

WHAT IS FAKE NEWS: A NEW DEFINITION

Simina-Maria TERIAN

Universitatea „Lucian Blaga” din Sibiu
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu
Personal e-mail: simina.terian@ulbsibiu.ro

WHAT IS FAKE NEWS: A NEW DEFINITION

Abstract: Fake news is one of the most debated social phenomena of recent years. It has been the subject not only of several attempts at defining it, but also of numerous comparative analyses of prevalent definitions. Nonetheless, the present article fosters the ambition of offering a new definition. The innovation of my definition stems from the fact that it departs from the dominant “hybrid view” on fake news, which considers the defining traits of the phenomenon to be its truth value (i.e., its falseness) and the intention of its author (i.e., to mislead its public). Opposing this view, the present article argues that the producer’s intent is irrelevant in regard to classifying news as fake news. On the contrary, the defining trait of fake news is, alongside the falsehood of its content, the discourse’s perlocutionary force, which invariably entails a call to action addressed to the text’s recipient.

Keywords: fake news, social media, truth value, intention, perlocutionary act.

Citation suggestion: Terian, Simina-Maria. “What Is Fake News: A New Definition.” *Transilvania*, no. 11-12 (2021): 112-120. <https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2021.11-12.17>.



Fake news is, most certainly, neither a recent phenomenon nor a new concept. Whereas the practice itself has existed ever since antiquity, the concept used to define it first appeared at the dawn of the modern era. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the earliest known reference to “fake news” can be dated back to the 16th century and has been widely used since the late 19th century¹. However, the term “fake news” has enjoyed a spike in popularity during recent years, especially following the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. For instance, “fake news” has been named the “word of the year” in 2017 both by the American Dialect Society² and by the reputable Collins Dictionary³. Moreover, the phrase’s popularity seems to be ever-increasing, given that Macquarie Dictionary, the most trustworthy resource for Australian English, not only chose “fake news” as “word of the year” for 2016, but has also recently declared it “word of the decade”⁴.

The aim of the present article is to formulate a new definition of fake news. This ambition naturally entails that I will distance myself from previous attempts, given that there is not only “an abundance of (tentative) definitions”⁵ of the phenomenon, but also numerous reviews trying to classify the definitions that have already been laid out. However, as I will illustrate in the following, the majority of existing definitions fall under a “hybrid view” (fake news = lack of truth + lack of

truthfulness), and this is the main position that I intend to contest. But before I go into further detail, it seems necessary to establish whether a new definition of fake news is at all required. I mention this because, regardless of the numerous definitions that the phrase was given in recent years, its utility has oftentimes been put to the question. Probably the one who best formulated such objections is Joshua Habgood-Coote, who identified three major shortcomings of the phrase “fake news”, as well as of its correlative, “post-truth”: both concepts are presumably “linguistically defective” (they do not have very precise meanings), “unnecessary” (they overlap with preexisting terms, especially from the semantic fields of deception and misinformation), and they represent “propaganda” (they embody the “bad ideology” of the one making use of them)⁶. Of course, each of these objections deserves a more in-depth debate of its own; it is equally obvious, however, that they are not equally solid. Whereas the clarity and utility of the phrase “fake news” will undergo a comprehensive analysis in the following, the third objection (the “propaganda”) is irrelevant for the phenomenon’s study; on the contrary, as in the case of other negative terms that have circulated throughout political and ideological discourse (such as “manipulation” and “misinformation”), it is precisely the propagandistic nature of the phrase that makes it even



more fascinating for scholarship.

As for the phrase's precision and utility, Habgood-Coote's objections are fairly isolated. Nearly all the researchers engaging with this phenomenon emphasized that fake news indicates a new reality and requires new approaches. Therefore, fake news—or the “new” fake news, for those who consider that this practice is older than traditionally thought—designate “a new feature of political discourse”⁷, but also a symptom of the contemporary world, marked by a “new act of sharing” demonstrating that „the *infrastructure* essential to the spread of fake news ... has shifted radically in the past few decades”⁸ and that the ethics of this new space is not yet configured according to stable principles, but to a series of „*disputed norms* of communication”⁹. Given these circumstances, “a new epistemology”¹⁰ is required for better understanding the phenomenon, as well as “a new system of safeguards”¹¹ in order to protect ourselves from it; naturally, we also need the most precise definition as possible, which would allow for better identifying it.

