



SARA Law Research Center

International Journal of Legal and Social Order, <https://www.ccdsara.ro/ijlso>

ISSN 2821 – 4161 (Online), ISSN 2810-4188 (Print), ISSN-L 2810-4188

Nº. 1 (2022), pp. 388-396

## INFORMATION SAFETY: TOP FIVE FAKE NEWS IN THE ROMANIAN MEDIA (2022)

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### ***Abstract***

*The phenomenon of “fake news” is increasing in both the online area in Romania and in other media: newspapers, radio and television. The pandemic and the war in Ukraine have been bombarded with such information. Some theorists even speak of a hybrid-information war that precedes the war in Ukraine (see the 2016 USA election and evidence of Russian Federation interference in the process). In Central and Western Europe, the phenomenon is explosive through the falsification of documents, the spread of fake news, trolls, and website cloning. How safe is information for the public? How much are journalists making sure they inform correctly, check information so they can maintain the information safety?*

**Key words:** *“fake news”, news, emotion, Elon Musk, sources.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

We live in a world where information is power. It is said in an opinion that we live in a world where problems should be easier to highlight, should be conceptualized (Cirmaciu Diana, 2021, p. 67). But information in the Internet age requires sometimes additional checks, uncertainty (Curta, 2021, p.45-53), comparisons with other news, analysis by the reading public to establish the reality of the news data (such as the CRAAP test, which checks the currency and relevance of the information, authority-sources, accuracy and purpose of the material). Social media is often the place where the public gets its information from (or where it is delivered a certain type of information), but it is a difficult medium to control because it spreads false messages very easily.

### **1. “FAKE NEWS”- MORE THAN FALSE NEWS**

What are the “fake news”? Are they simply false news or more than that? What makes them spread so quickly, and especially why is the general public no longer interested in the (sometimes) subsequent denials? Who uses them and for what purpose?

First of all, let's make the distinction between “fake news” narratives (*Armanca, Danilet, Oprea, Tabusca, Tibrigan, 2021, p.13-18*), which are put into circulation by an organization, a state with the aim of creating confusion and generating social tension, while false news has no origin of an ideology or the strategy of a state, and in some cases they have no intention of manipulation<sup>1</sup>. People's cultural baggage and expectations - their fears or fears - are used to the maximum by rumours, lies, false events, exaggerations that cause public panic. “Fake news” reinforces these fears (for example, a future global blackout, the price of gasoline, oil, running out of products in stores in the first month of the pandemic in Europe and in the USA - no toilet paper), causes damage to the image of some people, institutions and political, financial earnings (by increasing the number of readers and click bites). Being emotional beings (*Ireton, Posetti, 2021, p.15-50*), not just rational, more dangerous is the flash of emotion they create that can make the audience respond to the command. Our anxieties are inside us, so we tend to take in and spread information that confirms our expectations, our fears, in the form of the herd wave.

Another worrying phenomenon is related to citizens, who consider information sources equal: people no longer distinguish between journalistic integrity, credible sources and those who do not know the values of journalism, between information and opinion, satire, the citizens consider them equal.

The following material presents a selective top of the five most resounding “fake news” in the Romanian mass media, during the year 2022.

## 2. UE WILL FORCE US TO EAT INSECTS

In early September 2022, when news of the pandemic and war had thinned out, prints and TV news reappeared about this new and forced food style. *Digi 24* treats the news as a fake in the material “How the fake news that the EU will force citizens to eat cockroaches was born” (September 4th)<sup>2</sup>. The news initially appeared on *Romania TV* in July, viewed as a “food reset” imposed by “neo-Marxists” and being brought back in the speeches of politicians such as the Minister of Agriculture Petre Daea (on *Romania TV* and *Antena3*), George Simion and AUR (Alliance for Union of Romanians), which submitted to the Parliament a draft law on the prohibition of the use of insects in the production of food for the human population.

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<sup>1</sup> The first fake news appears in Ancient Egypt and the Roman Empire, but it has also been used in all historical periods.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/cum-a-luat-nastere-fake-news-ul-potrivit-caruia-ue-va-obliga-cetatenii-sa-manance-gandaci-2065163> (accessed on 22.10.2022)

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The news is presented on September 14th by *BITV* and is picked up in September by the website *ziare.com*<sup>3</sup>. The context of the news has existed since 2013, when the UN, through the specialized agency Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), considered (in a report) insects an alternative source for protein<sup>4</sup>. As a result, material on the same topic appeared in the American and Dutch media in 2015 and strong public backlash related to this assumption.

