Chapter 9

“Ridiculous and Untrue – FAKE NEWS!”:
The Impact of Labeling Fake News

Anna Grazulis
Marist College, USA

Ryan Rogers
Butler University, USA

ABSTRACT

Beyond the spread of fake news, the term “fake news” has been used by people on social media and by people in the Trump administration to discredit reporting and show disagreement with the content of a story. This study offers a series of defining traits of fake news and a corresponding experiment testing its impact. Overall, this study shows that fake news, or at least labeling fake news can impact the gratifications people derive from news. Further, this study provides evidence that the impact of fake news might, in some cases, rely on whether or not the fake news complies with preexisting beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

From the early days of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and continuing to present day, many falsified news reports espousing legitimacy circulated the internet at a rapid pace, in part due to social media sites (Davies, 2016). These falsified news reports became widely known as “fake news.” Given the recent emergence of this term, little is known about the spread and effect of fake news on consumers. Some have claimed that fake news impacted the 2016 election results and is a threat to democracy, while others have claimed that the impact of fake news is overblown (Rajan, 2017; Sydell, 2016). This disparity itself merits exploration and the current study examines another fold to this phenomenon: the labeling of fake news. Beyond the spread of fake news, the term “fake news” has been used by people on social media and by people in the Trump administration “to discredit reporting… often offering no evidence to back up their disputes with those outlets’ stories” (Massie, 2017). The President himself has engaged in this behavior (Dorf & Tarrow, 2017). Consequently, this study will provide an experiment to identify how the labeling of fake news affects audiences.

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BACKGROUND OF FAKE NEWS

One definition says that fake news stories are “intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers “(Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213). Another article offered a broader definition, “false or misleading content — hoaxes, rumors, conspiracy theories, fabricated reports, click-bait headlines, and even satire” (Shao, Ciampaglia, Varol, Flammini, & Menczer, 2017). Clearly, those definitions are not in complete agreement though it has generally been agreed that fake news is deliberately misleading content (Dorf & Tarrow, 2017; Shao, et al., 2017). Despite the lack of a broad scholarly consensus on modern fake news, the concept of fake news might be related to other concepts. Indeed, it has shades of yellow journalism, propaganda, satirical news, and entertainment news reports but none of these definitions, for the reasons stated below, completely encompass fake news.

The concept of fake news might be traced in the U.S. to yellow journalism, or highly sensationalized journalism (Kolodny, 2016). In a feud to sell more papers, newspaper magnates Joseph Pulitzer of New York World and William Randolph Hearst of New York Journal printed stories that over-exaggerated and sensationalized Cuba’s struggle for independence in the late 1800s (Atkins, 2016). Some of the reports were false, but they nurtured anti-Spanish sentiments throughout the U.S.; and eventually resulted in unverified blame on the Spanish for the explosion of the U.S.S. Maine in Havana Harbor, which led to abundant American support during the Spanish-American War (Atkins, 2016). Notably, this account of the Spanish-American War has been challenged (Kolodny, 2016) but the relevance to fake news is still germane. This can be tied to the notion that fake news is frequently created to garner clicks and make money (Sydell, 2016), not unlike Randolph and Hearst. Indeed, the creation of fake news can be quite lucrative if a story attracts web traffic and the site sells ad space (Ohlheiser, 2016).

As such, there is a noteworthy overlap between fake news and yellow journalism but fake news may have more deliberate machinations than simply making money. As a result, propaganda is another concept that might illuminate fake news. Welch asserts, that there are many different definitions of propaganda but that, most agree that the purpose of propaganda is to influence opinion (Welch, 2003). According to Welch, propaganda serves an agenda, persuades and eliminates other options. Fake news articles may appear to have this goal but fake news “does not demand that the purveyors of fake news must always have an ideological agenda: fake news is not the same as propaganda” (Gelfert, 2018, p. 110).

Consequently, fake news may have traits of yellow journalism or propaganda but not necessarily. An investigation into fake news wherein a fake news creator in Los Angeles, Jestin Coler, was interviewed can help illuminate this topic further (Sydell, 2016). Coler divulged that “he got into fake news around 2013 to highlight the extremism of the white nationalist alt-right,” by publishing partly or fully fictionalized stories he could later denounce (Sydell, 2016). One of Coler’s most popular fake news stories, published to a fake news site designed to resemble a credible news site was titled, “FBI Agent Suspected In Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead in Apparent Murder-Suicide,” was shared on Facebook over half a million times, and received 1.6 million views on the fake news website (Sydell, 2016). This example from a purveyor of fake news more closely resembles satire, “a genre which necessarily sets out to critique and entertain (with the qualification that these purposes necessarily interact, although neither is wholly instrumental to the other)” (Declercq, 2018).

The notion of satirical news is worth exploring given Coler’s attempt to lampoon the far-right with fake stories. Manipulation of news for satire in not novel (Gelfert, 2018). While there are many satirists throughout history, The Onion is one modern example of this, designed to look like a legitimate newspaper it publishes satirical stories involving contemporary topics (Atkins, 2016). The Onion, with outlandish
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