The Issues with Defining Fake News

These all seem reasonable observations, but in reality, the issue is infinitely more complex. Which are the main obstacles interfering with the attempt to adequately define fake news? The first of them, once we transgress structural objections such as those raised by Habgood-Coote, is that the understanding of this phenomenon requires “interdisciplinary research”¹². Such a requirement is not a simple trend among other contemporary trends but constitutes rather a necessity. Since, in the absence of an interdisciplinary study, the concept risks to dissolve into a series of idiosyncratic definitions, sharing no common trait and therefore functioning in parallel instead of converging. This could also take place because, oftentimes, the disciplines studying the phenomenon tend to define it in their own terms and ignore the contribution of other disciplines. For instance, from a preponderantly journalistic and communicational perspective, fake news is defined as “the broad spread stories treated by those who spread them as having been produced by standard journalistic practices, but that have not in fact been produced by such practices”¹³. However, computer scientists concentrate on linguistic traits and the ways in which news is disseminated online,¹⁴ whereas philosophers and psychologists are interested especially in the truth value and the intentions of their creators and publishers. The main issue is that such partial approaches tend to give way to what we could coin *disciplinary bubbles*, in which interdisciplinary dialogue becomes impossible. In this way, notwithstanding that the definition cited above seems essential for a journalist or a specialist in the ethics of communication, it could prove useless or be easily contested by a philosopher or computer scientist. For instance, a journalist obtaining certain information through bribing or blackmailing his sources represents, without a doubt, a violation of “standard journalistic practices”, but it does not necessarily mean that the news is fake.

At the same time, the definition of fake news must be operational, that is to say, it must allow for the quickest verification and for the most precise labelling of presumed fake news as such. Naturally, no analysis can eschew the now established practice of “fact checking”. Beyond this, however, verifying other aspects of news can prove problematic. For example, if we return to the definition of fake news formulated by Jessica Pepp, Eliot Michaelson, and Rachel Sterken, which I have cited above, we can observe how both of its components—the “broad spread” and the production of news by transgressing “standard journalistic practices”—are difficult to assess both by the ordinary consumer and by the scholar studying the phenomenon. On the one hand, even when overseeing the ambiguous nature of the phrase, it is difficult to establish the extent to which news was or was not “broad(ly) spread” online. If, as the three aforementioned authors claim, “the required breadth would seem to vary with the field of interest for the story” and, for a story to become fake news in a smaller community, “it might only need to be read and treated as news by fifty or so people”¹⁵, even the verification process would require a laborious analysis (consisting of identifying the “fifty or so” people who know/spread the news, discussing who among them consider it news, etc.), which is hard to believe could be conducted *for every news*. On the other hand, even if we suppose the existence of a consensus on what we call “standard journalistic practices”, how could we check whether or not the obtainment of every news respected these practices? In order to explore this aspect, we would have to gain access to some additional information, which more often than not remain inaccessible (how many sources does the story have, has there been a conflict of interest in reporting it, etc.).

Not least, a fundamental difficulty consists in *identifying the dimensions* that should be taken into account in defining of fake news. The difficulty is, as we shall see, two-pronged: (a) there are components which, however characteristic to fake news they might be, are nonetheless not decisive in defining it; (b) there are components that not only *do not* contribute to defining the phenomenon, but also prove misleading for its understanding, in the sense of allowing for definitions that are too broad or, on the contrary, too narrow. Both these categories should be eliminated from the definition of fake news, even if some of them might prove more or less useful for understanding the phenomenon. But what are the minimally required dimensions that we should consider in order to arrive at a working definition? Axel Gelfert identifies several “recurring themes” or “thematically related clusters” in discussing fake news: the environment, the truth value, and the intention¹⁶. For Glenn Anderau, there would actually be four instead of three components: falsity, intentionality, “minimum audience”, and “dynamic account”¹⁷. The most scrupulous in this regard seem to be Romy Jaster and David Lanius, who list no less than 7 dimensions of fake news: *Truth, Deception, Bullshit, Appearance, Effect, Virality, and Media*¹⁸. Given their larger number, I will employ them in building my argument, with two alterations: first, I will approach them in a

different order than Jaster and Lanius, in the hopes of having identified a more logical trajectory from the more general components to the particularities of fake news; second, I will subsequently merge two of the aforementioned dimensions (“Deception” and “Bullshit”) into one, given that they actually represent two facets of the same component (“Intent”).

