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**Citation:** Himma-Kadakas, M. 2017. Alternative facts and fake news entering journalistic content production cycle. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. 9(2), 25-40. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v9i2.5469>

ISSN 1837-5391 | Published by  
UTS ePRESS |  
[mcs.epress.lib.uts.edu.au](http://mcs.epress.lib.uts.edu.au)

REFEREED PAPER

## Alternative facts and fake news entering journalistic content production cycle

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**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v9i2.5469>

### Abstract

Processing information into journalistic content in contemporary news media creates a favorable environment for the distribution of misleading and fake information. This paper analyzes the distribution of alternative facts and fake news as a phenomenon characterizing post-fact society and how journalistic work processes may promote and legitimize the distribution of misleading content. The study looks into the back- and front-stage performances of journalistic information processing that are influenced by social time acceleration and the insistence of ‘click-bait’ news criteria. We used three different methods for teaching news reporting on three different groups of Estonian journalism students, and analyzed their performance using self-reflection in focus group interviews. Two groups of students, whose assignments were geared toward the outcome, focused more on front stage performances and underestimated back stage performances, e.g. the evaluation of sources, background information gathering, and fact checking. One group, which was taught news reporting as a process of information filtering, perceived and reflected both front and back stage performances. The results indicate that (online) newsroom practice, which is influenced by time pressure and the continuous requirement of new content, may force journalists to skip the stages of conventional journalistic information processing and due to that create favorable environment for publishing and distributing misleading and fake news.

### Keywords

fake news, alternative facts, journalism education, journalistic role performance, post-fact society, post-truth society, news content production

**DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST** The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** This work was supported by institutional research funding IUT (20-38) of the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research.

## Introduction of alternative facts and fake news to journalistic practice

The issue of *alternative facts* and *fake news* has received attention during a number of various topical events: riots in the U.K. in 2011, shootings in Newtown, U.S. in 2012, the bombing at the Boston Marathon in 2013 (World Economic Forum 2014), the Ukrainian crisis (Thomas 2014; Mitrokhin 2015), the Brexit referendum, and the 2016 and 2017 presidential elections in the U.S. and France, respectively (Desigaud et al. 2017). *Fake news* in the context of the aforementioned events could have been interpreted as intentionally widely spread misinformation; *alternative facts* could have been treated as the intentional misinterpretation of factual material. Fake news is also a tool in information war; in this context the distribution of false information is deliberate and uses the strategic narratives that have the components of news factors of Anglo-American journalistic culture (Khaldarova & Pantti 2016). This sort of misinformation is spread primarily via social media, but is occasionally published by mainstream media and substantially distributed (Desigaud et al. 2017) and, due to this, was validated as journalistic facts (World Economic Forum 2014). This leads to the focal question of this paper: how is it possible that misleading and factually questionable information passes the conventional information processing cycle in the news media? In order to address this, it is wise to begin with the conceptualization of the terms *alternative fact* and *fake news*.

The terms *alternative fact* and *fake news* are controversial and ambiguous. The meaning of the noun *fact* is defined as ‘a thing that is known or proved to be true’ (Oxford Dictionaries). Previously cited studies also admit that it is difficult to establish what is *fake* or what is *fact*, as sharing facts does not automatically mean sharing the perception of what is a fact. Therefore, it is appropriate to return to conventional interpretations of fact construction. The definition in journalistic approach is that the fact is always proven, checked and therefore true — anything alternative to this cannot be treated as a fact.

Gebner treats journalistic fact as setting the focus for directing attention, emphasizing in order to signify importance, typecasting and accenting value and power which are tied together in association in the thread of action (Gerbner 1973, p. 183). Gebner’s approach also denotes that democracy in itself does not guarantee the presentation of knowledge as truth. In Tuchman’s (1980) interpretation, the construction of a fact is always related to professionalism and motivated by the political sphere. She also emphasizes that the fact does not exist in isolation — for signification, it needs the context of a network of other facts. In a contemporary context, this means that alternative facts or the phenomenon of fake news cannot emerge independently; they are constructed with the objective of embedding this sort of content into journalistic information processing and social media, passing off the information as journalistic content. *Alternative facts* and *fake news* are components of what Harsin (2015) calls the regime of post-truth, however they are not the only components thereof. In the context of constructing fact, however, the legitimization of alternative facts or fake news in journalism became key players. Alternative facts relate more to the interpretation of fact construction, whether intentional or unintentional; fake news refers to intentional falsehoods that imitate journalistic facts and is distributed via social media and, in

some cases, mainstream media. In this paper, both are treated on similar basis, as their embedding into mainstream media is similar.

