

Conceptualizing the Media Ecosystem: Addressing Misinformation, Disinformation, Fake News, and Deepfakes — Key Insights from Interviews with Professional Journalists

Anastasiia Iufereva

IULM University, Milan, Italy

anastasiia.iufereva@studenti.iulm.it

Abstract: As technology continues to evolve rapidly and online content—particularly on social media—is widely consumed, the spread of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and deepfakes has become a critical concern. While numerous studies recognize the severity of these phenomena and their negative societal impact, significant conceptual ambiguities persist. To address these gaps, this research integrates insights from relevant scholarly literature and in-depth interviews with professional journalists to refine the conceptual frameworks of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and deepfakes, clarifying their distinctions. It may contribute to communication research by enhancing the conceptual understanding of key media ecosystem concepts and guiding strategies for media management and literacy development.

Keywords: Fake news, Deepfakes, Misinformation, Disinformation, Social media, Journalism

1. Introduction

The contemporary media ecosystem is marked by the widespread presence of false and misleading content. The dissemination of such information is exacerbated by the widespread accessibility of digital devices, the absence of effective mechanisms to detect and constrain the circulation of inaccurate data on the Internet, and the relatively low level of media literacy among users. This issue is further intensified by escalating international conflicts and crises in diplomatic relations, where false or incorrect narratives are used as a tool to discredit adversaries and manipulate public opinion. Significant attention is devoted to misinformation and disinformation (e.g., fake news, deepfakes), which can harm individuals and society overall (Shinde & Sathyaprakash, 2023). For this, the amount of research regarding mis- and disinformation has experienced exponential growth. “At the same time, when research in a particular area increases significantly within a short time frame, there is a great risk of a lack of overview, fragmentation and research cumulativity. This holds particularly true when research is simultaneously carried out in many otherwise rather disconnected disciplines” (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). This concern is particularly relevant to misinformation and disinformation studies, including fake news and deepfakes, as these phenomena are examined across various disciplines (e.g., computer science, political science, sociology, journalism, and mass communications). Consequently, there is an absence of widely accepted conceptual frameworks to define ‘disinformation,’ ‘misinformation,’ ‘fake news,’ and ‘deepfakes’ in contemporary social and humanitarian sciences. To address these gaps, this study aims to systematize these definitions and develop conceptual models for these terms.

2. Data Collection

This research was designed as a qualitative study, with semi-structured interviews to explore professional journalists' perspectives on such key concepts as ‘disinformation,’ ‘misinformation,’ ‘fake news,’ and ‘deepfakes’. Data gathering was carried out between September and December 2024 in Italy. Twelve respondents were selected based on purposive sampling, with the selection criteria focusing on their professional experience across different types of media. While the primary strategy was purposive sampling, the process also involved some degree of convenience sampling. The journalists were selected from diverse media outlets, aligning with established media studies classifications: public service media (PSM), private television and radio, print media (leading dailies), digital-native news media, local/regional media, and community/non-profit media (see Table 1). Semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Google Meet. Interviews, conducted in Italian, the participants' native language, were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed using automated software (Microsoft Word). During the interviews, a structured questionnaire served as a guide, ensuring consistency across interviews while permitting participants to elaborate on their experiences and opinions. The collected data were compiled into a single Word document. The following thematic areas were covered during the interviews: the concept of fact and truth, understanding fake news, characteristics and indicators of fake news, reasons for the creation and spread of fake news, principles of journalism and fact-checking, core principles of journalism (e.g., objectivity), a detailed description of the fact-checking process, and journalism ethics and challenges. Then, the analysis followed a rigorous thematic analysis approach, as outlined by Zúñiga et al. (2023). This process involved six distinct phases: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated listening

to and reading of transcripts; (2) generation of initial codes to identify key concepts; (3) identification of overarching themes emerging from the coded data; (4) review and refinement of themes to ensure coherence and validity; (5) definition and naming of final themes; and (6) production of the research report, integrating empirical findings with relevant scholarly literature. This study specifically focused on the differentiation of key terms related to information disorder: ‘disinformation,’ ‘misinformation,’ ‘fake news,’ and ‘deepfakes’.

