Fake News

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"Fake news" is an expression that became popularized and politicized during the 2016 U.S. elections. Predating these elections, it primarily denoted inaccurate news pieces (often intentionally fabricated), or was used as a more specific term for political satire in the form of staged news shows. The inflationary use of the term since 2016—most notably by the presidential candidate and later U.S. President Donald Trump—changed its meaning, so the concept has become multifaceted and blurred. The influential *Collins Dictionary* even named it "Word of the Year 2017," an anecdotal indicator of the general popularization of the term during that time. The meaning of the term now ranges from fabricated news circulated via social media to a polemic umbrella term meant to discredit "legacy" news media. The first interpretation is particularly common among academics and journalists and thus is of focal attention here; the latter has become prominent among certain politicians and is discussed later on in this entry. Most academics refer to the first interpretation when using "fake news"; however, alternative terms such as "fabricated news" or "pseudo-press" might be preferable in order to avoid confusion with the second, rather problematic interpretation of the term.

As a reaction to the rise of the "fake news" expression in public debate, numerous academics have tried to define it more precisely for scientific use. They are mostly focusing on fake news as a specific form of intentionally fabricated content. For example, Alcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 213) specify fake news rather narrowly as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers." They explicitly exclude other forms of misleading information, such as mistakes by journalists or politicians, rumors or conspiracies without association to specific news articles, and entertainment-oriented formats such as satire. Other academics broadly perceive fake news as part of the larger issue of misinformation online (e.g., Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), or specifically as "a new form of political misinformation … in journalistic accounts" (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018, pp. 1–2). In a widely cited first draft article on fake news, Wardle (2017) introduces a typology of mis- and disinformation. She argues that the content, the underlying motivations of the creators, and the dissemination of information varies, and that mis- and disinformation can exist in various forms, rather than just one clear-cut type called fake news. Wardle identifies seven distinct types on a scale of intended deceit. These range from satire over misleading headlines, misleading content, and false contextual information to imposter content (with faked source information), manipulated content, and fully fabricated content. Similarly, Nielsen and Graves (2017) identify a range of views on fake news, derived from focus groups with

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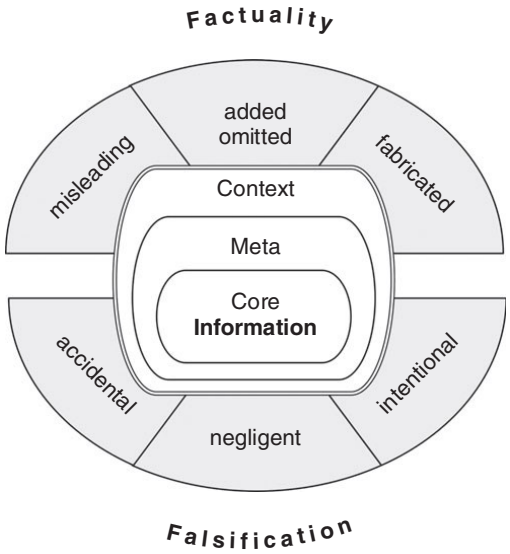

Figure 1 A "fake news" systematization.

audience members. From their perspective, it can be either satire, poor journalism, propaganda (i.e., partisan or political content), advertising, or false news (i.e., intentional fabrications).

Therefore, these authors see fake news and similar forms as existing in a wider continuum of false or misleading information, while some authors primarily regard fake news as the result of intentional deception. This also refers to the more general differentiation between misinformation and disinformation, as alluded to in Wardle and Derakhshan's Council of Europe report (2017). In this perspective, misinformation is unintentionally false, while disinformation is deliberately false (Jack, 2017; see also Torres, Gerhart, & Negahban, 2018). Notably, disinformation campaigns often strategically exploit existing and trustworthy information channels as a cloak to disseminate their messages. As such, identifying the intentionality of disinformation is challenging and can be sensitive to interpersonal differences (Nielsen & Graves, 2017).

In summary, when conceptualizing fake news as a certain form of media content, one can differentiate various forms of wrong, misguided, or fabricated news along several dimensions and aspects of the transmitted information. They imitate professional news media formats but differ from them in terms of organizational processes or content (Lazer et al., 2018). As implied by Wardle (2017), the deviance may refer to various elements that compose the published message: from actual content features (termed "genuine" information by Wardle) to more contextual aspects.

For a cleaner systematization (see Figure 1), one may refer to a basic differentiation between (i) the core content of the information (including textual information, imagery, audio elements, etc.); (ii) accompanying meta-information (headlines/titles, author information, tags, and keywords); and (iii) contextual aspects (positioning, references to other articles, framing). All of these elements can be subject to varying levels of "fake," that is, discrepancies from factuality: from (a) misleading (but factually correct) information; to (b) additions or deletions of information (e.g., "enrichment"

of facts by misleading or wrong information, or a change of meaning by omitting or deleting relevant information); to (c) complete fabrications without any factual basis.

Combinations of these elements are possible: A malicious actor may take an actual event, enrich the report on it with misleading information regarding one of the central actors, and publish this with false author information, seemingly as part of news reporting via social media in a hard-to-detect disinformation campaign. Indeed, merely limited deviations from the factual information cores may be the most efficient form of disinformation. Fake news does not follow a logic of maximization. Actually, full fabrications may be the least effective, as they may be the easiest to identify. All of these combinations may also be part of less malicious (though potentially equally damaging) misinformation. There is certainly a wide range of reasons for the literal "falsification" of information and resulting mis- or disinformation: from (x) simple accidental mistakes, to (y) negligent behavior (sloppy work and errors of omission), to (z) planned (and potentially strategic) manipulation.