With the emergence of digital journalism, many key practices have changed and the once-conventional filters that guaranteed factual accuracy have changed as well. The scholarly discussion about the journalistic profession is emerging on the grounds of who journalists are and what do they do (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Hellmueller & Mellado 2015; Willnat et al. 2013). According to the perspective of systems theory, journalism as a system provides society with fact-based, relevant and current information (Görke & Scholl 2007, pp. 651). At the same time, more contemporary approaches indicate the necessity of debate over the conventional normative construction of journalism (Anderson 2011; Deuze & Witschge 2017). The plurality of platforms has fragmented work practices inside newsrooms and, in the process, journalists are challenged by new competitors outside the journalistic field — social media, blogs, vlogs, ‘alternative media outlets’, etc.

Conventional news reporting – processing information into journalistic content – incorporates various operations, the purpose of which is to exclude false and incidental information. This begins with information channels and the selection of sources, however. Sigal (1973) divided the paths through which information reached the reporter into three categories:

1. Routine channels (official proceeding, press releases, press conferences, non-spontaneous events)
2. Informal channels (background briefings, leaks, non-governmental proceedings, news reports, editorials, etc.)
3. Enterprise channels (interviews, spontaneous events, books, research etc., reporter’s own analysis)

Sigal (1973) admits that on-the-beat efficiency dictates the gathering of news via routine channels, but in the contemporary context of online journalism, this raises the question from which channel misleading or false information enters into routine channels. Governmental officials as routine sources have been seen as trustworthy, but social media with its distribution of computational propaganda (Desigaud et al. 2017) may lead to the notion of trustworthiness.

The informational functions of journalists are challenged by digital media as well as by other information providers (Picard 2015). The information gathering and processing practices of a ‘networked journalist’ are more connected to online and digital sources, which are easily and instantly accessible (van der Haak et al. 2012). The growing amount of information is creating an information overload, which leads to ineffective information processing and poorer decision-making (Jacoby et al. 1974). The problem lies not in the information or the amount thereof, but rather in the ‘filter failure,’ as Clay Shirky (Asay 2015) states. In such conditions, journalists’ role is to be ‘the filter’: to select and process information in order to make sense of society. ‘Filtering’ – conventional news reporting –

demands time and other resources, which often are scarce in online journalism (Himma-Kadakas and Palmiste 2017), as in deciding what becomes news and what gets published, online journalists are on the front line.

Misleading and indistinguishable fake news may be constructed deliberately by a person or constructed by an algorithm based on reader engagement. 'Click-bait' headlines and emotionally loaded content enhance the financial interests of media enterprises. Fake news, either aggregated by algorithms or constructed by people, fits the news logic of Anglo-American journalism and is therefore successfully dispersible via (social) media.

The aim of this research essay is to analyze how product-oriented work practice, which resembles the conditions in online newsrooms, influences the processing of information into journalistic content. This may explain how and why alternative facts and fake news get published in mainstream media. Beginning with the professional journalistic value of trust, I will examine trust from the perspective of trust and credibility in digital media. As trust in journalism is assured through the rigorous stages of information processing, it is important to look into journalistic content production processes (section 'Information processing cycle (in legacy media)'). The empirical study of Estonian journalism students inspects production processes from the aspect of the effectiveness of verifying the facts (sections 'The outlining of information processing stages' and 'Perception of news production process experienced'). The issue of how misleading or false information gets published in an online news portal is observed in the section 'How news get published online,' which is based on the reflections of online journalism students. The concluding section discusses the connections between conventional journalistic production processes and the eventualities of alternative facts and fake news being published in online news media.

