

Redesigning Fake News: Is This Concept Still Fruitful?

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Abstract The notion of fake news is criticized for being conceptually superfluous (Habgood-Coote 2019). The reason is that we possess in our philosophical vocabulary other less controversial concepts that may already do its work. Despite everything, I claim that the notion of fake news still has its own utility. To see this, we must reduce the scope of fake news to keep it separated from other potential overlapping concepts, even at the cost of struggling a little bit with the ordinary sense of the term. In this regard my proposal is to consider fake news as news that significantly violates journalistic norms. Hence, I describe two sets of journalistic norms that regulate the process of production and publication of news, respectively. When one those sets (or both) is significantly infringed, the outcome is fake news. This view sets fake news apart from other pathologies of information, since it pays no attention to truth values of news and the intentions of news producers.

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0. Introduction

Habgood-Coote (2019, 2022) has recently maintained that the philosophical community would be better off refraining from using the term ‘fake news’ in its vocabulary. One of the reasons he brings in support of his argument is that ‘fake news’ denotes an unnecessary concept: we already have plenty of concepts – like disinformation, misinformation, bullshit etc. – for talking about deceit and miscommunication. Besides, those concepts may fare better than ‘fake news’ since they have clearer and stabler meanings in ordinary language and they are much less easily weaponized. For these reasons, and since meaning change is a slow and laborious process, Habgood-Coote concludes that we should simply drop the term ‘fake news’.

The aim of this paper is to redesign the term ‘fake news’ for academic usage. The idea is to preserve fake news conceptual necessity by saving it from contamination with other concepts. It is a stipulative project: it’s not trying to capture what we ordinarily mean by ‘fake news’ – it does not even have to accept that there is any such unified concept – but is instead trying to describe a notion that should address the challenge of conceptual necessity. To do this, I first recall the received view on fake news and its own limits (§ 1). Then I make a distinction between news and information (§ 2): my main thesis is that

news is an entity that responds to certain norms of journalism, and cannot be reduced solely to its semantic content (information) as the received view dictates. Norms of journalism are then extensively described in § 3. Afterwards, I put forth a notion of fake news as news that significantly violates norms of journalism (§ 4). This violation may concern two different sets of norms: production norms and publication norms. Notably, violations of the latter involve wrapping news content, so to speak, in a set of outward features that are at odds with journalistic style and rules. Fake news, then, identifies a concept that set itself apart from potential overlapping ones, thus avoiding Habgood-Coote's critique of conceptual necessity.

1. The prevailing view and its own limits

The first step is one of clarification. I believe that Habgood-Coote's diagnosis is justified by the way in which the concept of fake news has been defined so far. As Grundmann (2020) noticed, the vast majority of the accounts in the literature are hybrid views (HV). Hybrid accounts of fake news rest on two different assumptions¹. First of all, fake news is essentially propositional content that can be communicated in many different ways, such as articles, pictures and videos. For instance, a doctored picture that depicts a migrant vessel docking in a berth communicates a certain news content by means of an extralinguistic device. Secondly, fake news must satisfy two different conditions: a subjective one and an objective one (hence the label 'hybrid'). The first condition establishes that a producer of fake news must have deceiving intentions of some sort. Common candidates are the intention to deceive about news content, an indifference towards the truth while pretending to be truthful, or a disjunction of them². The second condition concerns propositional content of fake news, which must be literally false or at least capable of conveying something false via implicatures (or both). Every news item that satisfies both conditions is fake news for HV³.

However, if the notion of fake news is framed in this way Habgood-Coote has an easy game stating that we do not need such a concept. The reason is that we possess other concepts that already cover such cases. Consider the concept of disinformation. This notion usually refers to cases of misleading content spread with the intent to mislead the addressee (Fallis 2009). Disinformation already covers a lot of cases that would be covered by hybrid definitions of fake news. The same goes for accounts that drop the subjective condition: "misinformation" already applies to cases of dissemination of misleading content regardless of any deceiving intention (Fallis 2016). But what about other kinds of attitude? Mukerji (2018) has proposed to consider fake news as Frankfurtian bullshit in the form of news publication. Since disinformation and misinformation cannot account for the attitude of indifference towards the truth, we may reasonably end up accepting Mukerji's definition as the characterization of an independent concept. But having the form of a news publication does not add anything, per se, to the concept of bullshit. In other words, fake news here might at most be a subcategory of bullshit, but it cannot constitute a new conceptual category on its own. Once again, we do not need fake news to serve in this role.

