

The anatomy of fake news: Definitions, differentiations, consequences, and spread

Justin Harrison

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The Anatomy of Fake News: Definitions, Differentiations, Consequences, and Spread

Abstract

As the growth and spread of inaccurate information has emerged within western societies in recent years, showing no abatement, the validity and effectiveness of our democratic institutions and processes, and civil society generally, have increasingly been called into question. Accordingly, it has become more essential than ever to properly identify the pernicious aspects of this information spread. As a starting point for developing a shared approach to addressing the issue, this present study seeks to establish the nature of academic publishing's treatment of "fake news." An interdisciplinary review of the relevant peer-reviewed literature, specifically as it relates to the definition, consequences, and spread of fake news, was undertaken. Through critical evaluation and synthesis of the literature within a content analysis methodology, this study identifies a lack of consensus on a definition of fake news, notes the deep and harmful impacts to many crucial aspects of social and democratic health as highlighted in the literature, and surfaces the research's unanimous conclusion that a virile media ecosystem enables its spread.

Introduction

Society has watched in horror as the spread of various forms of inaccurate information has emerged within western societies (Langin 2018), showing no abatement, calling into question the validity and effectiveness of our democratic institutions, processes, and civil society. Now it has become imperative to properly identify the nature of the pernicious aspects of this information spread. As a starting point for developing a shared approach to addressing the issue, this present study seeks to establish the nature of academic publishing's treatment of "fake news." In particular, there is the risk that the very notion of "fake news" exists only in an undefined, vague way, with no shared understanding of its meaning as an expression. In addition to the formlessness of the expression's meaning, scholarly focus is also concerned with the spread of fake news, and the consequences that this has had within society.

Accordingly, an interdisciplinary review of the relevant peer-reviewed literature, specifically as it relates to fake news' definition, consequences, and spread, was undertaken. Through critical evaluation and synthesis of the literature, applying a content analysis methodology, I identify a lack of consensus on a definition of fake news, note the deep and harmful impacts to many crucial aspects of social and democratic health as highlighted in the literature, and surface the research's unanimous conclusion that a virile media ecosystem enables its spread. Finally, I propose research propositions to guide future research in this area.

Problem

There is an ever-growing concern amongst policy makers, businesses, educators, and academic researchers over the spread and impact of fake news (Lazer et al.2018). With online misinformation and disinformation spreading, and the imprecise term “fake news” being bandied about as a sort of catch-all descriptor, society’s very ability to know what is real, what is accurate, is under threat, shaking the very foundations of fact-based, democratic thought. Given the pervasive use of fake news as a term, it is essential that we identify and agree upon a meaning before we can begin to properly address it.

However, “fake news” is a very elastic term, used in different contexts to mean different things. As Claire Wardle notes (2020, para. 3), the phrase “fake news” is “a woefully inadequate phrase. For one, much of the content being debated isn’t actually fake, but instead used out of context or manipulated. Further, as has been pointed out, “[t]here is no single and unambiguous definition of fake news: literature on the subject offers various perspectives on the phenomenon and emphasizes its different aspects, pointing to its complexity and broad impact” (Rosińska 2021, 2); or, as other fake news scholars have noted, “terminology matters, and uses of these key terms can lead to conflation that hinders a nuanced understanding of the specific issues at stake” (Gibbons and Carson 2022, 233).

Without a precise definition of fake news, then, no clear understanding of the issue is possible, and no coordinated solution likely. This lack of consistent definition(s) presents a myriad of challenges for various stakeholders. For instance, this situation hinders scholars who study political discourse, technology platforms that aim to address the issue, journalists acting as guardians of reliable information, governments enforcing anti-fake news legislation, and policymakers and civil society participants who strive to address global issues such as racism, migration, and gender discrimination, all of which are particularly susceptible to misinformation and disinformation. As society looks to evidence-based decision making, the spread of “fake news,” in all its related manifestations, risks diverting resources and attention away from possible solutions.

Purpose

The purpose of this present study is threefold. By applying a content analysis to identify and analyze key themes emerging from peer reviewed literature, it seeks to identify and clarify: how the academic literature defines “fake news” as a term; what this literature recognizes as the consequences of fake news; and what the causes are of its spread. Ultimately, it is hoped that by establishing a common and shared understanding of these issues, this paper will contribute data towards addressing these concerns in a unified way.

Growth in Fake News Scholarship

“Fake news” as a term or phrase has indeed been studied extensively in the academy in recent years, with a marked explosion of published research since Donald Trump announced his campaign for US President in June of 2015. As a contextual demonstrate of this substantial growth in academic research and publishing, a date-limited article search was undertaken for comparison of before and after this announcement (Table 1), using 2015 and before as one set of results, against 2016-2023 as the other. Three databases were used: Academic Search Complete (ASC), Web of Science (WoS), and Google Scholar. Due to the design and functionality of each of these three different databases, different metadata fields were used in each of the three database searches, with a precise one-to-one comparison thus impossible: ASC has subject indexing and a peer review filter; WoS has Title and “article” filter; and Google Scholar has title search and “about” as the number of listed results. The search term “fake news” (in quotation marks) was used.

Table 1: Database Search String Comparison

ASC (SU: “fake news”):	WoS (TS=“fake news”):	Google Scholar (“fake news” in title):
2008-2015: Total: 17 Peer review: 1	2005-2015: Total: 20 “Article”: 15	2008 – 2015: “about 148”
2016-2023: Total: 2,725 Peer review: 1,338	2016-2023: Total: 2,771 “Article”: 2,315	2016 – 2023: “about 19,700”

Figure 1: The number of articles with “fake news” as an indexed subject term was compared in order to capture before and after June 15, 2015

As we see, the exact phrase “fake news” showed up in the scholarly literature after 2015 to a much greater amount, suggesting this precise phrase was in circulation significantly more in scholarship than previously. Further, as indicated by this phrase showing up in only indexed or title fields, this specific phrase was heavily used as a point of scholarly focus.

