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THE (IN) SECURITY OF INFORMING AUDIENCE IN NOWADAY'S MEDIA CASE STUDY: CLONING ROMANIAN NEWS WEBSITES

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Abstract

Informing the public correctly these days is not as simple as we might think, in the "communication age", despite the diversity of tools and the fast pace at which news can be disseminated in real time. Journalists and online channels face significant challenges, dealing not only with disinformation, propaganda or fake news, but also with other larger impediments such as cyber-attacks, phishing, website cloning, scams and distribution of malware. Cloning incidents involving the Romanian media have been sporadically reported over the years, especially during significant events, political elections or crises. of all kinds This article aims to highlight some of these cases in recent years that contribute to a state of insecurity among online readers.

Key words: website cloning, manipulation, phishing, media, security.

INTRODUCTION

Several incidents of newspaper cloning have begun to appear in the international and Romanian media¹ in recent years. These are related to practices of replication by falsification of original media publications. The easiest newspapers to falsify are especially those online.

¹ We mention some of the cloned newspapers in Great Britain: *Daily Mirror, Manchester Evening News, Chronicle Live, The Guardian*, in 2021, when over 1000 news sites and over 50,000 fake news articles were cloned (compared to 2020, when the British media faced over 700 illegitimate news sites and around 20,000 of articles). Charlotte Tobitt, *Theft of news articles and entire websites more than doubled in UK in 2021* https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/ripped-articles-cloned-news-websites/ (accessed 10.10.2024)

The recipe for completely falsifying a newspaper issue involves creating fake versions of well-known publications in order to spread false information or deceive readers. Through a series of techniques, depending on the intentions of those who carry it out, but also on the resources they have.

Cloning Romanian media sites usually involves creating a counterfeit version of a legitimate news site to spread disinformation, phishing attempts, or to generate advertising revenue through deceptive means.

Cloning incidents involving the Romanian mass media have been sporadically reported over the years, especially during major social events (the case of wars, the Olympic Games - for phishing attempts), electoral periods and elections (with the aim of spreading misinformation or manipulate public opinion) or crises (during the COVID-19 pandemic, many fake news sites appeared, capitalizing on public fear and misinformation).

I. CLONING TECHNIQUES

Homograph spoofing² is a type of attack where attackers use characters that look similar to one another, but are actually different, to trick users. This is usually done with domain names, but can also be applied to other areas, such as URLs or even email addresses. The goal is to create a website or link that looks like a legitimate one but is actually fake, tricking users into thinking they are interacting with a trusted information source. Some already known examples are those of some famous publications. In 2017, cybersecurity researchers discovered a domain that looked almost identical to the legitimate New York Times website, but with one subtle difference: the domain used the Cyrillic character for "y" instead of the Latin "y" (the legitimate domain was nytimes.com, and the fake nytimes.com - with Cyrillic "y", which looks identical to Latin "y" in most browsers, imperceptible to the average user). This domain was part of a larger set of attacks designed to trick users into thinking they were on the real New York Times website. Once on the fake site, users could have become vulnerable to phishing attacks, scams or malware. Other examples could include fake versions of sites like CNN or BBC, where attackers used homograph spoofing to create similar domains like: bbc.com - bbc.com (using Cyrillic "c" instead of "c" Latin) or cnn.com - cnn.com (using Cyrillic "c" instead of Latin "c").

Doppelgänger is the term that refers to a double, double or "evil twin", a concept that appeared in history and literature. At the end of 2023, euronews.com presented a material about Doppelgänger, as the name of the new disinformation campaign launched by Russia against Ukraine and the cloning of news sites or the massive distribution of "fake news", reaching the conflict between Israel and Hamas³. And the French and German media have faced such cases, we mention

² The term spoofing means "cheating", "falsification", "trick".

³ Sophia Khatsenkova, "Doppelganger: How a Russian disinformation campaign is exploiting the Israel-Hamas war", <u>https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/11/23/doppelganger-how-a-</u>

Le Parisien (leparisien.fr replaced by leparisien.pm in 2022), 20 Minutes, Le Monde, but also the newspaper Der Spiegel, for distributing fake news about the war in Ukraine and the one in the Gaza Strip. Social media users have created a platform to check their authenticity, Antibot4navalny, against these fake sites.

