

Aneta Stepien:

Hello and welcome to Reflections. We are your hosts today. My name is Aneta Stepien from Critical Skills.

Gerard Maguire:

And my name is Ger Maguire from Law.

Aneta Stepien:

So today, reflections on fake news and what dangers can information presents to students, to academia, and to our democracies. This is the first episode of a three-part podcast, which is part of Maynooth University SPARK initiative project.

Aneta Stepien:

Okay, so probably everybody has heard the phrase fake news and can think of a story associated with that. Gerard, what is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about fake news?

Gerard Maguire:

You know, I think it's probably going to be the same as everybody's. Unfortunately with the last few years, I do instantly think of the United States and I think Trump. It's the first time I heard it being used popularly and being spoken about kind of more openly. So that's the first thing I think of. I think of political figures, I think of USA, I think of Trump.

Aneta Stepien:

Yeah. That is actually spot on because when we look at when the phrase became popular, it was actually around 2016, so that is the, basically, election when Donald Trump became president. Interestingly the phrase fake news and the other phrase associated with that, which is the post-truth, they were added to the Oxford Dictionary as new terms. We, in fact, saw Donald Trump often using this word fake news to kind of discredit his political opponents. So this is definitely spot on and yeah, the term be began to be widely used around that time.

Gerard Maguire:

I really liked that term actually. I don't know it that well, but post-truth, I think it's a really interesting way to kind of approach it. I think it's really interesting.

Aneta Stepien:

Yes, and that notion of truth, obviously when we say the truth, we mean facts. In that context, when we talk about fake news, we talk about facts. I think that there are other terms that we hear being used interchangeably and that's disinformation and misinformation, but I think there is a distinction between disinformation and misinformation. Do you have a sense of what is the difference between disinformation and misinformation?

Gerard Maguire:

I do, and you know what, it's really easy, I think, to be misinformed even about the definitions, because there can be confusion around it. Do they mean the same thing? Do they mean different things? There's

two definitions I like of them. They're short and they're snappy and you probably have a much further in-depth understanding of the definitions than I do. But for me, disinformation is it's false, it's inaccurate, or it's misleading information and it's designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profits. Whereas misinformation is inadvertent or unintentional spread of false or inaccurate information. It's not through anybody's fault. Again, as you said, it's just been misinformed that they are not aware of the truth behind what it is that they're saying.

Aneta Stepien:

In fact ...

Gerard Maguire:

In fact, it's choice terms, yeah.

Aneta Stepien:

Yes. We can say from what you just said, the definition of disinformation, I think we can safely say that we can use the terms fake news and disinformation, as synonymous words, so we can use them interchangeably, right?

Gerard Maguire:

Absolutely.

Aneta Stepien:

I think maybe to our listeners, we can say that that is in fact what we would be doing. We will be using both terms interchangeably. Going back to the notion of truth, I think it's really important to say, is fake news simply a lie? I think what you just said about misinformation and disinformation.

Aneta Stepien:

Fake news relates more to, yeah, lying, but it's lying with a specific purpose. I think that is very important distinction. It is an organized form of lying, right?

Gerard Maguire:

Absolutely.

Aneta Stepien:

Because when do we just lie? I don't know if you agree with me but there's so many different reasons why we lie. I might be ashamed of something or embarrassed or scared or afraid of something, and that's more like-

Gerard Maguire:

Or even want to trying to make someone feel better and say, "That's a lovely outfit," or, you know?

Aneta Stepien:

Exactly, exactly. But I think the distinction between lying and fake news is that fake news is organized form of lying, perhaps by groups or nations or even though politicians, who have interest in or can gain

from distorting the facts or obscuring the facts, so making the facts inaccessible to general public. There is always a purpose of that. So they want either political influence, they want to manipulate the facts to have a gain of some sort.