Nevertheless, for fake news, the intentionality of their production is central in many academic definitions and needs to be considered. A simple typo may already distort the meaning of a message, but it needs to be differentiated from both careless reporting (where errors are an avoidable, but deliberately ignored side effect) and deliberate falsehoods.

Obviously, fake news is not necessarily a well-defined concept, and the current approaches and definitions are not unidimensional, as described earlier. There is also a further complication due to the frequent use of the term as a label meant to discredit legacy news media (in recent times, most prominently by the U.S. President Donald Trump). Fake news as an allegation aims at challenging mainstream media discourses and blurs the interpretation of the concept. Labeling someone as fake news can serve as a rhetorical mean to cast doubt on a certain story or to shake trust in the media system as a whole (Jack, 2017).

The denouncing of media and journalism, using derogatory terms, can be regarded as part of a well-known strategy predating the popularization of the term fake news. Historically, allegations that the press are liars have been used as a rhetorical and political device by numerous leaders, especially in autocratic regimes, to silence oppositional and independent voices in the public. One could argue that journalism has been the target of such accusations from its very start. Political or religious leaders often reacted harshly to independent reporting from "the people"—who were not even regarded as having the right to publish unfiltered information and opinion. Historical sources close to the beginning of the printed press already referred to allegations of newspapers as being full of lies, bias, and distortion. In the evolution of Western democracies, the role of the press was crucial, but also heavily contested: For example, the phrase "press of liars" was used as an inflammatory term to denounce the liberal press in the evolving nineteenth-century Germany (see Schmolke, 1971). Furthermore, the press was an instrumental part and object of the twentieth-century world wars, serving as a catalyst for the rapid evolution of propaganda warfare. News information became subject to large-scale state intervention and national interests as a means to influence the outcome of the war by strategic control over the "morale" of the people, and by spreading

demoralizing messages to enemy nations. In that sense, both "fake" news as well as allegations of news being fake have been serving the goal of disinformation for centuries.

In more recent times, news media around the globe continue to be put under various forms of pressure, and the dangers to reporters and the press are so frequent that they need to be tracked by organizations such as "Reporters Without Borders." These attacks are not always direct and overt, but also indirect by denouncing journalistic information and sowing seeds of doubt about the factuality of news. Journalist's motivations are questioned, so that their messages are perceived as being biased opinion rather than fact, and "alternative" interpretations are seeded to the public by interested third parties.

Observers noted that lately such strategies have been applied by U.S. President Donald Trump. Cumulating in his "fake news award," which he awarded to traditional U.S. media outlets in 2018, Trump has repeatedly claimed that major news outlets lie about numerous aspects of his campaign and presidency. Researchers have linked his strategy to the concept of "gaslighting," that is, the intentional orchestration of deceptions and biased narrations that are aimed at distorting the receivers' trust in their own perceptions, memories, and thoughts (for an overview, see Jack, 2017). As a consequence, for instance, Marwick and Lewis (2018) have criticized the inflammatory use of the term fake news and note that the allegation of fake news is primarily meant to undermine trust in (unfavorable) information.

To prevent further confusion between fake news and alleged fake news, some academics now prefer alternative concepts that are not loaded with contrasting meanings, both in academia and the public sphere. Howard and colleagues, for example, use the term "junk news" (2017) to describe content that "includes various forms of propaganda and ideologically extreme, hyper-partisan, or conspiratorial political news and information" (Howard, Bradshaw, Kollanyi, Desigaud, & Bolsover, 2017, p. 3). Meanwhile, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) focus on "fabricated news." Others, such as Lazer et al. (2018), retain the term because of its scientific value but narrow it down to information that imitates professional news media appearances while deviating from the professional routines and intentions of news media. Broadly speaking, one can describe the latter as (political or economic) "pseudo-press"; mimicries of professional news outlets with deceptive intentions.

As noted by Lazer et al. (2018), research on the prevalence and impact of fake news in this pseudo-press sense is scarce, but points toward a rather small prevalence and impact of fake news among the public. For instance, Allcott and Gentzow (2017) analyzed web-browsing data, a user survey, and a database of 156 pre-checked false stories that circulated prior to the U.S. elections. They found that on average users perceived one to three instances of fake news prior to the election but did not necessarily believe the stories. In addition, placebo fake news articles invented for the study and added to the questionnaire as a control variable were "remembered" as frequently as the fake news that actually circulated prior to the election. This suggests that people do not remember fake news very well. Nonetheless, Lazer et al. (2018) pronounce that fake news should not be underestimated and can spread widely. Pseudo-press offerings are especially shared via social media (Allcott & Gentzow, 2017) and thus benefit from an implicit endorsement of their content through the sharing by well-known others and friends. Different forms of fake news effects, ranging from increased cynicism and

apathy, to the encouragement of extremism, may benefit from such forms of "social proof."

It is thus not surprising that the debate about fake news has been accompanied by a rise in civic and governmental attempts to counter online mis- and disinformation. Globally, multiple fact-checking organizations aim at authenticating official sources as well as social media claims, and there are some national attempts at governmental regulations of the issue. Last but not least, the debate on fake news and the role of social media networks in the electoral success of Donald Trump motivated Facebook at the beginning of 2018 to change their policy regarding data access. How far these different initiatives are able to prevent fake news flourishing and its potentially adverse effects on media users or the democratic system, however, is an open question for future research.

SEE ALSO: Credibility; Journalism; News; Propaganda; Public Trust in News Media

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