Format (“Appearance”)

I will begin my analysis by giving expression to an apparent truism: fake news is—or at least imitates/is mistaken for/takes the guise of—news, i.e., a (sub)genre of journalistic/informative discourse claiming to transmit real information about some entities or events of public interest to a certain community. However, such a classification is not at all self-evident, given that, according to Jaster and Lanius, most contemporary definitions do not consider fake news as defined by its status as news.¹⁹ But without this status, it is hardly conceivable that fake news could have ever had the impact it eventually had. In M. R. X. Dentith’s words, “fake news gets its potency by being a deliberately misleading *news* story”²⁰. In other words, even if it is not technically “real” news, fake news imitates/is mistaken for/takes the guise of “real” news. Through its very format, it *pretends to be* “real” news, hence it can be at least partially regarded as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent”²¹.

Such a status requires a set of remarks and additional dissociations. First of all, fake news is not the only type of news that mimics “real” news. Other types of discourse fall into the same category, such as imaginary news. The latter, regardless of whether it features in fictional works or belongs to the (sub)genre of satirical news, also mimics real news. Until the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, the phrase “fake news” was reserved mainly to describe satirical news²², and some computational approaches still use this category to identify fake news. However, satirical news—and imaginary news generally—represents a different (sub)genre of news, because, unlike fake news, it doesn’t claim to transmit exclusively real information, but explicitly performs within an aesthetic convention, either fictional or comical.

On the other hand, a difficulty seems to reside in the delimitation of news itself from other social practices. Are certain opinions voiced on private social media accounts to be regarded as “news”? Or should this genre be exclusively associated with institutionalized journalism? The problem can be addressed in two ways, both of which lead to the same conclusion. A first approach would be to accept that institutionalized journalism as it was conceived in the modern era is much too restrictive and that it should be rather understood, as Mitchell Stephens suggests in his seminal book on the history of news, as “more than just the production of printed ‘journals’”, and in this way expanded to include the entire “activity of gathering and disseminating news”²³. A second approach would be to identify, as Stuart Allan does, a “culture of news” that would transcend the separation between media and society²⁴ and through this would no longer require

the validation of institutionalized journalism. Throughout both approaches, however, information from social media is still to be regarded as news, even if, in both cases, the claim that “[f]ake news challenges our conception of what the ‘news’ is”²⁵ remains equally valid.

Third, the issue of discerning fake news is raised not only in regard to the limits of journalism as institution and practice, but also in regard to journalistic genres. For instance, Dentith voices the opinion that this category of news cannot assimilate “opinion pieces”, “press releases”, or “stories told by politicians or other influential individuals”²⁶. Things are very debatable in regard to the latter two categories, since the greater half of the history of news (and the history of journalism generally) consists of press releases, letters, edicts, decrees, and laws published by various administrative, economic, or religious institutions. Concerning opinion pieces, necessary distinctions are difficult to make in this case, but this has nothing to do with the ambiguity of fake news as concept, but rather with that of news as general phenomenon. As Nikil Mukerji remarks, “fake news is like news, except fake. Accordingly, the concept of fake news has to be at least as vague as the concept of news.”²⁷ Accordingly, any definition of fake news should include and build upon the concept of news, irrespective of how the latter is understood.