Consequences and spread of fake news

In addition to how “fake news” is defined in the academic literature, this present study is also particularly concerned with how this literature identifies the consequences and the spread of fake news. These two additional variables beyond the definition, of fake news’ consequences and of its spread, became key questions of the study after user experience data from the University of Victoria Libraries’ Fake News Subject Guide (Harrison, 2023) was examined. From the guide’s fourteen subtopic pages, the pages entitled Consequences of Fake News and How Fake News Spreads were viewed significantly more than the guide’s other twelve pages (which, for context, include titles such as How to Spot Fake News, Tips for Avoiding Fake News, and Fact Checking Fake News). Accordingly, based on this significant quantifiable user experience data, it was deemed essential to use these themes of fake news’ consequences and spread to probe further in a content analysis of the peer reviewed literature relating to fake news.

Literature Review

Turning now to established literature that has looked at the wider landscape of published scholarship related to fake news, I note several studies that have contributed in various ways to a wider scope on various angles of the topic. While most academic literature on fake news understandably takes a specific approach to the topic, whether discipline-based, methodological, thematic, or quantitative occurrences,

some researchers have undertaken systematic and other wide-ranging reviews. However, none has analyzed the literature to identify the incongruity of definition, along with the consequences and spread, of fake news.

As a point of insight into the field's lack of a shared understanding of how to study its concerns, Wardle (2018) argues for the need of smarter definitions involving the information landscape and to agree on shared terminology within the context of the "obsession with the phrase 'fake news'" (p. 951). She posits that it is unhelpful as a term because it is too limiting in its precise meaning and, further, distracts from the term's appropriation by political elites for use against those attempting to hold them to account (p. 951). Consequently, she puts forward the construct of "information disorder" to create a framework within which to study the "information ecosystem" (p. 952), which includes seven distinct categories that constitute information disorder. However, the "obsession" Wardle warns against has not abated since the publication of her article, and the impulse behind using "fake news" in various ways and the attendant need to agree on a shared definition, continues.

Tandoc et al. (2018) have made a great contribution towards attempting to define fake news, and serves as a foundational work towards this end. Their article provides results of a review of how 34 previous studies defined "fake news" between 2003 and 2017. The authors found six ways the previous literature had defined and "operationalized" (p. 5) the phrase: satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, propaganda, and advertising. Tandoc et al. suggest that fake news "hides under a veneer of legitimacy as it take on some form of credibility by trying to appear like real news" (p. 11). However, as we shall see, the results of the present study surface articles that incorporate definitions that do not align with any attempt to appear as news.

Shueb et al. (2021) also mapped trends in the fake news field of scholarly publishing, in particular the country collaboration of authorship, disciplines, and funding agencies that are tied to the growth of publications in this field. This study serves to fruitfully expand our knowledge of how the literature is grappling with understanding how scholars are investigating fake news, and further indicates the vastness of the problem of locating a shared definition. Clearly scholars recognize the need to pin down a common knowledge and language around fake news if we are to effectively address it.

Bryanov and Vziatyshva (2021) provide a useful scoping review of an analysis of 26 scholarly articles seeking to identify predictors of individuals' belief in misinformation. They find that people's susceptibility to fake news, or misinformation (the authors use the words interchangeably), is based on personal and cognitive styles and of information literacy levels. Their study provides a solid foundation in discussing how and why individuals fall for fake news, suggesting a need to focus on information literacy as a skill to develop, bolstered by educational interventions at key moments. While valuable as a foundational contribution in our understanding of fake news susceptibility and judgement when exposed to it, this study does not address the definition concern "fake news" inherently provokes.

Thompson et al. (2022) also provide the results of a systematic review as relates to fake news detection. Their article provides the results of a meta-analysis of 125 studies which aggregates their results quantitatively into insights related to addressing online fake news detection. The authors focus on identifying trends in deep learning, machine learning, and ensemble-based fake news detection that other scholars have applied to detect fake news. Again, while valuable in expanding our knowledge of which technologies are being applied to combat fake news, this study leaves issues like definition, consequences, and spread outside of its focus.

On a larger scale, Meneses Silva et al. (2021) seek to identify and map the research on technologies applied to address fake news. In their study, the authors undertake a systematic review of the scientific

and engineering literature to surface which technologies and algorithms have been used to study and detect fake news. While providing a wide mapping of the landscape of this topic, this systematic review was limited to examining which technologies have been applied to combat fake news.

Di Domenico et al. (2021) further our overall understanding of fake news in providing a systematic examination of fake news as it relates to social media and marketing. The authors indeed identified many of the difficulties of identifying a shared definition of fake news, noting that many definitions and much of the terminology in the literature are used interchangeably such as “misinformation,” disinformation, and often simply relate to a basket of misleading content (p. 332).

Aïmeur et al. (2023) also train their fake news focus specifically on social media, as they undertake an extensive review of literature. The authors, in seeking to identify the root causes and review automated detection methods of fake news in social media networks, provide a very useful discussion on the various definitions of fake news, in which they provide two major categories based on the studies they examined: intention to deceive and content-based. The authors surface many of the words used interchangeably in the literature, such as clickbait, hoax, rumor, satire, propaganda, framing, and conspiracy theories (p. 8) to further highlight the challenges with developing a shared definition. While not examining directly the consequences of fake news, this article does discuss the role “bots” play in spreading fake news over social media, and further discusses several detection techniques.

Perhaps most salient to the present study, Wu et al. (2002) contribute results of an extensive literature review and synthesis toward identifying the antecedents of fake news on the internet, and also looks at its consequences. The authors review 202 articles to find that many definitions exist. In fact, in their search string methodology they incorporated many other words often used interchangeably with “fake news” in the title (such as misinformation OR disinformation OR rumour), which likely provided a large data set but would have brought in articles not indexed as “fake news” the way this current study has.

