

Beyond Rational: Understanding of Fake News in the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract: The paper focuses on fake news as one of the most serious threats and distinguishing features of the post-truth period, which is defined by the following aspects: the rise of diverse sources of information on the Internet, the devaluation of facts, and the proliferation of fake news. These conditions necessitate a revision of the algorithm, the verification and presentation of information, as well as tactics and techniques for dealing with fake news. The purpose of this research is to describe the distinct characteristics of fake news. The authors have specifically extracted research from the Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar search databases; the sample includes 120 scientific articles with titles related to fake news that were published after 2016 when the term "fake news" gained legitimacy after being named word of the year by Collins (usage of the term increased by 365% since 2016). The analysis focused on key definitions of fake news suggested in each selected research and its permanent and non-permanent characteristics.

Keywords: Fake News, Misinformation, Disinformation, Journalism, Social Media, Post-Truth Era.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of the Internet and popular social practices online have resulted in significant shifts in the mass media sector during the last decade. Post-truth era has emerged, characterized by the intersection of sometimes opposing ideas, perceptions, and techniques. Under these conditions the fake news is spreading, which destroy public discourse in the media environment and exacerbate political and social differences. As a result, the primary goal of this research is to describe characteristics of fake news and determine which parts comprise the nature of this phenomena.

2. Sample Description

For this research scientific papers have been extracted from the database Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar search. The sample consists of 120 scientific publications with titles that mention "fake news". The selected papers were published after 2016, when a term "fake news" was acquired a certain legitimacy after being named word of the year by Collins (since 2016 usage of the term had increased by 365%). The analysis focused on two crucial issues: (1) how each of the studies defined and operationalized the term of "fake news" and (2) what are the permanent and non-permanent characteristics of this phenomenon.

3. Results of Analysis

3.1 Fake News: Approaches to the Definition

Fake news is crucial phenomenon since it contributes to the formation of our "real" world through the constant consumption of media products that present their interpretation of reality. Even though fake news is widespread, it is defined differently. As a result, the definition of fake news remains ambiguous, causing semantic uncertainty.

Fake news is "a catch-all term with multiple definitions" (Lilleker, 2017, p. 1), resulting in various approaches to identifying fake news. In the academic literature, research focuses on two critical components in defining fake news: how fake news is communicated and circulated in today's information ecosystem, and the kind of fake news content that is created and shared. According to the first approach, scholars define communication technologies (e.g., websites, social media, etc.) as tools utilized solely for the creation and dissemination of fake news in today's information environment. This perspective is consistent with the technological determinism approach since it asserts that the emergence and subsequent development of social media platforms has exacerbated the problem of widespread fake news. The media is viewed as an essential component of fake news, and the role of the internet environment in the propagation of such messages is underlined. As for the second approach, the study focuses on the content of fake news, namely the format of such messages and degree of inaccuracy. Scholars describe the format in which fake news is provided, the features of it, and the degree to which they may be real or false. Therefore, the following part of the current research will outline in more detail two approaches frequently found in definitions of fake news: (1) the role of the medium as an

integral component of fake news and as the basis for the circulation of fake news; (2) the news format (false information masquerading as news), and the degree of falsity.

(1) According to the first approach which is in line with the technological determinism approach, fake news is "produced and published by mass communication vehicles such as social media, dominating traditional and social platforms, becoming increasingly part of many people's daily lives" (Rocha et al., 2021). Sutu (2019), for instance, states that "fake news is authentic material used in the wrong context, news products disseminated on websites that specialize in fake news and use layouts similar to those of real media sites <...>" (p. 83). According to Bakir & McStay (2017), a key element of contemporary fake news is that "it is widely circulated online" (p. 1). Thus, it leads to information overload and the dissemination of fake news. Fake news multiply rapidly and act as narratives that omit or add information to facts. Other studies highlighted the methods by which fake news spreads, emphasizing the crucial role that technology plays in communication (Aldwairi & Alwahedi, 2018). One such example of a technological communication tool is social media. Fake news can also be propagated through email chains, posters on streetlights, and other means (Rini, 2017). However, there is a substantial correlation—especially during the 2016 election—between social media and fake news (Rini, 2017, p. 45). Social media has completely changed the composition, scope, and intricacy of news in the last few years (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016; Copeland, 2007). Social media is widely regarded as an essential channel for disseminating news and user-generated material, among other types of information. According to Nielsen (2016) and Vosoughi et al. (2018), Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are the main platforms used for information dissemination. These platforms publish a large number of postings each day. Social media serves as a platform for social engagement, communication, and entertainment in addition to information sharing (Hwang et al., 2011; Kuem et al., 2017). People can share diverse opinions and values if they have unrestricted access to a wealth of knowledge (George et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2019; Rubin, 2019). It is simple to become disoriented in this information flow and stop telling authentic news from fake news on social media (Stein-Smith, 2017, Kumar et al., 2018). According to Machete & Turpin (2020), "search engines and social media platforms contribute to people's tendency to believe the information they come across on these platforms without verifying its veracity, even though they do not encourage people to believe the information being circulated." Hence, fake news has become a major part of social media, raising doubts about information credibility, quality, and verification (Olan et al., 2022).

