Report on Bachelor / Master Thesis

Institute of Economic Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

Student:	Bc. Mikayel Harutyunyan
Advisor:	Doc. Julie Chytilová, Ph.D.
Title of the thesis:	Fighting Fake News with Accuracy: Dual Processing Perspective

OVERALL ASSESSMENT *(provided in English, Czech, or Slovak):*

Summary

The master thesis of Mikayel Harutyunyan focuses on an important and current topic of fake news. Specifically, Mikayel explores ways how to attenuate the impact of fake news and prevent their spreading. In order to study this question, he designed an economic experiment and implemented it among a large sample of more than 500 people in US. The findings indicate that the experimental treatment (accuracy prompt in the form of a warning label) does not significantly affect the probability of discerning fake news, but it affects intentions to share true news with others. Besides the main outcome variables, Mikayel also collected data about a number of other interesting variables and finds a set of interesting observations/correlations between personal characteristics and ability to discern fake news.

In my view, the thesis is exceptional in several respects. First, it focuses on an important topic subject to current debates among both academics and practitioners. The research idea is of high policy relevance. Mikayel designed an experimental treatment which had, ex ante, the potential to be effective in attenuating the impact of fake news and at the same is relatively easy to implement and scaleable. Second, Mikayel has an impressive knowledge of the related literature. He closely follows the most recent developments in the literature, including work in progress or in press. Third, the thesis presents the results of an advanced research work. Mikayel uses state-of-the-art methods and follows the latest standards of the discipline. This is illustrated, for example, by the facts, that he (i) pre-registered the study, (ii) obtained an ethical review from the Research Ethics Committee at FSV before the data collection, (iii) used the software Qualtrics for programming the survey, and (iv) used the Prolific platform in order to reach a varied sample of individuals (and covered the cost of the data collection from his personal funds). It is exceptional to see a Master student to take these steps. Overall, the thesis is highly advanced for a diploma thesis.

Contribution

The literature on fake news is very recent and rapidly growing, given the importance of the topic. Mikayel studied in detail the existing studies and their results. Based on this literature review, he designed a new type of experimental manipulation in which he presented to the subjects Facebook-style news headlines (fake or true) with or without an accuracy prompt. The advantage of the treatment is that it is simple and at the same time possible to apply at a large scale, in contrast to other possible interventions, such as verifying the news by social media provider.

Methods

As I mentioned above, Mikayel uses state-of-the-art methods both to collect and analyze the data. He is clearly aware of the latest standards in the profession, including pre-registration of the study, applying for ethical review, etc. He also presents a nice connection between theory and its application in the empirical part of the thesis. He presents several hypotheses which are clearly stated and tested

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with the data he collected. I also appreciate the attention to detail, for example the careful selection of news to be displayed to the subjects, or running a series of robustness tests. I would also like to appreciate careful interpretation of the results and including a section on limitations of the study.

Literature

It is obvious that Mikayel is very interested in the topic of his thesis and closely follows the relevant literature, including the most recent developments across and at the intersection of several fields. The thesis provides a detailed and useful overview of the literature and clearly links the contribution and approach in the thesis to the existing studies.

Manuscript form

The thesis reads well and is written in very good English. The text is well-structured and the tables clearly organized.

Overall evaluation and suggested questions for the discussion during the defense

To sum up, I believe the thesis fulfills the requirements for a bachelor thesis at IES, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University. I recommend the thesis for the defense and suggest grade A.

The results of the Urkund analysis do not indicate significant text similarity with other available sources.

SUMMARY OF POINTS AWARDED (for details, see below):

CATEGORY	POINTS
Contribution (max. 30 points)	30
Methods (max. 30 points)	30
Literature (max. 20 points)	20
Manuscript Form (max. 20 points)	20
TOTAL POINTS (max. 100 points)	**100**
GRADE (A – B – C – D – E – F)	**A**

NAME OF THE REFEREE: Julie Chytilová

DATE OF EVALUATION: August 27, 2021

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Referee Signature

EXPLANATION OF CATEGORIES AND SCALE:

CONTRIBUTION: *The author presents original ideas on the topic demonstrating critical thinking and ability to draw conclusions based on the knowledge of relevant theory and empirics. There is a distinct value added of the thesis.*

METHODS: *The tools used are relevant to the research question being investigated, and adequate to the author's level of studies. The thesis topic is comprehensively analyzed.*

LITERATURE REVIEW: *The thesis demonstrates author's full understanding and command of recent literature. The author quotes relevant literature in a proper way.*

MANUSCRIPT FORM: *The thesis is well structured. The student uses appropriate language and style, including academic format for graphs and tables. The text effectively refers to graphs and tables and disposes with a complete bibliography.*

Overall grading:

TOTAL	GRADE
91 – 100	**A**
81 - 90	**B**
71 - 80	**C**
61 – 70	**D**
51 – 60	**E**
0 – 50	**F**