The Domination of The Title: Killing Critical Thinking before It's Born

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Abstract— The rapid evolution of technology determined a wide accessibility of the Internet. From using Internet only for work to using it almost at every hour this tool is now as an extension of our brain. This favored changes in our mind as: shortage of our attention, loss of focus, skimmed reading and a constant desire for instant gratification.

One of the unfortunate consequences is that people do not have patience to read a long text anymore. We know that online texts have to be in short paragraphs, with bold keywords and with a lot of images nearby in order for them to be taken into account by users, but there is a phenomenon that is more severe than that. More and more people are reading only the title of a text and they think they have the sufficient information.

We discuss about a tyranny of the title, of which media and advertisers are taking advantage. By creating a title that seems to tell all the story and attaching a photo to it (that it can even not be real), these entities mislead the readers and make them believe that they are informed and that they understood the story.

This paper's aim is to present a corpus analysis of the comments of newspapers' news on social networks and prove that most of them are not connected to the content of the article. In the same time, we try to find explanation for this dangerous behavior that affects people's critical thinking.

Keywords— critical thinking, fake news, misleading advertising, title.

I. INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where everything has to be delivered in a short form, in a short time and, if it is possible, in a very simple structure. This paper presents an effect of this fast world determined by the Internet, an unfortunate consequence which is the fact that people read only the headline of a text without feeling the need to dig more in the information. There are some researches that show that more and more people share posts on social media without reading the whole text. This paper's aim is to find some explanations for this dangerous behavior, a behavior that kills the chance for critical thinking to be applied.

II. THE EFFECTS OF ONLINE CONTEXT

In the last years, the usage of the Internet has increased in a

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spectacular way. The purposes of online surfing developed in a various manner. People do not go online only for researching or for entertainment. Today, almost every activity in a day of an adult is connected with the online. We talk about shopping, cooking, work, education, entertainment, dating, working with institutions, events, and so on and so forth. The Internet became our extension and it is almost impossible to do the same activities without going online at least once a day. Social Media is the place the users spend most of the online time. For example, 90% of young US adults use social media on a daily basis [1]. Given these facts, many studies focused their research on the effects on the human brain. The usage of the Internet seems to determine a shortage in attention span. There were some non-peer reviewed studies which drew a dramatic conclusion that humans now have an attention span smaller than a gold fish, but the reality is not really like this. It is true that the attention span is being challenged due to many stimuli while surfing online, but this is not the only factor that influence it. The attention span depends on the task and it is linked with motivation about that task [2]. However, the online medium became a battlefield where a lot of entities fight to grab the attention of the user and use different tricks, attractive colors and attractive headlines, shocking images and use an appeal to user's curiosity.

In a strong connection with the attention span, there is the multitasking effect and loss of focus. The multiple stimuli require multiple activities and the user switches attention from one stimulus to another having the illusion that he does multiple activities in the same time. The switching from one activity to another is done in less than a minute with some studies presenting even in less than 20 seconds [3]. The same study noticed that the anticipation of switching from a work task to an entertainment task is taking place sooner and it is more enjoyable and the focus is lost quicker than usual. Spending time online it is not relaxing and calm. Our cognition, especially our conscious mind is used constantly and there is always a task that asks something from us.

Another change in our mind determined by the presence of the Internet in our lives is about the capacity of memory. More specific, our transactive memory works less knowing that there is a tool that has all the information we need at any time we need. We feel that we have less responsibility to remember useful information because there is one single entity that we find in the same place that can give us the information we need [4]. Thus, a new paradox is born: We give up retaining

information, but we feel like we know and possess a lot of information. This phenomenon influences self-perceived knowledge. When we use the Internet for searching information, we have the illusion that we know things, that we are smarter and that our intellectual activity increased and the studies show that we feel this even when we use our daily smartphones for different purposes that imply online surfing [4]. This illusion of higher self-knowledge shows that we consider the Internet an extension of our mind, a device that will be forever next to us, always prepared to give us what we are looking for. We consider that a part of our mind is encapsulated in the Internet dimension. This is even more grown steadily for the generations that were raised with the presence of the Internet nearby since the very first years of life.

Another factor that is worth to be mentioned in this paper is the Internet's ability of giving people instant gratification. In this way, the Internet creates a small (or really increased) addiction becoming a factor of influencing the reinforcement/reward system of our brain. The Internet is attractive because it assures novelty and unpredictability of the content that increases the dopamine in our brain. Regardless of the content, our brain anticipates that something interesting might come up and makes us search for something new in a constant manner [5]. The rapidity of the Internet makes us access the content only through one click and, in this way, we can become addicted to instant gratification.

III. WHO READS MORE THAN THE HEADLINE?

The Internet medium requires a different way of text writing and publishing because the reading is happening in a different matter compared to reading on a paper. People skim quickly through a text, their attention is caught by images, by short paragraphs and bold keywords. But in the late years this started to be too much for some Internet users. A 2016 study made by Columbia University and the French National Institute shows that 6 out of 10 people do not click the link of a Twitter post, but they share it only by reading its title. By analyzing the links of five main news outlets over one month period they noticed the difference between the shares and the clicks on those links [6]. This is an alarming number thinking that in this way a lot of unchecked information is being shared. This contributes massively to the spread of fake news on social media. By blindly sharing a post, the user takes part of the massive disinformation that affects him and everyone. There was the very famous fake story made by The Science Post, a fake news website, where the title said ` Study: 70% of Facebook users only read the headline of science stories before commenting`. After clicking the link, user could see that in fact it was a prank, the text repeating the headline and adding `lorem ipsum`. The article had over 190.000 shares because many people didn't even open the link [7].

