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Nicholas W. Jankowski

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RESEARCHING FAKE NEWS: A SELECTIVE EXAMINATION OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Nicholas W. Jankowski

The term "fake news" came to dominate public political discourse in late 2016 regarding possible efforts by Russian agents to manipulate the US Presidential election. A similar alarm was raised during subsequent European elections the following year. This widespread concern was twisted into an epithet by some political figures, particularly President Trump, to describe traditional news outlets. Eventually, the alarm and name-calling transformed into a serious topic for empirical research, and the initial fruits of that work are beginning to appear. This short article provides a panorama of the scholarship emerging around fake news and illustrates this work by examining in more detail two radically different studies. The article concludes with suggestions for extending this initial research. But first, some background is provided to set the stage.

KEYWORDS fake news; research methods; research agenda; elections; communication research

Background

It is often difficult to precisely trace the origins of a phrase or topic, and such difficulty accompanies the term "fake news." One narrative suggests the term has a long history, dating at least to the period of World War I and II, but came rapidly into prominence during the US Presidential election campaign in 2016 (Leetaru 2017). Monitoring of the term on Google shows a marked spike of searches for the term around the period of the November 2016 election in the United States, and President Trump is credited with elevating use of the term in public discourse during his first press conference in January 2017 (Carson 2017).

While the history of the term may be long and while it may have achieved status as "word of the year" in 2016 by an Australian dictionary (Elle 2017), it is less clear what the term means. Basic definitions, like the one provided by the Collins English Dictionary, suggest it refers to "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting."[1] Wikipedia extends this concise formulation by relating it to the historical period of Yellow Journalism and suggests the importance of motivations behind use of the term: "Fake news is written and published with the intent to mislead in order to gain financially or politically, often with sensationalist, exaggerated, or patently false headlines that grab attention."[2] Trump and other politicians have usurped the term and use it to brand traditional media sources (e.g. *The New York Times*, CNN), with which they disagree. In this manner, the term has acquired status as a pejorative label for liberal media outlets, and has lost commonly accepted meaning.

These difficulties aside, serious efforts have been undertaken to categorise the types of fake news and identify outlets of such misinformation. One such effort resulted in a

database[3] of sites sorted along 13 categories that went viral shortly after the November 2016 elections in the US. The effort has been subject to much criticism because of inclusion of news sources considered more critical than fake and because of the unwieldy character of the typology with often overlapping categories.

Concern about fake news frequently revolves around what is or is not considered true and is able to serve as the basis for public discussion, particularly during periods of elections. The role of journalists and traditional media in contributing to that discussion is countered by those who argue for "alternative facts" and denounce particular media as "fake."[4] Within this conflict, the very foundation of public discourse in a democracy is brought into dispute.

That conflict has been the basis for much of the alarm and concern about labelling journalists and media as "fake," resulting in myriad opinion pieces and commentary (Yates 2016).[5] Empirically based research frequently follows such public concern and is beginning to appear regarding fake news. The earliest empirical exercises focused on defining fake news and relating it to already existing terms such as propaganda and misinformation. One of these efforts constructed a typology of varieties of fake news and launched a database with sources and instances of fake news. Initially conceived as a classroom exercise, news of the effort went viral shortly after the US Presidential election in November 2016 (Zimdars 2016). While perhaps suitable for the originally intended pedagogical purpose, this typology lacks parsimony and precision to serve as a useful tool for empirical research.

Other journalistically based reports chronicled the emergence of fake news sites and pecuniary motivations of those involved (e.g. Maheshwari 2016). These case studies of sites and creators of fake news have been valuable for general orientation towards the phenomenon, but do not have the intent to place fake news within a broader theoretical and methodological framework. Similarly, reports prepared by the Pew Research Center, while valuable as quality surveys on topical issues such as fake news, do not generally reflect the theoretical grounding expected from academic research.