Medium

What is the role played by the medium in the spread of fake news? Or, more exactly: can any news be fake news, or only those that are disseminated through a particular medium, such as social media? The majority of fake news commentators, regardless of whether they consider it a new phenomenon or just the new face of an older phenomenon, made observations regarding the role of social media (and of the Internet, generally) in its dissemination²⁸. For instance, Regina Rini saw that “there is a strong contingent relationship between fake news and social media”²⁹, whereas David Lazer et al. noticed that “Internet platforms have become the most important enablers and primary conduits of fake news”³⁰. But is this a defining medium for fake news? In order to make this claim, we should condition the phenomenon on certain practices and processes that occur exclusively online. Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken tried to explain the spread of “new” fake news through the emergence of a new speech act: “the speech act of ‘sharing’ is characteristic of, if not essential to, the new fake news”³¹. However, the simple fact that the authors mention “*new* fake news” illustrate that they do not consider medium to be deciding for the entire phenomenon, but only for one of its historic manifestations. Additionally, Gelfert’s observation that “a piece of online fake news does not cease to be fake news, just because it gets picked up and repeated on AM talk radio or makes its way into an op-ed piece by a paper columnist”³² holds true. Consequently, the (online) medium cannot be considered a distinctive element for the emergence and spread of fake news.



Virality

An often-invoked feature of fake news is its virality, which derives to a large extent from—without fully coinciding with—its dissemination across social media. News can be spread in a myriad of ways, but the development of so-called “social bots” which, according to several estimates, represent between 5 and 15% of all social media accounts³³, gave a new impetus to the spread of information, both real and false. In fact, according to Rini, achieving virality is the very purpose of fake news: “The ‘news’ part of ‘fake news’ implies that the deception is intended for an audience larger than the immediate recipient; fake news is meant to be shared and shared again.”³⁴ Nonetheless, virality of fake news does not necessarily rely on the medium through which they spread. This is emphasized by Gelfert who, without considering the medium among the defining elements of fake news, still considers virality to depend on it: “What makes contemporary fake news a novel phenomenon, and gives it its significance, is the extent to which systemic features inherent in the design of the sources and channels through which fake news is disseminated ensure its proliferation.”³⁵ For Gelfert, virality of fake news emerges “by design”, but in his vision, this design does not necessarily include the Internet, but a series of rhetoric strategies such as “confirmation bias”, “repetition effects”, “priming”, “affective arousal”, “poisoning the well”, etc.³⁶ In any case, a possible objection to this approach can be the same objection raised by Gelfert to those who exaggerated the role of social media in the production and dissemination of fake news: if fake news does not become viral, this does not mean that it is less fake and/or news. Therefore, one cannot claim that virality is a defining trait of fake news.

Truth Value

However, all scholars of fake news agree that the truth value, i.e., the lack of truth, is one of the mandatory elements in the definition of fake news. Ultimately, if news would not be fake, we would not refer to it as *fake* news, but as other informational phenomena. Additionally, in nearly all definitions focusing on the truth value of fake news, this criterium is complemented by their intention (namely to mislead). Together, the two criteria constitute what has been coined *the hybrid view* on fake news. A perfect illustration of this is the definition formulated by Jaster și Lanius:

“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.”³⁷

I will discuss the—present of absent—intention of fake news in the following. For now, I will exclusively concentrate on its truth value. A first observation in this regard is that fake news not only can include, but through its very definition includes certain textual segments that, taken in and for themselves,

cannot be classified as “falsehoods”. This particularity has been observed by numerous scholars addressing the phenomenon. They have shown that “fake news need not be entirely fictional”³⁸, that “[m]any fake news stories are not wholly false, but mix deliberate falsehoods with well-known truths as a means of obfuscation”³⁹, and that, “[i]f it suits their purpose, publishers of fake news will, on occasion, deliberately sprinkle some truths on top of their stories, for example, to make them more credible”⁴⁰. Notwithstanding, I consider that classifying these elements as “truths” is, in itself, a misleading act. Actually, *all* fake news—including the news launched by young Macedonians in 2016, that Pope Francis would endorse Donald Trump during the U.S. presidential elections, which represents a classical example of fabricated news⁴¹—contains elements linking them in one way or the other to reality; otherwise, it would not be news at all, but pure fiction. Moreover, I think it would be misleading to hierarchize fake news according to the—larger or smaller—“coefficient of truth” it embodies, given that the most toxic examples of fake news are not necessarily those that contain the most fabricated elements. But this claim deserves a separate demonstration. For now, let us remark that the presence of *certain* “real”/“true” elements is not a factor that would single out *certain* fake news; they simply characterize *any* fake news as a (sub)genre of news.

