FAKE NEWS

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Fake news has attracted a lot of scholarly attention. A quick search for the term on Google Scholar yields more than 30,000 results published between 2016 and 2019, with most studies examining how fake news is characterised, created, circulated, and countered (Bente 2018). Fake news articles range from something as harmless as reporting that an 83-year-old woman had trained 65 cats to steal valuable items from her neighbours (Palma 2017) to something as serious as spreading false information about kidnappers descending on small villages in India, which triggered a spate of mob killings perpetrated by angry residents (Frayer 2018). Social media companies, which have borne much of the blame for the spread of fake news through their platforms, have taken actions, such as limiting how often a message can be forwarded, deleting accounts that share fake news, and partnering with third-party fact-checkers to debunk fake news (Dixit 2019; Frenkel 2018). Governments around the world have also passed legislation to combat the spread of fake news (Funke 2018). For example, Singapore passed a law empowering ministers to require individuals, social media companies, and even internet service providers to correct or take down fake news posts that threaten public interest (Singapore 2019). But what, to begin with, is fake news?

Defining fake news

Fake news is not a new term. Studies in the past used the term to label a range of messages, such as news satires and parodies. For example, studies had labelled political satires on television, such as The Daily Show, which rose to popularity in the early 2000s, as fake news programmes. These programmes engage in political commentary based on facts, often delivered with humour or exaggeration, using formats and techniques associated with real television news programmes, such as using a news anchor and doing live reports. However, some scholars questioned early on whether this was an appropriate label for such programmes. In an analysis of The Daily Show, Baym (2005, 268) argued that the combination of comedy and political commentary in the programme constituted instead ‘a new form of critical journalism, one which uses satire to achieve that which the mainstream press is no longer willing to pursue’. Others also used the term to refer to news parodies, such as The Onion, a popular website that publishes mostly fictitious entries written in news formats. In parodying news, these sites call attention to the excesses of real news organisations, such as engaging in sensationalism and clickbaiting. Thus,
Berkowitz and Schwartz (2016, 13) argued that ‘fake-news organizations have come to serve as a Fifth Estate watching over the mainstream journalism institution’.

The 2016 United States presidential election saw a resurgence of the ‘fake news’ term but applied to a different set of messages. A quick look at Google Trends, which tracks how frequently a search term is sought via its search engine in comparison to the total search volume within a particular span of time, shows that searches for ‘fake news’ started to increase in October 2016, when the United States presidential campaign was in full swing. News reports documented cases of viral social media posts about the campaign, propagating lies while disguising themselves as real news articles. A famous example is a fake news article that wrongly reported that Pope Francis, the leader of the Catholic church, had endorsed then-candidate Donald Trump (Silverman 2016). Not all fake news posts are political. Others are downright ridiculous. For example, one of the most viral fake news posts in 2016 was about a woman who supposedly defecated on her boss’s desk after she won the lottery (Silverman 2016).

Contemporary use of the term fake news applies it to falsehoods packaged to look like news to deceive people. For example, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, 213) defined fake news as ‘news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers’ while Rochlin (2017, 388) defined it as ‘a knowingly false headline and story [that] is written and published on a website that is designed to look like a real news site, and is spread via social media’. Tandoc et al. (2017) reviewed the different ways the term has been used in communication studies and identified two main components of fake news definitions: the level of facticity and the main intention behind the message. Facticity refers to ‘the degree to which fake news relies on facts’ while intention refers to ‘the degree to which the creator of fake news intends to mislead’ (Tandoc et al. 2017, 147). For example, in terms of facticity, political satires tend to be high while news parodies tend to be low; both, however, have low levels of intention to deceive. Satires and parodies depend on the audiences’ acknowledgement of their news formats being fake for the humour to work; they also often come with disclaimers that they do not produce real news (Tandoc et al. 2017; Rashkin et al. 2017). Thus, Tandoc et al. (2017) argued that satires and parodies do not fall under the contemporary definition of fake news, echoing earlier questions about the use of the term to refer to these messages (Baym 2005; Berkowitz and Schwartz 2016).

Situating fake news

The rise of fake news is also marked by several related terms, such as misinformation and disinformation. Singapore’s anti–fake news law refers to ‘online falsehoods and manipulation’ (Singapore 2019).