Table 1: Sample of Italian media outlets

Type of media outlet	Media outlet	Position
Press (leading dailies)	La Repubblica	Editor-in-chief
	Corriere della Sera	Journalist
Private TV	Mediaset	Editor-in-chief
	La 7	Journalist
Public Service Media	RAI	Editor-in-chief
	RAI	Journalist
Digital native news media	Follow Up News	Editor-in-chief
	Valigia Blu	Journalist, editor
Local/regional media	Nord Est Multimedia S.p.A. (NEM)	Editor
	Milano Free, Musica 361, 7 Giorni	Journalist Freelance
	Milano today	Journalist
Community, non-profit media	Internazionale	Journalist Freelance

3. Results of Analysis

3.1 Misinformation VS Disinformation

In academic research, the key difference between ‘misinformation’ and ‘disinformation’ lies in the intention behind sharing the information. Misinformation refers to the accidental sharing of incorrect or misleading information (Wardle, 2017; Li & Chang, 2022), whereas disinformation involves the intentional creation and dissemination of false information or distorted stories to deceive or harm others (Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Rodrigo et al., 2022). Jack (2017, p. 15) notes, "While both terms refer to misleading information, misinformation usually implies no intent to mislead, while disinformation suggests knowing deception." Disinformation is a broad term encompassing intentionally false content, such as hoaxes, rumors, or clickbait, aimed at provoking reactions (like likes or comments) or serving a specific agenda. Conversely, misinformation involves the sharing of incorrect information without any intention to mislead the public or pursue personal goals.

These findings align with the insights gathered during the interviews, as media experts distinguished between these terms. For instance, an editor from "RAI" explained: "*The term misinformation is used, but it hasn't become part of our vocabulary yet. Disinformation means spreading false news to influence or harm someone. I engage in disinformation when I knowingly share false news to cause harm. Misinformation occurs when I share false news without realizing it. I don't intend to harm anyone, but the news might seem believable to me, and I share it*" (editor, public TV, "RAI"). The journalist from "Valigia Blu" added, "*There are subtle distinctions to make. Disinformation means intentionally creating and sharing false news to mislead or harm someone, while misinformation occurs when we accidentally spread false news because we didn't know it was false. In this case, fake news spreads without any malicious intent*" (journalist, digital native news media, "Valigia Blu").

3.2 Fake News: Key Definitions

A significant challenge in both academic and public discourse is defining 'fake news,' as this concept is often conflated with other related concepts such as deepfakes, clickbait, rumors, and various types of disinformation. Oremus (2016) suggests that we should avoid labeling everything as "fake news." To understand what "fake news" means, it's essential to consider various definitions. For instance, Sutu (2019) describes fake news as "real content used in the wrong context or news shared on websites that spread false information, often designed to

look like real media" (p. 83). Bakir and McStay (2017) note that a key feature of modern fake news is its widespread online dissemination (p. 1). Rini (2017) points out that while fake news can spread through other means, such as emails or posters, it is particularly linked to social media, especially during the 2016 election (p. 45). In recent years, social media has transformed how news is structured and shared (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016; Copeland, 2007). Many definitions focus on the format of fake news, which often mimics real news. For example, Levy (2017) states that fake news copies the look and feel of credible news outlets. Brennen (2017) defines fake news as "fabricated content made to look like real journalism designed to deceive" (p. 180). Thus, fake news often follows traditional media conventions, presenting itself as accurate and trustworthy (Han et al., 2017; Kim & Dennis, 2019). These definitions emphasize that fake news often imitates real news reporting, making it easy for audiences to mistake it for legitimate information.

To gather journalists' definitions of 'fake news,' we asked selected respondents to share their views on what fake news is. Based on their responses, we identified key categories and grouped them into several themes.

Fabricated or Partially Distorted Content: Fake news can be completely false or based on real events that are manipulated to mislead the audience. Some journalists say fake news includes "*unreal facts that do not match reality*" (editor-in-chief, press, La Repubblica). Others note it can involve real information that is twisted, as an editor from Follow Up News stated, "*It spreads false news that seems true but isn't.*" This manipulation might involve changing the context, misrepresenting facts, or selectively reporting to sway public opinion.

Fake News Resembling Real News: Journalists pointed out that fake news is especially dangerous because it looks like a real journalistic piece. This makes it hard for audiences to tell the difference between fake news and credible news. The journalist from Milano Today said, "*It may seem true, but maybe it isn't.*" The journalist from La7 described fake news as "*manipulated news that seems true but isn't.*" This deceptive format—using professional headlines and visuals—makes it harder to combat fake news, as people often accept it as real.