In their study, Rapti et al. (2022) seek to encapsulate a definition and typology of fake news, as they seek to identify the emergent properties and entities involved in fake news incidents. They find that the term “fake news” is not effectively defined and recognize that it is often used interchangeably with several other words, including hoax and clickbait (p. 3). In the end, they assert “fake news” is an umbrella term for various kinds of disinformation intending to mislead online audiences, further confirming a need to agree upon a shared definition.

Lastly, Zhang and Ghorbani (2020) have provided a useful overview of online fake news in their study, which seeks to understand the best ways to address fake news, including its detection. Towards these ends, Zhang and Ghorbani summarize extant studies in order to establish an effective detection system for fake news. They recognize the variety of topics in the literature make this a difficult prospect, given the range of objectives, methodologies, and domains of the literature (p. 3). However, the authors, in their review of fake news detection, do point to the importance of understanding the fake news phenomenon, especially as it relates to the online environment, and discuss how it is created and spread.

While these studies serve to effectively provide instructive entrees into the landscape of fake news literature, they do not set out to identify or quantify the shared understanding of fake news’ definition as a baseline towards building an understanding of fake news’ impact or spread. The following study will provide results from a dataset of 100 peer reviewed articles that in some fashion possess a definition of fake news, and mention cause, spread, and/or consequences.

Research questions

As mentioned above, user experience data from a popular academic library research guide on Fake News was collected, analyzed, and used to inform the research questions and the coding framework of a content analysis research project. As such, I was interested in the following research questions:

- How is “fake news” defined in the peer reviewed literature?
- Whether any terms were used other than or interchangeably with “fake news”
- What are the consequences of fake news as identified by the peer reviewed literature?
- What does the peer reviewed literature identify as the cause of its spread?
- What is the frequency of instances in which no definition is used in the literature?
- Is there a disciplinary variation to these questions?

Content analysis

Using the data from the Fake News Subject Guide as an insight into what areas of fake news that researchers are concerned with, a content analysis of 100 academic articles was undertaken. This analysis sought to investigate the presence, meanings, and relationships of certain words, themes, or concepts related to fake news. Content analysis is a broadly applied qualitative and quantitative research technique (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) that comprises three approaches: conventional, targeted or summarizing. For the purposes of this fake news content analysis, the codes and categories were created after reading the study’s articles. As such, preliminary analytic categories were identified from the existing peer-reviewed literature, before being subjected to a coding procedure, using what Mayring (2014) calls an inductive content analysis, which in this case involved summarizing thematic categories of information retrieved from the reviewed articles.

Following Schreier (2019), this fake news content analysis followed the following steps:

1. Deciding the research questions and selecting material:

Data collection: articles were selected using a Boolean search with the following search string:

“fake news” AND (cause* OR spread OR consequen*)

Two advanced, scholarly-indexed academic literature databases were used, which, when combined, provided a substantial corpus of articles to secure more than sufficient data for the study:

- EBSCO Academic Search Complete with “fake news” as an indexed Subject term combined with terms* in the Abstract field;
- and Web of Science (“fake news” in Title field and additional terms* in Topic field)

A total of 100 peer reviewed articles were selected for analysis based on metadata relevance to the search terms and likely relevance to research questions.

2. Creating a preliminary coding frame:

Preliminary analytic categories of codes and classification were determined by the research questions before being subjected to textual analysis and coding to establish thematic categories using NVIVO. A pdf of each article was uploaded into NVIVO for coding purposes. The following key codes were created after :

- Definitions of fake news

- Articles with no definition of fake news
 - Terms used interchangeably with fake news
 - Consequences of fake news
 - How fake news spreads
 - Articles by academic discipline
 - Authors by country affiliation
 - Articles published before or after Donald Trump’s candidacy
 - Proposed solutions to address issue of fake news
3. Piloting and modifying the coding frame:
The above codes served the questions well and were not modified.
 4. Initial coding was undertaken:
Each of the 100 articles were coded, as applicable. In some instances, articles did not have content suitable for every code, and indeed necessarily so. For instance, in the case of coding, a definition of fake news meant the article would not be coded as an article with no definition. In some other cases, where there were multiple words used instead of or alongside “fake news”, multiple coding references were made for the same code.

Select Project Items

Automatically select subfolders Automatically select descendant codes

Name	Nickname	Created	Modified
Before June 16, 2015		2023-02-17 11:34 AM	2023-02-17 11:34 AM
Consequences of fake news	Reduced trust of	2023-02-17 12:51 PM	2024-03-08 5:29 PM
Causing financial harm		2024-03-08 5:28 PM	2024-03-08 5:28 PM
Distorted public debate and reduced ability to		2024-03-08 5:27 PM	2024-03-08 5:27 PM
Increased social fragmentation		2024-03-08 5:28 PM	2024-03-08 5:28 PM
Other		2024-03-08 5:28 PM	2024-03-08 5:28 PM
Reduced integrity of democratic norms proce		2024-03-08 5:27 PM	2024-03-08 5:27 PM
Country of origin of author or publisher affiliati		2023-02-17 11:35 AM	2024-03-08 5:06 PM
Disinformation		2023-01-17 3:28 PM	2023-04-14 1:38 PM
Fake News Definition		2024-03-08 5:12 PM	2024-03-08 5:12 PM
Genre		2024-03-08 5:12 PM	2024-03-08 5:12 PM
No definition		2024-03-08 5:13 PM	2024-03-08 5:13 PM
Smear		2024-03-08 5:12 PM	2024-03-08 5:13 PM
Unhelpful		2024-03-08 5:13 PM	2024-03-08 5:13 PM
How fake news spreads		2023-02-17 12:51 PM	2024-03-08 5:23 PM
left political bias		2023-02-17 11:31 AM	2023-02-17 11:31 AM
Method		2023-05-11 11:35 AM	2024-03-08 5:07 PM
Misinformation		2023-01-17 3:28 PM	2023-04-14 1:38 PM
On or after June 16, 2015		2023-02-17 11:34 AM	2024-03-08 5:01 PM
Other word(s)		2023-02-17 12:19 PM	2023-06-12 3:07 PM
Political		2024-03-08 5:14 PM	2024-03-08 5:14 PM
Related to accuracy		2024-03-08 5:14 PM	2024-03-08 5:14 PM
Related to larger ecosystem		2024-03-08 5:15 PM	2024-03-08 5:15 PM
Related to News		2024-03-08 5:14 PM	2024-03-08 5:14 PM
right political bias		2023-02-17 11:32 AM	2024-03-08 5:18 PM
role of libraries		2023-05-23 11:50 AM	2023-06-08 1:56 PM
Solutions to fake news		2023-02-17 2:36 PM	2024-03-08 5:20 PM