(2) A further area of investigation is the idea that fake news is an intrinsic feature of the Internet's information space. Proposed definitions ignore the media as a tool for the production and dissemination of fake news in favor of focusing on the characteristics of fake news, methods of content presentation, and the effects of dissemination on the general population. Definitions of "fake news" will be determined by interpreting two factors: (a) the way fake news is presented; and (b) the way facts and the degree of trustworthiness of the information are presented.

(a) The existing definitions are preoccupied with the format of fake news. There are numerous ways to propagate inaccurate or misleading information online, and this news format is just one of them. However, the definitions of recent research have consistently included the news format, as seen here: messages disguising themselves as news and disseminated via the Internet or other media are known as fake news. They are typically produced as jokes or to sway political opinions (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018). False information about the world is presented in fake news in a style and with material that mimics that of reliable news sources (Levy, 2017). "Fake news is made-up news, manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are designed to deceive us," according to Brennen (2017, p. 180). One of the goals of fake news is to mimic real-world events and situations. It often mimics the conventions of traditional media news and its key characteristics, which are verifiability, accuracy, balance, and truthfulness (Kim & Dennis, 2019; Jaster & Lanius, 2018, Lazer et al., 2018). For this reason, fake news may seem to be true news. According to these definitions, fake news frequently appears in the news format, which is a respectable method of reporting on current affairs in the real world. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that "this conceptualization of fake news emphasizes, on the one hand, that this information formally imitates media content and, on the other hand, that it has not been produced following the same processes or with the same intention as news produced by the media" (Miró-Llinares & Aguerri, 2021, p. 5).

The next definition of fake news is defined as news items that are purposefully and demonstrably incorrect and have the potential to mislead readers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). According to Klein & Wueller (2017), "the online publication" of incorrect statements of truth might be interpreted as "fake news" (p. 6). "Altered truths" are the definition of fake news, demonstrating the validity of the media's agenda (Shrivastava et al., 2020). False information bundled to trick the public into believing it was created by experts who respect the truth, according to Fiedler (Rimer 2017). "Information that is knowingly false, erroneous, or deceptive and that is intended to

hurt the public or be profitable" (HLEG, 2018). These definitions have two essential components: intent and authenticity. Firstly, information that can be independently verified as false is included in fake news. This time, the notion of falsity is included in the definition and the attribution of falsehood is made at the narrative level. Second, the purposeful fabrication of fake news is to deceive readers. Numerous recent studies have embraced this definition (Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2017; Conroy et al. (2015), Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The motivation behind fake news writers is described in certain scholarly studies, and it may be boiled down to two things: subverting social norms and shifting power dynamics. Therefore, we contend that a more comprehensive definition of fake news should be adopted, one that encompasses the phenomena of information flow between an actor and an action that primarily aims to refute widely held beliefs about reality to challenge established power structures (Weiss et al., 2021).

(b) Some research indicates that fake news has a certain degree of credibility. Manipulation of facts results in two sorts of fake news, each with varying dependability. It is worth noting that the fluidity and ambiguity of truth are also important characteristics of post-truth, which is distinguished by the absence of rigid structures, elasticity and plasticity, idea substitution, and the presence of multiple points of view, each of which can claim the truth. Under these conditions, a fact in fake news may be made up and have nothing to do with reality. According to Gelfert (2018), "fake news has little to do with real-world events." Fake news is defined as articles "invented entirely from thin air," completely contrived, transmitting "new content [that] is 100% false," and having "no factual basis" (p. 96). Other studies have defined fake news in similar ways, with a focus on facticity. For example, Pennycook et al. (2018) define fake news as "entirely fabricated and often partisan content that is presented as factual" (p. 1865). Another type of fake news is when a factual truth is altered or presented wrongly. In this scenario, we're dealing with partially produced fake news: "fake news" is defined as "complete or partly false information, (often) appearing as news, and typically expressed as textual, visual, or graphical content with the intention to mislead or confuse users."