¹ See e.g. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), Rini (2017), Dentith (2018), McIntyre (2018), Jaster and Lanius (2018, 2021), Kalsnes (2018), Watson (2018), Buckingham (2019), Anderau (2021).

² There are other candidates as well, like the intention to deceive the addressee about the status of news (see Anderau 2021). What matters here is the requirement over producers' intentions.

³ Alternatively, some fake news accounts reject one of the two conditions of hybrid views and focus on either the objective requirement or the subjective one (Gelfert 2018, 2021; Mukerji 2018, Croce and Piazza 2021). Nevertheless, they all share the first assumption on fake news as a kind of propositional content.

I argue that the first assumption of HV is inadequate and does not serve the purpose of defending fake news as a necessary concept. My plan is to criticize it and then to put forth a new theory of fake news that can justify its use in our philosophical vocabulary.

2. News is not the same as information

My claim is that the main issue with HV is that its notion of news is excessively minimalist. Whether it is fake or not, for the HV a news item boils down to its propositional content plus a handful of other properties taken from the dictionary. For instance, in developing their own definition of news Jaster and Lanius start from the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry:

In our account, we are employing the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s (2018) minimalist notion of “news” as “newly received or noteworthy information, especially about recent events” and, in a more specific usage, as a “broadcast or published report of news”. Accordingly, we use “news” to refer to any report of typically recent events that is broadcast by media or individuals to address a public (Jaster and Lanius 2021: 20).

News here is noteworthy information about recent events plus a bunch of other properties, such as a feature of attributability (the piece of information can be credited to the activity of a news source, whether it is an institution or an individual) and a naïve version of the minimum audience condition («to address a public»)⁴. But what is information from a philosophical perspective?

I do not want to dig in the complex notion of information here. Suffice it to say that whenever we talk about information transmitted through either linguistic or extralinguistic devices we are dealing with well-formed and meaningful data (Floridi 2010). That is, information is something that possesses a semantic content, and thus represents some part of the world as being a certain way (Fallis 2015). Theorists of information usually split into two camps. There are those who embrace a factive account of information (Dretske 1981; Floridi 2011; Dinneen and Brauner 2015) according to whom information must be necessarily veridical semantic content⁵. Factive theorists think that information has a structural relation with knowledge. Knowledge encapsulates veridicality because it encapsulates semantic information, which in turn encapsulates veridicality. Other theorists, instead, believe that information is non-factive: it can be as true as false since it is a purely semantic entity that bears no essential relation with truth (Scarantino & Piccinini 2010; Cevolani 2011; D'Alfonso 2011). As Simion (2023) notes, for the second group information here is almost the same as meaning: the headline “Pope Francis endorses Donald Trump” conveys the information that pope Francis actually endorses Donald Trump in virtue of the fact that it means that pope Francis endorses Donald Trump. Regarding news, authors that belong to HV have in part a similar position to that of non-factive theorists of information. News is like non-factive information in the sense that it is propositional content conveyed in many forms (such as articles, photos, videos) which can be either true or false. News does not cease to be such if it lacks only truth –

⁴ Actually, the stance of Jaster and Lanius on the matter is more complex since they treat news as reported (i.e. asserted) information. Nevertheless, their starting point is the idea that news is information, for to assert something there must be something that can be asserted to begin with: «in the contest of fake news, “information” [...] needs to refer to the communicative *content* of utterances» (Jaster and Lanius 2021: 36).