Another important observation regards the perspective from which fake news is formulated. The problem regards chiefly the so-called “(hyper)partisan news”, which certain analyses either classify as fake news proper or treat it as being similar to fake news⁴². Notwithstanding, it is crucial to add that ideological bias is not a defining element of fake news *per se*. Advancing such a criterium is indicative rather of a naïve and idyllic perspective over the media, according to which journalists “objectively” reflect reality “as it is”. But, how Dentith remarked, “media coverage of supposedly contentious issues (particularly in the U.S., it seems) have turned out to be, for decades, highly partisan”⁴³. Furthermore, Rini convincingly demonstrated that “partisanship is consistent with epistemic virtue”, since “[p]artisanship reflects a person’s *value commitments*”⁴⁴. Therefore, partisanship cannot be accepted as a criterium for defining and identifying fake news.

Such a clarification is important for understanding yet another aspect of the phenomenon. According to Jaster and Lanius, “a news report is true” when this trait (truth) is to be found “both in its *literal content* (‘what is said’) and in its *communicative content* (‘what it pragmatically conveys’)”⁴⁵. Subsequently, “fake news reports need not be literally false. Even when what is *said* is true, a piece of news is lacking truth if it pragmatically *conveys* something false.”⁴⁶ What does it actually mean, however, that the communicative content of news is false? The typical cases seem to be those in which the information required for understanding news is presented selectively, so that its producer/publisher can more easily suggest (“convey”) a *certain interpretation* based on the conveyed information. Yet, the problem does not reside here in the communicative content (in the “interpretation”),

but in the literal content (in the “information”). For, however “partisan” the interpretation given to the news by its author would be, its “fake” character does not originate in the fact that the information conveyed would be interpreted *in a certain way*, but rather in the fact that certain information was deliberately omitted. In fact, even this selective transmission of information is a form of deceit, as shown by the phrase “lying by omission”. Therefore, we can maintain the distinction between the two types of fake news mentioned by Jaster and Lanius on the condition that we redefine it. In this regard, it can be useful to distinguish between *falsehood by addition or substitution* (which can be observed in the case of fabricated news) and *falsehood by omission* (which is the preferred form taken by propagandistic news). In both cases, however, we must concede that falsehood takes place at the level of the news’ literal content.

Intent

I have already mentioned that, throughout the majority of contemporary definitions of fake news, the truth or falsehood value of fake news is associated with another element, namely the intention⁴⁷. According to Lazer et al., “the defining element of fake news” is “the intent and processes of the publisher”⁴⁸. Regarding to the content of this intention, most scholars agree that the traditional intention of fake news is to deceive its recipient. For example, Dentith defines fake news as “a misleading story which is intended to deceive some target audience”⁴⁹, emphasizing that the key element of this definition is the idea of “intentional deception”⁵⁰; for Gelfert, “[f]ake news is the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims *as news*, where the claims are misleading *by design*”⁵¹; similar opinions are to be found in the definitions of Rini, Jaster, and Lanius, cited above.

However, the intent to mislead has also been nuanced. One limit of deception fell under the category of what has been called “the Frankfurtian view”, based on Harry G. Frankfurt’s concept of “bullshit”. According to the American philosopher, bullshit does not necessarily entail the intention of deceiving your recipient, but rather a “lack of connection to a concern with truth”, i.e., an “indifference to how things really are”⁵². This perception was borrowed and applied in the study of fake news by Mukerji, who thought that “fake news is Frankfurtian bullshit that is asserted in the form of a news publication”, adding that, on the one hand, “a bullshiter simply does not care whether what he says is true”, and on the other, that „[i]t appears that he wants to hide his actual motives”⁵³.

There is no doubt that both deception and bullshit are defining traits of *certain* types of fake news. Considering this, it is very likely that the news that a group of Muslims set fire to a church in Dortmund in New Year’s Eve 2016 is meant to deceive its audience⁵⁴, whereas the one regarding Trump being endorsed by Pope Francis is simply indifferent to the truth. But do these situations account for all cases of fake news? Are there no other cases in which the creators and publishers of fake news truly believe in the truth value of the

information they disseminate? For instance, in discussing the infamous Pizzagate case, wherein it was stipulated that there was a human trafficking and pedophilia network run by members of the Democrat Party from a pizzeria in Washington, D.C.⁵⁵, Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken seriously consider the eventuality that “our hypothetical author would likely have taken himself to be *getting the truth out*”⁵⁶.