### **Trust and credibility online**

Can journalistic credibility be generated by software? The answer to this question lies in multifold research on automating journalistic content production. The algorithmic news production has been seen as cost-effective and redefining the labor (van Dalen 2012; van der Kaa 2014; Napoli 2014) and for some time was treated as a promising development in news production (Dörr 2015; Clerwall 2014; Carlson 2015). A more critical approach indicates that the objective of information processing will always demand human competence (Linden 2016) and disconnecting journalistic decision-making from the news production process has consequences (Carlson 2017), since algorithmic news production may lead to distribution of fake news.

The combination of current (online) journalism practices and the decrease of audiences' skepticism has laid the groundwork for alternative facts and fake news getting published. This, too, is nothing new: Hovland and Weiss (1951) exemplify how an individual, as time passes, may remember *what* was communicated, but does not remember *who* communicated it, and the journalistic source is automatically trusted. The reason behind this trust is the guarantee provided by the conventionally rigorous information processing in the news reporting, which should ensure the trustworthiness of the facts.

Trust can be defined as regular, honest and cooperative behavior that is deeply embedded in social context (Leith 2013), similarly to journalism, which carries the 'leap of faith' for its editorial process that conventionally, in legacy media, lead to publishing. Perceived credibility is the sum of perceived trustworthiness and perceived expertise (Fogg 2003). But Jessen & Jørgensen (2011) develop this model in the context of digital media and add the social element to the online credibility, calling it *aggregated trustworthiness* (AT). AT consists of social validation (large-scale verifications made by others), profile (identity online), authority and trustee (brand or authority on the matter). But they also admit that AT does not substitute for the critical analysis of online information. Individuals translate information practices from our physical environment to cyberspace and virtual spaces (Narayan 2013); from the audience's perspective, this means that trust in TV, radio and newspaper content is seamlessly transferred to digital media as well. From the journalists' perspective, social media contains a lot of content that has all the characteristics of news and can therefore be mistaken for journalistic content. Professional roles are a key aspect in defining journalism as a profession, and the speed in which news and information travel within society increases every day. The privileged space that practitioners once had to inform different audiences is no longer the same (Mellado et al. 2016).

### **The information processing cycle**

In legacy media, information processing into journalistic content was controlled by 'slot' and 'time-value' (Schlesinger 1978, 126-128). The 'slot,' determined by volume, time and deadline, exists in broadcast media and newspapers, but not on the internet. However, in the news reporting work process, online news portals still use the same logic of 'slot-filling' (Lehste 2012; Vobič&Milojević 2014). This work process is partly copied from news agencies that provide information 24/7. On the internet, trying to fill the 'slot' results in broadening the news value filter and publishing at a rapid pace.

The perpetual news cycle demands the constant mass production of content, which is routinized, fast and efficient (Gans 2003, p.50). However, this influences the stages of information processing, which conventionally used to guarantee original and factually correct content. Gans (1979, p.239) indicates that when time and staff are in short supply, news organizations become dependent on wire services or other news media. This also means that the information-processing cycle is always compromised by the possibility of misleading information getting into the source (e.g. news agency, news portal, blog, social media).

There are a number of ways to analyze processing of information into journalistic content. For example, Laakaniemi (1995) and Rich (2000) address information processing from the perspective of understanding writing as a process. Laakaniemi examines information processing from the point of view of newsroom practice and divides the practices into the *product approach* and the *process approach*. Though Laakaniemi does not outline the precise stages of writing a news story, he tackles the process in terms of problems that occur in information processing (organizing collected material, focusing, copy editing, time management, etc.). Rich (2000) outlines the reporting and writing process through the self-coaching method, which has four phases:

- 1) **conceiving**: the stage of developing the idea for a story, focusing it, and refocusing the material if necessary;
- 2) **collecting**: the reporting stage, information gathering, interviewing sources, and gathering additional information in the course of interviewing;
- 3) **constructing**: the writing stage, planning and organizing material, and writing a draft of the story;
- 4) **correcting**: the revision stage, checking facts, rewriting, and correcting grammar, style and typing errors.