In the case of cloning a news site, the content is fake or only partially falsified. Cloners publish made-up articles, often based on rumors or distorted information, which may seem credible at first glance. These may include sensational headlines to attract attention, which may not even have any connection with the content of the article. A very important step is then to distribute the new site online. Counterfeiters mostly use social media platforms, emails and other digital channels to disseminate these fake newspapers, taking advantage of algorithms that promote popular content. This is where search engine optimization (SEO) and marketing intervene. Using search engine optimization techniques to make fake sites appear in the first search results can increase the exposure of these sites.

Those who clone news websites are counting on the fact that the IT field is one that not everyone is good at (although everyone uses devices) and will exploit this lack of media education. Many people are not educated in identifying reliable sources, which facilitates the unconscious spread of false information.

Partial and unauthorized reproduction is another very common situation and involves the use of original content taken from newspapers without permission, which can lead to legal and copyright issues.

A new challenge is the phenomenon of deep fake, when with the help of artificial intelligence (AI), images and videos of celebrities or well-known people are also generated, not just processed and also have their voices cloned.

II. AUDIENCE RISKS

All the above phenomena are very serious and can lead to misinformation. Cloned newspapers can be used to spread fake news (*Shu et al., 2017*), thereby affecting public opinion and trust in the media.

Phishing is a type of cyberattack in which attackers attempt to trick the reading public into providing sensitive information such as passwords, credit card numbers, spam or other personal details (*Arun Anoop M, 2016, 412-417*). This is often done by impersonating a trusted entity, usually through email, social media or fake websites (including news websites) that appear legitimate. The goal is to trick the victim into clicking on a malicious link or downloading malicious

russian-disinformation-campaign-is-exploiting-the-israel-hamas-war; Andrea Smernea, Doppleganger. Cum au clonat rusii paginile unor publicatii internationale pentru a raspandi informatii false despre Ucraina si Israel, https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/mapamond/doppleganger-cum-au-clonat-rusii-paginile-unorpublicatii-internationale-pentru-a-raspandi-informatii-false-despre-ucraina-si-israel-2590129 (accessed 02.09.2024)

software, leading to data theft or bank fraud. The scam also behaves similarly, a way of fraud in the form of false offers of "free samples", fake e-mails, counterfeit goods.

The impact on the media industry is an increased one. These incidents can undermine the credibility of legitimate publications. of journalists and the profession itself and can affect their income, especially in the already complicated context of the media industry (*Maruta M.*, 2023, 271-284).

III. FROM NEWSPAPER CLONING TO CLONE ROMANIAN NEWS WEBSITES

A special case of cloning a physical newspaper took place in 2012, being considered "an unprecedented attack on the press". The *Ring* newspaper was cloned, and its copy reproduced the logo, format and fonts, but only had 16 pages, unlike the original which had 24 pages. The fake one had completely different topics on the first page, being a vendetta between the candidates for the 3rd District Mayor's Office of Bucharest, the cousins Liviu and Robert Negoita⁴. The clone printed in Baia Mare circulated in the Romanian capital at the end of the electoral campaign. The editor-in-chief of the free daily newspaper, edited by SC Ring Media Group SRL, urgently notified the police, who discovered hundreds of copies of the cloned number in several cars abandoned in traffic.

A first example of cloning a news website took place in 2009, being the page of the well-known television station *PRO TV*. The original site www.stirileprotv.ro, owned by PRO TV SA, was cloned by another site with an almost identical name, but anonymous owner - www.stirile-protv.ro⁵. The copy reproduced the articles, the editorial style ("underlined phrases, links to other articles"), the site's headings with the names and order from the original site, the editorial campaigns. At the request of Pro TV SA, the fake website was suspended for "copyright infringement". In 2020, stirileprotv.ro website is once again the target of clones by "ghost sites", which are used by the well-known media brand to "misinform" but also "to obtain various material benefits." Even in 2023, there were scams (dishonest schemes, frauds) with get-rich-quick recipes, promoted through sponsored posts on social media, which used the visual identity of Pro TV News.