Filter Clear Filter

Select item from nickname Select

Select All Clear OK Cancel

Figure 2: The initial NVIVO Codes used to thematically organize by category the main themes and sub-themes to serve the research questions of the study.

Results

To begin with, the articles were drawn from a variety of academic disciplines (figure 2), demonstrating the wide-spread concern of the phenomenon of fake news. While the large percentage of articles from Media Studies and Library and Information Studies (LIS) literature might be expected, of note to this author is the large number of articles from the Business/Management disciplines. Discipline was identified initially by academic department at time of publication of contact author. In cases where that was not an adequate measure, the discipline of the contact author's highest degree was used for identification.

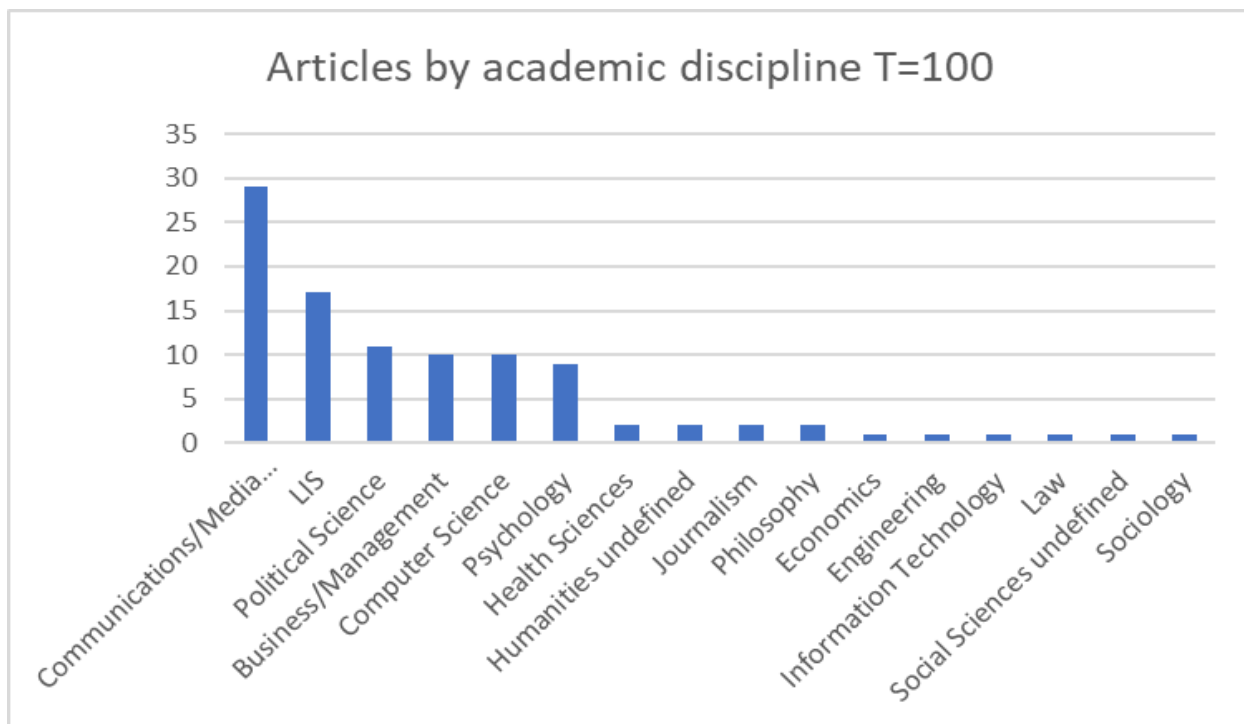


Figure 2: Articles by academic discipline.

Next, to gauge the geographic scope of these articles, country affiliation was analyzed (figure 3). Perhaps it's not surprising that the five highest ranked countries are ones where English is commonly spoken, possibly reflecting the matching of English-language search terms in academic journal databases (EBSCO Academic Search Complete and Web of Science) that carry predominantly English-language sources. The home country of the contact author's position was used to identify the source country. Perhaps given the concerns of fake news in the US during the period covered by this study, and/or perhaps due to the overwhelming portion of English-language publishing produced in the US, it is not a surprise that the largest share of articles reviewed were associated with the US.