The production cycle, according to McManus (1994, p. 183), can be divided into three stages: **discovery** (series of decisions regarding how a news department will deploy its resources to learn what is going on in the community that might be newsworthy); **selection** (choices regarding which events and issues discovered in Phase 1, discovery, ought to be reported); **reporting** (decisions regarding how to cover the events and issues selected to create a narrative account).

Meyrowitz (1985) and Karlsson (2011) divide news reporting into two types of performance. *Back-stage performances* include stages of information processing (e.g. finding the idea for a news story, gathering information, evaluating sources, fact-checking). *Front-stage performances* focus on content production stages, such as presentation and distribution. Passively obtained news, which means the full cycle of front- and back-stage news reporting, are the mainstay of news production (Meyrowitz 1985; Karlsson 2011); at the same time, fast, efficient and conflict-oriented news promotes reactive or passive reporting that is provided by proxies (Gans 2003). Passive reporting enables content which contains the criteria for newsworthy, selling and seemingly true, to pass the journalistic filter.

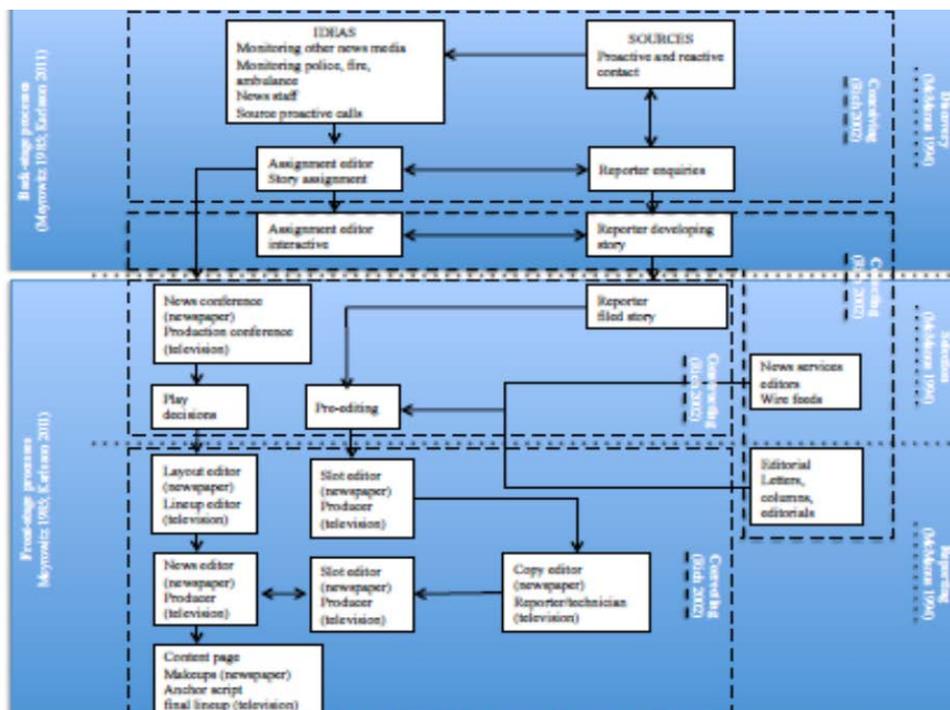


FIGURE 1 Content Production Approaches

Previously presented content production approaches can be visualized (Figure 1) in order to outline the similarities. It is constructed on the basis on Ericson's et al. (1987) visualization of news production in the organization. Therefore Figure 1 is a combination of empirical study (Ericson et al. 1987) and theoretical approaches (Meyrowitz 1985; Karlsson 2011; Rich 2000; McManus 1994). As can be seen from the model, the stages of information processing in the content production cycle are quite similar. Their difference is mainly discursive and depends on the viewpoint of the subject.