Wardle (2017) distinguished between misinformation and disinformation. While these two terms both refer to the dissemination of false information, misinformation refers to inadvertent sharing while disinformation refers to intentional dissemination of false information (Wardle 2017). Such distinction makes the role of intentionality particularly salient. For example, studies on fake news identified two main types of intention: financial and ideological. The now-infamous teens in a small town in Macedonia who operated websites that pushed fake news stories were motivated by making money from the ad revenues their websites were getting from pushing out outrageous and false content online (Subramanian 2017). Writing fake stories required no legwork and, hence, no substantial operational costs. Other creators of fake news were clearly motivated by ideological reasons, such as influencing voting decisions and, hence, electoral outcomes (Albright 2016).
It is important, however, to distinguish between motivations for creating fake news stories on one hand and sharing fake news stories on the other. Studies have documented that some people share fake news not primarily to deceive others. Some people share fake news to humour friends, warn loved ones, or show others they care, without necessarily realising they were sharing something that was false; others share fake news hoping someone will confirm or debunk it for them (Tandoc et al. 2018). Therefore, while a piece of fake news can be categorised as a form of disinformation – intentionally created with the main purpose of deceiving others either for profit or for propaganda – based on the intention behind its production, its subsequent spread through social media users might be unintentional.

Fake news is just one type of online falsehood, and a way to distinguish it from other types is through its format (see Figure 10.1). Fake news takes some of its power to deceive from being able to masquerade as real news through the use of formats associated with real news, such as the use of an inverted-pyramid style, a headline, and a byline (Tandoc 2019). For example, Waisbord (2018, 1866) referred to fake news as ‘fabricated information that astutely mimics news and taps into existing public beliefs to influence electoral behaviour’. The news format functions as a heuristic that affects online readers’ credibility assessments (Sundar 2008). Such mimicry is not only limited to the article; fake news producers also create websites that mimic the layout of real news sites and, in some cases, even mimic the URLs of legitimate news sites, just changing a letter or a word. Furthermore, the fake news ecosystem also seems to mimic that of real news. Equipped with bots, fake news creators create a synthetic network of fake news websites so that when a user searches online a piece of fake news she had come across, the user is bound to find the same fake news reported elsewhere, mimicking widespread news coverage of real events (Albright 2016).

But fake news as a term has also been weaponised by some political actors to use against real journalists. Numerous cases have been documented of politicians around the world labelling a legitimate article they disagree with or that paints them in a negative light as fake news and the news outlet and journalists behind the article as fake news producers (Holan 2017; Farhall et al. 2019; Tandoc, Jenkins et al. 2019). Thus, Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019, 97) also distinguished between fake news as a genre, which refers to ‘the deliberate creation of pseudojournalistic disinformation’, and fake news as a label, which refers to ‘the political instrumentalization of the term to delegitimize news media’. Because of this politicised use of the label, others have proposed other terms to replace ‘fake news’, such as ‘junk news’ (Howard et al. 2017). In October 2018, the UK government also banned the use of ‘fake news’ in policy documents and official communication, arguing that it is ‘a poorly-defined and misleading term that conflates a variety of false information, from genuine error through to foreign interference in democratic processes’ (Murphy 2018, para. 2).
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Others, however, argued that the term *fake news* has conceptual utility and refers to a form of falsehood that is distinct based on its mimicry of an artifact imbued with social legitimacy (see, for example, Mourão and Robertson 2019). While it has been misused by political actors with vested interests, *fake news* as a term has conceptual use: first, it is a term now routinely used in normal conversations and therefore has implications on how different stakeholders understand the phenomenon it supposedly denotes; second, it refers to a specific type of online falsehood that leeches on a journalistic format and therefore might require specific responses and interventions; and third, it also makes the problem more salient for journalists, who now find themselves revisiting assumptions and conventions that have dominated traditional newsworks (and their potential vulnerabilities) (Carlson 2020; Tandoc, Jenkins et al. 2019). We cannot drop a term that clearly refers to a particular phenomenon just because a few actors have misused it.

What is fake?