Unverified or Inaccurate Information: Journalists emphasized that fake news is often unverified and lacks credible sources. The freelance journalist from Milano Free defined fake news as "*information given inaccurately, without checking with reliable sources.*" Similarly, the journalist from Internazionale noted the fast spread of unverified claims: "*News that hasn't been verified or shared too quickly.*" This highlights the difference between professional journalism, which involves thorough fact-checking, and disinformation, which is often spread without verification.

Fake News as a Tool for Manipulation: Some journalists stress that fake news is created to mislead audiences and shape public opinion. The journalist from Valigia Blu explained its main purpose: "*To make people believe something that isn't true.*" Fake news aims to provoke specific reactions, such as social media engagement or public outrage. It is often spread strategically to achieve social, economic, or political goals.

Overall, from the authors' perspective, fake news is a type of disinformation that can be entirely or partially false, often based on real events but created to mislead or manipulate a target audience. To appear more credible, fake news adopts the style of real journalism, including exaggerated or sensational headlines and a main text that lacks solid evidence, such as official documents or reliable data. While fake news may not always include multimedia elements like photos or videos, these are often used to enhance its impact. The topics chosen for fake news are often selected to resonate with specific audience interests, increasing its chances of going viral. Additionally, fake news often takes advantage of cognitive biases, reinforcing existing beliefs and hindering critical thinking.

3.3 Defining of Deepfakes

While fake news primarily involves textual information, with photos and videos playing a complementary role, deepfakes are primarily based on visual media, such as photos and videos (Westerlund, 2019). The term "deepfake" is a blend of "deep learning" and "fake," referring to images and videos altered or entirely generated through artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning techniques. Despite the potential positive applications of deepfakes in fields such as education, healthcare, and entertainment—offering opportunities for creativity and harmless amusement—malicious use of deepfakes has raised significant concerns. As Lundberg & Mozelius (2024) observe, "The malicious use of deepfakes creates a social problem and could threaten democratic institutions, social stability, and international security." Deepfakes are characterized by their ability to modify or entirely fabricate images and videos, making them powerful tools for representing both real and fabricated events or situations.

During interviews with professional journalists, emerging threats posed by deepfakes were highlighted. For instance, the editor of a private TV channel noted that the ability to create visual content, especially photos and videos, that appears completely plausible is becoming more widespread and difficult to verify: *"With the help of artificial intelligence or advanced technologies, it is easy to spread fake news. For example, just yesterday, they reported that a man had been killed, and until DNA evidence was available, it was uncertain. Anyone could have created a video with his face showing that he was run over. Until DNA evidence was available, it wasn't certain. Especially with images and the speed at which we consume news, it is much easier to spread false information online"* (editor, private TV, "Mediaset"). Another journalist added, *"... new risks associated with fake news come from technology itself, not just the ability to spread it through social media, but from the new dangers created by artificial intelligence, where fake images and videos can be artificially generated. For those without the tools to interpret and distinguish between truth and falsehood, it becomes much more complicated."* (journalist, private TV, "La7").

Therefore, based on empirical research findings and a review of scientific literature, we have gained new insights into these concepts (see Table 2).

Table 2: Understanding the 'Media Ecosystem': Key Concepts

Concept	Definition
Fake news	constitutes a form of disinformation that may be wholly or partially fabricated, often addressing real events, situations, phenomena, or individuals. It is deliberately created to mislead or manipulate a specific audience. To enhance its perceived credibility, fake news adopts the format of a recognized journalistic genre (e.g., actual news) and adheres to a particular structure. This includes elements such as headlines—typically exaggerated, inaccurate, or sensational—alongside the main text, which generally lacks a systematic, cohesive, and well-founded evidentiary basis, such as official documents, critical data, statistics, or scholarly papers.
Disinformation	involves the deliberate creation and dissemination of misleading information with the explicit intent to deceive or cause harm, aiming to manipulate public opinion or achieve specific objectives.
Misinformation	refers to the unintentional sharing of inaccurate information without the intent to deceive, often occurring when individuals mistakenly believe the content is correct.
Deepfakes	a photo or video product created by artificial intelligence, referring to multimedia materials that are either completely or partially false. It includes a variety of content genres: from entertaining video materials to political and social provocations.