## Method

The aim behind the study of journalism students' content production cycle was to outline the factors influencing the factual outcome, the news article, in different work situations. The data used in this paper is gathered during two periods of time, with the first period (2010-2011) focusing on newspaper work processes and the second period (2017) focusing on online media. In order to analyze how teaching method influences the perception of news reporting, *product approach* and *process approach* teaching methods were applied on two different groups of journalism students (1st group, N=42; 2nd group, N=38) in two years (2010 and 2011). The *product approach* method simulated newspaper work routines emphasizing the product — the final news article. The changes made in teaching method (*process approach*) for the second year took into consideration the problems addressed by Laakaniemi (1995). The *process approach* method combined practical assignments of newsroom simulation with lectures and seminars. In lectures, news reporting was explained as a process; the seminars gave the students opportunities for self-reflection and coaching from peers. The group of students who followed the 'online newsroom' work process were taught according to the *product approach* method. Similarly to newsrooms in Estonia (Loit&Siibak 2012, Leheste 2012), the group of students had to publish news 'items' every ten minutes during a 6-hour work shift; categories were required to be covered were foreign news, finance, state politics, culture and entertainment. One article containing at least three units of multimedia components was also required.

At the end of all three courses, the students' perception of the content production process was studied in focus group interviews (1st group, N=15; 2nd group, N=13; 3rd group, N=10); students were selected by random sampling (except the 3rd group, where all participating students were interviewed at the focus group). During the first year, the focus group interview also included suggestions for changes in teaching methods for the following year's course. In all three groups, focus group interviews clarified the students' perceptions of the news construction process.

From the point of view of news reporting and information processing didactics, it is essential to analyze news construction as a process — as a narrative compiled by the reporter. With this, the present study contributes to the conceptualization of the unity of the news-constructing process, examining the different stages of information processing and the perceived role of the reporter. There were two main topics in the focus group interviews: 1) the outlining of information processing stages as seen by the students, and 2) reflections on news production as a process, as it was experienced by the students. Focus group interviews

were analyzed according to the categories outlined in Figure 1. Although focus group interview as a method is a quick and effective method for this sort of reflection, it also has its shortcomings in the form of groupthink or domination of topical issues, which can overshadow some focuses.

The next section presents the analysis of the focus group discussions, organized thematically according to the two focuses. First, the 1st and 2nd focus group interviews are analyzed, as their teaching methods had more similarities to newspaper. The experience and self-reflection of the 3rd group of students is more focused on the content production cycle in online media, and is therefore analyzed separately.

### **The outlining of information processing stages**

In the 1st and 2nd group, students were first asked to sketch the stages of information processing in the news production cycle. The first group, who were trained using *production approach* methods, described how news reporting for them began with reorganizing collected information (structuring material according to conventions of hard news, selecting quotes, rephrasing, selecting suitable language, etc.). Two out of 15 students in the first group noted in the drawing task that it was time-consuming to find the idea for a news story. With this, they pointed to the preliminary stages of information processing — finding the idea for the story and selecting sources — which by Rich and McManus would accordingly be categorized as conception and discovery, but in the subsequent discussion, neither finding the idea nor the focusing or framing of the material were considered to be part of the news reporting process.

The stages that were absent from students' perceptions of information processing were stages that Meyrowitz and Karlsson have marked as back-stage performances. This indicates that most of the students perceived the stages of information processing that were visible in the final outcome. However, there were two students out of 15 who mentioned finding the idea, but not all of the stages of these categories were reflected. This is important as the evaluation of sources and finding the idea for the story are critically important for the evaluation of the origin and trustworthiness of the information. The second group (*process oriented* method), whose training included lectures and discussions in seminars about different stages of information processing, described the news construction process as beginning with finding the idea for a news story or the evaluation of the newsworthiness of the material. In both groups, students emphasized that finding the idea for the story was hardest. This is somewhat contradictory, as the 1st group unanimously evaluated that finding the idea the hardest part, but at the same time did not consider it to be part of the processing of information.

In the course of discussion, back-stage performances such as social communication were highlighted. The main difference between the two groups, however, was that the first group considered interviewing to be part of the reporting process only because '*it gives one quotes for the story.*' Therefore, it was seen by the first group as part of their practice, but was not perceived as a part of information processing. The second group included communication (specifically interviewing) in the news reporting process and also mentioned that interviewing was a source of direct quotes, but with the difference that interviewing and

meeting with sources also provided an opportunity to gather additional background information.