Gerard Maguire:

It's funny that you just said that word, because I was going to ask you something and probably put you on the spot, but I was just ... with fake news, do you think then it's always kind of premeditated? Or you know what lies and casual, I suppose, if you can imagine my air quotes, casual lies, they might just happen on the spot, you might just be caught off guard. But you think with fake news and the way that we see it being implemented, that it's premeditated all the time or can it be ever accidental?

Aneta Stepien:

Depends what we are talking about. If we talk about where the fake news originates, it takes a lot of effort to actually produce fake information because you have to take facts and twist them and present them in a certain way. There's a certain amount of effort that goes into producing fake news. Whereas as you say, lying, it might be a little bit more when you're caught off guard and you lie, it's like a defense mechanism, right?

Gerard Maguire:

Yeah.

Aneta Stepien:

But with fake news, there's much more work to be done, and that is something that we will be unpacking.

Gerard Maguire:

It's interesting, isn't it? How deep it runs. We don't probably appreciate, a lot of us ... well, me, anyway, how deep and how deeply ingrained, like you just said, the effort to create a fake news story or item or idea. Yeah, it's just something I would never have appreciated, how deep it really runs. So I love that as part of this, that I've gotten to work with you, you've got to explain this to me. It's such a deep rooted level that I didn't know existed and I'm sure students and anyone else that ends up listening to this will be surprised.

Aneta Stepien:

Yes. I think what is also very important to stress with fake news is that it is actually much more sinister than just lying. It actually provides a threat to our democratic systems. It is not an accident that fake news proliferated with Donald Trump. As you know, four years later, as we speak, in the current presidential elections in the US, we see President Trump saying that he has won the elections even though the votes are still being counted. So what we see here is the impact of fake news and the society's growing acceptance and perhaps even immunity to fake news, how it actually threatens the basic democratic process, which is voting and counting votes and based on that, deciding who is going to be the next president of the United States.

Gerard Maguire:

Yeah, a hundred percent. I think it can have a scary impact because you do believe ... and with voter turnout and things like that, if they are hearing these ideas that are falsified and saying, "Well, this is who's winning in X state versus Y state," and then think, will people be less inclined to then turn up and vote because they think, "Oh well, it's already been won by the person I'm not voting for," or "that I am voting for." I think it's really interesting, sorry, just to note there that when it's used in elections, that is something that is really terrifying. It's one of the few ways that I had ever kind of come across this idea of fake news was in relation to elections.

Aneta Stepien:

Gerard, you deal with human rights law, right? And international relations as well. Connecting to the threats to democracy that fake news poses to our democracy, we can see how dangerous fake news can be and how it affects relations between the countries. You were telling me the story of how one fake news impacted on worsening relationship between Russia and Germany. Can you tell that story?

Gerard Maguire:

Yeah, absolutely. It's a sad case but a very interesting case, exactly, as you said, to see how it really severed relationships between two nations that were, I suppose, to use the term friendly and highly dependent on each other for imports exports. Again, fake news can have this impact on trade, so not only just international relations but trade relations, financial obligations.

Gerard Maguire:

In this, this is called the Lisa Case is what it was referred to after. It was a code name, I suppose, or a pseudonym given to the young girl that was involved. She vanished one day from a street in Berlin ... but I should probably preface this and say that ... so she was born in Germany but Russian parents, so second generation. Basically, she had been kidnapped and she resurfaced maybe three or four days later and had told a story that she'd been taken by migrant workers and she was repeatedly raped and held hostage.

Gerard Maguire:

After a police investigation, it materialized that she had actually run off with a boyfriend and made the story up so that she wouldn't get in trouble. But what had happened as a result of this was Russia calling on Germany to act in a more efficient manner in trying to find out what happened to this girl, where did she go, and what happened? They went as far as, in Russian media, it said that Germany's current government supports child abuse.

Gerard Maguire:

Russia started severing ties, economic ties and trade ties with Germany, which really had a knock on effect. We were already having a bad effect. This was still only coming out of recessionary times, I guess, so this had a really negative impact.

