fake products and services (e.g., fake Covid-19 tests and vaccines)
- encouraging a false sense of security (e.g., misleading information on treatments)
- creating suspicion and generating doubt about official guidelines and sources.



2.3. THE CRITICAL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO AVOID SPREADING FAKE NEWS

The possibility offered by social media to feel an active part of the information ecosystem extends the responsibility of individual users and their 'social' behaviour. Users are called upon to make a 'critical use' of social networks by avoiding spreading, without personal control, content and messages of poor quality and credibility. This is to protect both the user's credibility and, more generally, the credibility of the information system.

What we say, the posts we like and the content we share become part of the information flow of our contacts. Each of us is 'media' and we should feel responsibility for our actions and choices in these digital environments. Being fully aware of our online behaviour can make us better together and contribute positively and constructively to the information ecosystem.

Valigia Blu (Italian Information community), post of 20/10/2016

As today's digital and virtual world offers us the opportunity to actively participate, disseminate and create content, it is important to acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills to recognise when and what information is needed, where and how to obtain that information, how to critically evaluate it and above all how to use it ethically. This set of knowledge and skills is called **media and information literacy**, defined by UNESCO⁵.

As has been extensively discussed above, nowadays we are overwhelmed by a multitude of news: some true, some false, some incorrect. Besides developing skills such as critical thinking, we can learn to distinguish which news is true through practice: this means not being satisfied with what it seems, but asking questions, reading carefully and looking for evidence to support what we are reading.

All people who use social media have an important role in preventing the spread of fake news, making sure that something is reliable before sharing it. So, what can we do to recognise fake content online? When is it necessary to double-check before sharing something online?

We should not go so far as to debunk everything that comes through social media, but we need to adopt **behaviours and develop skills** that allow us to make a proper assessment of the news we have come across, as explained below.

When you come across a news circulating the web via social media, you should first ask yourself a few questions before sharing or forwarding the post or article, as follows:

Did I make sure of the source? Is it a hot or controversial topic? Would someone reading my post base an important decision on what I am sharing? Does it seem 'too good to be true'?

In order to facilitate the analysis of a news circulating on the web, it might be useful to consider the following five questions:

WHAT kind of fake content?

⁵ <https://www.unesco.org/en/media-information-literacy>



Before believing or sharing something, it is important to identify whether it is true or false content. Among the different types of false information that are spread around, the most relevant are:

Hoaxes and fake news: This is news that is spread with the intention of misleading people. The reasons why this news is spread can be various: political reasons, ideological reasons, malicious intentions to make famous people look bad, financial gain and so on. A hoax becomes 'media' when it is spread and amplified by the mass media, either intentionally or unintentionally, due to insufficient verification of the sources of the news.

Scams: There are news stories or posts that aim to 'steal' your personal information or make you click on a link that will download malware onto your computer.

Ads: Sometimes there are fake ads that are disguised as real content that can mislead the reader.

WHO is spreading this news?

Adults are more likely to trust the content of a story if it has been shared by a person they trust, so always identify the person who posted it. If the person who shared the news has not indicated the source, look it up and do not assume that a newspaper, TV network or online news site is the source.

Once you have identified the source, find out who the author is and why he or she might be considered a valid source for the news he/she is spreading. Depending on the type of source, you might do the following checks:

- Website: check whether the given web address exists or not.
- Scientific or health article: do a search on the author's name to see what comes up.
- Photo/article about something happening in a certain place: check whether any other news/photos about this event have already been posted.

WHY is the news being spread?

It is important to identify the reason why a piece of news is given: remember that sensationalist or extravagant news or headlines often disguise fake news. It is necessary to investigate by means of guiding questions, such as:

Does it want to make me laugh? Scare? Make me angry? Does it use emotionally charged words or images to provoke an emotion in me?

Also, bear in mind that some fake news sources propose stories with the intention of making you hope that it is true so as to induce you to click and spread them: so be careful of stories that you like to believe.

WHEN did the news start to spread?

Many news stories are published more than once: you can search for the story to see if it has been published before. In the case of a photo, you can search with the description of the photo to see if something previously published comes up.



Another signal to take into account when assessing the reliability of the news is how long the account of the person posting the news has been active. If an account appears to be new or has recently started posting with no history, pay attention.

WHERE can I find out if it is something real?

On the web, there are methods to understand whether a piece of news is real or not:

- ✓ For the checking of online news, it is possible to consult special sites that monitor the accuracy of facts such as www.factcheck.org www.snopes.com www.poynter.org www.PolitiFact.com (at international level) and other similar sites at national level.
- ✓ For images, you can conduct a reverse search on TinEye (www.tineye.com) where you will find information on where the image appeared and will also show similar images to determine whether an image has been modified.

In a nutshell, without necessarily having to become an 'evaluator' or 'fact checker', you can follow useful tips to spot if what you are reading may be inaccurate, incorrect or even false.



3. FURTHER READING

What is Social Media in Simple English - Created by Rapid Learning Life

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQ8J3IHhn8A>

Social Media, Explained for Beginners with Tips, History, Learning, Resources

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItoTvKPhgFk>

Top 10 most popular social media platforms in 2023

<https://www.shopify.com/blog/most-popular-social-media-platforms#:~:text=The%20latest%20statistics%20show%20that,are%20active%20users%20of%20Facebook>

“25 Advantages of Social Media that are good to keep in mind”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zQtfnCdcNw>

What are the dangers of oversharing on social media?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2xm5fc5MQk>

“Credible source: five tips to determine if your source is credible”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdcmjPR7Ntw>

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4. <https://giustocontatto.it/quando-un-tuo-evento-diventa-una-notizia/>
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10. <https://www.indypl.org/blog/for-adults/fake-news>



11. <https://www.factcheck.org/2016/11/how-to-spot-fake-news/> How to spot fake news?, Eugene Kiely, Lori Robertson, posted on November 18, 2016
12. https://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/tip-sheet/tipsheet_false_content.pdf