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Speaking of Fake News

Definitions and Dimensions

Romy Jaster and David Lanius

1. Introduction

There has been much discussion about what fake news is and what to do about it—among politicians and journalists, between academics and in the wider public. But it is not clear what fake news is and what people mean when they speak of “fake news.” So much so, that doubts have been raised that the term is useful at all (e.g. House of Commons: DCMS 2019; Habgood-Coote 2018; Wardle 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan 2017; Zuckerman 2017).

This chapter shows why a definition is urgently needed and what a suitable definition of “fake news” might look like. We take up Brown’s (2019) challenge to keep using the term “fake news” with care, since doing so enables us to raise important philosophical and societal questions.¹

We begin by introducing our definition of “fake news” (§2) and employ it to set fake news apart from related phenomena that are often conflated with it (§3). We then extract seven potential dimensions of the concept of fake news from the literature (§4) and compare the most representative definitions that have been proposed so far along those dimensions (§5). In particular, we discuss the definitions by Rini, Gelfert, Dentith, Mukerji, and Zimmermann and Kohring, show up their merits and debits, and put them in relation to ours.²

So, although we take our definition as the starting point and argue for it on the sidelines, our primary aims are (i) to enable a systematic evaluation of prevalent definitions with respect to their extensional scope, practical utility, and conceptual transparency, (ii) to demonstrate that there is more widespread agreement than one would think at the outset, and (iii) to show (in §6) that defining “fake news” is

¹ As Brown (2019, 152) shows by refuting Habgood-Coote’s (2018) arguments, “‘fake news’ sometimes functions as a slur, but it need not do so if used with care. When it is, it allows us to raise philosophical questions that could not be discussed if the concept was abandoned.” We agree with this assessment.

² For systematic assessments of definitions in the literature, see also Egelhofer & Lecheler (2019), Michaelson et al. (2019) and Fallis & Mathiesen (2019).

not only far from futile, but of vital importance to confront the epistemic threats posed by fake news.

2. Defining Fake News

As we have argued elsewhere (Jaster & Lanius 2018), fake news is news that lacks truth and truthfulness. It lacks truth in the sense that it is either literally false or communicates something false. It lacks truthfulness in the sense that it is propagated with the intention to deceive or without concern for the truth. Both conditions will be spelled out in detail below.

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.³

News is nowadays distributed via more channels and by more agents than in the past (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2014). Politicians distribute their content on Twitter or Facebook without professional journalists as intermediaries. Of course, most tweets and Facebook posts do not qualify as news. But reports about recent events that are broadcast to a public are news, no matter on which channel and by whom the content is distributed.⁴

We take reports to be assertions, or *truth warranting* utterances, i.e., utterances that go along with the guarantee of truth on the speaker's part (Carson 2006, 2010).⁵ The guarantee of truth need not be given intentionally or knowingly. Instead, it is part of the illocutionary speech act itself. Speakers may know that their utterance comes with a guarantee of truth—but at the same time they may not feel committed to believing their utterances to be true.

³ Our definition can be modified to account also for a more normative understanding of news. We then define fake news as assertions about recent events that are broadcast by media or individuals to address a public and that lack both truth and truthfulness. Due to their lack of truthfulness, such assertions do not qualify as news (in the normative sense). According to this (slight) modification of our definition, fake news is *not* news (in the normative sense).

⁴ Not everyone follows us here. See, for instance, Fallis & Mathiesen (2019) for a view that is more restrictive in this respect.

⁵ Truth warrant may be more complicated than this. We usually do not guarantee the truth of what we say, but seem to guarantee only that we believe to know what we say. Moreover, truth warrant is presumably a matter of degrees with full-fledged assertions only on one end of the scale. But these intricacies don't matter for the purposes of this chapter.

2.1 Lacking Truth

When things go well, a news report is true—both in its *literal content* (“what is said”) and in its *communicative content* (“what it pragmatically conveys”).⁶ In the case of fake news, the literal or communicative content is false. Thus, fake news lacks truth on one of the two dimensions.

An example for fake news with false literal content is the Pizzagate story that circulated in Russian media outlets in 2016. After WikiLeaks published email correspondence from Hillary Clinton’s mail server, conspiracy theorists began to suspect that the emails contained encoded messages having to do with a child pornography ring run by Hillary Clinton and other high profile Democrats in the basement of a pizza joint. Russian websites and smaller news outlets quickly jumped on the story and distributed it widely. After an armed civilian showed up in the pizza joint to self-investigate the issue, the case was reported and discussed in most established media. In reality, there was no child pornography ring in the pizza joint. There was not even a basement. The Pizzagate fake news story is false.⁷

Other cases are more subtle. After turmoil in the German city of Dortmund on New Year’s eve, the American online medium Breitbart reported in January 2017 that “a mob of more than 1,000 men [...] set fire to a historic church” (Hale 2017). What is *said* here is not false. There was a large group of people. Fireworks were launched. There was a fire. Yet, the report is highly misleading because it *conveys* falsities.⁸ The report suggests that the fire was started wantonly by Muslims, that the church itself was burning, and that the fire was of considerable (i.e., newsworthy) size. All of that is false. In reality, the fireworks accidentally set a catching net on fire that was attached to scaffolding around parts of the church. According to the fire department, the fire was small and could be contained immediately.⁹ This shows that fake news reports need not be literally false. Even

⁶ We are using “what is said” in Saul’s (2012) sense. Cf. also Recanati (2004) on the notion of literal content. The claims in this chapter about literal content should be largely uncontroversial. Communicative content, as we understand it, is what a competent speaker, knowing the context and all relevant background information, would assume an utterance to mean (instead of or additional to what it literally says). Communicative content is thus logically independent of any individual speaker’s or audience’s actual intentions. However, since written utterances typically have multiple contexts of interpretation, they can have multiple communicative contents.

⁷ Of course, the Pizzagate story could theoretically have turned out to be true. What this entails about the status of the reports will be discussed later on.

⁸ Note that we are using the term “misleading” in a technical sense such that an utterance is “misleading” if and only if its communicative content is false. We do not use the term in the sense in which “misleading” necessarily entails the utterance’s actual or potential effect on the audience, as, for instance, Fallis (2015).

⁹ See *The Guardian* (2017).

when what is *said* is true, a piece of news is lacking truth if it pragmatically *conveys* something false.

2.2 Lacking Truthfulness

Fake news also lacks truthfulness: It is distributed either with an intention to deceive or with no concern for the truth. By all accounts, the Russian news about Pizzagate and the Breitbart story are characterized by an intention to deceive: The news reports were presumably propagated with the goal of inciting false beliefs about the reported events in the respective audiences.