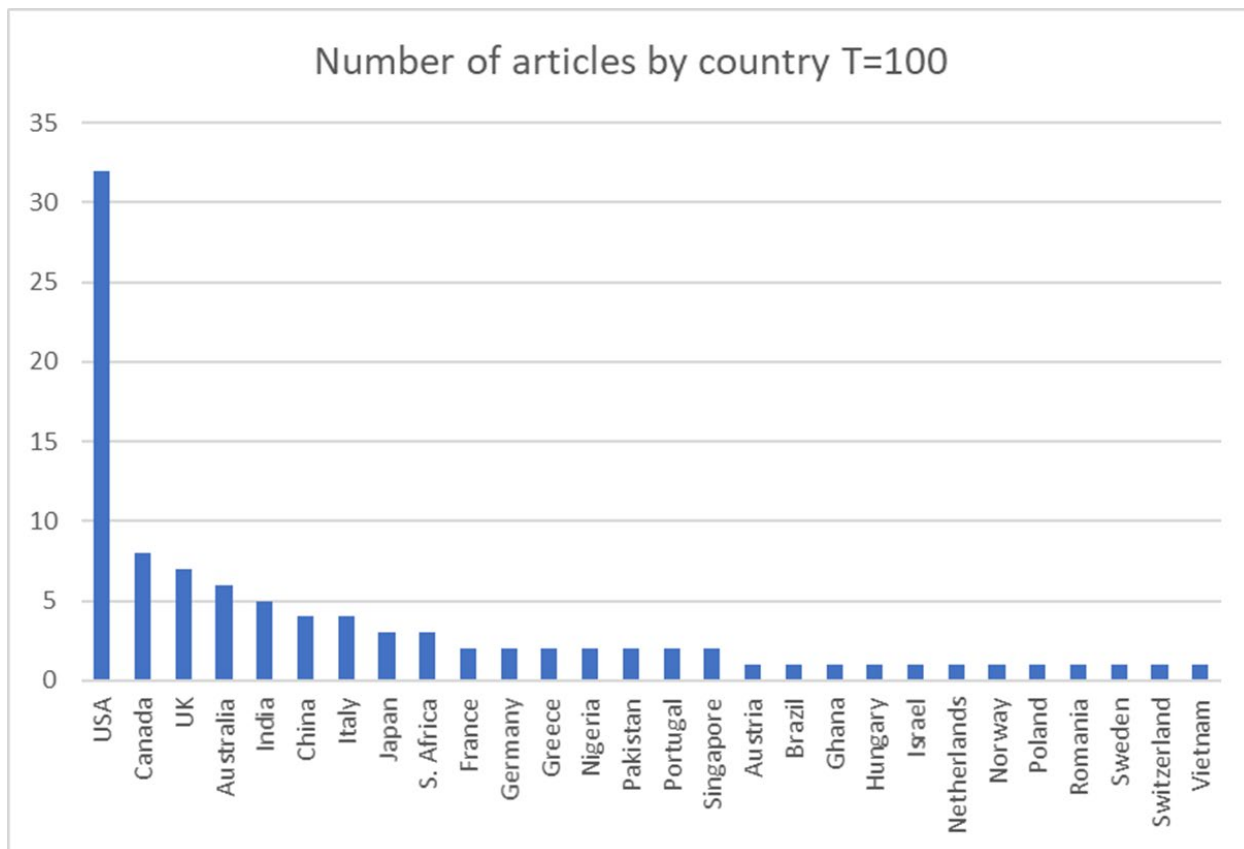


Figure 3: Analyzed articles by country of origin.

As mentioned above, it was of interest to this study to quantify the relationship between articles published before and after Donald Trump's 2015 candidacy announcement, working on the hypothesis that his presence on the national stage in America might have contributed to the growth in fake news research. Indeed, this hypothesis was supported by the results. No articles returned on the databases using the search strings described above were published prior to 2017 (figure 4). The most prolific publishing on this topic during the period covered by this study is between 2018-2022.

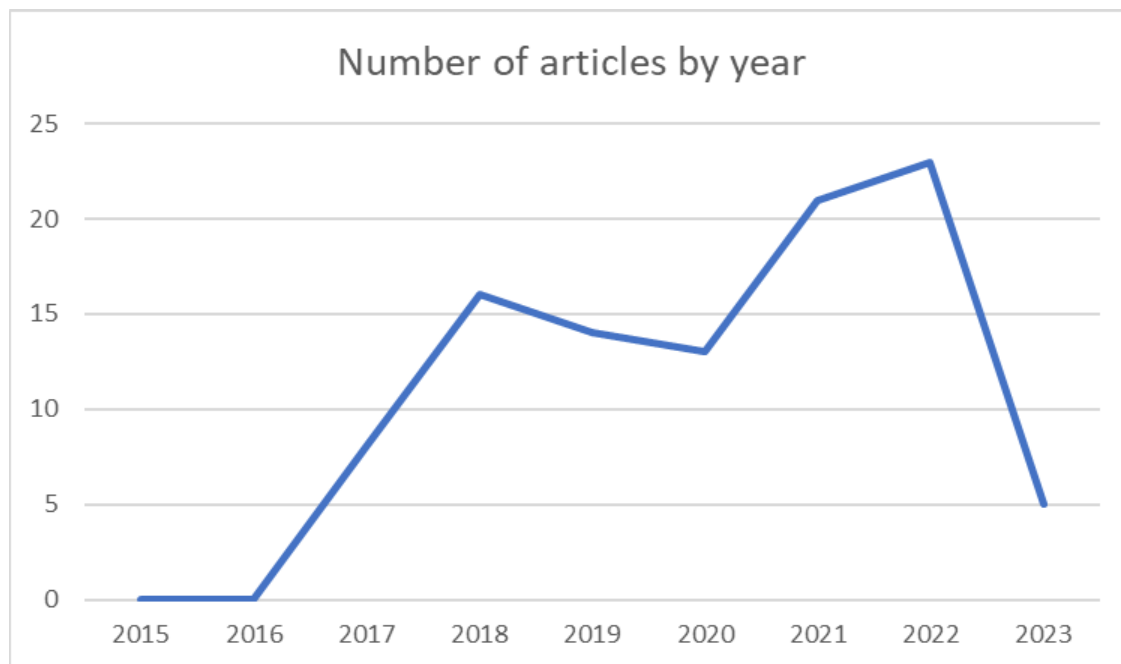


Figure 4: Articles in this study by year published. *Note: 2023 includes up to May 2023 only

Definitions of fake news

Broadly speaking, the definitions of fake news used in the reviewed articles fell into two main categories, with a third grouping refusing to be categorized. Building on the work of Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019), I have labeled these three categories as: genre, label (of contestation), and meaningless term (figure 5). In some cases, articles used more than one definition of fake news, which makes specificity a challenge, even as identifying specificity or lack thereof is, in some ways, the intention of the current study. To illustrate what is meant by these three categories, I provide an exemplar quote for each one, below.