Mukerji also discusses Pizzagate in great detail and considers it “the quintessential *fake news* story”⁵⁷, taking into account other possible intentions of the authors besides the simple bullshit. On the one hand, he accepts the possibility that Pizzagate is a deliberately fabricated news with the aim of deceiving, so that he feels compelled to distinguish between “the *bullshit type*” and “the *pure lying type*”⁵⁸. On the other hand, Mukerji also accepts the possibility that the creator of Pizzagate genuinely believed his own fabrication, but adds that then, “the idea of deception is extended such that it also covers *self-deception*”⁵⁹. However, this detail is less relevant from the perspective of defining fake news. What is important is that Mukerji shows—even without explicitly claiming this—that fake news can equally account for *all types* of possible intentions: indifference towards the truth (= bullshit), “pure lie” (= the intention to deceive), and truthfulness (even under the guise of self-deception). However, when fake news can be spread *with any sort of intention* from the part of the producer/publisher, this simply means that intention cannot be considered as a distinctive trait of fake news. In other words, the creator’s intention—at least his/her intention of telling, distorting, or ignoring the truth—cannot be included in the definition of fake news.

Effect

Throughout the literature, there has been frequent debates on the toxic effects of fake news. Ultimately, had they not existed, the phenomenon would not have been so discussed in the first place. But do these effects have to be integrated into the definition of fake news? The majority of scholars think not. Gelfert is an exception, as he claims that “for a claim to be considered fake news, it must *in fact* mislead a relevant audience—though precisely how large an audience may depend on the case at hand—and it must do so in virtue of the way it is designed to pass itself off as news (at least to the relevant target audience)”⁶⁰. Furthermore, he claims, “what matters in the case of fake news, and gives urgency to it as a sociopolitical phenomenon, is that sufficiently large numbers of people are in fact taken in by it”⁶¹. Gelfert’s position raises two issues. The first refers to establishing a reasonable threshold for the effect to qualify certain discourses as fake news. What does “a relevant audience” and “sufficiently large numbers of people” actually mean? Absolute numbers? Percent? It is hard to believe one could ever answer these questions in a satisfactory manner. The second issue regards the very premise of this approach: if fake news is not convincing (or, in any case, does not manage to convince “sufficiently large numbers of people”, regardless of how we define these numbers), does this mean that it ceased



to be fake? We hereby encounter a similar situation as when we addressed the medium and the virality. And the answer is equally similar: because of several reasons ranging from the difficulty of establishing a reasonable quantitative threshold for the number of people that should be “mislead” to the impossibility of objectively checking the fulfilment of such a criterium, the effect—at least in the way Gelfert understands it—cannot be included in the definition of fake news.

Notwithstanding, fake news is intended to exert effects on its public “by design”. Moreover, if we could think of a way to salvage the role of intent within fake news, we would claim, without fear of being mistaken, that the intention of the producers and/or publishers of this type of discourse, regardless of their attitude towards the truth, is precisely that of producing *certain effects* on their public. This is precisely the element distinguishing it from “real” news. “Real” news such as presenting the latest laws adopted by a country’s Parliament, announcing the traffic jams in a certain segment of the highway, or the scores of the last stage of the national football cup does not intend to produce *specific* effects on the public it aims at. For instance, a lorry driver planning to travel on the highway on which the traffic jam had meanwhile occurred could dismiss the news as irrelevant, postpone his trip until the jam subsides, or travel regardless, yet fostering other expectations. Yet, none of these effects is particularly pursued by the story’s creator: the latter hopes, of course, that the drivers will find the news *somehow* relevant, without being in the least concerned as to *how*. On the contrary, fake news is meant to produce in their recipient *a certain type of action* (or, as we will see, inaction). For example, Pizzagate was intended to spurn or to increase the hostility of U.S. voters against the Democrats, the Dortmund incident was fabricated to create or increase the hostility of Christians (and generally that of non-Muslims) towards Muslims, whereas the news factory of Veles, North Macedonia, that launched the news about Trump and Pope Francis pursued financial gains.