*‘All people as sources are equal. If this old lady is disturbed by smoke coming out of the funnel (and if she is not a lunatic) and is able to present facts for her allegations, then of course she is a suitable source.’*

(Kaur, FG1)

The previous quotation was excerpted from the discussion on the credibility of sources. Students from the first group assessed sources by news value of the story, rather than the truthfulness or credibility of the source. Two of the following quotations are from the discussion over the same topic with the second group:

*‘And then there is the thing that you cannot let the source influence you. You have to be equal with him.’ ‘Yes, and you have to maintain a critical state of mind, so you would be able to think that all of this is pure nonsense.’*

(Joosep and Hendrik, FG2)

The issue of critical evaluation of sources was one of the clearest differences that became evident between the *product approach* and *process approach* groups of students. Evaluation of source credibility is the first instance in which the exclusion of misleading information or fake news begins.

Front-stage performances from the collecting and constructing (Rich 2002) stages were reflected through focusing in the process of selection (McManus 1994). Here, too, were differences between two groups. Most of the students in the first group acknowledged that there was ‘such thing as focusing,’ but did not reflect it as part of the news construction process they experienced.

*‘Actually, focusing on the material, as we have learned in school, is pointless, since it is not done like that anywhere in the newsroom.’*

(Madis, FG1)

However, in the second group, determining the focus was utilized as a tool for decision-making in the collection and selection stages of the material.

*‘When I have my own focus, I ask questions in the light of the focus. If the interview gets carried away, I can come back to my focus, rely on that.’*

(Joosep, FG2)

The reporting and correcting stages were most similarly reflected in all three focus groups. As all three focus groups have been trained with knowledge and skills on how to write articles according to news genre conventions, all three groups had identical ideas regarding what the final outcome of the news should look like. The reflected criteria on structure, suitable language, quoting, technical formatting, etc., were identical. In other words, students, regardless of their perception of information processing stages, are all able to present information of any degree of factual accuracy, in the form of news. In drawing a conclusion

based on this, there is a point for consideration: the ‘packaging’ of false information without being aware of that is easy if the reporter does not perceive the diverse functions of information processing stages.

#### *Perception of news production process experienced*

After sketching the process of news reporting, the students were asked to discuss how they had experienced the news reporting process during the course. The aim of this assignment was to reflect the real situation of news work they had experienced. It became evident in the following discussion that students in the first group saw news reporting in terms of practices that they had heard about or experienced during internships in media organizations. Students who had experience working as interns in newsrooms were seen as experts by others in the focus group interviews, and knowledge of ‘*how it is done in newsrooms*’ was significantly persuasive for peers. This sort of expertise was influential for peers in both groups.

*‘The news we learn to write here is like finance theory — it’s theoretical, but it doesn’t work quite like that in the real world. In real, life things work a bit differently.’* (Joosep, FG2)

Emphasizing that the learning course was different from real practice was similar in the first and second group, but at the same time, the third group (online newsroom simulation) saw it as a very real-life situation. The differences between first and second group in perceiving ‘real’ and ‘training’ became evident when students began discussing how they would act in class and how in the newsroom. Most of the students in the first group made the excuse that they disregard some stages of information processing as content production in newsrooms disregards them as well. At the same time, while all of the students in the second group acknowledged that they might occasionally neglect some of the stages of information processing, they still perceive the importance of each step of the process.

#### *Value of the conflict*

During the first year, the teachers emphasized that hard news usually contains conflict as a news value. During the second year, the teachers did not mention the news value of conflict at all; instead, the words *problem* or *opposition* were used. Other news values such as proximity, actuality, meaningfulness, unexpectedness, etc., were also knowingly emphasized on the second year. The aim of that sort of teaching was to see how much the valuation of certain news values impacts the outcome. Each student was asked to name one news value that he or she considered to be most important.

*‘For example, I had to find the conflict in this financial news, and I went on and on in the documents registry. But at some point I gave up, since I couldn’t dig up any conflict.’* (Kärt, FG1)

This quote from one of the students from the first year was quite revealing, as all her peers had similar stories. All of the students in the first group named conflict the most important news value. The students frantically tried to find stories that would include conflict, or tried

to emphasize the conflict of any sort in the final news text. The expectation of the teacher, or in real newsroom situation — of the editor — may have tremendous impact on information processing. This case of constructing conflict into the news pervaded all stages of information processing (all these that the first group had reflected).