Assertions put forward without *any* concern for truth are what Frankfurt has famously called “bullshit.” In Frankfurt’s view, the bullshitter “does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose” (Frankfurt 2005, 55). To put it more precisely,

[a person] A is bullshitting relative to a QUD [question under discussion] q if and only if A contributes p as an answer to q and A is not concerned that p be an answer to q that her evidence suggests is true or that p be an answer to q that her evidence suggests is false. (Fallis & Stokke 2017, 295)

We use “bullshit” roughly in Fallis and Stokke’s sense. To bullshit is to contribute an utterance as an answer to a question under discussion without concern that what one says *or communicates* is based on evidence.

The most prominent examples of bullshit fake news are the fabricated news reports circulated by Macedonian teenagers before the US elections in 2016. We know from interviews that the teenagers did not have any interest in the truth or falsity of their reports (Silverman & Alexander 2016). Their goal was not to deceive the audience about the reported content, but to fabricate news that generated as many clicks and thus as much money as possible.¹⁰

While the teenagers’ news were usually flat-out false, bullshit fake news may as well be misleading. In 2018, Donald Trump tweeted a picture of a wall under construction and added “Great briefing this afternoon on the start of our Southern Border WALL!” The tweet could be literally true: Trump may have actually had a great meeting. But it is misleading: Together with the picture, it insinuates that construction on the southern border wall had already begun. This is not the case; in fact, the picture shows a completely different wall.¹¹

¹⁰ They may well want to deceive their audience about their attitude towards the truth. In fact, deceiving their audience in this way seems to be a necessary means for getting clicks.

¹¹ Of course, we cannot know for sure whether Trump is actually bullshitting in this tweet. But, arguably, he simply tweeted a picture of some wall being constructed without caring about the truth or falsity of the insinuation that goes along with it.

Here is an overview of our definition of fake news:

FAKE NEWS		LACK OF TRUTH	
		False utterance	Misleading utterance
LACK OF TRUTHFULNESS	Intention to deceive	Reports on the Pizzagate conspiracy	Breitbart's report on the burning church
	Bullshit (disregard for truth)	The teenagers' reports on the US elections 2016	Trump's tweet on the "Southern Border WALL"

Importantly, there is a difference between *originating* or *knowingly distributing* fake news on the one hand, and *unknowingly distributing* existing fake news on the other. A report being fake news is tied to (1) features of its content (lack of truth) and (2) the sender's mindset (lack of truthfulness). Like a lie, fake news can spread, even if no one but the originator is untruthful. Let's call someone who originates or knowingly distributes fake news a "fake news distributor."

3. Related Phenomena

With a definition of "fake news" at hand, fake news can be systematically differentiated from a variety of related phenomena which are regularly conflated with fake news.¹² Figure 1.1 situates fake news in a broader landscape of related phenomena.

First, fake news is a subspecies of truth-warranting utterances. This sets fake news apart from utterances that are not truth-warranting, among them questions, typical instances of satire or parody, and jokes. Secondly, fake news is a subspecies of news. This sets it apart from claims about history ("The state of Israel was founded in 1948"), scientific facts ("Water is H₂O"), and assertions uttered in private. Thirdly, fake news lacks truth, which sets it apart from most candid news reports. Fourthly, fake news lacks truthfulness, which sets it apart from typical instances of inadvertently erroneous news reports as well as many cases of conspiracy theories and propaganda. Let's look in more detail at the relation of fake news to satire, conspiracy theories, and propaganda.

Even though the term "fake news" was initially used for *satirical* news shows (Amarasingam & McChesney 2011), these shows do not typically spread fake news. First, speech acts of satire need not be set in a truth warranting context. Usually, no assertion is being made, even if parts of the audience may mistakenly believe so. Secondly, satire only works against the background of a shared

¹² Others have drawn similar distinctions based on their accounts of fake news. See, for instance, Dentith (2017), Gelfert (2018), or Mukerji (2018).

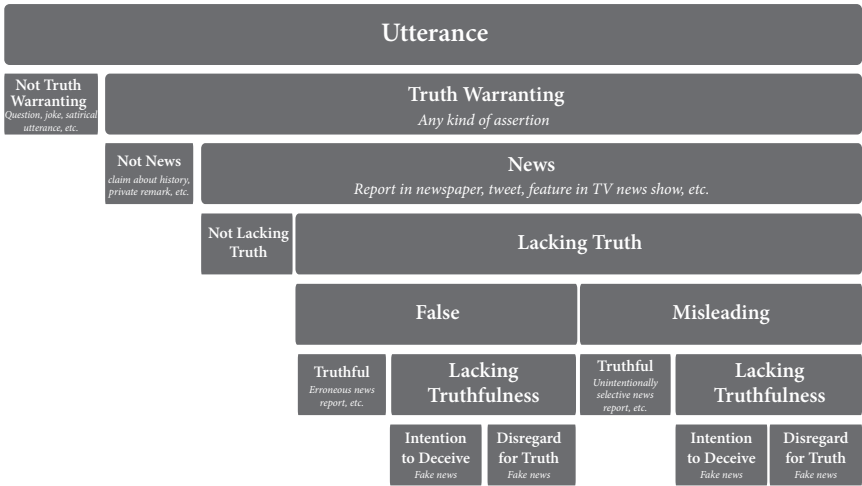


Figure 1.1 The fake news landscape

understanding that truth is not aimed at. The whole point of satirical humor would be lost if the target audience took the satirical content at face value.¹³ Satirical fakes of news are not the same thing as fake news.

Likewise for fake news and *propaganda*. Given that propaganda is “[c]ommunication designed to manipulate a target population by affecting beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behavior compliant with the political goals of the propagandist” (Benkler et al. 2018, 29), fake news and propaganda are not the same.¹⁴ The Macedonian teenagers had no political agenda. Thus, their fake news stories are not propaganda. Reversely, propaganda need not be false or misleading. Sometimes, it states truths, sometimes it does not even make statements at all, as in inciting or glorifying pictures.¹⁵ Yet, fake news and propaganda may be co-instantiated. In an attempt to conceal the German Democratic Republic’s inability to prevent the massive potato beetle plague in 1950, national

¹³ That is not to say that satire does not work with deception. There is satire that makes a point of deceiving people and revealing the deception afterwards. Note, however, that the humorous element comes with the revelation, not with the deception itself.

¹⁴ Benkler et al. (2018) follow Jowett & O’Donnell’s (2006) influential work on propaganda.