⁵ I use ‘veridical’ in the place of ‘true’ because strings or patterns of well-formed and meaningful data can constitute sentences in a natural language; however, they can also generate formulas, maps, diagrams, videos, or other semiotic constructs in a variety of physical codes. In these cases, ‘veridical’ is preferred over ‘true’ (Floridi 2010: 50).

just as false information remains information for non-factive accounts. But herein lies the problem. If news is analysed as a kind of information, whether under a factive or a non-factive interpretation, it follows that fake news is a kind of information too, since for HV fake news is a type of news. But now we face the consequences of conceptual necessity already presented in § 1, since there are many other concepts that already describe pathologies of information.

In my view, the key move is to give up the idea that news is fully reducible to some kind of information, which is at the root of the problem. In fact, I believe that this is an unduly minimalist conception of news which unfortunately gets validated by idiomatic uses of the term ‘news’ in ordinary conversations. For instance, sometimes we use sentences like “she has some news” or “you gave me good news” without thinking twice, thus legitimating the equivalence between news and reported information. But it is also true that here we are disputing the notion of news within a highly-specialized philosophical framework: we cannot settle for the naive interpretation conveyed by an idiomatic use. To see why we may discard the idea of news as non-factive information, we may test its validity through examples until we reach a point of no return.

Suppose that friend of yours texts you saying that she saw a terrible car accident along the street that passes in front of your house. Later that day, your local newscast transmits a detailed report on the same event that reaches an enormous amount of people and arouses clamour in your neighbourhood. Are we entitled to say that the piece of information reported by your acquaintance is the same thing as the newscast report? Most likely, our intuitions would suggest a negative answer. However, a hybrid account may hold that the issue here is just that the piece of information reported by your friend is told in private; unlike the newscast report, it does not count as news because it does not address the public. So the negative answer, they continue, is not driven by a rejection of the equivalence between news and non-factive information. It is just that the report of your friend could not reach a sufficient amount of people.

Let’s accept for the time being this reply for the sake of the argument, and go on by tweaking a little bit the example. Consider the same scenario except your friend communicates the fact via social media. She writes a public post on Facebook recounting the incident and offering more or less the same amount of information that she shared via text in the first scenario. The post is public and therefore it is available to a large audience. Now we ask ourselves the same question: is the piece of information reported by your acquaintance on social media the same thing as the newscast report? Again, my intuition tells me that a newscast report is qualitatively different from the Facebook post of your friend, even though I may not be able to spell out why at first. This time the hybrid account cannot appeal to some version of the minimum audience condition to justify my intuitions, since the Facebook post is there for everyone to read (provided that privacy restrictions are not in force). It could be argued that the difference lies in the format: the Facebook post does not have the news format as the newscast does. But what is the news format? Many hybrid accounts either adopt an ostensive definition – the news format is the format of articles, photos and videos published by news sources – or make it coincide with some version of the minimum audience condition. We have already discarded the latter with the last example, so we may test the ostensive definition. Let’s tweak again our example!

Imagine again the same initial scenario, but this time your friend buys a WordPress domain to create a temporary information website where she can publish and disseminate news relevant to her and her local community. Your friend is not very competent and is also hasty in gathering information, but she thinks that in the end the most important thing is to report the fact. On this occasion, then, she writes an article that reports what she saw of the car accident, including the testimony of some passers-by and police officers

who reached the location. She then uploads the article on the Facebook page of her website and so her report is both public and in the form of news article. Again, is this the same as the evening newscast report on the car accident? I doubt it, since it is not enough to imitate the appearance of a thing to be that thing. In the same way, I have the strong intuition that having the form of news does not necessarily make a piece of information news.

The essential difference that I want to stress is that information encapsulated in the newscast report seems to be something that underwent a certain process of regulation. Unlike the text/post/personal website of your friend, the newscast report is in part the outcome of an activity of selection and verification that follows the precise rules of an acknowledged human institution; and this is journalism. In its several expressions that range from national newspapers to independent blogs, journalism is the social institution that has the monopoly on the production and the presentation of news. Thus, a news item is not just a semantic entity. It is instead a sociological entity inasmuch as its existence depends to the observation of some *settled journalistic norms* that characterize its process of production and publication. There are at least two proofs of the existence of these norms. Firstly, journalists themselves acknowledge them as constitutive part of their institution. In their bestseller *The Elements of Journalism*, for instance, the two reporters Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel characterize journalism as a dynamic social institution and pinpoint a set of ten norms that every journalistic venture ought to observe⁶. Secondly, as readers we usually have strong background expectations towards journalistic products, so much that we are prone to reproach journalists if we assess that they fell short of them. These expectations point to the existence of some standards that has to be respected, otherwise there would have been no expectations from the outset. Therefore, a report of the car accident is news if and only if is produced and delivered to the public following the norms of journalism. Instead, the piece of information that I acquire from my acquaintance does not need to follow those rules in order to be such. But if information and news are different entities with the latter being something that responds to certain norms, then what is fake news? In order to answer this question, we must first say something more about norms of journalism.