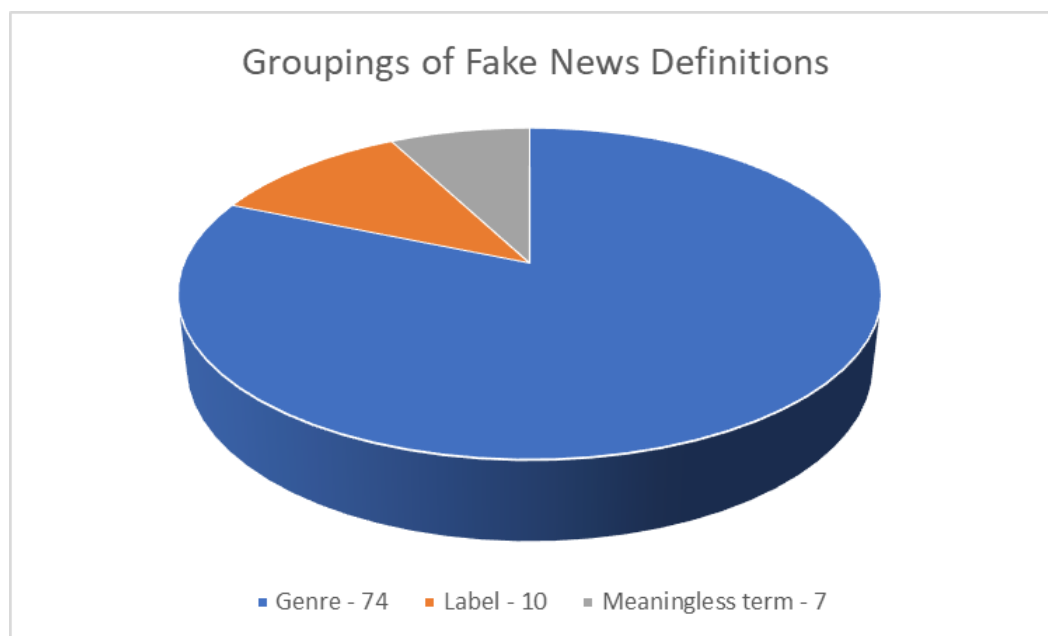


Figure 5: Articles grouped by definitions of fake news. Note: some articles used more than one definition.

This study defines as Genre a visible “thing” displaying false information, intentionally created to deceive. Often, though not always, this tangible “thing” is designed to look like journalism, whether simply a lie posted online, a tweet, or an image with false information. It is a product involving informational content, often tied to the traditional notion of news production/distribution, sometimes with an identifiable intent. Sometimes it is less concrete, merely fabricated or false information. Sometimes it is a thing related to news, sometimes just information that is false or misleading

Lazer et al. (2018, p. 1094) provide an example of such definition: fake news is “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent.” Similarly, another example of a definition of fake news as a recognizable, physical “thing” comes from Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 213): fake news is defined “to be news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers.” And Egelhofer and Lecheler echo notions of intent, deception, and journalism thusly: fake news is “the deliberate creation of pseudojournalistic disinformation” (2018, p. 98).

On the other hand, to be coded in the category of definition as Label of contestation, the definition recognizes fake news not as a tangible thing, but rather as a smear, or label, that one elite (usually a political elite) uses to attempt to establish their narrative superiority over that of an opponent’s (whether another political elite or a member of the news media elite). For instance, al-Rawi et al. expresses this understanding when describing fake news within their study: “[t]his study attempts to examine the way some active Twitter users connect certain figures, parties and sides with fake news, which can be regarded as a part of their political spamming activities that are meant to discredit their ideological opponents” (2018, p. 54). Egelhofer and Lecheler recognize “fake news” can have meanings both of genre and label, as they point out the term also serves as “the instrumentalization of the term to delegitimize news media” (2018, p. 98). So, rather than a physical or electronic message or “thing,” this category of definition revolves around it being a charge, a smear to discredit the legitimacy of opponents’ arguments, data, questions, and credibility.

Lastly, of the three categories, is the one which includes articles that consciously refuse to use a definition for fake news. This expresses a view that the term’s existence and use facilitates political elites’ use of it against opponents, and that through the term’s granularity obstructs the broader view (and problem) of a complex society-wide information and media landscape. As Wardle notes, “[t]he ecosystem of polluted information extends far beyond content that mimics ‘news’” (2018, p. 951). Instead, terms such as “infodemic,” “infobesity,” and “information disorder” are proffered. For instance, Chen et al. explicitly state that “we eschew the use of the terms ‘misinformation’ and ‘disinformation,’ and based on their common characteristics of being fake and misleading, we regard misinformation as an inclusive concept, where misinformation is a concept set and disinformation is a subset of misinformation” (2021, p. 1871).

Other words than “fake news”

In the effort to pin down a shared definition of “fake news” or identify the significance of the problem in doing so, it is instructive to note the kinds of words that were coded as other than “fake news” but were used interchangeably or in its place. They were grouped into four main categories, relating variously to: news; truth/accuracy; political norms/processes; a larger information ecosystem

These are words and/or expressions authors used in place of the phrase “fake news.” Even though the articles analyzed had fake news as an indexed term by subject, title, or keyword, sometimes authors used different wording in their text. In the interests of observing how widespread the interchangeable nature of the fake news concept is in its language, coded words are displayed. The first three categories are displayed in figure 6, and the fourth, being the largest, is displayed in figure 7.