The particular way in which fake news pursues *certain* effects among its public can be easily explained with the aid of pragmatics. According to this discipline, one can claim that the producers and spreaders of fake news perform a *practical perlocutionary speech act*, i.e., they attempt to determine the recipient to perform a certain type of action. According to J. L. Austin, the following situations fall within the category of perlocutionary acts: “Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them.”⁶² This description inspired a classification made by Robert Gaines, who, according to the manner in which perlocutionary acts affect the feelings, thoughts, and/or actions of the interlocutor, divided them into five categories: involuntary (FEELINGS₁: *amuse, shock, astonish*, etc.), voluntary (FEELINGS₂: *intimidate, insult, humiliate*, etc.), epistemic (THOUGHT₁: *deceive, teach, persuade that*, etc.), motivational (THOUGHT₂: *persuade to, inspire, incite*), and practical (ACTIONS: *get H to [start/*

continue/finish/stop] doing A)⁶³. Among these categories, even if the first two are not in the least excluded from the effects pursued by fake news, they do not represent the main objective of this type of discourse; because feelings, however strong, are transitory and do not necessarily lead to changes in one’s behavior. Then, albeit the epistemic element plays a significant role within fake news, it is far from being its defining factor. Ultimately, fake news does not foster philosophical ambitions: its aim is not to help people in clarifying fundamental aspects of their existence, and generally, the public’s desire to conduct in-depth investigations to find out more about the subjects discussed in fake news is not in the best interest of the latter. By way of consequence, the key question is whether the aim of fake news is “only” a motivational one (*H is persuaded to do X*) or a practical one (*H effectively does X*). The difference seems minor, but, from the perspective of the studied phenomenon, it is essential. Returning to the aforementioned cases, we can reasonably assume that, from the standpoint of the authors of Pizzagate, their entire undertaking would have been a failure had it not had a tangible negative effect on the Democratic Party (ranging from people publicly denouncing them on social media to voters expressing their sympathy for their rivals); similarly, from the perspective of the Macedonian publishers, we can safely assume that their news about Pope Francis would have failed its initial aim had the public only read it as an interesting story and not shared it further. In conclusion, without excluding the emotional and cognitive components, fake news is meant to lead their public to action: they pursue a practical effect, i.e., to influence the behavior of their readers in a palpable way.

Conclusions

As noted above, the novelty of my definition is best observed in comparison to the hybrid view on fake news. According to this view, “fake news is news that is both lacking truth and truthfulness ... News fails to be true if it is either literally false or conveys false information. News lacks truthfulness if it is produced with the intention to deceive or without any concern for the truth in the relevant domain.”⁶⁴ Departing from this view, my definition dismisses the intention of the news’ producer as irrelevant, favoring the impact that this subgenre aims to effect on its public. Consequently, the definition I hereby put forward is the following: *Fake news is a (sub)genre of journalistic/informative discourse that conveys false information presented as true, with the purpose of eliciting a certain type of action in a certain community*. The definition has three elements: (a) classifying fake news as actual (“real”/“true”) news; (b) the discourse’s truth value (=false); (c) the effect that it pursues (to incite somebody to do something). These elements were all discussed throughout the article. I will limit myself to bringing two additional distinctions. First, the addition of “in a certain community” does not constitute a fourth element of my definition, but rather a simple extension of the concept of “news”; through its very nature, news always targets “a certain community”. There is no universal news,

even if some are labelled as being “of general interest”. Second, component (c) of the definition includes both the action and the *inaction* (detering someone from performing a certain action). The latter category of news is generally spread by governments and authorities in positions of power, which try to seem more stable than they actually are, in order to hinder the establishment of a robust political opposition. In fact, if we were to consider the first fake news in history to be the triumphant account of pharaoh Ramesses II of a battle he waged in 1274 B.C., then we could say that the phenomenon itself began precisely with this category of news.⁶⁵

In addition to its superior accuracy, I believe that the definition formulated in the present article can contribute to a better understanding of fake news from at least two perspectives. On the one hand, by eliminating the intentional factor and acquiescing that, at least sometimes, the authors of fake news genuinely believe their allegations, it allows us to

delve into a hitherto insufficiently researched field, referring to the thematic convergences between different fake news and the possibility of assimilating them into broader scenarios, especially by making use of conspiracy theories. On the other hand, by eliminating the assumption of malintent that governed the entire understanding of fake news can help us better understand the mechanism through which they spread, replacing the rudimentary dichotomy between the deceivers and the deceived with the more complex representation of networks or communities rallying behind shared sets of values and beliefs. But these are, of course, topics that should be approached at length in separate studies.