The news about the insects, as ingredients of European fast foods, like famous companies McDonalds, KFC..., became the subject of stand-up comedy on a Russian television and was picked up and transmitted by the Russians to the population as “real news” (October 2022).

### 3. FAKE VIDEO, UNVERIFIED NEWS

In June, *Digi 24* does not verify the information received and transmits a fake news. The material attracts criticism from the Romanian media, after the respective national station highlighted the fact that the information is very carefully verified by their editors at all times.

The material was in Russian, old from 2008, featured a young man who was being interviewed about the music in a club and is presented by the TV producer, Cosmin Prelipceanu in the *Jurnalul de seara* (evening journal edition) as something completely different: Russia attracts recruits with lies (a drunk “recruit” told the story of how will enlist in the war and how he will drive tanks)<sup>5</sup>.

The failure to check the news and its transmission as Russian propaganda is harshly criticized by the Romanian journalist and political commentator, Cristian Tudor Popescu, on the same TV station, in the program *Cap limpede* (together with the moderator Claudiu Pandaru)<sup>6</sup>. The remark leads to the dismissal of Cristian Tudor Popescu from the *Digi24* station, which calls into question the functioning mechanism of the respective TV station and the freedom of expression of Romanian journalists.

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<sup>3</sup> Alina Toma, „Ne va obliga sau nu UE sa mancam gandaci? Zvonurile care au pus pe jar omenirea”, <https://ziare.com/insecte/gandaci-mancare-ue-1759500>, 04.09.2022 (Accessed on 22.10.2022)

<sup>4</sup> The European Commission conveys its view as follows: “it will not force citizens to eat insects (or anything else). The consumption of insects is possible, never mandatory, as long as they are authorized as novel foods by the Commission”. Razvan Filip, “Pazea, ne obliga UE sa mancam gandaci! Originile unei naratiuni false”, in <https://pressone.ro/>, 28.08.2022, <https://pressone.ro/pazea-ne-obliga-ue-sa-mancam-gandaci-originile-unei-naratiuni-false> (Accessed on 22.10.2022)

<sup>5</sup> Mihai Todoca signs the article found at the category *Fact check*. <https://specialarad.ro/dupa-ce-ne-a-obosit-vreo-trei-zile-ca-este-cel-mai-serios-post-de-stiri-digi-24-promoveaza-un-fake-news-de-zile-mari/>(Accesed on 23.10.2022)

<sup>6</sup> “It is a black lie. There is gray, there are many shades of gray in fake news. This is black fake news, it has nothing to do with anything”- Cristian Tudor Popescu.

#### 4. THE SWIMMER DAVID POPOVICI BOUGHT A LUXURY CAR

As soon as he came of age of adulthood and got his driver's license, the young world record holder allegedly bought a very expensive car (over 100,000 euros) - this was the news that circulated on online sites, on radio and national television, being widely distributed also on social networks.

*David Popovici stole all the eyes with his new car! The world champion, demonstration in front of his colleagues: "Look, there's no one inside"* was the title with which the material appeared on October 10th, 2022 on *as.ro*<sup>7</sup>, from where it was picked up by *spynews.ro*<sup>8</sup> and *Realitatea sportiva*<sup>9</sup> on October 11th. On the same day, headlines like this end up being shared on social media from other sports news sites: *David Popovici bought a luxury car that he parks by remote control. How much is the car that "The Shark" drives*<sup>10</sup>.

Popovici immediately noticed the fake and took action: he posted the misleading images on his Facebook page, with the message "I don't have a driving license, nor a car, I like to ride a bike and I urge you all to enjoy the rides by bike. It is not known, maybe we will meet on a shift". The online press, radio and television take this idea one after the other<sup>11</sup> and transpose it as a discovered and debunked fake news.