Therefore, according to our view, fake news is a piece of information that might be completely or partially fictitious and deal with real events and situations. Fake news is purposely generated to mislead and/or manipulate a certain audience. To establish credibility, the news format is used to simulate a popular journalistic genre (actual news) with a structure (title, image, content) designed to capture readers' attention, inspire confidence, and, as a result, mislead them. "Once the reader suspends credulity and accepts the legitimacy of the source, they are more likely to trust the item and not seek verification" (Kalsnes, 2018). To identify the distinct characteristics of fake news, it is vital to highlight both continuous and non-constant traits.

3.2 Characteristics of Fake News

This section of this research deals with a discussion of the key characteristics of fake news. To determine the features of this type of disinformation, it is necessary to distinguish between constant and non-constant characteristics. Thus, the author suggests a certain type of typology that encompasses features of fake news. It can not only organize and systematize the existing knowledge regarding fake news, but also it can facilitate the recognition of this type of information.

3.2.1 Constant Characteristics of Fake News

A lack of evidence base. Fake news lacks a systematic, cohesive, and well-structured evidentiary base for the claimed issue. The evidence base is a collection of reputable sources of information that includes references to official documents, critical data, statistics, scientific papers, and so on. The news story, which includes recent events or words made by an actor (for example, a politician), is frequently at the heart of fake news. The news story is developed and condensed around this information occasion, and appealing to an evidence foundation is beyond the producers' attention span.

Suspicious and unverified primary sources. The source of fake news is difficult to detect. It can take the shape of a post on a news feed (on Facebook) or a tweet (on Twitter), just as true news is posted on these social media platforms (headline). Title, image, and signature/source. However, not all sources are equal in authority. "From this perspective, those who distribute fake news are completely identifiable: some pages take the names of famous newspapers by changing one or two letters to deceive; others create real websites, blogs, pages, Facebook or Telegram groups that often evoke conspiracy theories; sometimes, they are personal accounts of natural persons - often fake - who gain users' trust by touting important knowledge or by declaring their freedom from "the system" (Guerra e fake news, 2022). There is also the news without a link to the source: users spread this message making it popularized without knowing of origin of this news.

Imitation of news format. Many studies argue that fake news follows the format of a news narrative, resulting in increased attention and trustworthiness (Baptista & Gradim, 2020; Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Lazer, 2018; Rochlin, 2017; Kalsnes, 2018). Fake news is usually associated with freshly emerging, time-critical events, or hot topics in order to attract the attention of internet users, and this content may not have been thoroughly vetted by existing knowledge bases due to a lack of confirming evidence or assertions (Shu et al., 2017, Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020).

The importance of the topic for a certain segment of the society. The prevalence of fake news may be substantially determined by the publication's relevance/importance to the public (Salgado and Bobba, 2019; Galeotti 2019; Trilling et al. 2016). This importance is subjective, as this disinformation may appeal to certain readers but not others. Rini (2017) included this component in the definition of fake news, claiming that bogus information is produced to confuse a section of the audience, despite the fact that one of the primary purposes of fake news is to achieve popularity. To the degree that fake news is relevant, its popularity can be linked to the coverage features of a certain event or the topic covered or studied (Vosoughi et al. 2018; Bright 2016).

The velocity of fake news. Fake news and its creators are typically short-lived (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Fake news, viral or not, has a limited duration. If the news spreads and sparks a public debate, competent journalists and fact-checkers may be able to quickly expose it. For example, several active fake news websites during the US presidential election of 2016 no longer exist following the campaign (Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020).

Intense emotional connotation of the message. Newsmakers frequently communicate their thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and sentiments through fake news. Zhang & Ghorbani (2020) present the concept of "non-physical content" as the core kernel of fake news, stating that it encompasses all of the significant ideas, sentiments, and perspectives that the authors wish to convey to the readers. Sentiment polarity is another significant aspect of non-physical material in fake news. To make their news more persuasive, authors frequently express strong positive or negative emotions in the text body (Devitt & Ahmad, 2007). In particular, stories that elicit powerful emotions become more appealing and widely disseminated. Aside from multiple categories and sentiment polarity, fake news can target certain domains and subjects. Some research (e.g., Galil & Soffer 2011) have found that fake news about crises, conflicts, catastrophes, money laundering, crimes, sexual offenses, or fraud, etc.) receives more public attention. Furthermore, the appealing theme is a political one. Vosoughi et al. (2018) reveal that incorrect content concerning politics was not only widely circulated, but also reached a larger number of people than other subjects.