¹⁵ Note that pictures can be used to do mischief with the truth in very analogous ways to fake news: a photomontage depicts an event that has not happened and thus corresponds to a literally false statement. The pictorial analogy to literally true, but misleading verbal statements is a cropped picture which shows an event that has happened, but conveys something false by cutting out relevant aspects of the scenery. Such pictures can be (and often are) used in news reports with an intention to deceive or with disregard for the truth—if they are, the corresponding news reports are fake news. Presumably even more often, the pictures themselves are not even tampered with, but are simply used in a misleading context (by falsely claiming or insinuating that they depict certain events in a certain place at a certain time). This, again, can amount to fake news if the corresponding news report (in combination with the picture) is deliberately or without regard for the truth propagated such that it conveys something false.

newspapers announced that the plague had been caused by the US government by dropping potato beetles over GDR territory. These news reports were both fake news *and* propaganda.

The same holds for fake news and *conspiracy theories*. Roughly, a conspiracy theory is an explanation of some event, according to which certain people or groups share a (typically hidden) interest in the occurrence of an event and conspired to bring it about (Popper 1992, 19).¹⁶ Many fake news reports do not deal with that sort of explanation of events (consider the Breitbart story about the burning church). Conversely, not every conspiracy theory is fake news. Some may turn out to be true (like Watergate), and even when false, their distributors need not be untruthful. Pizzagate is a fake news story because Russian and other outlets distributed it untruthfully, but the conspiracy theory underlying it had been circulating for much longer. A story may start out as a mere conspiracy theory and become the subject of fake news subsequently.¹⁷

4. The Dimensions of Fake News

In this section, we differentiate seven dimensions that potentially form part of the concept of fake news and are derived from the debate so far.¹⁸

The Truth Dimension: On most accounts, fake news is taken to lack truth in some way. Apart from Mukerji (2018), who analyzes fake news as a form of bullshit, virtually every account in the debate so far commits to the idea that fake news has *something* to do with falsity. Some scholars think that fake news is necessarily false (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017, 213; Horne & Adali 2017, 2; Klein & Wueller 2017, 6; Rini 2017, E-45; Levy 2017, 20; Mustafaraj & Metaxas 2017, 2), while others allow for fake news to be merely misleading (Dentith 2017, 66; Tandoc et al. 2018, 147; Shin et al. 2018; Gelfert 2018, 102).¹⁹

The Deception Dimension: Most definitions of fake news contain the requirement that false content is propagated intentionally. Often, it remains unclear what the intention aims at—whether fake news is intended to deceive about facts in the world or merely about its distributor’s state of mind.²⁰ More often than not,

¹⁶ There are other definitions of conspiracy theories (e.g., Keeley 1999; Mandik 2007; Dentith 2014). Most are in line with the way we set fake news and conspiracy theories apart.

¹⁷ The difference between fake news and fake science is more straightforward. Only news (in the minimal sense) can be fake news, but science is not news. Thus, there are no things that are both fake news and fake science. However, there can be fake news *about* science as well as fake science.

¹⁸ Concepts usually have a number of dimensions, which can be seen as more or less essential (relative to their other dimensions). As a result, the terms expressing such concepts are, as defined by Lanius (2019, 34–7), multi-dimensionally polysemous.

¹⁹ A few scholars also focus on the even narrower feature that fake news is entirely fabricated, such as, for example, Nelson & Taneja (2018).

²⁰ Of course, any attempt to deceive about facts in the world goes along with the attempt to deceive about one’s own state of mind.

however, the intention to deceive about the news's content is taken to be a central criterion of fake news (Horne & Adali 2017, 1; Klein & Wueller 2017, 6; Rini 2017, E-45; Dentith 2017, 66; Egelhofer & Lecheler 2019, 7; Tandoc et al. 2018, 147).

The Bullshit Dimension: The intention to deceive about content is not considered an indisputable criterion. Rini (2017, E-44–5), for example, acknowledges that “deception is not always the primary goal of fake news. Often the motives are financial rather than epistemic” (see also Gelfert 2018, 102). Many authors emphasize the political or financial motives of fake news producers (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017, 217; Rini 2017; Levy 2017, 20; Gelfert 2018; McNair 2017, 38; Nelson & Taneja 2018; Tandoc et al. 2018, 138). Someone may knowingly spread fake news without at the same time having the intention to deceive about its truth. What may thus be central to fake news is not an intention to deceive about what is reported, but an indifference to the truth; fake news may turn out to be bullshit.

The Appearance Dimension: Sometimes, it is held that fake news is intentionally propagated as “real” news (Levy 2017, 20; Shin et al. 2018; Rini 2017).²¹ In fact, a widely undisputed and often explicitly mentioned feature of fake news is that journalistic formats are imitated (Horne & Adali 2017, 1; Rini 2017, E-45; Levy 2017, 20; Mustafaraj & Metaxas 2017, 2; Nelson & Taneja 2018; Tandoc et al. 2018, 138; Gelfert 2018, 103; Mukerji 2018, 929). Thus, some authors understand fake news to falsely pretend to be based on journalistic sources and adhere to journalistic standards (Egelhofer & Lecheler 2019, 10–11).

The Effect Dimension: When politics and countermeasures are concerned, the effects of fake news are usually at the center of attention. Some authors (most emphatically Grundmann 2020) stress that fake news actually deceives or is at least likely to deceive parts of the audience. Gelfert (2018, 108), for instance, takes fake news to be “objectively likely to mislead its target audience” and Allcott & Gentzkow (2017, 213) define fake news as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers.”

The Virality Dimension: The public and most academics agree that fake news has become a huge challenge to democratic decision and opinion formation processes. In large part, this is seen to be due to its virality (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017, 217; Shao et al. 2017; Shin et al. 2018; Tandoc et al. 2018, 138). Much like rumors, fake news spreads fast and sometimes uncontrollably. Rini (2017, E-45) thus includes virality as a necessary condition in the definition of fake news. If she is right, fake news necessarily is either intended to be widely propagated or actually virally spread.

The Media Dimension: There is broad consensus that the propagation of fake news is driven by digital forms of communication and particularly social media (Tandoc et al. 2018, 138–9). Some scholars take this to be essential to fake news

²¹ This dimension is related to the *Deception* and the *Bullshit Dimension*. Make-believe suits both endeavors well.

and argue that fake news can only be propagated online (Bounegru et al. 2018, 8; Klein & Wueller 2017, 6; Mustafaraj & Metaxas 2017, 2). However, only very few authors assume that this is a strictly necessary criterion.

Here is an overview of the seven potential dimensions that emerge from the literature:

<i>Truth Dimension</i>	Fake news is false or misleading.
<i>Deception Dimension</i>	Fake news distributors intend to deceive.
<i>Bullshit Dimension</i>	Fake news distributors are indifferent to the truth.
<i>Appearance Dimension</i>	Fake news mimics “real” news.
<i>Effect Dimension</i>	Fake news entails the actual (or a certain likelihood of) deception on the part of the audience.
<i>Virality Dimension</i>	Fake news is (or is intended to be) widely propagated.
<i>Media Dimension</i>	Fake news is a phenomenon of the Internet or social media.

