

Research report – “Detecting fake news”

From: Paul, Felix, Miriam, Hanna, Luis

Since the end of last year we have dealt with the topic of fake news in German and history lessons and wanted to participate as a class in a cross-border media project called "Digital resistance". This was a project that was intended to promote a critical understanding of media in schools in several countries and, at least in Austria, took place in cooperation with the university. Our university supervisors came to school several times to give us general information about the project, and then input to help us shape our own contribution to the project. After several hours of preparation in the German and History lessons, the productive phase began in 2019 in which we actively developed material for the project.

Main topic

After a long consideration, my group decided to go for the topic "Detecting and dissemination of fake news". A topic that was interesting for us because fake news could be incredibly effective and the distribution was relatively simple. Of course, credibility and reach can be expanded with a more professional approach, but even a small amount of work can make a big difference with the right approach and an emotional topic. And that was exactly what fascinated us: the phenomenon when topics address us emotionally in such a strong way that we react so strongly that the authenticity of the information is completely pushed into the background and we completely forget to critically question, if the content is true. This phenomenon is perhaps a “childhood disease” of human interaction with the internet and may evaporate in a few years, if the handling of digital information loses something of its euphoric nature, but even if it does, it does not change the current relevance of fake news.

Methods

Because we had already considered the medium "film" from the very beginning, our method of processing was chosen very quickly. We spent some time thinking about how to build the film and, most importantly, how to deal with the issue of fake news. In the end we decided to shoot a film in which we spread fake news about a garage building below our schoolyard. Since this undertaking could prove to be quite difficult and above all risky in reality, we decided to make the whole film fictional, this allowed us to consciously create the desired effect in the film and at the same time always keep full control over the developments and reactions of our misinformation. We researched and developed a concept on how to best stage the distribution of our fake news message and opted for social media. We created a fake-Instagram account where we put our false information online and reached almost 200 followers within a day. On the site itself, there were enough references to the falseness of the content, but since these were not visible in the video, we were still able to give the viewer the feeling of expansively spreading false information.

Results

The results of our work became partly already clear to us in the working process, when we became aware of how simple it is to change contents in articles with relatively unspectacular methods and to fake them completely. Especially via social media, it is extremely easy to post texts and articles without sources or references, and these can still go viral and reach a very large number of users. This has

shown us how important it is to question and check content and not to take up purely emotionally controlled information. And our fake video itself showed us very well that video content doesn't necessarily have to correspond to the truth. At the end of the day, a video is not necessarily a representation of reality, but a representation of an action and whether it is real or not is very difficult for us to understand, because unfortunately we are sitting at the "wrong" side of the camera.

Working method

Working together as a group went well, we shared the work very effectively from the beginning and gained a lot of time, because while two of us were thinking about the concept for the video for example, the other part of the group was already shooting the first scenes. This parallel work was incredibly productive and it resulted in much less disagreement and discussion because not all five of us had to agree anymore, but rather think about a constructive compromise in smaller groups. This meant that everyone was involved in all the work, but there were, so to speak, "experts" who came to conclusions in a much quicker way.

Conclusion

I enjoyed the project very much and the free work turned out to be a very pleasant format, because we were able to manage our own time and thus an individual work pace could develop, which was not only more pleasant, but also certainly helped achieving higher quality results than a strictly divided work plan to which everyone had to adhere. I was worried at first that we might run out of time, but we worked much more productively from the start than we would have expected.

In summary, it was a very exciting and fun project, which also brought us closer to a topic that you cannot take seriously enough.