Simplified language and style of the fake news. It has been recorded that the vocabulary employed by fake news is more formal and simpler in terms of details and production techniques, not just in article headlines but also throughout the content (Horne & Adali 2017). Fake news producers regard certain aspects, such as straightforward and stunning messages, appealing headlines that appeal to the audience's emotions, and clickbait, as important for multiple disclosures. In contrast to traditional media, the most commonly used words in discovered fake news, such as "sex", "death", "corruption", "illegal", "alien", or "lies", refer to dramatic or scandalous content (Budak 2019). Another feature of fake news is message repetition, which enhances its credibility: "Just one prior exposure to fake news headlines is enough to significantly increase subsequent awareness about their accuracy" (Pennycook et al., 2018, p. 1876). This repeating effect is exploited by web bots who are involved in fake news. Flooding the internet with social media bots and fake news sites that post and share the same fake news can make a bogus article appear credible (Tandoc, 2019). For example, a user may stumble across a bogus news report online and decide to search Google to confirm it. If that person sees similar fake news posted elsewhere, they may be misled into believing the post is genuine (Tandoc et al. 2018). As a result, repetition effects imply that repeated exposure to the same information—even if the repeat message comes from the same source and is thus rationally redundant—makes that information more convincing (Gelfert, 2019).

Conscious intent to deceive or mislead. The intentions of content creators are malicious. These intentions amount to the conscious intention of the authors to deceive or mislead the audience. For this reason, fake news is different from journalistic errors (a type of misinformation) and other types of journalistic genres (e.g., satire and parody). For instance, journalistic errors occur inevitably in the process of reporting on often intricate matters (Jaster & Lanus, 2018), and the main aim of satire and parody is to entertain the public, there is an implicit understanding between the author and the reader that the item is false (Tandoc, 2017).

Variability of the authenticity of the news. One distinguishing element of fake news is the manipulation of content validity. However, the credibility of such information varies. Most authors argue that fake news does not need to be completely false or fabricated. Fake news is completely or partially untrue (Tandoc et al. 2018;

Gelfert 2018; Rini 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow 2017; Jaster & Lanus, 2018), adheres to the media agenda, and attempts to describe actual occurrences while distorting and twisting the truth (Rini, 2017). Regarding the identification of sources of information, this can be indicated as a link to primary sources (e.g., reports, statistics, video, images, etc.). However, even if there is a factual basis, the data presented may be erroneous. "Many fake news stories are not completely false, but rather combine purposeful falsehoods with well-known realities to obfuscate. Almost all fake news claims to be about genuine people and entities, which contributes to its initial legitimacy. After all, bogus news claims to be news, not fiction" (Gelfert, 2018, p. 100). Many fake news stories are not entirely fictitious, but rather combine purposeful falsehoods with well-known facts to obfuscate the truth. The latter, purposely misleading one's audience, might be accomplished simply by selectively presenting partial truths. This implies that there is no value "to overstate the degree of disconnect that exists between fake news and reality, or, in any case, that it should not be built into the definition" (Gelfert, 2018).

3.2.2 Non-Mandatory Characteristics of Fake News

Fake news tends to be viral. The fundamental purpose of fake news is to become viral (Rini 2017) and generate a large number of reactions, including views, likes, reposts, and debates. However, this feature is not always present in fake news, as not all items may become popular and gain widespread attention. In the age of digital cacophony, most news, including fake news, goes ignored by users. The following factors can influence virality: topic relevance, high value of the news (for example, content with photos and video material makes the news more appealing), correctly selected format for presenting the news, and platform (fake media website, social networks, instant messengers, etc.). It is crucial to note that the success of falsified things is dependent on pre-existing social conflict (Tandoc, 2017). An equally significant component is the competent selection of the target audience, because, as previously stated, fake news is directed at a specific part of society, thus the content must relate to the values and attitudes of that target group in order to be noticed.

Mobilizing cognitive bias. Since fake news is directed at a specific demographic, it may involve manipulation of our bias. Gelfert (2018) even used the term "confirmation bias" to stress that the goal of fake news is to exploit consumers' pre-existing cognitive biases. "The most striking example is confirmation bias, the universal tendency to want new evidence that confirms our beliefs and theories" (Gelfert, 2018, p. 1). Far from being a side consequence of fake news, the systemic ways in which it mobilizes our cognitive biases and alters our thinking processes, are integral to its purpose. Confirmation bias contributes to many informal fallacies that stifle critical thinking, as well as systematic issues in the architecture of the sources and channels via which fake news travels, creating barriers to critical thinking and active investigation. Much fake news employs representational strategies that actively alter customers' cognitive biases, to deceive consumers into propagating (e.g., through online "sharing") the very statements that misled them in the first place (Gelfert, 2018).