As can easily be seen, our definition contains the *Truth*, *Deception*, and *Bullshit Dimension*, as it defines fake news as news reports lacking truth in what is said or communicated and being propagated with either an intention to deceive or disregard for the truth.

5. The Definitions of Fake News

Let us now look at the following prominent definitions and see which dimensions they emphasize.²² Rini (2017) has early in the debate proposed a definition of fake news as false stories with an intention to deceive. Gelfert (2018) defines fake news as misleading by design. Dentith (2017, 2018) offers a definition of fake news as misleading or false and intended to deceive. Mukerji (2018) defines it as bullshit asserted in the form of news. Zimmermann & Kohring (2018) give a definition of fake news from the perspective of communication science as recent disinformation. We will discuss them one by one.

We take all of the definitions to be *explications* of the concept of fake news, and thus engage with the project of “transforming a given more or less inexact concept into an exact one” (Carnap 1950, 3). The term “fake news” is used in a variety of ways in ordinary speech. Even upon reflection, there are unclear cases. To explicate the concept of fake news, in our view, we need to find a definition that

²² For a helpful overview of a number of yet other definitions which are analyzed in terms of the *Truth*, *Deception*, and *Appearance Dimension*, see Egelhofer & Lecheler (2019, 3).

classifies all clear cases of fake news as fake news and all clear counter-instances as things other than fake news, providing guidance in unclear cases.

5.1 Rini's Definition: False Stories with Intention to Deceive

Rini (2017, E-45) defines a fake news report as

one that purports to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage, yet is known by its creators to be significantly false, and is transmitted with the two goals of being widely re-transmitted and of deceiving at least some of its audience.

This definition contains most dimensions we distinguished. It emphasizes the *Truth* ("known [...] to be significantly false"), *Deception* ("deceiving at least some of its audience"), *Virality* and, presumably, the *Media Dimension* ("being widely re-transmitted"). It also seems to emphasize the *Appearance Dimension* (mimicking "real" news), but note that Rini wisely inserts a "typically"-clause here. Many fake news reports certainly mimic "real" news, but many also differ substantially from "real" news in content, form, and style (Horne & Adali 2017). Accordingly, Rini rightly abstains from including the *Appearance Dimension* as a necessary condition.

The differences to our definition lie elsewhere. First, Rini understands fake news to be known to be significantly false. But first, as argued, fake news need not be false, but may merely be misleading. Secondly, fake news need not be *known* to lack truth. The teenagers spreading fake news for profit may not have known about the falsity of many of their clickbaiting news reports—they just did not care. So while we agree that the *Truth Dimension* is crucial, we disagree about its scope and Rini's epistemic twist.

The *Virality Dimension* seems highly plausible at first. Most fake news stories are presumably spread with an intention to reach large numbers of people. But that is because fake news is news and, as such, broadcast to a public. Rini's emphasis on re-transmission seems to tacitly presuppose that fake news is a phenomenon of the Internet and social media (*Media Dimension*). Here, we disagree. A print newspaper may just as well spread fake news without the goal of wide re-transmission. To be fair, Rini (2017, E-45) states that "fake news can be spread other ways—email chains, posters on streetlamps, etc." But the paradigm of fake news she targets with the idea of re-transmission is clearly one that locates fake news in social media.²³

²³ Rini's commitment to this understanding of her definition becomes evident in her discussion of "social media testimony" (2017, E-54).

Whether fake news is transmitted with the goal of “deceiving at least some of its audience” depends on how exactly we understand the condition. Rini (2017, E-45) is quite explicit in this respect. As she points out, not all fake news reports require an intention to deceive about their content. Some are propagated with commercial or personal motivations and put forward with a bullshit attitude. Yet, in her view, there is nevertheless deception involved. On Frankfurt’s original understanding, bullshitters intend to deceive their audiences as well. In contrast to the liar, however, their deception is not about their assertions’ content, but about themselves. In Frankfurt’s view, bullshit requires the (second-order) intention to deceive about the speaker’s indifference to the truth.

While this might not always be the case with respect to the entire audience, it seems true for at least parts of it. Trump may want to fool some of his followers about his intentions, and so may commercial fake news producers. Of course, their motivation to deceive about their indifference to the truth is purely instrumental. If their attitude were all too obvious, there might not be any (or too little) incentive for the audience to click on the fake news story.

Rini clearly understands the intention to deceive to extend to the distributor’s intention to deceive about her own indifference to the truth as well. If “the goal to deceive” is understood this broadly, this amounts to our condition of lack of truthfulness and combines the *Deception* and *Bullshit Dimension*. Note, however, that the bullshitter’s deceitfulness is among the most contested elements of Frankfurt’s definition of bullshit (Fallis & Stokke 2017). We therefore take it to be wise not to commit to it in a definition of fake news and instead spell out explicitly how the lack of truthfulness plays out.

Let’s recapitulate the similarities and differences between Rini’s and our definition. Taking the “typically”-clause seriously, we agree that fake news does not by its nature mimic “real” news (*Appearance Dimension*). We also agree that fake news distributors pursue the goal of deceiving at least some of their audience—provided that this covers both the *Deception* and *Bullshit Dimension*. We disagree that fake news is necessarily distributed with the goal of being widely re-transmitted (*Virality Dimension*) and the underlying idea that fake news is a phenomenon of the Internet (*Media Dimension*). We also disagree that fake news is necessarily (known to be) false.

5.2 Gelfert’s Definition: Presentation of Claims as News Misleading by Design

Gelfert (2018, 108) defines fake news as “the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design.” The definition emphasizes the *Truth* (“false or misleading”), *Deception* (“deliberate presentation”), and *Appearance Dimension* (“claims as news”). The *Effect*

Dimension enters the picture via the concept of misleadingness Gelfert employs. Fake news is misleading, according to Gelfert, in the sense that it “is likely to result in (and often does cause) false beliefs on the part of its target audience” (105). The *Virality Dimension* is not explicit in the definition itself, but Gelfert clearly thinks that fake news is distributed with “the goal of widespread circulation” (102).