In the second group, students recorded news values such as influence (7), prominence (2), conflict (1), actuality (2), and proximity (1). Therefore the expectation of an authoritative person influences the selection of topic, focusing, selection of sources, constructing the final news text, etc. Understanding of this from on sides could help to decrease the pressure influencing the content production cycle.

### *Ethical considerations*

The fact that ethical considerations should be honored at any stage of information processing was one explicit difference between the two groups. It is important to mention that the interviewer intentionally avoided the word ‘ethics’ during both focus group interviews. The first group expressed the opinion that ethical considerations were important mainly in terms of how human sources were interpreted in the published product. Ethics was mentioned only once in the context of selecting material to put into the final text; it was indirectly discussed primarily in the context of the influence that the final text might have on sources after the story had been published. In other words, ethics was part of the reporting process mainly when it explicitly appeared in the final news text.

The second group did not use the word ‘ethics.’ However, it was implicitly discussed regarding almost all of the stages of information processing that follow communication with sources. Taking into account a source’s previous experience in communicating with a journalist, considering the potential harm that might result from revealing information, and considering potential consequences after the story was published were just some of the examples given where ethical considerations were considered important. Although ethics was not directly taught in the supplementary seminars and lectures to the second group, it was emphasized throughout the course.

The main difference between the two groups was that product-oriented students only mentioned the information processing stages that were visible to readers in the final news text (e.g. selection of information, quotes from sources, editing text). The students in both groups mentioned different parts of information processing (e.g. finding the story, managing time, reorganizing the material, and communicating with sources), but the difference between the *product approach* group and the *process approach* group was that the latter was able to describe the stages of information processing separately from their personal experience of news reporting.

### **How news gets published online**

The issue of finding newsworthy information and reliable sources is common in everyday work practice both in newspapers and online newsrooms. In all three groups of the study, this was considered to be the most difficult part. Sources that easily provide ideas and readily

accessible information for articles, whether human sources, social media, news services or PR agencies, became of great value. Expanding on that thought, it becomes one of the loopholes for alternative facts and fake news to enter the news flow, at least in online media where the constant demand for publishing tempts to accept any kind of provided information.

The newsroom teaching methods in the third group of students were different from previous two groups. Methods used in the course were mainly lectures and seminars where the theoretical overview on online journalism was given. The topics of workflows, ethics, management, practical workshops of data visualization etc. were covered. The course ended with 6-hour work shift that copied the work practices of Estonian online newsrooms (Leheste 2012).

Before the analysis of the focus group interview, it is appropriate to describe the situation in the students' online newsroom. The work shift was supposed to start with a meeting to talk through topics and work arrangements. But instead of that, all of the students sat at their computer, searching for topics online and the meeting had no interpersonal communication. At some point during the meeting, one of the students recognized that for cooperation they needed communication, and proposed that everybody should write down their ideas into shared Google document. As it was soon clear that they would not be able to work as a team without person-to-person communication, they started discussing ideas for stories. Within moments, ideas were selected, extended, and the production was coordinated. This is significant, because often 'networked journalists' work single-handedly or in contact with colleagues online (Van Der Haak et al. 2012). This newsroom simulation showed that collaborative and communicative work practices are efficient.

The students had to publish something every 10 minutes. In addition, they had to produce and publish one multimedia story containing at least two components in addition to text. The latter requirement resulted in the perception that '*it was something that needs to be done to get the nuisance over with*' (Virgo, FG3). This expression by one of the students led everybody else to think along these lines as well. For example, the students discussed two topics about which they could have taken footage. The final selection, however, was made based upon which event takes place closer to the students' location.

*'It is close to here, on Vaksali Street.'* *'Yes, but the office of the mad scientist is closer. And besides, we can take the video about the experiment he is conducting at eleven. But on Vaksali Street we are not even sure that we can get the video.'* (Helis and Kristel, FG3)

The news value that began to dominate the entire production cycle was time constraint, i.e. being able to quickly cover information that is easily accessible. Setting aside the multimedia story, the other news pieces published carried the same news value: getting information easily on the web. The usage of online databases boiled down to news agencies, press releases, public information announcements and referred content from foreign news media. The students reflected in the focus group that they did not think about news values or what or how influenced the journalistic work.