In the summer of 2019⁶, two websites used *Libertatea*'s newspaper logo, which had no connection with the Romanian publication edited by the Ringier

⁴ Ioana Radu, "PDL, acuzat ca a clonat un intreg ziar", https://www.cotidianul.ro/pdl-acuzat-ca-a-clonat-un-intreg-ziar/ (accessed 11.10.2024)

⁵ Petrisor Obae, "Clona site-ului de stiri al Pro TV a fost inchisa", <u>https://www.paginademedia.ro/2009/02/clona-site-ului-de-stiri-al-pro-tv-a-fost-inchisa/</u> (accessed 22.10.2024)

⁶ Petre Dobrescu, "Site-ul Libertatea, clonat in Rusia si Panama" <u>https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/site-ul-libertatea-clonat-in-rusia-si-panama-</u> <u>2733869?fbclid=IwAR13mF5Lu1-Dd5-</u>

rzXgg3LYbI35wf1LyRfGCWWBzWsJDQH53bBRkYW1Egk (accessed 11.10.2024)

media company. Among the duplicated elements were the identical design, but also the signatures of several *Libertatea* reporters. An investigation by *Libertatea* journalists, who label the actions "identity theft", revealed that one site was registered in Panama and the other in Russia (*life24-ro.site and sigmaweb-worksz.com*) and that one of them promoted slimming products, through sponsored posts, on Facebook, reproduced through photos, in the material on *Libertatea*. The Ringier media company notified the two sites to stop using the *Libertatea* logo.

In 2020, *Libertatea* is again the target of a website clone. *Libertatea* published a material dissing a website that reproduced an online page of their newspaper⁷. funlandinfinity.club had duplicated the *libertatea.ro* website and published an article in which it claimed that the Minister of Finance of Romania at the time, Florin Citu, supported a cryptocurrency trading platform. The page was also used by the star of the *Pro TV* television station, Andreea Esca, in a similar material, asking readers for their bank card details and an initial investment of 250 euros, and even the president of Romania, Klaus Iohannis.

The page also had contact details, also false, that referred to a non-existent phone number and an address that corresponded to a village in Lombardy, Italy. This time, the fake material encouraged readers to invest in the Bitcoin Revolution platform, "an algorithm designed to take money from the richest people in the world and redistribute it among middle-class Romanian citizens". The material included comments from some so-called customers, other fictitious accounts, which led to other sites, which could only be accessed with a username and password that sent the reader to a collage with the news presenter Cristian Leonte, from Stirile Pro Tv. Libertatea journalists contacted the National Authority for Administration and Regulation in Communications to close the site, but not having legal prerogatives for this action, they suggested forwarding the case to the Romanian Police, cataloging cloning as a "cybercrime". Similar incidents of deep fake (images and recordings generated with the help of AI) happen with Libertatea (but also with several Romanian banks) in 2022 and in 2024, when the cloned sites are distributed on the socialization networks⁸. The platforms to which the readers were redirected were "non-existent". Well-known people such as Mugur Isarescu (governor of the National Bank of Romania),

⁷ Iulia Marin, "FAKE NEWS! Un site obscur a clonat o pagina din *Libertatea* si le cere oamenilor sa investeasca in criptomonede, folosindu-se de numele Andreei Esca si ale lui Florin Citu si Klaus Iohannis" https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/un-site-obscur-a-clonat-o-pagina-din-libertatea-si-le-cere-oamenilor-sa-investeasca-in-criptomonede-folosindu-se-de-numele-andreei-esca-si-ale-lui-florin-citu-si-klaus-iohannis-3036170 (accessed 10.10.2024)

⁸ Petre Dobrescu, "Imaginea site-ului Libertatea, folosita in deep fake-ul cu guvernatorul BNR Mugur Isarescu. Banca centrala avertizeaza impotriva fraudelor", https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/imaginea-site-ului-libertatea-folosita-in-deep-fake-ul-cuguvernatorul-bnr-mugur-isarescu-banca-centrala-avertizeaza-impotriva-fraudelor-4796867 (accessed 10.10.2024)

Sebastian Burduja (Minister of Energy), Ion Tiriac (businessman), Marcel Ciolacu (Prime Minister of Romania) appear in various videos promoting investments, which were actually frauds. This time, not only their image is used, but their voice is also cloned, clear examples of deep fake, against which the above have filed a criminal complaint.

IV. Cloned TV and news agencies websites

In 2021, the website of the news porta *profit.ro*, the publication launched by experienced journalists in the economic field, was cloned (*profit.ro* is part of Clevergroup, together with the TV channels *Prima TV*, *Prima News*, *Prima Sport*, *Agro TV*).