It is unclear whether the *Bullshit Dimension* is instantiated. The core notion in Gelfert’s definition is “misleadingness by design.” Unlike journalistic errors, Gelfert writes, for a report to be fake news “it must be likely to mislead not only in a non-accidental way, but deliberately” (106). In fact, “the spread of false beliefs is not merely a side effect of fake news, but is a direct result of its function” (108) in that

fake news is designed to operate in a way that is unconstrained by the truth, either because it aims to instil falsehoods in its target audience (for example, in order to discredit a political opponent), or because the way it is deliberately operated is objectively likely to mislead its target audience [...]. (108)

It is not easy to pinpoint what exactly Gelfert has in mind when he talks about the way in which fake news is “designed to operate” or “deliberately operated.” The point might be that there is something in the process of spreading fake news that makes it (potentially) misleading. But the process of making up false claims to deceive the target audience into believing whatever is in line with one’s own political agenda is rather different from the process of gathering claims that sell. Moreover, the same processes may turn out to be (even objectively) far less likely to mislead if presented in different ways.

On a slightly different understanding, the idea would be that the way fake news itself operates—the way it diffuses into societies—makes it (potentially) misleading. However, it is unclear how this process of diffusion differs from the way other, reliable, news diffuses into societies. In an attempt to further unpack the idea of misleadingness by design, Gelfert points out that

purveyors of fake news have begun to employ strategies of bringing about belief and ensuring continued propagation of their stories [...], by manipulating their consumers’ preexisting cognitive biases and heuristics. (111)

We are not sure whether Gelfert considers this an essential feature of fake news or whether the exploitation of biases is merely supposed to explain what is new about fake news these days.²⁴ We agree with the latter idea, but are skeptical concerning

²⁴ An anonymous referee has suggested to us that, in Gelfert’s view, fake news reports are misleading by design in that their purveyors employ some strategy that is likely to mislead. We are not sure whether this is more illuminating than simply saying that “fake news is likely to mislead” unless one has something to say about the strategy employed.

the former. If a news outlet publishes a false report, according to which Angela Merkel had a friendly meeting with Kim Jong Un in Uganda, and the outlet publishes this report in a deceitful manner, then this should qualify as fake news, even if the report does not manipulate or exploit any pre-existing biases or heuristics on the consumers' part.²⁵ There are counterexamples to Gelfert's definition as well: When bullshit fake news are badly crafted, they neither aim at instilling false beliefs in the audience (in virtue of being bullshit), nor are they objectively likely to mislead their audience (in virtue of being badly crafted).²⁶

We take it, however, that Gelfert's key insights can be accommodated by our definition. Gelfert characterizes the way in which fake news is designed to operate as one that is "unconstrained by the truth." He distinguishes two ways in which this lack of constraint by the truth may manifest: Fake news either

aims to instil falsehoods in its target audience [...], or [...] is objectively likely to mislead its target audience, its real goal being (for example) the generation of clickbait through sensational claims that attract an online audience. (108)

Extensionally, this boils down to the two ways in which news reports may lack truthfulness that we distinguished. In our view, it is the *distributor* of fake news who is not constrained by the truth. The distributor is untruthful, and that just means that she either intends to deceive (*Deception Dimension*) or distributes content without regard for the truth (*Bullshit Dimension*). Thus, even though we agree with Gelfert that "[t]he example of the role of Macedonian clickbait farms [...] suggests that the deliberate nature of fake news does not necessarily consist in the intention to manipulate others by instilling specific false (or malicious) beliefs in them" (107), it would be a mistake, in our view, to shift the attention away from the distributor's attitude toward the truth altogether. Instead of looking for a specific design of fake news such that it is objectively likely to mislead its target audience (*Effect Dimension*), what makes the news reports by the Macedonian teenagers fake news is their disregard for the truth (*Bullshit Dimension*).

Apart from the *Deception Dimension*, we agree with Gelfert that fake news is false or misleading (*Truth Dimension*) and that it is not a phenomenon of the Internet alone (*Media Dimension*). We disagree, however, that fake news aims at widespread circulation (*Virality Dimension*) and is presented as news (*Appearance Dimension*). Moreover, we suggest substituting the *Effect* with the *Bullshit Dimension*.

²⁵ Of course, any report potentially exploits some sort of bias on some agent's part. But if the condition is understood in this weak sense, this feature cannot be distinctive of fake news.

²⁶ The latter point also applies to Grundmann's (2020) definition.

5.3 Dentith's Definition: Misleading or False and Intended to Deceive

Dentith's (2017) discussion of fake news shifts between an account of what fake news is and what allegations of fake news amount to. He writes (2017, 66) that "fake news is an allegation that some story is misleading – it contains significant omissions – or even false – it is a lie – designed to deceive its intended audience." In a later paper, he does not talk about the allegation anymore and writes: "Fake news is a misleading story intended to deceive some target audience" (Dentith 2018, 24). We will discuss the later version.

Dentith's definition incorporates the *Truth* ("misleading") and the *Deception Dimension* ("intended to deceive"), remaining mostly silent on the other dimensions. It is unclear whether the definition incorporates the *Bullshit Dimension*. As we will see, Dentith's statements about fake news being "intended to deceive" can be interpreted as including or excluding bullshit fake news.

We agree with Dentith that fake news can be misleading (*Truth Dimension*), although we have a somewhat broader understanding of misleadingness. Dentith thinks of misleadingness as being "due to the selective way in which [...] some but not all of the data" is presented (2018, 26). Accordingly, he takes a news report to be misleading if "it contains significant omissions" (2017, 66; 2018, 24). We prefer to allow for many other ways in which statements can be misleading, for instance, by presupposing or implicating something false.²⁷ We don't take this to be a point of serious disagreement, though. Dentith's reference to omission of facts is perhaps best read as *one way* in which a story can be misleading.

What is more important is that the *Bullshit Dimension* seems to be altogether missing in Dentith's definition. By characterizing fake news as being "intended to deceive some target audience," Dentith seems to exclude the case of the Macedonian teenagers, who clearly did not intend to deceive their audience. Yet, like Rini, he can analyze these cases as bullshit, as long as he agrees with Frankfurt that bullshit comes along with a second-order intention to deceive about one's own indifference to the truth. If understood this way, Dentith's requirement of an "intention to deceive" is close to congruent to the lack of truthfulness postulated in our definition. But as already laid out in connection with Rini, we take it to be advisable not to commit to the deceitfulness of bullshitters in a definition of fake news. Unfortunately, Dentith does not resolve this ambiguity in his papers.

²⁷ Perhaps one could argue that presupposition is itself an instance of omission because the presupposition vanishes once all the information is provided. Even then, though, cases remain in which something that is irrelevant is made to look relevant by mentioning it. We take it to be wise not to commit on controversial points here and stick with a broad notion of misleadingness.