Presence of photos, videos, and other multimedia materials in fake news. Fake news has also been defined as the alteration of real photographs or videos to create a misleading narrative. Visual clues are a significant but optional feature of fake news because not every fake news contains visual or graphical content (Kalsnes, 2018). As previously demonstrated, fake news exploits individual vulnerabilities, frequently relying on exaggerated or inaccurate visuals to elicit wrath or other emotional responses in customers (Shu et al., 2017). Visual characteristics are collected from visual materials (such as photographs and videos) to capture the many aspects of fake news. Image modification has grown in popularity as a result of digital photography, strong image alteration software, and expertise (Tandoc 2017). Effects might range from simple to complex. Simple modifications can include expanding the space. Effects might range from simple to complex. Simple modifications can include adding more space and deleting little items. More extreme modifications could include removing or putting people into the photograph. Another type of manipulation is when fake news appears in photo manipulations and uses images from one context in another (for example, fake news uses photographs that depict a completely different event and are unrelated to the situation being described, which is especially common for natural disasters, military operations, and so on) (Kalsnes, 2018).

Presence of sensational headline of fake news. Typically, fake news headlines are false and outrageous, having exaggeration, sensationalism, and even violence in common. However, this characteristic is not mandatory. Given the tendency of fake news to imitate real news, headlines can be neutral in tone, avoiding exaggeration and attempts to immediately shock readers.

Table 1: Characteristics of fake news

Constant characteristics of the content of fake news	
The lack of evidence base	Fake news lacks a systematic, cohesive, and well-structured evidentiary base for the claimed issue. The evidence base is a collection of reputable sources of information that includes references to official documents, critical data, statistics, scientific papers, and so on.
Suspicious and unverified primary sources	The origin of fake news is difficult to determine since it can spread on the Internet, particularly on social media, without attribution to the source. Internet users can propagate bogus news. Fake news can also surface on questionable news websites or on sites that resemble legitimate, authoritative media but are not.
Imitation of news format	Fake news takes the form of true news and refers to freshly developing, time-critical events or hot topics in order to attract the audience's attention.
The importance of the topic for a certain segment of the society	The chosen topic addresses the interests and values of a specific segment of the audience to produce a viral impact on the message.
The velocity of fake news	Fake news, viral or not, has a short lifespan.
Intense emotional connotation of the message and emotional response of the audience	News makers often communicate their thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and sentiments through fake news, making it more shareable and popular.
Simplified language and style of the fake news	The material is written in easy language. The presenting manner for the event is informal. The story's title is engaging and appropriately describes its content. Persuasion strategies may include several repetitions.
Conscious intent to deceive or mislead the audience	Fake news is manufactured and circulated for selfish reasons, since the author seeks to fool the audience.
Variability of the authenticity of the news	All fake news has one thing in common: the content is false, which varies depending on the author's aims. They typically showcase wholly or partially created content based on true facts (there is a reference to an event or famous persons).
Non-mandatory characteristics of the content of fake news	
Fake news tends to be viral	The primary purpose of any fake news is to become viral and generate a lot of reactions (views, likes, reposts, etc.). However, this feature is not always present in fake news, as not all items may become popular and gain widespread attention.
Mobilizing cognitive bias	Fake news may exploit customers' innate cognitive biases. It leads to several informal beliefs that stymie critical thinking, as well as systematic aspects in the architecture of the sources and channels via which fake news travels, creating hurdles to critical thinking and active inquiry.
Presence of photos, videos, and other multimedia materials in fake news	Fake news has also been defined as the alteration of real photographs or videos to create a misleading narrative.
Presence of sensational headline of fake news	Fake news headlines are typically inaccurate and outrageous, with exaggeration, sensationalism, and even violence as prevalent themes. However, this feature is not required because headlines can have a neutral tone.

4. Conclusions

The problem of fake news remains relevant and continues to spark discussions about its definition, features, and characteristics. The authors of this research have attempted to contribute to the analysis of fake news. We have identified the crucial characteristics of fake news, which might be beneficial for media experts and professional journalists. It is vital for them to be capable of identifying fake news, as legacy media still act as gatekeepers in the current media space by making decisions about which stories are featured or published. Moreover, understanding fake news in a more profound way is important for comprehending the consequences and effects of the post-truth era. In this context, the position of fact is changing, as subjective information that aligns with personal beliefs plays a more critical role. This shift leads to increased polarization of opinions and fragmentation of the mass media landscape, which, in turn, facilitates the spread of fake news.

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