#### 5. FLORIN SALAM IS DEAD

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<sup>7</sup> The material appears on *Antena Sport* and is signed by Cosmin Cioboata; the news contains images from the Elisabeta Palace, where Popovici and other Romanian swimmers have been medaled in the summer of 2022 by the Royal Family of Romania and an insert in which a car leaves without the driver being seen. Popovici states "Look, there's no one inside", a statement that is twisted and falsely used in the material. [https://as.ro/inot/david-popovici-a-furat-toate-privirile-cu-noua-sa-masina-campionul-mondial-demonstratie-in-fata-colegilor-ia-uite-nu-e-nimeni-inauntru-228238.html?fbclid=IwAR3mKL0UNc6LM6xMWbryOBUG29Q0jLw94jw08Khfq\\_vSBh\\_7T9fa\\_uB6YpLM](https://as.ro/inot/david-popovici-a-furat-toate-privirile-cu-noua-sa-masina-campionul-mondial-demonstratie-in-fata-colegilor-ia-uite-nu-e-nimeni-inauntru-228238.html?fbclid=IwAR3mKL0UNc6LM6xMWbryOBUG29Q0jLw94jw08Khfq_vSBh_7T9fa_uB6YpLM) (Accessed on 23.10.2022)

<sup>8</sup> *David Popovici purchased his first luxury car. How the champion impressed his colleagues: "Look, there's no one in the car"*, signed by Ioana Cazacu, who cites *Antena Sport* as a reliable source. <https://spynews.ro/sport/david-popovici-sia-achizitionat-primul-bolid-de-lux-cum-ia-impresionat-campionul-pe-colegii-sai-ia-uite-nu-e-nimeni-in-masina-290837.html> (Accessed on 23.10.2022)

<sup>9</sup> *What luxury car did David Popovici buy after winning gold medals at the World and European Championships*, signed by Dan Istrate and provides clear details "The car starts at 57,000 euros and can reach almost 100,000, if it has all the features in force. It is a BMW Series 5 Touring, estate version". <https://www.realitateasportiva.net/ce-bolid-de-lux-si-a-cumparat-david-popovici-dupa-ce-a-castigat-medalii-de-aur-la-mondiale-si-europene> (Accessed on 23.10.2022)

<sup>10</sup> <https://playtech.ro/stiri/david-popovici-si-a-cumparat-o-masina-de-lux-pe-care-o-parcheaza-din-telecomanda-cat-costa-bolidul-pe-care-il-conduce-rechinul-589022> (Accessed on 23.10.2022)

<sup>11</sup> *BI TV, Antena 3, România TV, Digi 24, Digi FM, ziare.com, spynews.ro* kept both news, and the disclaimer was uploaded to the site late, close to midnight. *Gazeta sporturilor* deleted the initial news.

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A news that produced emotion at very high levels was the one in which the singer Florin Salam died, as a result of Covid. It is a serious slippage of the journalist profession, such baits are produced many times with various stars (Fuego, Angela Similea, Ion Iliescu are just a few of the names that have produced recent hits).

On August 13th, 2022, this news appears on the *Pro TV* website, the cause of death would have been drug consumption. The news was given “on sources”, unverified, in order to present it first. It was an irresponsible act, having major emotional consequences, especially for the singer’s family, but also for his fans. The information is taken over by *Capital* and *Antena 3*.

It took the singer’s daughter to send denials on social networks, and then Salam himself sent a video proving that everything was a fake, in order to change the public information. Currently on the *Pro TV* website, the news is listed as “unverified information” and apologizes to those it affected so strongly<sup>12</sup>.

Some TV stations were more modest and gave the news that Florin Salm died, but they did further verification - they talked to the singer’s relatives, contacted the medical staff at the hospital (this is the case of *Romania TV*, which returned to the original title faster than and *Pro TV*).

The news was immediately shared on Facebook, and for two or three days, users made fun of the living dead. Even in this case, the public did not charge the mass media for amateurism.

### 6. ELON MUSK AND ANGELINA JOLIE IN ROMANIA

From a spark of cancan or miscellaneous fact, the news has rolled so many times that it has acquired proportions that cannot be stopped or denied. Between October 29th and November 1st, 2022, the maximum of fake news was reached in Romania with unverified information on sources such as that on Halloween, Bran Castle was rented by none other than the billionaire Elon Musk. He, along with 300 of the richest and most famous people on the planet, were going to spend time at the castle, in the company of the beautiful actress, Angelina Jolie. Although it was found out relatively quickly about Angelina that she was in Los Angeles and would not take part in the masquerade ball, the newsrooms rushed to broadcast spicy details from Bran as quickly as possible.