3. Norms of journalism

My account is not the first to highlight the role of journalistic norms in the definition of fake news. The one put forth by Pepp, Michaelson and Sterken (2019) already addresses the potential relation between fake news and journalistic norms. The norms cited by them are the commitment to the interest of readers, a scrupulous verification of information, transparency about sources and conflicts of interest, independence from those covered and from sources, proportionality in the amount of coverage given to events relative to their likely significance, and historical and social contextualization and synthesis of information. What immediately stands out from this list of norms is the fact that they all operate upstream in the news cycle. We may call them norms of news production. Roughly, these norms are comparable to a list of good epistemic practices for journalists. They do not guarantee any degree of success; scrupulous verification may nevertheless lead reporters to a failure for other self-independent causes (e.g. their usually-reliable source was wrong). But they are valuable in themselves and, most importantly, they

⁶ The list of norms was not drawn up out of thin air. Kovach and Rosenstiel have joined a committee of other journalists which organized systematic examinations of journalists' views upon the matter by means of several public forums through the years (cfr. Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014).

represent a first round of check and filters that set news apart from simple information delivered by testimony or other individual sources.

However, norms that characterize the journalistic enterprise does not boil down to norms of news production alone. I maintain that there is also a whole range of rules that should regulate how the semantic content encapsulated in news – that is, their information – is finally presented to the reader. This set consists of what I call norms of *news publication*. As for standards of news production, norms of news publication ought to represent our background expectations for journalistic writing too, albeit at different level. But what are these norms? We might initially consider the well-known conversational maxims put forth by Grice (1989) as a starting model for norms of news publication. The reason is that (sentences of) news articles are usually expected to be adequately informative, true, relevant, perspicuous, unambiguous, brief and orderly as much as possible. Nevertheless, I believe that norms of news publication are not directly reducible to Gricean maxims. One reason is that, contrary to talk exchanges, information delivery accomplished by journalism does not take hold in a context of mutual adjustment, for news consumers do not have the possibility to challenge journalist's statements or to ask for clarifications. And since this element is common knowledge between producers and consumers, it gives rise to unordinary expectations for journalistic writing. On the part of news producers this means, for instance, that they are expected to make their intended implicata as accessible as possible, for there might be different but similarly plausible interpretations for what exactly a journalist conveys when making a statement. Notice that the same thing, to some extent, is taken into consideration in normal conversations too, but in the context of journalism it acquires much more importance. The reason, again, is that we bear different expectations from talk exchanges. Also due to the special position of authority with respect to information distribution, journalists are more responsible for how they convey what they want to get across than ordinary speakers, all other things being equal.

Another difference between Gricean maxims and norms of news publication is that some attitudes towards the former are not equally permissible when it comes to the latter. Overt violations of norms of news publication – what Grice would call “flouting a maxim” – are not always tolerated, especially with norms that resemble the maxim of Quality. That is why abuse of figurative language is often unusual for journalism and strikes the audience as alienating⁷. Furthermore, it seems that the profession of journalism gives place to two apparently divergent outcomes when it comes to covert violations of the maxim of Quality (lies). On one side, it seems that we, as readers, are more prone to assume that the maxim of Quality is satisfied in the context of journalism. The reason is that, in such a context, the observance of that maxim is almost never put in question; it is as if its assumption is satisfied by default. Indeed, when we refer to journalistic sources, like newspapers, we naturally take for granted that the author did not communicate something they believe to be false, given that journalism should always aim at the mark of truth. As a consequence, the observance of other maxims becomes a matter of *more urgency*: we especially expect journalist to not presuppose information unknown to the readers; to be perspicuous, unambiguous and brief; to not be redundant, maintaining a balance between headlines and articles in terms of amount of information, and so on. On the other hand, in the context of journalism news consumers find covert violations of the maxim of Quality more reproachable than when the same infringement occurs in talk exchanges: observance of the maxim of Quality is even more pressing. That is why we sanction more

