A Working Definition of Fake News

Subjects: Sociology

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Current literature on fake news is rather abundant and mainly focused on history, variety, and types, rather than processes. This review draws on current literature to build a working definition of fake news focused on its present relevance to journalism and political communication contemporary debate, distinguishing it from non-pertinent conceptual varieties and contributing to a much-needed clarification on the subject. We performed a qualitative analysis of the literature published between 2016 and 2020. Data were extracted from Web of Science and Scopus. We define fake news as a type of online disinformation with misleading and/or false statements that may or may not be associated with real events, intentionally designed to mislead and/or manipulate a specific or imagined public through the appearance of a news format with an opportunistic structure (title, image, content) to attract the reader's attention in order to obtain more clicks and shares and, therefore, greater advertising revenue and/or ideological gain.

fake news   disinformation   post-truth

The post-truth era (as the value of truth has become less relevant from a sociopolitical point of view) has given rise to a series of collective and equivalent concepts, with overlapping and similar meanings that share an extensive semantic field. "Misinformation" and "disinformation" [1], "fake news" [2][3], "post-truth" [4], "bullshit" [5][6][7], "information pollution" [8], or "information disorder" [9][10] are some of the concepts that—within the scope of contemporary debate in the field of journalism and political communication—seek to define the types, elements, and different phases of false information. In fact, this mixture of discursive genres, launched by the literature, has promoted a semantic confusion that makes the study of the topic and the identification, detection, and fight against fake news itself difficult. This extension of the semantic field made these concepts, especially the term fake news, more equivocal, non-empirical, and the target of opinions and arguments. It is the definition of the concept of "fake news" that has generated greater discussion among journalists and the academic community. In fact, the concepts "information pollution" and "information disorder" emerged with the aim of finding a comprehensive term, such as a hypernym, that would combine the various approaches of a fragmented media ecosystem [8][10][11].

Thus, several authors have rejected the validity and use of the term fake news because it has an "unstable" and "absurd" meaning [12] that is overloaded and polysemic, with a strong political connotation to delegitimize the media [13]. A better approach is to use more comprehensive and not so complex terms. A group of experts from the European Commission, precisely because of its polysemic nature, chose to use the term disinformation instead of "fake news" [14]; Meel and Vishwakarma [8] opted for the terminology "information pollution", while Wardle and Derakhshan [10] opted for "information disorder" and Kapantai et al. [11] preferred the use of the terminology "false information".

However, for other authors, the concept of fake news continues to deserve to be used, even if the complexity of its meaning is recognized and a common definition is incessantly sought, albeit without great success [2][6][15][16][17][18][19][20]. With the popularity that the term has reached, several academics have focused on the topic, namely with attempts to create a univocal definition. These exercises increased its semantic field, for example, considering satirical and parody news, propaganda, or publicity as types of fake news [3].

Therefore, the main objective of this review is to propose a working definition of fake news, making the concept clear and univocal, eliminating its association with other meanings and contexts that made it generic and polysemic. Aware of the complexity of the concept, by the discursive forms it presents not only as a label used by political actors to criticize the media and journalists, but also in the form of genre [21], we intend to find an operative definition appropriate for media studies based on the interpretation of three strongly contested dimensions: (1) creator/producer intent; (2) the degree of falsity of the content, and (3) the format of presentation of fake news. We aim to achieve a focused and narrow definition that excludes several categories (bullshit, advertising, jokes, inaccurate reports, bad journalism, satirical news) to which its meaning is associated, but also a definition that justifies their exclusion. However, the academic debate around the definition of fake news goes far beyond this categorization into types or genres and would benefit from being refocused through a vision that considers these processes.

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