Dozens of reporters and cameramen were sent to the scene, who transmitted to television, radio and print media information about the guests, costumes, delicacies eaten, and some even claimed to have seen Musk and how he was dressed (of course, under anonymity protection). On November 1st, at the end of the ball, media representatives started to say they knew it was fake news, but didn’t denounce it sooner. Some online editions kept the fake news on their

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<sup>12</sup> *Pro TV* was harshly criticized by the other media <https://www.libertatea.ro/opinii/florin-salam-traieste-de-murit-a-murit-pro-tv-sfarsit-de-era-4242559> (Accessed on 04.11.2022)

websites for several days after, without apologizing for the lack of professionalism they showed. Commentators and media analysts are of the opinion that the event was not just a fake-news, but a whole phenomenon of testing the limits of the public carried out by the secret services.

The first to release the information is the website [mediaflux.ro](http://mediaflux.ro), classified as an “exclusive Paparazzi” material: “ULTRA-SECRET Event In Romania: The Richest Man In The World, Elon Musk, Angelina Jolie And Other Billionaires Of The Planet, Halloween Party at Bran. Peter Thiel, The Founder Of Paypal, Already Landed Last Night At The Otopeni Airport”<sup>13</sup>. The site quotes from “our sources” as other notable guests are expected to arrive: Sergey Brin, founder of Google, Steve Jurvetson, founder of Hotmail, on the board of Space X, Peter Thiel, founder of PayPal, Luke Nosek, co-founder PayPal and founder of Gigafund. A few hours later, comes the second incendiary headline “[mediaflux.ro](http://mediaflux.ro) Global exclusivity”: “Bomb Details Inside The Party Of The World’s Billionaires At Bran Castle. Elon Musk Hired A Director For Dracula’s Experience”<sup>14</sup>. A little later, the third material appears “Elon Musk Confirms That He Is In Romania. He Wrote On Twitter About A Very Popular Product In Our Country”<sup>15</sup>. Six more news about Musk appear in the following days: four on October 30th (“The Romanian Attending Elon Musk’s Mega Halloween Party In Bran. Mediaflux Found Out Who He Is”, “Cozmin Gusa Points To Mediaflux In An Exceptional Material: Elon Musk “Disembarks” In Romania Disguised As A Vampire. “Trick or treat?!”, “How Much Did It Cost To Rent Bran Castle By Elon Musk! Exclusive Details Regarding The Transaction”, “Elon Musk’s Mother, Maye, Comes To Bucharest. What Event Is The Former Model Participating In”), one on October 31st (“Romeo Dunca Turned Down Elon Musk And Went For A Ride With Friends In The Helicopter He Didn’t Want To Rent To Billionaires”) and

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<sup>13</sup> The material is signed by Malina Pana and at the end of it there is an invitation to the public: “Whoever has information about this subject, please write to us at [pont@mediaflux.ro](mailto:pont@mediaflux.ro)”. <https://mediaflux.ro/exclusiv-paparazzi-eveniment-ultra-secret-cel-mai-bogat-om-din-lume-elon-musk-angelina-jolie-si-alti-miliardari-ai-planetei-petrece-re-de-halloween-la-bran-peter-thiel-fondatorul-paypal-a-ateri/>(accessed on 05.11.2022)

<sup>14</sup> The article appears in the Showbiz section, signed by Toma Ionescu and is a “world exclusivity”. <https://mediaflux.ro/exclusivitate-mondiala-detalii-bomba-din-interiorul-petrece-rii-miliardarilor-lumii-de-la-castelul-bran-elon-musk-a-angajat-un-regizor-pentru-draculas-experience/>(accessed on 05.11.2022)

<sup>15</sup> In the *News* section. This one is also signed by Malina Pana and is born as a result of Musk’s message on Twitter, interpreted as “a sign that he has already tasted traditional Romanian products”: “Fresh bread and pastries are some of life’s great joys!”. Musk is placed at several luxury villas in the Brasov area. After resuming the lists of VIPs that are apparently preparing to appear, the editor notes “MediaFlux was the only publication in Romania and even in the world that obtained exceptional information and images from what can be called not the event of the year, but of the last a little over 30 years in Romania”. <https://mediaflux.ro/elon-musk-confirma-ca-e-in-romania/>(accessed on 05.11.2022)

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another one on November 1st (“Where Elon Musk Spent Halloween. The First Pictures Of The Billionaire In A Party Costume”).