⁷ Recall that Grice treats metaphors, hyperboles, ironic statements etc. as blatant violations of the maxim of Quality.

harshly journalistic mistakes, even accidental ones, and demand maximum professionalism from reporters.

I think that the reason behind this apparent irreconcilability of expectations – that is, expecting that observance of the maxim of Quality is at the same time less urgent and more urgent – is due to a difference in sets of journalistic norms which are taken into consideration each time. Expecting that the maxim of Quality is being strictly observed is probably something that pertains more to norms of news production. The scrupulous verification of information, already mentioned by Pepp et al. (2019), is a good example of that. That is, we somehow believe that a piece of news whose informative contribution was poorly verified should never appear in the column of the local newspaper to begin with. But, as long as it appears in that column, we take for granted that norms of news productions have been observed and that the author of the article is truthful. Then expectations towards norms of news publication kick in and, suddenly, observance of other maxims becomes more pressing. But this does not imply that observance of truthfulness was irrelevant: it was simply bound to a previous stage of journalistic activity⁸. Finally, another reason of diversity with Gricean maxims is due to the importance of style in journalistic writing. By ‘style’ I do not only mean the syntax, the grammatical elements and the overall sentence complexity of journalistic production. Rather, the label also includes the whole set of tacit rules and conventions that dictates how journalists should craft their works: from draft of appropriate headlines to organization of stories according to the ‘inverted pyramid’ scheme (substantial information first, then secondary one). These superficial features serve as hallmarks for the social category of journalists and establish another ground for our own expectations. Hence, we do not just expect journalists to observe norms that ensure an effective informative exchange, but we also expect journalistic headlines and articles to take a certain form. The set of journalistic norms of news publication is therefore broader than the one of Gricean maxims.

4. Fake news as violation of journalistic norms

I now define fake news as follows:

FN: news that significantly violates journalistic norms of production or publication, or both.

Two observations need to be made. Firstly, according to FN, fake news is conceptually separated from pathologies of information. In FN, there is no reference to content falsehood or producer attitudes. As we shall see, a true news item may still count as fake news in my account, in the event that it violates norms of journalism. Thus, fake news does not denote false or misleading information spread with deceiving or bullshitting intentions. That is because news, and so fake news, is more than just information. The advantage of FN is that it avoids Habgood-Coote’s charge of conceptual redundancy, since this definition of fake news points to a completely new phenomenon.

Secondly, there are many ways of violating norms of journalism. A news item can report that some alleged facts really occurred without supporting this claim with solid and reliable evidence. Unverified news item of this kind may eventually turn out to be true. But this

⁸ Other norms of news production may work in the same way. Consider the commitment to the interest of readers. This norm entails, among other things, a duty of selecting only news that might interest to the reader (=newsworthy). So when an event is not reported by news media outlets we automatically judge that it was none of our concern.

outcome does not save them from being classified as fake news, according to FN⁹. At the same time, reference to norms of news publication opens the door to new ways of falling short of news. Since these ways are rarely captured by existing account of fake news, I will elaborate more on this. Summarising what we said in § 3, there is a whole set of outward features of news that signals a possible violation of norms of publication. This set includes a sentence construction that leaves too much room to implicature indeterminacy; the use of eye-catching expressions, forward-referencing and other clickbaiting-like techniques; the presence of expressions that serve the purpose of sensationalism through appealing to emotions; an excessive length of the headline due to information abundance (often coupled with a redundant article that does not add any relevant information); the abuse of figurative language; and many other things.