Source: The author's elaboration

4. Conclusion

The research explored key definitions of concepts frequently discussed in academic and public discourse. We identified the differences and similarities among phenomena like misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and deepfakes. Based on empirical research findings and a review of scientific literature, we have gained new insights into these concepts. A potential area for future research could be fact-checking strategies. This might involve analyzing media practices in Italy and comparing journalistic practices in other countries. Such research would help identify commonalities and differences, deepen our understanding of specific contexts (including cultural diversity), identify global trends, and analyze the impact of globalization on the journalism profession.

References

- Bakir, V., & McStay, A. (2017) "Fake News and the Economy of Emotions: Problems, Causes, Solutions", *Digital Journalism*, 6(2), pp. 1-22.
- Berkowitz, D., & Schwartz, D. (2016) "Miley, CNN and The Onion: When Fake News Becomes Realer Than Real", *Journalism Practice*, 10(1), pp. 1-17.
- Brennen, B. (2017) "Making Sense of Lies, Deceptive Propaganda, and Fake News", *Journal of Media Ethics*, 32, pp. 179-181.

- Broda, E., and Strömbäck, J. (2024) "Misinformation, Disinformation, and Fake News: Lessons from an Interdisciplinary, Systematic Literature Review", *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 48(2), pp. 139-166. DOI: 10.1080/23808985.2024.2323736.
- Copeland, D. (2007) "A Series of Fortunate Events: Why People Believed Richard Adams Locke's 'Moon Hoax'", *Journalism History*, 33, pp. 140-150.
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., Goyanes, M., and Skurka, C. (2023) "Understanding Fake News Corrective Action: A Mixed-Method Approach", *International Journal of Communication*, 17, pp. 3428-3450.
- Han, J., Lee, S., & Kim, J. (2017) "A Process Integrated Engineering Knowledge Acquisition and Management Model for a Project-Based Manufacturing", *International Journal of Precision Engineering and Manufacturing*, 18, pp. 467-467.
- Jack, C. (2017) "Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information", Report, URL: https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_LexiconofLies.pdf, Accessed: 26-03-2023.
- Kim, A., & Dennis, A. (2019) "Says Who? The Effects of Presentation Format and Source Rating on Fake News in Social Media", *MIS Quarterly: Management Information Systems*, 43(3), pp. 1025-1039.
- Li, J., & Chang, X. (2023) "Combating Misinformation by Sharing the Truth: A Study on the Spread of Fact-Checks on Social Media", *Information Systems Frontiers*, 25, pp. 1479-1493.
- Levy, N. (2017) "The Bad News About Fake News", *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, 6(8), pp. 20-36.
- Lundberg, E., & Mozelius, P. (2024) "The Potential Effects of Deepfakes on News Media and Entertainment", *AI & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-024-02072-1>.
- Nyhan, B., Blair, S., Busam, J. A., Clayton, K., Forstner, S., Gance, J., ... & Zhou, A. (2017) "Real Solutions for Fake News? Measuring the Effectiveness of General Warnings and Fact-Check Banners in Reducing Belief in False Stories on Social Media", Dartmouth College Working Paper, URL: <https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.dartmouth.edu/dist/5/2293/files/2021/03/fake-news-solutions.pdf>.
- Oremus, W. (2016) "Stop Calling Everything 'Fake News'", *Slate*, URL: <https://slate.com/technology/2016/12/stop-calling-everything-fake-news.html>, Accessed: 26-03-2023.
- Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. (2021) "The Psychology of Fake News", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 25(5), pp. 388-402.
- Rodrigo, P., Arakpogun, E., Vu, M., Olan, F., & Djafarova, E. (2022) "Can You Be Mindful? The Effectiveness of Mindfulness-Driven Interventions in Enhancing Digital Resilience to Fake News on COVID-19", *Information Systems Frontiers*, pp. 1-21.
- Shinde, P. L., & Sathyaprakash, M. R. (2023) "Digital Immigrants and Digital Deception: Consuming and Combating Fake News Online", *Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 4(1), pp. 34-47.
- Sutu, R. (2019) "Fake News, from Social Media to Television: Case Study of the Romanian Presidential Elections 2019", *Styles of Communication*, 11(2), pp. 81-92.
- Westerlund, M. (2019) "The Emergence of Deepfake Technology: A Review", *Technology Innovation Management Review*, 9(11), pp. 39-52. <https://doi.org/10.22215/timreview/1282>.