Illustrations of Empirical Research

There is a longer history of studies about misinformation and science, most recently regarding climate issues (Bolsen and Druckman 2015; van der Linden et al. 2017), scientific findings more generally (Bolsen and Druckman 2015), and innovations in media literacy and automatic detection systems (Rubin, Chen, and Conroy 2015). A meta-analysis (Chan et al. 2017) identified almost 7000 studies addressing psychological aspects of misinformation and one of the same authors recently co-authored an experiment comparing the opinion-changing value of different forms of fact-checking messages (Young et al. 2017). While the history is long, a new wave of scholarly studies of fake news seems to be developing.[6] Two recently published articles that explicitly address political events are highlighted in this short contribution: "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 election" (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) and " Fake News as a Floating Signifier: Hegemony, Antagonism, and the Politics of Falsehood" (Farkas and Schou forthcoming, 2018).

These two publications cannot be seen as representative of recent scholarship, but they do illustrate the range of theoretical perspectives, questions and methods being employed to explore aspects of fake news. Moreover, they serve as input for considering

further empirical investigations of fake news, particularly from the perspective of media and communication studies, elaborated in the conclusion section of this article.

Social Media and Fake News

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) note the increasing reliance of Americans on social media, especially Twitter and Facebook, for their everyday news, also during periods of elections. This reliance exacerbates the importance of news accuracy and elevates concern about the functioning of a democracy when misinformation on these platforms becomes widespread. Set within this frame of concerns, the authors attempt to measure the degree of exposure to and believability of fake news through an online survey held under an opt-in sample of some 1200 voting-age US residents shortly after the November 2016 election. Questions in the survey included identification of "important" sources of election-related news, recall of specific stories and assessment of the truth of those stories. Regarding the last topic, the survey included a list of actual and fictive story topics in order to determine the accuracy of recall. This list was compiled from a database of fake news articles the authors prepared from other sources for the three-month period prior to the election. Together with demographic data on respondents, the researchers attempted to profile respondents who most strongly believed fake news.

The authors report that the importance of social media lagged behind traditional media, especially television, as a source of information about the 2016 election. They conclude that social media is "an important but not dominant source of political news and information" (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, 223). While this interpretation reflects the aggregate response to the survey question it does not provide breakdown between groups of the respondents classified according to a range of demographics (e.g. party affiliation, age, education, place of residence). In lieu of such an analysis, the authors probed respondents on the believability of items in a list of topics based on actual and fictitious examples, using their database of fake news stories as a benchmark for assignment of truthfulness.

Perhaps the heart of the study involves comparison of respondent identification of actual fake news headlines and placebo headlines in order to measure the accuracy of recall. Extrapolating to the country population, the authors estimate that "the average adult saw and remembered … 1.14 fake news articles from our fake news database," leading the authors to estimate very low exposure by the adult population to fake news stories in the months prior to the election (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, 227). As would be expected, ability to distinguish fake from real news headlines correlated strongly with education, age and general media consumption of respondents. Still, exposure was miniscule and, along with limited believability, the authors argue that fake news items would have had a very slight impact on voters.

Although this study reflects care in design and instrumentation, the authors mention several caveats regarding the results: sampling concerns, particularly with opt-in designs; recall difficulties; possible omissions from the database of fake news stories; and unreliability in weighting responses and in extrapolating the results to the entire population of voters. While some of these issues are inherent to survey research, the authors do not suggest alternative designs for reducing or eliminating the issues. Nor do the authors recommend refinement of the research questions or replication of the results through further study. One straightforward recommendation that could emerge from the study would be to extend it

to other elections, other samples, other countries and to expand the overall design to include other data collection methods than survey research.