An online dictionary defines *fake news* as a noun that refers to ‘false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke’ (Cambridge 2020b). Combining two words, *fake news* as a term is an oxymoron (Tandoc et al. 2017). While news is normatively based on truth, the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines *fake* as a noun that refers to ‘an object that is made to look real or valuable in order to deceive people’ (Cambridge 2020a). Online resources list the following synonyms: *counterfeit*, *forgery*, and *sham*, among others. Thus, a ‘fake’ requires a referent, one that is ‘real’ or ‘authentic’. For example, the huge illegal industry of counterfeit products that mimic luxury items, such as expensive bags and watches, depends on the existence of the authentic goods. How good a fake Louis Vuitton bag is, for example, depends heavily on how closely it resembles the authentic bag. Its ‘quality’ as a fake item depends on how able it is to closely resemble the original.

Embedded in the definition of what constitutes a ‘fake’ is intentionality. A fake Louis Vuitton bag is not a product of a manufacturing process gone wrong. It is a product of a thoughtful, intentional, and usually meticulous copying of its authentic, original counterpart. Thus, a piece of information might be wrong but not necessarily fake. News outlets routinely get their accounts of events wrong, especially when an event is still developing. But a news report about the novel coronavirus originating in bats, only to be debunked by a later scientific discovery, is not copying an authentic counterpart.

Intentionality is, of course, challenging to study empirically. For example, Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019, 101) argued: ‘While we consider the intention to deceive as inherently given in regard to pseudojournalistic fake news websites, we suggest that determining this intentionality for journalistic sources is a crucial challenge for future research’. Establishing intentionality requires confirming the motivation of fake news producers, but as websites producing fake news rarely carry real names or contact details, doing so is a big challenge. Despite such difficulty, it is important to recognise that intentionality is an important element in the conceptualisation of what counts as ‘fake’. This, however, is made more complex by how some fake news sites see their blending of real and fake news as not morally wrong – the main intention is to advocate for their ideological causes, and mixing truths and falsehoods is just one tool to achieve this goal. For example, an analysis of how websites that routinely publish fake news – as well as some real news – in the United States present themselves in their About pages found that these sites ‘sought to provide alternative interpretations, rejecting objectivity in favour of approaches to “truth-seeking” rooted in personal and political values’ (Robertson
and Mourão 2020, 16). These actors do not see themselves as engaging in deception; they believe in their own lies.

What is news?

The word *fake* in the term *fake news* acts as a modifier of the word *news*. A ubiquitous word, *news* is a complex concept. Such complexity explains the multitude of ways it has been defined in newswriting textbooks and journalism studies handbooks. It is said that journalists know news when they see it, or what Rogers (2004) called the ‘news sense’, but will find it difficult to define what news really is. Some texts define *news* as referring to an account of a recent, interesting, significant, and extraordinary event (Patterson 1993; Berner 1992; Harriss et al. 1981; Kershner 2005) while other sources identify instead factors that journalists look for in an event or issue to consider it as newsworthy. These factors are sometimes referred to as ‘news values’ that guide editorial decisions, such as timeliness, proximity, eliteness, impact, conflict, and novelty, among others (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Harcup and O’Neill 2016). A fundamental assumption across these various definitions is that news is something based on truth (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001).

News, therefore, is more than just the event or issue that is reported about; it is also how such reports are socially constructed. News production is characterised by layers of processes to ensure accuracy and is guided by numerous rules, such as ensuring accountability. For example, in a study of fake news websites in the United States, Mourão and Robertson (2019, 2080) argued that fake news, while packaged like real news, ‘is not subjected to traditional news norms as ascribed by the Western liberal model of professional journalism: it is not – although it possibly never aspired to be – factual, objective, neutral, and informational’. Real news, therefore, is defined not only by the output per se but also by the processes involved in its production. However, while this is instructive for scholars who study mediated messages, it is challenging for individuals exposed to both real and fake news who might not know what really goes into news production.

This is where media literacy as an important intervention to combat the spread of fake news comes in, but it is also important to understand how different stakeholders define ‘news’, for this has implications for how nuanced our understanding of the fake news problem and its potential solution becomes. As news consumption patterns change, especially in terms of how and when people get their news, it is plausible that what news means to people is also changing. For example, news has always been regarded as an important conversation starter and can bring people together (Lasswell 1948), but this is now even more true on social media, where news seems to be valued more for its social than its informational utility (Tandoc et al. 2020). The spread of fake news might be emblematic not only of people’s changing news behaviour but also of their changing valuation and definition of news. For example, in some of the focus group discussions we conducted in Singapore, we asked participants to define what they consider to be news. While many referred to outputs by traditional news outlets, some elderly participants referred to health tips they come across on Facebook, as well as WhatsApp messages forwarded to them by friends, as constituting news.