In February 2022, other media sites in Romania are falsified, according to *paginademedia.ro*⁹. The independent news agency *News.ro* and *Capital.ro* were cloned by sites from Russia (bitinitiators.com/profitsmall.com/feednewers.com), attracting the attention of the National Cyber Security Directorate at the time. being "involved in attempts at fraud and disinformation". *News.ro* fought for several months to block the cloned pages, which appeared in the online environment, copying the agency's layout and distributing it on Facebook, promoting solutions for immediate enrichment.

The National Cyber Security Directorate suggested in the article that the public must be the one to protect themselves in these situations, offering a list of precautions to follow: "check carefully the details of the information sources, such as the site's domain name; If you receive news from unknown or dubious sources, always verify the link before accessing, preferably with a security solution; Make sure you use an official communication channel when read news from the online environment, to make sure that the information you read is not an attempt at disinformation". Once we come into contact with such cloned sites, the only "weapon" would be to report them to the Directorate - "Do not hesitate to notify the Directorate if you notice other such dangerous initiatives, which aim to mislead users and misinform ".

A case that became an internal investigation for the journalists from the newspaper *Bursa*, was the cloning of the online site, *bursa.ro*, in January and then in February 2023. On January 30th, 2023, a first material appears "Cybernetic attack on the address of the *Bursa* newspaper and of the reading public"¹⁰, signed I.Ghe., which publishes two photos mirrored - one with the fake page and the

⁹ Iulia Butea "Alerta. *News.ro* și *Capital.ro* au fost clonate de site-uri din Rusia. "Verificati cu atentie detaliile surselor de informare"" https://www.paginademedia.ro/stiri-media/publicatii-romanesti-clonate-rusia-20616270

⁽accessed 01.11.2024)

¹⁰ <u>https://www.bursa.ro/atac-cibernetic-la-adresa-ziarului-bursa-si-a-publicului-cititor-</u> 60709848#google_vignette

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other with the official page of the newspaper online from January 27th, 2023. The cloned page imitated the frontispiece of the newspaper, but there were also changes regarding the rest of the titles ("Local news from all over the country"). The copy was opened with a main article, signed by a Bursa journalist (Andrei Iacomi), about a Romanian personality, Ion Tiriac, precisely to convince the public to access the link that ultimately led to the financial harm of the readers. The material was entitled "SPECIAL REPORT: Ion Tiriac's last investment horrified the management of large banks in Romania" and advised the public "to invest in a new cryptocurrency trading program called - in the fake article -Crypto Engine". If the readers were not interested in that material but wanted to access other sections of the cloned page, they were immediately redirected to the trading program. The cloned page by "unknown authors" was quickly published on several anonymous Internet sites. In the material from Bursa, the journalist Andrei Iacomi explains how we can immediately realize if we are dealing with a fake: "there are terms used/translated in a wrong manner and there are some missing reasons. We (i.e. the editorial staff of the *Bursa*) do not make investment recommendations because that is not the role of the media." The journalist denies that he knows Ion Tiriac and claims that he did not write or sign the that material.

The management of the newspaper presented all these data to the Police of Sector 1 Bucharest, because "the cyberattack makes a misleading advertisement that can financially harm the reading public and that harms the newspaper *Bursa* and the editorial team in a subsidiary way", demanding the opening of a criminal investigation regarding "the commission of fraud crimes, forgery and use of forgery regarding the identity, in order to obtain undue benefits, acts provided for and punished by the Criminal Code", identifying the authors of the cyberattack and holding them criminally and materially liable.

On February 14, 2023, the journalist Andrei Iacomi signed an investigation related to the cloning of the newspaper website in which he had been involved in January.¹¹ This time, other clones of the publication are reported, with "fake articles", which "do not have the address of the publication's website". The "fraud" that circulates on the cloned pages still has the image of Ion Țiriac urging readers to invest through a cryptocurrency trading algorithm, in order to "get rich" is actually a way to harm readers, as in the case other Romanian news sites. The recipe for this scam is the same: "names of people with great financial success or other influencers are used who urge people to take advantage of a so-called opportunity to make a lot of money, even millions" in a short time. Readers must create an account at the indicated site, where it is redirected, but "quickly", in order not to miss the opportunity. Next comes the request to deposit a few