Fake News as Floating Signifier

Farkas and Schou (forthcoming, 2018) approach the topic of fake news radically different from the previous researchers. Instead of conducting a survey and measuring respondents' awareness of a fake news articles as determined by a set definition, Farkas and Schou argue that there is no single meaning or signifier of fake news. Instead, they suggest the meaning is multiple or floating in the terminology of Laclau (2005). Stronger, the authors contend that it is a futile exercise to determine what the "real" meaning of the term might be, and recommend exploration of how the term is employed by different groups. In their words, "Instead of asking how and why 'fake news' is produced, we showcase how the *concept* of 'fake news' has been mobilised as part of political struggles to hegemonise social reality" (emphasis in the original) (Farkas and Schou forthcoming, 2018).

Based on a discourse analysis of material related to fake news collected from a wide range of sources during a four-month period in 2016, the authors identify three categories or "moments" of fake news stories: critique of digital capitalism, critique of right-wing politics and media, and critique of liberal and mainstream media. The article provides illustrations of how the term fake news fits these three categories. This study provides a "reading" of materials related to fake news, but it does not offer other scholars with much support for replicating the analysis. While the period during which the material was collected is noted, no indication is given of the distribution of news stories across the three categories or moments, no indication is given as to how stories were assigned to one (or more) of the categories and whether some possibly did not fit. Although the authors indicate that other moments could have been selected, no indication is given as to what were other candidates for categories and why they were not considered further.

Such issues of data selection and analysis seem secondary to the authors' concern in developing an argument for their reading of the material and for suggesting the suitability of Lactou's concept "floating signifier" in understanding the term fake news. Although the argument for this reading and this term seems plausible, it is not possible to verify through separate analysis. As an exploratory study, the work suggests a view for understanding fake news through a series of competing societal visions, but it is not clear what further empirical research could be constructed based on the idea of fake news as floating signifier.

Avenues for Empirical Research

Given the degree of attention and concern about fake news, it is safe to anticipate an increase in scholarly attention to the topic from a range of disciplines. For example, various research programmes are developing computer algorithms that might succeed in identifying fake news (e.g. Rubin, Chen, and Conroy 2015).[7] Projects analysing vast quantities of social media are also emerging in an effort to ascertain the role automated scripts or bots may play in dissemination of misinformation during public events, including elections (e.g. Howard et al. 2017).[8] Regarding media and communication studies, forthcoming research would do well to address some of the classical themes and concerns from this genre of scholarship.

Without subscribing to the dominant paradigm in communication theory, as outlined by McQuail (2010, 63–66), the overall categories of that model are helpful in identifying areas within which research can be placed. Applied to fake news, this suggests research can be organised according to news *production*, *reception* and *message*. Further, the *context* in which fake news operates (e.g. social, cultural and historical; country and political system; and type of events such as election or public discussion of issues) is of importance. Initiatives for *social action*, typically outside the parameters of the dominant research paradigm, are also important for consideration.

Beginning with news production, there is a rich literature that explores the organisations and professions associated with news making, from Breed's (1955) gatekeeper study in the mid-1950s through an ethnographic analysis of the newsroom at *The New York Times* (Usher 2014). While most of these studies were undertaken long before the digital era, Usher's study being an exception, all predate concern with fake news and how journalists and traditional news organisations are reacting to its emergence and to, in fact, being construed as the originators of fake news.

The study of news reception is equally rich and concerns of some of the classic studies remain relevant when exploring the reception of fake news: attention to fake news, recall of news items, assessment or believability of the news and possible actions (or, more generally, effects) resulting from attention to fake news. The study by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) described earlier is illustrative of this genre of research, based on the questions posed and research method employed—survey research. Survey designs, however, lack the detail and depth possible through ethnographic studies and future reception studies of fake news would benefit by comparative multiple-method designs. An illustration of a qualitative study of news reception across diverse national and cultural settings is the anthology edited by Jensen (1998) *News of the World: World Cultures Look at Television News*, which could serve as a model for a more global understanding of fake news.