Summing up, we can say that Dentith's definition resembles ours closely. On the *Truth Dimension*, our definitions both stress the falsity or misleadingness of fake news (although Dentith brushes over some ways in which reports can be misleading). Dentith's requirement that fake news is intended to deceive either excludes important examples of fake news or it commits to Frankfurt's controversial postulate about the bullshitter's deceitfulness regarding her own attitude towards truth. In the latter case, this boils down to subsuming the *Bullshit Dimension* under the *Deception Dimension* instead of keeping them separate as two ways in which lack of truthfulness may manifest.

5.4 Mukerji's Definition: Bullshit Asserted in the Form of News

Mukerji (2018, 929) argues that fake news is "bullshit asserted in the form of a news publication." This is an elegant definition and an interesting view, since it differs considerably from other definitions. It does not require fake news to be false or misleading (*Truth Dimension*), but focuses instead on the *Bullshit* and *Appearance Dimension*. There are two striking differences to our and most other definitions of fake news.

The first is that, since bullshit can be true, fake news can be true as well, in Mukerji's view. The definition abandons the *Truth Dimension* entirely, treating falsity and misleadingness as merely contingent, albeit highly prevalent features of fake news.

Can fake news be true? Let us consider a thought experiment.

The Clinton Report

A magazine fabricates a news story about the Clintons, according to which they are running a child porn ring. The authors take the story to be false and propagate it with the intention to deceive their audience. As it happens, the Clintons are running a child porn ring. The story is true.

Is this report an instance of fake news? If the answer is "yes," fake news reports are "fake," not because they lack truth, but because their distributors pretend to be concerned with the truth when they are not. This squares well with a more normatively loaded understanding of news, on which a defining feature of news is that their distributors care about the truth. Fake news distributors fake that concern, thus producing fake news.

Despite the appeal of this line of thought, we are inclined to hold on to the *Truth Dimension*. When it comes to societally relevant phenomena, philosophy should not roam unnecessarily far from the understanding of the phenomenon in other scientific fields—or society, for that matter. A definition according to which

fake news need not lack truth gives up a feature that governs much of the public and scientific thinking about fake news. This considerably diminishes the chances of informing public and scientific discourse.

There is a second pragmatic reason for holding on to the *Truth Dimension*. In view of the upsurge of “post-truth” tendencies in politics and parts of public discourse, there cannot be enough emphasis on the value of truth and reality. There is a difference between facts and what people believe to be facts, and we should stick to truth as the ultimate goal of inquiry. Journalism, in particular, should retain the quest for truth as one of its cornerstones. Mukerji’s move to locate the “fake” in “fake news” entirely in internal features of news distributors shifts the focus away from the ultimate costs of fake news: people holding false beliefs about the world.

This shows clearly that “fake news” cannot be defined without conceptual engineering. We need to balance candidate dimensions carefully against each other and evaluate their advantages and disadvantages. In our view, the trade-off between the elegance of Mukerji’s definition and the normative costs of allowing for true fake news turns out in favor of the *Truth Dimension*. In our view, the Clinton Report is not fake news, but a different phenomenon, which is problematic in its own way and may be called “deceitful propaganda.” Deceitful propaganda can be true and is not the same as fake news. It can (also) be fake news only if lacking truth.

Let’s turn to a more sturdy problem of Mukerji’s view. Mukerji dismisses the *Deception Dimension*. Depending on one’s view on lying, this entails that fake news cannot be lies. In Mukerji’s own view, the problem does not arise. Mukerji takes lies to be assertions that the speaker knows to be false and calls this the “standard definition of lying” (Mukerji 2018, 941). On this understanding of lying, bullshit and lies are not exclusive categories. Someone may state what they know to be false and be indifferent to this feature of their assertion all the same, thus lying and bullshitting simultaneously.

However, what Mukerji calls the “standard definition” is highly contested. Many hold that lies go along with an intention to deceive about what is asserted. On a prominent view, “[a] lie is a statement made by one who does not believe it with the intention that someone else shall be led to believe it” (Isenberg 1973, 248).²⁸ Since bullshitters at best intend to deceive about their indifference to the truth, but not about what they say, Mukerji’s definition excludes lies from being fake news, on such a deceptionist view of lying.

The problem subsists even if lying does *not* entail a deceptive intention. While lying and bullshitting may not be exclusive categories, many lies *do* go along with an intention to deceive about what is asserted. These lies cannot be bullshit. But in

²⁸ See also Primoratz (1984, 54n2).

connection with fake news these lies matter. When GDR newspapers reported that the US Air Force had been throwing beetles from the sky, they intended to make GDR citizens believe that very claim. Today, we see news outlets such as Breitbart News, RT, or Sputnik pursue the same strategy. According to our definition, intentionally spreading false news to achieve a political goal (such as changing people's minds about some fact) is a straightforward case of fake news. According to Mukerji's definition of fake news, these cases will have to be assessed differently.

Mukerji can respond by arguing that the GDR example and others like it are bullshit and not lies because the speaker's *ultimate* goal is not to deceive, but to reach some political goal. However, that is implausible, since it would classify virtually any lie as mere bullshit. Only Augustine's (2002) "real lies" would still qualify as lies. But cases in which a person lies just for the sake of deceiving their audience, without *any* further goal, are highly unusual. Virtually anything we call a "lie" would collapse into bullshit.

For these reasons, we disagree with Mukerji about the *Truth*, *Deception*, and *Appearance Dimension*, while agreeing on the others.

5.5 Zimmermann and Kohring's Definition: Recent Disinformation

In communication science and journalism, practitioners and scholars have largely shifted to use the term "disinformation" instead of "fake news" (e.g., House of Commons: DCMS 2019; Habgood-Coote 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan 2017; Wardle 2017; Marwick & Lewis 2017). Classically, disinformation is false information spread deliberately to deceive. It differs from misinformation, which is simply false information and does not require a deceptive intention.

It is easy to see that we cannot simply identify fake news with disinformation. "Disinformation" has both a broader and narrower extension than "fake news." It is not confined to news and thus too broad: Ads on billboards or orally told lies about a disliked classmate can be disinformation if false and deceitful. Fake news, in turn, requires no intention to deceive; it may also be bullshit. Thus, disinformation is too narrow to include the fake news produced by the Macedonian teenagers.

Zimmermann & Kohring (2018) offer a definition that is intended to help. Fake news, they say, is "recent disinformation," where this has to be understood in a specific way. Their use of "disinformation" includes a lack of truthfulness in our sense: it requires either an intention to deceive or a disregard for truth. This use of "disinformation" is highly idiosyncratic, as "disinformation" usually does not include cases of bullshit.

The definition moreover relies on an idiosyncratic conception of "*recent* disinformation," which is interpreted as a "form of journalistic communication"

(Zimmermann & Kohring 2018, 532). For disinformation to be recent, it not only has to concern recent events; it also needs to be addressed to a public. Based on these terminological clarifications, their definition instantiates the *Truth*, *Deception*, and *Bullshit Dimension*, while waiving the others. Their view is therefore roughly equivalent with ours.