Related to news	Related to the political	Related to larger information ecosystem
counterfeit news	political spamming	echo chambers
conspiracy news	information warfare	filter bubbles
false news	information (or Influence) Operations	information pollution
false balance	counter-information	digital pollution
biased narratives	propaganda	information disorder
fake reviews	political misinformation	infodemic
	strategic disinformation	infodemia
	conspiracy theories	

Figure 6: Words used instead of “Fake News” in the categories relating to news, the political realm, and the larger ecosystem.

The fourth category of words used other than “fake news” relates to truth and/or accuracy. This was the largest of the four groupings (figure 7). These words tended to include ones with connotations of an intent to mislead, a vague thing devoid of creation or intent, content instead of “news,” making it more

of a general communication thing regardless of medium, “false” instead of fake, preying with phoniness, or simply the mild.

Words used related to truth/accuracy (instead of Fake News)		
malinformation	fake content	false amplifiers
deceptive information	fabricated content	doxing
online deception	problematic content	scam
deliberate misleading	imposter content	hoax
distortion of authenticity	misleading content	fraud
counterknowledge	false data	spin
post-truth	false message	misperceptions
alternative facts	false context	bad information
manipulated content	false connection	

Figure 7: The largest category of alternative words had to do with information being untruthful or inaccurate.

No clear definition of fake news

Perhaps the single most notable finding of this study is that, out of the 100 peer reviewed articles with “fake news” forming at least part of the search string, 31% of the articles reviewed had no clear definition of “fake news” at all. The y axis in Figure 8 (below) displays the number of articles studied by discipline that had no definition, with the x axis listing the number of articles by discipline in this study.

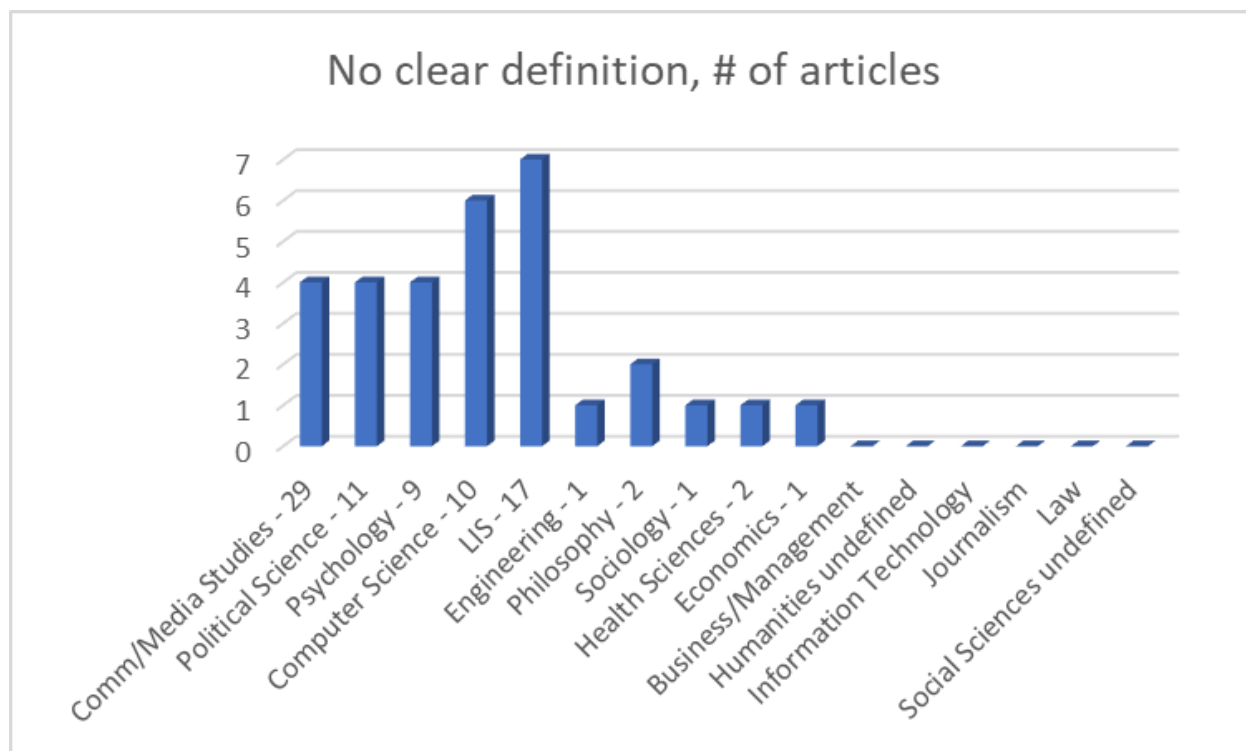


Figure 8: Articles with no clear definition of “fake news”

Likely these 31% of articles thought of fake news as a genre, rather than a label, based on the presumption that a clear articulation of it as a label would be required in that case. However, it is still surprising that so many authors did not feel the need to define the term, as if it was a given and understood by all.

Consequences of Fake News

Turning now to how the scholars of the analyzed articles interpreted the consequences of fake news, in the 100 articles analyzed for this study, there were 19 main themes that were mentioned or identified by the authors as being consequences of fake news. I further abstracted these 19 to 5 main ones, listed here, in figure 9.