Message analysis has an equally rich tradition in media studies, particularly with quantitative forms of content analysis. Qualitative studies of content have also contributed to the tradition and the discourse analysis of fake news by Farkas and Schou (forthcoming, 2018) can be considered an extension of that strand of research. Message analysis of fake news has only begun and much research still needs to be undertaken regarding its characteristics: frequencies of and trends in occurrences, styles of narratives, varieties and typologies of fake news. These concerns of content analysis are detailed at length in some of the classic and contemporary texts of this methodology (e.g. Krippendorff 2013). Concerted analysis of the content of fake news has hardly begun and future studies of this genre of news would be welcome, especially when combined with production and reception studies, and when conducted with a comparative objective.

Finally, critically grounded scholarship, located outside the dominant paradigm of communications research, is also needed. The strength of this work generally lies in a normative analysis and less in the presentation of empirically grounded research.[9] Outlets for this scholarship are often outside mainstream academic journals and find reflection in popular media (e.g. Tufekci 2017) and book-length monographs. A strain of critical studies often include an action component and are thereby able to reach beyond the status quo constraints of the dominant paradigm in communication research. Development of programmes in media literacy is one area where fake news research could excel and some scholarship is already exploring literacy programmes with regard to identifying fake news in a digital environment (Stanford History Education Group et al. 2016). The

particular challenge for action-oriented researchers is to serve both scholarship through increased conceptual understanding as well as society through support of programmes for social change. While this challenge dates to the early days of the social sciences,[10] it remains as central and critical today as then, especially with phenomena such as fake news.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES

1. An interesting etymological saga, "The real story of 'fake news,'" can be found on the Merriam-Webster dictionary blog (https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-real-story-of-fake-news), which suggests the term has been around for more than a hundred years.
2. See Wikipedia article available at https://theconversation.com/fake-news-why-people-believe-it-and-what-can-be-done-to-counter-it-70013.
3. This database can be accessed at http://www.opensources.co/; see also: https://docs.google.com/document/d/10eA5-mCZLSS4MQY5QGb5ewC3VAL6pLkT53V_81ZyitM/preview.
4. An argumentative exchange between NBC News reporter Chuck Todd and Kellyanne Conway, Counselor to the President, resulted in Conway arguing for "alternative facts" as to what motivated the Press Secretary to utter demonstrable falsehoods during his first meeting with the Washington press corps. See https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/video/conway-press-secretary-gave-alternative-facts-860142147643.
5. The volume of postings about fake news on the academic blog *The Conversation* have been so frequent that the blog editors maintain a list of all such postings on the site, which numbered 70 by mid-September 2017; see https://theconversation.com/uk/topics/fake-news-33438.
6. Scholars from many disciplines are involved in this new wave, including historians. See call for papers from the Newspaper and Periodical History Forum of Ireland (NPHFI) for a conference on fake news from an historical perspective: http://www.communicationhistory.org/cgi-bin/dada/mail.cgi/archive/commhistlist/20170313092449/.
7. This concern has resulted in computer scientists organising The Fake News Challenge, designed to explore "how artificial intelligence technologies, particularly machine learning and natural language processing, might be leveraged to combat the fake news problem;" see http://www.fakenewschallenge.org/.
8. Oxford Internet Institute is hosting the program Computational Propaganda Research Project, which embodies this objective; see http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/.
9. When communications scholar Herb Schiller was a visiting professor at the University of Amsterdam several decades ago, graduate students in his seminar were able to witness how he collected "empirical data" by reading *The New York Times* and using newspaper clippings as "data" for his critique of the media.
10. One of the classic debates on this theme, between Howard Becker (1967) and Alvin Gouldner (1968), encapsulated in the title of Becker's article, "Whose Side Are We

On?", remains relevant to contemporary concern regarding how scholars might address fake news.

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Nicholas W. Jankowski (corresponding author) is former Associate Professor in the Department of Communication, Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands and has served as Visiting Scholar at Oxford Internet Institute. He is a Co-Founder of the European Institute for Communication and Culture (EURICOM) and past Co-Editor of *New Media & Society*. One of his research interests is the transformation of political communication in a digital environment. Email: nickjan@xs4all.nl