Such dynamic definitions of what counts as news have implications on how we define fake news as well as on how we design interventions to combat its spread. If we go by the traditional definition of what news is and take traditional news formats as part of that definition, this might be inconsistent with discourses about fake news spreading via messaging apps and Twitter, where ‘fake news’ comes in the form of short messages. Changing news distribution and consumption patterns might have also changed audience expectations of what news is and
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should be. For example, as news outlets and journalists embraced Twitter as a platform to disseminate breaking news, audiences might be considering 280-character messages as a legitimate news format. Indeed, Mourão and Robertson (2019) argued that the definition of ‘fake news’ is relational: first, it is in relation to what is ‘real’, and second, that the ‘news’ it mimics also depends on cultural contexts (see also Wasserman 2017). This might also be true in relation to temporal context as the definitions of news and, consequently, fake news, evolve over time. This is something that future studies should explore.

Impact of fake news

The popularity of fake news as a research topic is partly based on its assumed negative impact on numerous aspects of social life. News reports and personal anecdotes abound that detail different types of real harm caused by fake news. However, compared with the scholarly attention devoted to studying how fake news is characterised, created, circulated, and countered (Bente 2018), fewer studies have examined the consequences of fake news. A study in the United States concluded that ‘the fake news audience is small and comprises a subset of the Internet’s heaviest users’ (Nelson and Taneja 2018, 3732). The experience of many other countries, however, might be different, given the various levels of social media and messaging app penetration rates around the world, on top of differences in political systems and cultural contexts. Furthermore, tracking the actual spread of fake news is challenging, especially as more and more information exchanges occur on closed messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, that third-party observers and researchers cannot easily track.

Some have expressed concern about the use of fake news as a form of foreign interference, with external actors sowing tensions and perceptions of chaos in a particular community to achieve political ends, such as influencing electoral outcomes or sabotaging economies (Jayakumar 2018; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). Thus, fake news has also been weaponised to weaken trust in social institutions, including science, politics, and journalism (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). Others have also explored the impact of fake news on the reputation of organisations. For example, a study found that appearing next to a piece of fake news can affect an online advertisement’s perceived trustworthiness (Visentin et al. 2019). Fake news websites might also exert some agenda-setting effects on a few partisan news sites (Guo and Vargo 2018). A study also found that discourse around fake news can also increase scepticism towards real news (Van Duyn and Collier 2019). These are a few examples of social and organisational implications. But how does fake news affect interpersonal relationships? Understanding the impact of fake news on interpersonal relationships as well as on personal, day-to-day decision-making can help reveal mechanisms that facilitate, if not encourage, the sharing of information regardless of its veracity (see Cabañes 2020). It can also help explain how individuals respond to fake news and why. For example, a survey conducted in Singapore found that most participants ignore fake news when they come across it on social media, instead of taking steps to correct or report it (Tandoc, Lim et al. 2019).

Conclusion

Fake news has attracted much scholarly attention and rightfully so. It is a problem facilitated by communication technologies and channels that millions routinely use, involves the mimicry of a social artifact imbued with history and legitimacy, and betrays a fundamental virtue that holds communities together: truth. The multitude of studies conducted after fake news rose again to buzzword status in late 2016 has provided us some understanding of the kind of problem we are facing – and yet there are still many things we don’t fully understand.
The spread of the novel coronavirus around the world in 2020 demonstrated there is still a lot of work to do. A church in South Korea, taking its cue from viral messages that claimed gargling saltwater could kill the virus that causes COVID-19, sprayed salt water into the mouths of its followers, infecting dozens of people (Park 2020). A spokesperson for the Philippine government echoed in a public broadcast viral social media messages that wrongly claimed eating bananas can protect people from COVID-19 (Luna 2020). In the United States, President Trump mentioned in a televised press briefing injecting disinfectants into people to kill the virus – this was followed by a few cases of Americans ingesting disinfectants (Slotkin 2020). Fake news provides one channel for falsehoods to enter public consciousness, but mainstream news coverage also provides another pathway as falsehoods now also come from political leaders whose voices dominate real news.

Fake news spreads like a virus – all it takes is one vulnerable host to spread it to others. Online and offline communities are still in need of being disinfected. As information technologies develop and people’s communication needs, habits, and values change, the phenomenon of fake news will also continue to evolve.

References


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