Chapter 5

An Empirically Supported Taxonomy of Misinformation

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ABSTRACT

Fake news, which includes both disinformation and misinformation, has been a challenge for many countries in the last few years. Disinformation has been present in modern history as part of the tool kit of PSYOPS for the military. Likewise, misinformation has been part of human history for a long time. Hoaxes, rumors, and urban legends—all of which can be classified as differing types of misinformation, although they are not commonly addressed as such—have been exploited by adversarial organizations for their own benefit. This study will propose a comprehensive taxonomy to tackle fake news, disinformation, and misinformation and assess the level of threat they pose to society. A comprehensive comparison with existing typologies will also be included.

INTRODUCTION

The term “fake news,” especially in media and journalistic studies, is often defined in contemporary contexts as new reports based on fictitious accounts made to look like real and factual incidents. Due to the proliferation of fake news, the various possible definitions for “fake news” have, themselves, proliferated in tandem with the proliferation of fake news itself. A review of definitions of “fake news” across journalism, media studies, computer science, and philosophy has yielded some commonalities across the concept of fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017; Svärd & Rumman, 2017; Gelfert, 2018; Bounegru et al., 2018). The various studies collectively agree that fake news is fictitious information presented to the public under the guise of it being factual information, with the intention to mislead or misinform the reader. The studies also agree that the term “fake news” has been applied indiscriminately across a broad spectrum of distinct types of information which could be classified under other terminology. This leads
An Empirically Supported Taxonomy of Misinformation

to the labeling of parodies, political satires, urban legends, hoaxes, and propaganda, amongst others, as “fake news”—creating misalignment with a common definition. That said, to better understand the term “fake news,” writers and collaborators on Wikipedia have created the following long-form definition (Wikipedia, 2019):

Fake news, also known as junk news or pseudo-news, is a type of yellow journalism or propaganda that consists of deliberate disinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional news media (print and broadcast) or online social media. The false information is often caused by reporters paying sources for stories, an unethical practice called check book journalism. Digital news has brought back and increased the usage of fake news, or yellow journalism. The news is then often reverberated as misinformation in social media but occasionally finds its way to the mainstream media as well.

Fake news is written and published usually with the intent to mislead in order to damage an agency, entity, or person, and/or gain financially or politically, often using sensationalist, dishonest, or outright fabricated headlines to increase readership. Similarly, clickbait stories and headlines earn advertising revenue from this activity.

The definition, however, is poorly framed as it provides no clear meaning of the term with no distinct boundaries. Further, it is loaded with additional references which require separate detailed analyses of the definitions linked to them. Misinformation and disinformation are also two concepts in the long definition that are used interchangeably, adding to the confusion. One definition of misinformation alludes to the “inadvertent sharing of false information,” while disinformation alludes to “the deliberate creation and sharing of information known to be false” (Wardle, 2017). The definitions of misinformation and disinformation are also problematic, as the definition of misinformation requires the existence of disinformation at a certain level. At the same time, the definition is peppered with specific cases where “fake news” has been weaponized to cause harm and damages to entities, adding a legal dimension to the concept. The difficulty in formulating a robust definition of “fake news” therefore acts as an obstacle to the development of a taxonomy of “fake news,” as well as any practices involving capturing or regulating “fake news.” Inappropriate definitions could potentially result in scenarios where researchers develop models and frameworks capturing only specific types of “fake news,” or scenarios where authorities’ formulations of legislative definitions become overly prescriptive and are subsequently viewed as biased. In fact, some researchers have voiced their opinions that legislative approaches to “fake news” might even have paradoxical elements (Judge, 2019).

As a result of the abovementioned problems, defining “real news” (or what is more commonly known simply as “news”) may be a helpful prerequisite to properly defining fake news. News - elucidated by the field of journalism - is taken to mean an independent, reliable power of journalistic channels to determine perceived facts, the profession adheres strictly to moral and ethical standards. The journalistic standard of News in general ensures that the information presented is neutral, has been verified with the right sources, and is accurate and factual based on the information available at that point in time. These higher standards of journalism, however, do not always exclude journalistic News from potentially propagating fake news. Ultimately, journalists are also humans who tend to follow the constructs of their society. As a result, the news produced by journalists is also vulnerable to the influences of society (political and financial interests) and to journalists’ own personal biases (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). Nonetheless—despite the potential for conflicts of interest and subjectivity involved—the news