Gerard Maguire:

Germany then found itself in a position where they had to kind of, I suppose, represent themselves again to the international stage and say, "No, we didn't neglect a child," or "We didn't not look after the child. We never supported child abuse." We were trying to get to the facts of the case before it happened but unfortunately, in Russia had already escalated because of disinformation and the

population or popular opinion of Germany had significantly declined at that point so it was very hard to rebuild those relationships.

Aneta Stepien:

Yes, I think that story, it is an excellent example how a really marginal story can be taken to be manipulated for political reasons, for ends, and impact on the relations between countries and impact on trade. Then almost like the story lives only on its own and keeps developing.

Aneta Stepien:

I guess that takes me to another point that we want to make, that especially for students who are doing research and they have to consult sources and they have to find information that informs their research, that informs their essays, their project, that it is a real, real challenge and actually fake news can be real threats as well to students. It can be a threat to academic freedom because as universities' ethos is to produce knowledge and as we expect from students to produce knowledge as well and rely on facts, rely on finding relevant information, then really disinformation poses a real challenge. There is a number of skills that the students should develop in order to fight this challenge.

Gerard Maguire:

Yep. It's interesting talking about what you just said about applying it to academia and how it's applied to students, because something that I've taught about while we've been working on this is, why is it relevant or prevalent, I suppose, now to students today? I mean, disinformation existed long before, surely before 2016, and students have done research and carried their work long before 2016. But if we identify it as a problem now, where did that come from? How was it combat before?

Aneta Stepien:

Well, yes, you are right, Ger. Fake news did not start in 2016 and we can say that fake news is as old as the world is. We can say that fake news existed under a number of different names and different conceptual frameworks for hundreds, if not thousands of years. Okay? But I think the problem now with students doing research in particular is how we access information, how we find information, and how we share information. It relates to information technology and the changing ways we obtain information from.

Aneta Stepien:

When we talk about fake news, we talk about digital environment where we now access information. I guess it's also good to unpack a little bit that term. When we talk about fake news, what do we actually talk about? We talk about fake science, for instance. You know, climate change deniers anti-vaxxers, you came across them. We talk about fake histories, so for instance, the Holocaust deniers, people who have revisionist attitude towards history and ignore the research, ignore data. We have fake people on Facebook.

Gerard Maguire:

That interests me and scares me.

Aneta Stepien:

Yeah, the Russian trolls, we talked about how they interfered with the elections in 2016. Again, we got going back to that year, which is some kind of threshold, of course. We have fake followers who leave fake likes on social media, like various bots. So when we talk about fake news, we talk about all this phenomena. And deep fake. You know, the-

Gerard Maguire:

That's ... Sorry, not to cut across you, that's a new term to me. That's something I had never come across until pretty much today when you were telling me about it. Can you ... just because I'm sure lots of people may not understand what that term is. Can you explain a little bit?

Aneta Stepien:

Yeah, so deep fake really shows how powerful the technology is in actually creating alternative reality. I'm not going to say alternative facts because that's just contradiction, but alternative reality. I guess the most famous example of deep fake is the video of Barrack Obama, where he's being interviewed. What happens in that video is you see him speak and it's him and it's his voice, but actually, it was created by superimposing many images of Barrack Obama. So taking his words out of the context with his face, so visually and with the audio, which looks like actually he said something which he didn't. It's completely made up. You're superimposed ... well actually they used his own face, but people now use it, they superimpose their face on celebrities [crosstalk 00:16:31]

Gerard Maguire:

I was just going to say ...

Aneta Stepien:

You probably have done that.

Gerard Maguire:

I have done that, one a hundred percent. Yes, I have put my face on multiple celebrities and really enjoyed it. I never knew that it could go that serious. You know, something that even I look .. and you know, and obviously I've seen lots of, and I know parody and satire can be prior to fake news, but obviously I've seen those parody videos where you've got Trump or Obama and they put all these words together and they're singing a song or something like that. I never knew it could be so sinister.

Aneta Stepien:

Yes.

Gerard Maguire:

That's what's scary.