¹¹ <u>https://www.bursa.ro/povestea-clonarii-site-ului-bursa-oamenii-sunt-ademeniti-sa-depuna-sume-de-bani-cu-promisiunea-unor-castiguri-fabuloase-09530940#google_vignette</u> (accessed 22.10.2024)

hundred euros, a discussion with financial experts or algorithmic trading systems capable of producing enormous sums for the lucky user. Then starts "an aggressive campaign by which readers are asked to make new deposits, you can no longer withdraw the money initially placed, and at a certain moment the site disappears completely". The signatory of the investigation reveals that behind the cloning was an IP (Internet Protocol) from Russia and the journalist tried to test the business as a simple user. After being redirected to other sites, fake cryptocurrency sites, on which he finally registered, with the promise he will be contacted by representatives of cryptocurrency companies, who, predictably, demanded money in exchange for a "25 lie -30% per week". When he told them that he was an undercover journalist, the agent replied that he will be contacted by a financial expert, but he never called him. The National Cyber Security Directorate self-reported in this situation, identifying the location of the cloned site and invited the editorial staff to take part in Online Safety, a joint project of the Romanian Association of Banks and the Romanian Police. A specialist in issues of this kind way, from the cyber security company BIT Sentinel, includes the duplication of Bursa newspaper page in the fake-news category, "for which user education is the key to solving the problem". It suggests minimal measures for readers: "to read carefully", "to have a bit of critical thinking about the content presented by a particular site - for example to check simple matters such as the actual address of the site", because there is a risk that the information is not truthful. Also, the attention of citizens who want to make financial transactions is drawn to the fact that there are a lot of financial frauds, through the phishing method.

Digi24, a major news television channel in Romania, was a target of cloned URL to spread false information or engage readers in phishing attempts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in 2023, several fake *Digi24* sites have been reported¹², trying to trick users into thinking they are accessing legitimate news. These cloned sites often used URLs that were very similar to the original but had small changes (*digi24.ro.com or top.rodigi24.com*), but the *Digi24* logo and font used were identical, "to induce misleading the readers, causing them to access" the respective news, cataloged by *Digi24.ro* representatives as "false".

The materials were "about celebrities from Romania", which promoted different products and services, but a very clear sign that they were "fake news" are the grammatical mistakes that appeared even in the titles of the materials (first of all, what was striking was the lack of agreement in gender and number correlated with the stars portraited: the TV shows hosts Andreea Marin, Andreea Esca, repetition of the same title with another character- Mihai Gadea and

¹² Adriana Dutulescu, "AVERTISMENT: Imaginea Digi24.ro este clonata si folosita alaturi de numele unor vedete din Romania pentru escrocherii", https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/avertisment-imaginea-digi24-ro-este-clonata-si-folositaalaturi-de-numele-unor-vedete-din-romania-pentru-escrocherii-2468847 (accessed 22.09.2024)

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Andreea Marin, name mistakes of the Romanian president - Klaus "Johanis" instead of Iohannis), associated with the photos of the stars and the appellation "shocking news", written in capital letters, on a red background, to be easily noticed. It is interesting that one of the news was broadcast and sponsored on Facebook from Sri Lanka, most likely from the fake page of a former governor "which, although it has a blue tick, does not seem to be an official page of a politician", although Facebook in this way it confirms the authenticity of the profile.

Digi24.ro, like other news sites from the country and abroad that face similar situations, issues warnings about such scams in order to educate the public, claiming that they do not reproduce cloned links because "once accessed, they can be dangerous" for users because "they can steal personal data from the electronic device of the one who clicks on it, or they can be used for financial scams". The journalists checked the respective links that led either to empty pages or to sites that presented questionable financial schemes.

CONCLUSION

Cloned news sites, fake news, scams and false video content, created by AI are more and more frequent these days. It is very easily to get tricked by the malevolent persons, algorithms or AI. As the possibility of normal people to create content or to transmit information really quick grows, the risks for the reader to find misleading news grows.

The audience needs to learn to check information and the sources not only within an article, but the news websites. Although the public might feel alone in this process, it is also more independent in fact-check and creating own opinion. It is going to be hard at the beginning, but after learning to be cautious, readers will also be selective in the field of an insecure communication field.

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