The news is picked up by *Libertatea* on Saturday, in an article announcing that Elon Musk is coming to Romania<sup>16</sup>. In the following articles published on Sunday, the newspaper stated that there is no confirmation of him coming, although the organizers of the event confirmed that Musk is on the guest lists. On Monday morning, Cătălin Tolontan published “MAI Officials: «Elon Musk did not enter Romania»”<sup>17</sup>, in which, at the end of the material, he noted that: “*Libertatea* apologizes to its audience, but also to those who took the information from us, because we risked by publishing on Saturday the anticipation that Elon Musk would arrive in the country on Sunday evening. It is not the fault of the sources we cited, but only ours, because we were not more scrupulous in analyzing and verifying the information. The fact that, later on, we did not also state that Elon Musk arrived in the country, does not excuse our initial error”. On Tuesday, a material appears on the topic of Musk’s arrival “How the television reported about «Elon Musk in Romania». Each station gave dozens of news daily, on *Digi 24*, *Pro TV*, *the Antenas* and *TVR*”<sup>18</sup>.

In the rush to be the first to bring other details, we find the news on other online publications, national or local, we mention only a few: *Cancan*, *Euronews*<sup>19</sup>, but also on all televisions: *Digi 24* “the news was the opening news of the Journal, with discussions with guests on the set and broadcasts from the spot, focused on the topic of the party), *TVR* (“Sources TVR INFO: Elon Musk and Angelina Jolie are coming to Romania”, followed by news with billionaires, including Musk, who are expected to come), *Antena 1* (says that Musk is expected to come), *Pro TV* (even has an anonymous guest who claims to have seen Musk

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<sup>16</sup> On October 31st, in the sequel of the material, he publishes an erratum in which he states that Musk will not come to the party and apologizes to the readers. It also attaches the original published news. <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/elon-musk-vine-in-romania-cel-mai-bogat-om-din-lume-a-inchiriat-castelul-bran-pentru-o-petrecere-privata-cu-miliardari-si-vedete-de-la-hollywood-4329053> (accessed on 04.11.2022)

<sup>17</sup> The material specifies the list of famous guests present at the party and that “but Elon Musk and Angelina Jolie did not arrive in Romania, confirmed, for *Libertatea*, two concordant sources from different arms of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, institutions that should have known the entry of American citizens into the country.” We learn that foreign security firms have checked the castle since September 2021 and bookings have been made since November 2021. <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/oficial-mai-elon-musk-nu-a-intrat-in-romania-4330380> (accessed on 05.11.2022)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/cum-au-relatat-televiziunile-despre-elon-musk-in-romania-zeci-de-stiri-zilnic-si-invitati-la-digi-24-pro-tv-antene-si-tvr-4331756> (accessed on 05.11.2022)

<sup>19</sup> Who also have convincing guests - Dragos Anastasiu, founder of Eurolines, entrepreneur, expert in tourism and HoReCa: “I know that Elon Musk is in Romania, I know that he is staying last night and the night before, I can’t tell you more. There are many hotels and the one I know of is definitely ready to receive important guests”. It also appears on *Digi24*, with equally stringent lines.

and Angelina Jolie and describes how they were dressed), *Antena 3* (claims that Musk is flying over the area from a helicopter and that he is / would be on the way, Dana Budeanu in the *Subiectiv show* with Razvan Dumitrescu, affirms as a certainty that Musk is not in the country).

Not even the radios avoided the trap. One of the most credible channels of Romanian Radios - *Radio Romania Actualitati*<sup>20</sup> presented the information in great detail - such as that Elon Musk has been in Romania for several days and rented the Bran Castle. They even used a correspondent from Brasov who transmitted a live report on this topic, adding how Musk arrived at a barn, what he did and then how he went to the party.

After three days that the miracle lasted, on Monday morning the subject ended up being a joke. In *Radio Zu's Matinal*, with Buzdu, Emma and Morar, the children were invited to say where Musk was, to play with the concept of "fake news", which was even more inventive.

### CONCLUSIONS

*The five examples presented can be considered up to the time of writing this material, the tip of the iceberg in terms of the vast phenomenon of "fake news" in the Romanian press in 2022. The reason we catalog them in this way is the emotional impact on the public, but and the serious slippages made by the media channels. Unfortunately, dozens of other materials of this kind have appeared in the public space and, worse, they will not be stopped.*

*The mainstream newsrooms work according to the concept of "time is money", they try to convey the information very urgently, with the risk of not checking too carefully all the data received from their sources, but the end does not justify the means. It is up to each individual reader to constantly inform themselves, using multiple media channels, to form an opinion about the news they read.*

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<sup>20</sup> Post public de informare de interes național cu format generalist

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[www.as.ro](http://www.as.ro)

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