Afterall, the traditional purpose of a title is to encapsulate the main idea of a story in order for the user to have an idea about what the text is about and make him read further. A title has to be short due to space limitation which makes it impossible to present the whole story [8]. The future journalists learn in their school that a headline has to have a clear message that has to be retrieved from the main information of the article, it has to be a strong connection between the text and the headline, the headline has to be formulated in a correct and easy understandable manner and, in the end, it has to give to the reader an impulse to read the whole text [9]. Of course, the last criteria is exacerbated today and some journalists do everything to catch the readers' attention. The issue with the catching title in online medium is not new. On the battlefield of gaining attention, journalists, advertisers and content creators try to create catching titles in order to get clicks from the users. Many people use the clickbait technique where they use shocking words, controversial information or even lies to attract people on their websites or to get their posts shared.

The issue this paper is trying to raise is that over 50% of users do not click on the headline of an article even if it is a clickbait one. One reason can be that the users started to get used to this technique and they reject it quite quickly. Another reason, strongly linked to the previous one, is that journalists and advertisers write the headline in a manner that create the illusion that the whole story is presented. With the help of some well-chosen images and some well-chosen words, they tell a story only from the headline, a story that it can be different from the real one in the text. From example, a study presenting an analysis on the news about the federal election in Canada 2004 revealed that the headlines were quite different from the text and that the people who only read the headlines had a different understanding about the story comparing to people who read the whole text [10].

IV. THE ROLE OF CRITICAL THINKING

To put critical thinking into practice means to have a rational and reflective thinking which determines the decision of what to believe in and the choice of the action we want to take [11]. Critical thinking makes us aware of what we have around, aware of the information we encounter and, the most important part is that it makes us to evaluate the information we interact with. This paper's position is that critical thinking does not even have a chance for it to be put in practice since the user doesn't even read the whole information. The disposition for critical thinking implies that a person must be open and adventurous, must have sustained intellectual curiosity, must clarify and seek for understanding, must have the ability to plan be strategic, must seek and evaluate arguments and must be able to analyze his own mind [12]. Since a user decides to share a post only by reading a title, he rejects the option of seeking further, he accepts the information as true without even evaluating it.

As it can be seen, to apply critical thinking a person has to have some dispositions that lead it to this type of thinking. And a person who has the minimum level of challenging the information he encounters most likely would click on a link, even the title seems to say the whole story. However, this

becomes unfair for the people who do not have these dispositions, but who can deserve to have a chance to have access to the primary tools of critical thinking. Now comes the question: Who is guilty for this phenomenon? The simple human that lets himself tricked by all the factors that influences the mind in online world? Or the advertisers and journalists that intentionally write headlines with the intent to sell the illusion of whole story or to frame a certain subject starting from the title?

V. A RESEARCH SAMPLE

In this section a pilot research sample will be presented in order to validate the methodology for further research. The aim of this research is to find out in what way Romanian social media users read only the title of a post before commenting underneath.

There were chosen for analysis a corpus of 5 posts from each of four Facebook pages of media outlets from Romania: Digi24, Antena 3, Mediafax and HotNews. The subject of the post was linked to covid-19 vaccination, the posts were chosen from a period of 10 days which had more than 5 comments.

The analyzed comments were put in four categories: a) comments about the subject detailed in the full text; b) comments based only on the title of the post; c) comments outside the subject; d) ironies, offenses or jokes.

After coding the comments, the preliminary results show that 7 out of 10 comments are on the subject from the title but they miss the information in the text.

For example, the following post is from HotNews Facebook page and states that „there are four reasons why Romanians do not get vaccinated as Danish people did". (Fig.1) The text of the post presents Daniel David, a psychologist from Romania that explains the 4 reasons why vaccination was more successful in Denmark than in Romania.

Fig.1

This post has 105 comments, from which 68 are comments based only on the title of the post, 23 are comments about the subject detailed in the full text, 7 are ironies, offenses or jokes and 5 are comments outside the subject.

We extracted a sample of 4 successive comments below (Fig.2):

Fig.2

First comment states: „I would say one reason, but it is not worth to tell it here because everybody makes a mockery of it". The second comments states „I don't understand Danish language`. The third comment says `I have a single reason. Romanians are smart and they do not get themselves easily fooled with science and civilization`. The fourth comment says `Where do you know from how many Danish people got vaccinated? From mass-media, who and others? Scandinavia chose her own path and it doesn't care about the rest of Europe, especially because it preserved her economy`.

None of these comments are related with the content of the text, with the four scientific reasons analyzed from a psychological point of you. One is a joke, two are ironic and the last one is on the subject, but it seems that the person didn't read the text where he could find out the number of the vaccinated Danish people, the sources of the information and the four reasons stated in the title.

This represents a start for further research to analyze a bigger number of posts and comments in order to draw a valid conclusion.

VI. CONCLUSION

We live in a period of lifetime where critical thinking seems to be more challenged than ever even if we live in free and democratic forms of organization. We are in a war with disinformation, with fake news which is faster and more

advantageous than never. Education is the best weapon, but is slow and it takes a lot of effort. Seeing that the actors of social media get involved in making the user satisfied with only reading a headline is outrageous. It is understandable that there are factors that influence this behavior as short attention span, instant gratification, multitasking and loss of focus and the illusion of self-knowledge. However, this is not an excuse for the user not to want to know more, not to want to read the whole story before sharing a post. We propose for the future a research concerning the solutions in order for people not to stop at the title of a post and to click and read the full text.

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