Yet, their definition is unfortunate. Of course, “fake news” is regularly used as a discursive weapon and so an alternative term might be helpful. However, Zimmermann and Kohring’s definition only worsens the situation. First, their idiosyncratic use of “recent disinformation” invites misunderstandings even within academia. Secondly, their definition aggravates a general confusion with the use of “information.” Let us explain.

There are many scholars and practitioners in the debate who talk about “false and misleading information.” At first glance, this seems fine because it seems to capture the two ways in which news may lack truth. And, of course, there are understandings of “information” by which talk of misleading information is sensible. Such talk would, for example, make sense if “information” were to be understood as referring to data or Gricean utterances (Grice 1957).

In the context of fake news, however, talk of misleading information turns out conceptually nonsensical. Neither data nor utterances yield the right interpretation of information in this connection. Talking about “information” as data in the context of fake news is particularly unhelpful. Since we are concerned with news, i.e., a specific type of assertions, a semantic understanding is required.²⁹ But an understanding in terms of (Gricean) utterances is not helpful either. Utterances are actions carried out by someone in some place at some time. Calling those “information” is yet another idiosyncrasy. We thus agree with Zimmermann and Kohring that, in the context of fake news, “information” (and thus “disinformation”) needs to refer to the communicative *content* of utterances. But then information cannot be misleading. *Utterances* are misleading when their communicative content is false. But misleadingness cannot be a property of the content of an utterance itself.³⁰

The upshot is that defining fake news as “recent disinformation” risks causing serious misunderstandings. These are partly due to the already existing confusion in the common use of the terms “information” and “disinformation.” They are further aggravated by the idiosyncrasy of the use of words in Zimmermann and Kohring’s definition. Yet, it is surprisingly similar to our definition. In their view, too, fake news is false or misleading and distributed with an intention to deceive or with an indifference to the truth. We seem to disagree whether to locate fake

²⁹ The understanding relevant in the context of fake news is, arguably, information as a semantic concept. See Lenski (2010) or Floridi (2011).

³⁰ There is also the possibility to define “misleading” differently than we did: namely, as being likely to bring about false beliefs. This would not solve the problem, however, because it is still the utterances (as events in the world) that are capable of causing false beliefs.

news on the level of utterances or on the level of their communicative content (i.e., information). In contrast to Zimmermann and Kohring, we view fake news not as recent disinformation but as *containing* recent disinformation (in Zimmermann and Kohring's sense of "recent disinformation").

5.6 Comparing the Definitions

We can now compare the definitions all at once:

Dimension Definition	<i>Truth</i>	<i>Deception</i>	<i>Bullshit</i>	<i>Appearance</i>	<i>Effect</i>	<i>Virality</i>	<i>Media</i>
Jaster & Lanius: News Reports Lacking Truth and Truthfulness	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
Rini: False Stories with Intention to Deceive	YES	YES	YES	NO	???	YES	???
Gelfert: Presentation of Claims as News by Design Misleading	YES	YES	???	YES	YES	YES	NO
Dentith: Misleading or False and Intended to Deceive	YES	YES	???	NO	NO	NO	NO
Mukerji: Bullshit Asserted in the Form of News	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO
Zimmermann & Kohring: Recent Disinformation	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO

As the table shows, there is less dispute with respect to some of the potential criteria of fake news than the seeming diversity of definitions suggests. At their core most definitions are more similar to each other than one would expect.

It has become clear that apart from Mukerji's all definitions contain a more or less explicit commitment to the *Deception Dimension*: They all postulate the distributors' intention to deceive, either about the content of the report or about the distributor's mindset. All definitions but Mukerji's contain also a commitment to the *Truth Dimension*.³¹ There is broad consensus that a definition will have to contain some reference to falsity and/or misleadingness. When it comes to the

³¹ Even on Mukerji's view, fake news will almost always be false because bullshitting is prone to lead to falsities.

Bullshit Dimension, Dentith and Gelfert's definitions are the only apparent exceptions to the otherwise prevalent view that fake news can be bullshit.

The *Media Dimension* is not clearly part of any of the definitions discussed. Although many of the discussions of fake news take its online distribution as a paradigm, all theorists agree that offline fake news exists. The same holds for the *Effect Dimension*. Only Gelfert characterizes fake news, in part, by its objective likelihood of instilling falsehoods in the audience.

The actual dispute among theorists comes down to the *Appearance* and *Virality Dimension*. We noted in connection with Rini's account that news, as such, is broadcast to a public. Any definition treating fake news as "news" in this minimal sense can therefore dispense with the *Virality Dimension*. The remaining question is whether fake news mimics ordinary news publications, as Gelfert and Mukerji seem to think. A president's tweet or a populist party's Facebook post does not resemble traditional or ordinary news in any meaningful way. Even the websites run by Macedonian teenagers resemble tabloid press news at best. This puts the ball into Gelfert and Mukerji's field. Does Mukerji intend "published in the form of a news publication" to be saying more than published as news in the minimal sense? If so, what is the stronger sense in which fake news has the form of a news publication? The same question arises for Gelfert.

All in all, our discussion has brought to light many points of agreement in the manifold definitions that have been put forward. In the next section, we are going to turn to the merits of having a definition of "fake news" in the first place, using our understanding of fake news as the working definition.

6. The Importance of Defining "Fake News": Epistemic Threats, Boundary Work, and Paradigm Repair

Fake news causes severe epistemic problems for societies. First, due to its lack of truth, the spread of fake news tends to generate false beliefs and uninformed decisions. We have seen this effect in the case of Brexit. Moreover, fake news has recently led to violence against innocents in India, Myanmar, and many other countries, because people mistakenly believed innocent people to be dangerous or to have committed crimes (e.g., Mozur 2018).

Secondly, due to its lack of truthfulness, the spread of fake news fosters distrust. Hardly any of our knowledge stems from direct perception. The vast majority of it is gained from the testimony of others, above all journalists. In selecting the sources we accept as knowledgeable, trust is essential. Thus, in undermining the public's trust in news generally, fake news can actively diminish the amount of what people (take themselves to) know.³²

³² Whether the phrase in parentheses is needed will depend on whether one accepts an externalist or internalist epistemology.

Third, reports lacking truth and truthfulness undermine societies' capability for deliberation and may thus foster illegitimate collective decisions. As Habermas (1996, 304) famously put it,

deliberative politics acquires its legitimating force from the discursive structure of an opinion- and will-formation that can fulfill its socially integrative function only because citizens expect its results to have a reasonable quality.