Those just mentioned are all instances of violation of norms of news publication, and they fundamentally occur along two levels. They consist in either the implementation of certain pragmatic strategies or a failure to stick to the style of journalistic writing. Concerning pragmatics, consider a headline like this:

(1) Celine Dion stops here. Doctors said there was nothing more to do.

Suppose the author of (1) knew that Celine Dion is alive and she has indefinitely interrupted her career due to her health condition. Despite the fact that the explicit meaning of (1) is true – Celine Dion really cancelled her tour dates for medical issues – the way in which the fact is presented is potentially misleading: the combination of the two statements may implicitly suggest that Celine Dion is dead¹⁰. In my view, this is a case of fake news. News content of (1) is presented in such a way that it violates norms of news publication, which require not to make significant implicata that we do not want to convey easily accessible to consumers. It is important to note that my assessment does not depend on the truth-value of (1)'s implicatum. Consider another fictitious headline:

(2) Sputnik V, latest data on vaccine efficacy eventually uncovers the truth.

Imagine that the author of (2) knows that there was an ongoing debate on the efficacy of the vaccine Sputnik V, and that those latest data put an end on it. So the explicit meaning of (2) is true. However, (2) gives rise to a series of implicata that may be ordered on a continuum that goes from the strongest ones to the weakest ones in terms of their accessibility (1 = maximum accessibility; 4 = minimum accessibility):

(IMP_1) There was an unsettled debate over the efficacy of Sputnik V.

(IMP_2) Telling the truth on the matter took quite some time and effort.

(IMP_3) The latest data on Sputnik V are unexpected.

(IMP_4) There was an attempt to conceal the truth on Sputnik V's efficacy.

⁹ On cases of unverified news that accidentally turns out to be true, see Jaster and Lanius (2018) and the reply of Croce and Piazza (2021). My solution aligns with the one offered by Croce and Piazza, according to which news producers who do not think that their claims are supported by the evidence are fake news producers. My point is similar, even though I do not talk about mental states or intentions of producers, but only about violation of norms of journalism (which include scrupulous verification of information).

¹⁰ It is not just the combination of them. The fact that the second sentence ("Doctors said there was nothing more to do") is conventionally employed by journalists to talk about demise may well play a role. This is something that pertains to an ordinary encyclopedic enrichment of (1).

Suppose that each of these implicata is true and the titlist wrote (2) to convey (IMP_4) as the main implicatum of her headline. In this case, (2) still counts as fake news in my view. The reason is that it leaves too much room for implicature indeterminacy. Although (2)'s calculable implicata are true, including (IMP_4), the headline does not make it immediately accessible to the readers, leaving them the whole responsibility for the interpretative process. Thus, violation of norms of news publication does not necessarily entail falsehood of content, and we can have again cases of true fake news¹¹.

In addition to pragmatic strategies, a deviant journalistic style can bring about a violation of norms of news publication too. Consider the following headlines taken from an online sample of false news gathered by *BuzzFeed News* during 2016 US election campaign:

(3) BREAKING BOMBSHELL: NYPD Blows Whistle on New Hillary Emails: Money Laundering, Sex Crimes with Children, Child Exploitation, Pay to Play, Perjury (Silverman 2016b).

(4) WikiLeaks CONFIRMS Hillary Sold Weapons to ISIS... Then Drops Another BOMBSHELL! (Silverman 2016a).

The fact that both headlines contain false information does not interest us here. What I would like to point out is that (3) and (4) fall short of our expectations of journalistic writing for two opposite reasons. (3) presents a recurrent deviant stylistic feature of fake news; namely, the tendency to pack as much information as possible in the title at the cost of being chaotic and messy – which in turn determines a deviation from the perspicuity required to journalistic writing. To reach that goal, in fact, the author of (3) abused verb phrases and name entities to get across as many details as possible. Moreover, the author used capitalized words and eye-catching words ('bombshell') to grab the attention of the reader. They could give up packing some information in the title as in (3*), reserving the rest for the article:

(3*) New York Police Department blows the whistle on Hillary Clinton emails.