When the students were asked about the stages of information processing that they perceived, the three stages they firmly reflected were finding a story, editing it according to conventional news genre, and publishing. The latter also meant that it was almost always necessary to correct some mistakes in the text (e.g. misspelling, typos, names, titles, links). Therefore, the constructed time pressure also resulted in publishing first, checking facts and quality later. Placing these sorts of influencing factors into a real-life online newsroom may yield the same results.

In this example, critical stages which should eliminate false information and provide fact-based content were left vulnerable. The way in which students searched for the idea of the news story left them prone to misleading or false information. The students acknowledged that they considered for publishing pieces of information that '*seemed like news*'; due to the lack of topical knowledge or lack of time to do background work, however, they left these pieces of information aside. Influencing factors, such as time pressure and a constant demand for publishing, paved the way for publishing information that was factually unchecked, but also not publishing due to the scarcity of resources needed to do research for fact-check.

### **Conclusions and discussion**

Alternative facts and fake news are componential phenomena of a post-fact society and depend on the distribution on digital platforms. Being embedded into journalistic content legitimizes their truthfulness (Thomas 2014; Mitrokhin 2015; Khaldarova&Pantti 2016; Desigaud et al. 2017), which is why the study of the journalistic processing of information into news is important. In the context of online journalism, the fact that content has to be created fast and cheap leads to the usage of material that is easily accessible and corresponds to news values such as conflict and prominence (Gans 2003). News factors in fake news imitate the news values of Anglo-American journalistic culture (Khaldarova&Pantti 2016; Desigaud et al. 2017) and make the misinformation, especially with the criteria of conflict and prominence, attractive for the journalist seeking easily publishable breaking news.

At the same time online journalism tries to function in the legacy media information processing cycle, which paves the way for alternative facts and fake news to enter the mainstream media news flow. According to the conventional approach, journalistic fact is constructed in a complex sequence of acts (Gerbner 1973) that is influenced by professionalism and motivated by the political sphere (Tuchman 1980). But if we add the conditions of contemporary journalistic practice, especially in online journalism, the result of what is fact and the interpretation of its meaning may vary a great deal.

The study of journalism students' perceptions about information processing stages in the news content production cycle revealed that in conditions similar to everyday news work, many stages are not perceived at all. Some of these information processing stages are vitally important to guaranteeing factual accuracy in journalism.

The results of this study show that the most challenging stages of the information are related to finding the idea and focusing the information. These are back-stage performances (Meyrowitz 1985; Karlsson 2011), which are invisible to the audience. Therefore the most

‘insecure’ stages of information processing are the initial stages: the channels through which the information reaches the journalist. Young journalists, as they were the objects of this study, lack informal channels (Sigal 1973), since they have not developed their professional network. The utilization of enterprise channels is time consuming and requires also network of sources. This leaves young journalists with the routine channels as they are seen as trustworthy and efficient pipelines for on-the-beat information gathering and instant publishing. This, in turn, paves the way for legitimization of alternative facts or fake news in news journalism. The product approach in journalism practice, may it be on legacy media platforms or online journalism, diminishes the role of source evaluation and fact checking.

Students who were not trained to perceive the content production cycle as a process oriented themselves to those stages of information processing that were visible in the final outcome, i.e. in the publishable article. This fact is significant, as it excludes some stages related to fact-checking, and focuses on the technical stages related to the final text. Conventionally, the rigorous legacy media production cycle with its various stages of information processing ensured factual accuracy. In contemporary online newsrooms constrained with time pressure and infinite ‘slot filling,’ this production cycle may not guarantee fact. Solution to the problem of time pressure was seen in automated content production that would leave the journalists more time for thorough content production (van Dalen 2012; van der Kaa 2014), but this argument has been challenged by the demand for competence of journalistic decision-making (Linden 2016; Carlson 2017).

Since the current situation creates a favorable environment for misleading or false information to be published, the information processing cycle in online journalism demands re-examining and perceiving which stages of information processing are prone for the misleading or false information to enter and what stages fulfill the purpose in creating credible journalistic content.

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