Aneta Stepien:

Well it starts with the apps like swap face. You swap faces, right?

Gerard Maguire:

Yeah.

Aneta Stepien:

And then, so with an appropriate knowledge, with people who have knowledge in how to use software, how to do these things, they can create something that looks real. Okay? You can watch Obama's interview from 10 years ago which looks real but it's actually fake. It was completely made up. Okay?

Gerard Maguire:

Wow.

Aneta Stepien:

This is just to show how deeply this goes. I guess my point is that all these things that we talked about, they require of us really to be vigilant and to be aware of what we are looking at, what we are reading, what we are watching, checking, "Is this real," and being able to have some kind of tools to spot fake news, have critical attitudes, really develop critical attitudes towards the material that we are engaging online.

Aneta Stepien:

For the purpose of our podcast, as this is the introductory part, even more important than just to define, have a definition of fake news where we'll eventually come to this-

Gerard Maguire:

Settle, yeah, yeah.

Aneta Stepien:

... and try to come up with something that is useful, I think what is really, really useful to examine information that we deal with online is to have these concepts and ideas that really comprise fake news and relate to practices and strategies of delegitimizing the information itself, because we need to remember that information creation is a process. It takes time and ways of doing to create a fake information. We need to think, okay, how was that particular video or article created? What's behind it? Who is the author?

Gerard Maguire:

The motivations.

Aneta Stepien:

Exactly, what are the motivations? You have to have all this set of questions, but also understand certain ideas and concepts that relate to fake news.

Aneta Stepien:

We are going to discuss these concepts in our next episodes, to leave something for curiosity.

Gerard Maguire:

Leave a hook, yes.

Aneta Stepien:

Exactly.

Gerard Maguire:

These concepts are very important and they are really the first step to start fighting fake news and building awareness.

Aneta Stepien:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. That was a much stronger word. I was thinking processing, but I like fighting, I like it. Yeah.

Aneta Stepien:

Oh no, I am thinking in terms of weapon, you know, this should be a weapon-

Gerard Maguire:

Well, they say education and knowledge is the greatest weapon. That's what Mandela says.

Aneta Stepien:

Yeah, and this is something that we are going to discuss in our next episode. Actually, the active attitude. It's not just about recognizing fake news but actually how you act with it. You know, not sharing before you actually understand where that news originates from. So that's something to make you curious about.

Gerard Maguire:

Hopefully. Just before we wrap up with this episode, I mean, for me, something I always liked is a really concise definition of something to understand how it impacts. So if last word of the day, over to you, Dr. Stepien, how would you define fake news?

Aneta Stepien:

So what was all that podcast about, eh? You did not learn anything. No, but we do actually want to provide a more concise definition. Probably fake news is most commonly described as a made-up news that is manipulated to look like credible information — so a newspaper article or a report that is designed to deceive us. It is again, this purposeful creation of something to make us react in a certain way, feel in a certain way, but it's actually, this information is manipulated.

Gerard Maguire:

Yeah, I really think that's a really important word that I've learned even from just listening to you speak to this is this idea of the intent that's behind it and how important and how relevant that is. I mean, in some of the issues we've talked about so far in this episode, we've seen how that intent has played out. We've seen how it's looked in democratic process, we've seen how it can negatively impact international relations among states. We can see its impact in human rights and situations. But what's really interesting to me is seeing how this can go so deep into academic work and how it can have potentially a very negative effect on students and on their research. I think that the tools that are needed and the concepts that you alluded to for in the next episode are going to be so invaluable for encouraging, supporting, and enhancing students' academic endeavors, which is partly why I'm so excited to be on board with it. Thank you for having me on this episode. I've been very excited.

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Aneta Stepien:

Thank you, Gerard. This was really stimulating and I also learned a lot from you today. I do hope that our listeners also found lots of stimulation in terms of thinking about, "What is that information that I am encountering online?" And that you will go and reflect on those issues and you will return to listen to us in our second episode.