Based on a broadly Habermasian view, truthfulness is required for deliberation; deliberation, in turn, is required for the legitimacy of political decisions (Cohen 1997). Only sufficiently informed people are able to deliberate in a way that legitimizes the outcomes of deliberative processes.

Apart from its direct epistemic effects, fake news is also prone to lead to an erosion of the norms of truth and truthfulness. According to Lewis (1979, 347), "the conversational score does tend to evolve in such a way as is required in order to make whatever occurs count as correct play." If many participants in a debate untruthfully make untrue utterances, this may become normal—in a descriptive and ultimately even in a normative sense. If such utterances become a regular part of public debate, they will change the standards by which we evaluate the appropriateness of subsequent contributions to it.

The risk of norm erosion is real for at least two reasons. First, the distributors of fake news frequently employ what has been called the "Firehose of Falsehood" method—they spread rapidly, repetitively, and continuously over multiple channels (Paul & Matthews 2016), thus violating the epistemic standards for contributions to the public debate openly and repeatedly. This pushes the standards of public discourse in a direction where fake news counts as correct play.

Secondly, fake news targets truth and truthfulness in a place where they matter more than in most other areas. Truth and truthfulness are the central values of journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2014), put into practice by operationalizing the norm of "journalistic objectivity" (Godler & Reich 2013). Democratic societies are applying particularly high epistemic standards to the production and propagation of news. By undermining the epistemic standards of news, fake news targets the norms of truth and truthfulness in a realm in which their protection is particularly important and their deterioration leads to an epistemically disastrous situation.

Of course, there is the realistic possibility of effective countermeasures. But a necessary first step is understanding the phenomenon of fake news, pinpointing its epistemic risks, and calling it out. That is why a viable definition of "fake news" is so crucially important.³³

³³ Thus, we agree with Brown (2019, 144) that it is possible to use "fake news" in a linguistically and politically unproblematic manner and even fruitfully if done so with care. To use the term with care, arguably, requires sufficient clarity about its meaning. Moreover, we provide in this chapter further evidence for Brown's claims that there is significant agreement among academics and other members of the public about its key features and that the concept is not unnecessary.

In journalism studies, two concepts keep coming up when the task of shielding journalism from deterioration is discussed: the concept of *boundary work* and the concept of *paradigm repair*. Boundary work (Carlson 2016; Gieryn 1983; Lewis 2012) is a necessary means for keeping up the epistemic standards for news publications (and also for knowledge more generally). It consists in demarcating what it takes to be an X—a journalist, for instance. Focusing on the scientific community, Gieryn (1983, 4–5) defines boundary work as

the discursive attribution of selected qualities to scientists, scientific method and scientific claims for the purpose of drawing a rhetorical boundary between science and some less authoritative, residual non-science... demarcating, defending, expanding, contesting the limits of legitimate science, the real scientist from the pseudo scientist.

As Carlson points out, this is relevant to journalism as well, since boundaries affect “the allotment of epistemic authority which (...) denotes knowledge practices accepted by others as legitimate” (2016, 316) and “in the case of news, the validity of any story rests on a shared belief that it is a legitimate form of knowledge” (360). Boundary work is therefore essentially important for the protection of epistemic standards in journalism and science alike.

Fake news poses a clear instance of broadcasting against which journalism needs to be set off. Fake news is alien to journalism in much the same way as pseudoscience is alien to science. It is therefore crucial to set the boundaries of journalism in a way that (1) excludes fake news from the set of legitimate practices and (2) draws attention to the features of fake news that make its distribution unacceptable.

The most straightforward means to engage in this task is through explicit categorization and definitions (Carlson 2016). Knowing what fake news is—and knowing that violations of truth and truthfulness are at its core—helps to set the boundaries of legitimate journalistic practices in their proper place: They will include practices that truthful agents employ to deliver true reports of events and exclude practices that do not obey this norm.

The second (and related) concept that is essential in connection with protective measures against the deterioration of journalistic practices is the concept of paradigm repair. Drawing on Kuhn’s (2012) work about science, journalistic paradigm repair is the practice of journalists to sanction violations of norms with the goal of strengthening their validity and compliance (Neuberger 2017). This aims at “reestablishing the authority, validity, and credibility of professional journalism in times of a perceived professional or organizational crisis” (Koliska & Steiner 2019). One important part of paradigm repair is to “consciously articulate (...) taken-for-granted assumptions [of journalism] in explicit terms” (Vos & Moore 2020).

The differences between boundary work and paradigm repair are subtle. While paradigm repair focuses on calling out *internal* attacks on the journalistic paradigm, boundary work focuses on threats from agents at the boundaries of journalism (Carlson & Lewis 2015). Both practices, however, aim at strengthening the norms within journalism. In our view, neither of the two practices should fall exclusively to journalists. Society as a whole needs to sanction violations of crucial paradigms of knowledge generation, assertability, and knowledge transfer. Doing so is crucial to preventing standards from shifting and the contexts of knowledge from blurring. Philosophy, too, has a contribution to make. By drawing attention to the lack of truth and truthfulness in the case of fake news, truth and truthfulness come into sharp focus as paradigms of journalism and norms that need to be upheld and defended against threats.

In summary, neither of the epistemic problems that come along with the spread of fake news is unavoidable. Fake news can be corrected, fake news distributors can be called out for their untruthfulness, and epistemic norms can be defended by publicly criticizing the distribution of fake news. But to do this effectively, we need to explicate the concept of fake news as clearly as possible to better understand the underlying phenomenon and to facilitate appropriate countermeasures. This chapter is intended as a contribution to this endeavor.

7. Conclusion

We started out by presenting our definition and differentiating fake news from propaganda, satire and parody, conspiracy theories, and journalistic errors. Then, we introduced seven potential dimensions of the concept of fake news. This allowed us to systematically compare some prevalent definitions with respect to their extensional scope, practical utility, and conceptual transparency. Most definitions can be interpreted in several ways. Often, the best and most charitable interpretations are very similar to each other. One result of this chapter is that the controversy about the definition of “fake news” might ultimately not run deep. Most definitions agree that fake news lacks truth and is published with problematic intentions. Some focus on more epistemic questions; some on its mimicking “proper” news. But, as we have tried to show, our definition is quite congruent with most other definitions—at least being interpreted plausibly. Other interpretations make them not only less similar to ours, but also encounter problems. Finally, we have argued that defining “fake news” (broadly along the lines of our definition) is useful because it lays open the epistemic problems resulting from fake news and enables us to develop effective countermeasures against its distribution and the resulting deterioration of epistemic norms in the public debate.³⁴

³⁴ Both authors contributed equally to this chapter.

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