But (3*) does not permit to squeeze as much substance into the title as possible, and is also less appealing than (3). Both are competitively disadvantageous features for headlines published in a context in which there is a dearth of attention on the part of news consumers, like Internet and social media platforms¹². It is the other way round with (4). Leaving aside capital letters and eye-catching words, the main problem with (4) is the use of another clickbaiting strategy: forward-referencing. Forward-referencing involves the use of incomplete and vague phrases that serves the purpose of pushing the reader towards the landing site by exploiting an information gap (Loewenstein 1994). That is exactly the function of the phrase "then drops another bombshell" at the end of (4). Forward-referencing brings about a violation of journalistic norms of news publication

¹¹ Notice three things. First of all, I avoided on purpose any theory-laden explanation of how implicit meanings are worked out. Since I claimed that norms of news publication differ from Gricean maxims I chose not to adopt a Gricean account of implicatures. Secondly, focusing over different sets of norms yields different theoretical predictions. An account based solely on norms of news production cannot deem (1) as fake news, for instance. The reason is that we cannot verify compliance with norms of news production only from the analysis of the statements delivered to news consumers. Finally, I do not exclude other pragmatic strategies.

¹² The vast majority of links shared or commented in social networks are never clicked, according to some studies (Gabelkov et al. 2016, Wang et al. 2016).

inasmuch as it distorts the objective of headlines. Rather than being self-contained, autonomous texts that provide for a label or a summary of their connected articles (Dor 2003, Ifantidou 2009), forward-referencing headlines build a bridge between them and the article so that consumption of the latter becomes a necessary requirement for the cognitive processing of the former. While (3) entails an overabundance of information, (4) relies on the opposite mechanism.

5. Conclusion

The model of fake news that I have put forth so far purports to overcome the challenge of conceptual necessity posed by Habgood-Coote. On my account, fake news does not denote a flawed kind of information. Instead, it refers to ways of crafting news items that are at odds with our expectations towards norms of journalism. My aim in introducing this reformulation was to carry out a redesign of the term ‘fake news’ for academics. As every operation of this kind, it has its pros and cons.

I believe that the merit of this model is to establish a stricter intellectual division of labor among potentially overlapping concepts, thus saving fake news from the problem of conceptual necessity. By depriving fake news of reference to intentions and truth-values we can reduce its scope: fake news now refers to a tainted mode of news production and/or publication. This notion is now disentangled from both misinformation and disinformation, because false news must not be automatically categorized as fake news too (and vice versa). Instead, this further judgement hinges on the way in which that false news item is presented to the audience. If that false news item also violates norms of journalism to a great degree, then, and only then, we can label it as fake news. This is the case of (1), (3) and (4). Otherwise, it is simply a case of misinformation or disinformation. The immediate consequence of this maneuver is that we can spot fake news only on an individual basis, looking each time for evidence of a significant breach of journalistic norms. So, we cannot properly say that Pizzagate is fake news, for instance. The reason is that general assessments like these only pick propositional content of the so-called Pizzagate story and then brand it as false or misleading: it says nothing about how statements that purport to unfold the conspiracy behind the Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant have been produced or presented to the readers.

This final remark leads us directly to the potential flaw of my account, which is its discordance with common use of the term ‘fake news’. Conceiving fake news as news that violates norms of journalism forces us to admit the existence of true fake news and to resist the move of deeming every false news as fake news, as we already said. This feature can result in counterintuitive outcomes, like when I claim that (2) may be fake news too. The weirdness of such assessment depends on the fact that falseness and fake news are so tight in the ordinary, extra academic conception that seems almost impossible to have the latter without the former. What we might say, instead, is that fake news is at most *typically* false or misleading. The reason is that norms of journalism reflect good epistemic and communicative practices, and a significant violation of them facilitates poor outcomes of this type.

Nevertheless, the definition project I embarked on here was not a descriptive one. My attempt was not to formulate a definition of fake news that diligently tracks intuitions of ordinary speakers around the term. In contrast, I was stipulating a notion of fake news that might be useful for the purpose of separating it from other distinct phenomena. Sometimes the cost of being at odds with ordinary usage is an acceptable one for this kind of projects. After all, if we intend to save fake news from the trap of conceptual necessity, we must be willing to pay the price of a good compromise.

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