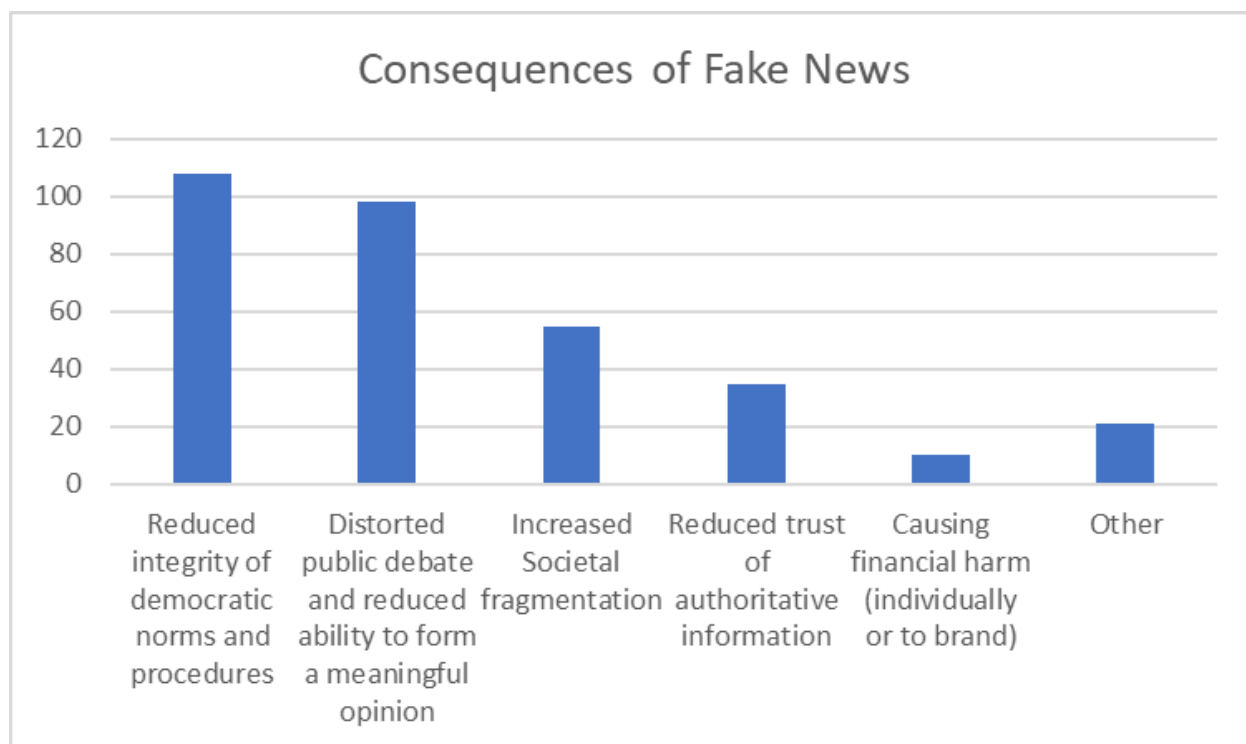


Figure 9: The consequences of fake news

As we can see, these scholars have identified deep and significant consequences of fake news, broadly speaking. These consequences tend to relate to a reduced effectiveness of credible institutions, including a reduction in efficacy of democratic norms, distinct and in addition to also an identified reduced trust in authoritative information. Additionally identified as consequences are issues relating to distorted public debate and ability to form an informed opinion, as well as an increase in societal fragmentation. Financial harm was also a significantly identified consequence of fake news.

How does fake news spread?

As mentioned above, how fake news spread was one of the key questions of this study. While there might not be agreement on how to define fake news or even what it is, there is complete agreement on how it spreads. The content analysis found that 100% of the articles identified the internet as the main method of the spread of fake news. Most all of the authors mentioned “social media” specifically, while some referenced specific platforms, and yet others mentioned computing power and speed of creation and sharing of information. Some, in the psychology literature, further identified motivations to believe fake news; and in some cases a political identity was also mentioned (in all cases conservative political supporters/agents). Yet, again, each and every article mentioned the internet as how fake news spread.

Suggested strategies to address fake news

The strategies to address fake news that were mentioned in the analysis fell into five main categories. In their variety, these categories reflect the diverse disciplinary nature of the articles studied. They range

from regulatory solutions, to educational and technological mediations, to reinforcing traditional reporting processes. These categories include:

- Platform regulation (by governments, self, users)
- Educational interventions
- Machine learning algorithms
- Strengthening the press industry broadly
- Fact checking

Conclusions

I sought to conduct an interdisciplinary review of the relevant peer-reviewed literature in the field of fake news, specifically as it relates to its definition, consequences, and spread. Through critical evaluation and synthesis of the literature, I identify a lack of consensus on a definition of fake news, deep and harmful impacts to many crucial aspects of social and democratic health, and a virile media ecosystem to enable its spread. Given what has been identified as the key consequences of fake news, the choice of terminology is crucial. The incorrect use of these important terms can result in confusion and prevent a detailed comprehension of the specific issues involved.

Given that this study concluded that there is no shared definition of the expression “fake news,” including no consensus on what fake news is (whether a thing, a rhetorical smear/signifier, or an unhelpful turn of phrase in a larger information landscape), more research and study is needed. In particular that which focuses on delineating various aspects of false information in distinct forms and media, as well as exploring and identifying new media and channels that can facilitate the spread of false information. Research requires a turn away from looking at “fake news” broadly, as an all-encompassing term, and turning instead to understanding the motives and impulses (political, technological, and social) that are driving the increasingly polluted information environment we find ourselves in.

Another approach to deal with the abstract or multivariate definition and understanding of what constitutes fake news might be for researchers to take an increasingly cross-disciplinary approach to investigating this area. There certainly has been no let up in social division, distrust of authoritative institutions, and poisonous political and civic discourse in recent years. Detaching the research away from specific instances and events explored in disparate disciplines and moving towards larger, shared trends and perspectives would be productive.

Yet it now remains particularly uncertain whether the academic literature will ever develop a shared understanding, let alone definition, of “fake news” in light of generative AI’s advancements, accompanied by an ever more powerful, fertile, and wide-ranging social media environment. Investigating how to think critically about information gathering, exposure, and dissemination in this new landscape might signal ways forward for exploration on how “fake news,” by whatever definition, extends into an uncertain future and how best we can attend to it.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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