Acknowledgement: „This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, CNCS-UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-TE-2019-1794, within PNCDI III”.

Note

1. Merriam-Webster, “The Real Story of ‘Fake News’”, 23 March 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-real-story-of-fake-news>
2. American Dialect Society, “‘Fake News’ Is 2017 American Dialect Society Word of the Year”, 5 January 2018, <https://www.americandialect.org/fake-news-is-2017-american-dialect-society-word-of-the-year>
3. Collins Dictionary, “Collins 2017 Word of the Year Shortlist”, 2 November 2017, <https://blog.collinsdictionary.com/language-lovers/collins-2017-word-of-the-year-shortlist/>
4. Macquarie Dictionary, “The Macquarie Dictionary Word of the Decade Winner Is...”, 4 February 2021, <https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/blog/article/780/>
5. Axel Gelfert, “Fake News: A Definition”, *Informal Logic* 38, no. 1 (2018): 94.
6. Joshua Habgood-Coote, “Stop Talking about Fake News!”, *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 62, no. 9-10 (2019): 1034.
7. M. R. X. Dentith, “The Problem of Fake News”, *Synthese* 8, no. 1-2 (2017): 65.
8. Jessica Pepp, Eliot Michaelson, and Rachel Katharine Sterken, “What’s New About Fake News?”, *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 16 (2019): 68.
9. Regina Rini, “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology”, *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 27 (2017): 47.
10. Sven Bernecker, Amy K. Flowerree, and Thomas Grundmann. “Introduction”, in *The Epistemology of Fake News*, edited by Sven Bernecker, Amy K. Flowerree, and Thomas Grundmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2
11. David M. J. Lazer, Matthew A. Baum, Yoichi Benkler, Adam J. Berinsky, Kelly M. Greenhill, Filippo Menczer, Miriam J. Metzger, Brendan Nyhan, Gordon Pennycook, David Rothschild, Michael Schudson, Steven A. Sloman, Cass R. Sunstein, Emily A. Thorson, Duncan J. Watts and Jonathan L. Zittrain. “The Science of Fake News”, *Science* 359, no. 6380 (2018): 1094.
12. Ibid., 1096. Anca-Simina Martin and Simina-Maria Terian reach similar conclusions in their article, “Știrile false: limite și perspective ale analizei lingvistice”, *Transilvania*, no. 10 (2020): 72-77.
13. Pepp, Michaelson & Sterken, “What’s New About Fake News?”, 69.
14. See the review by Costin Busioc, Stefan Ruseti, and Mihai Dascalu, “A Literature Review of NLP Approaches to Fake News Detection and Their Applicability to Romanian-Language News Analysis”, *Transilvania*, no. 10 (2020): 65-71.
15. Ibid.
16. Gelfert, “Fake News: A Definition”, 96-97.
17. Glenn Anderau, “Defining Fake News”, *Kriterion. Journal of Philosophy*, online first (2 September 2021): 9.
18. Romy Jaster and David Lanus, “Speaking of Fake News: Definitions and Dimensions”, in *The Epistemology of Fake News*, edited by Sven Bernecker, Amy K. Flowerree, and Thomas Grundmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 25-27.
19. Ibid., 37.
20. M. R. X. Dentith, “What Is Fake News?”, *University of Bucharest Review: Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 8, no. 2 (2018): 27.
21. Lazer et al., “The Science of Fake News”, 1094.
22. Bernecker, Flowerree & Grundmann, “Introduction”, 4.
23. Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News: From the Drum to the Satellite* (New York: Viking, 1988), 3.



24. Stuart Allan, *News Culture*, second edition (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004) 3.
25. Dentith, "What Is Fake News?", 24
26. *Ibid.*, 26–27.
27. N. S. Mukerji, "What Is Fake News?", *Ergo* 5 (2018): 937.
28. A key moment in this regard seems to be the 2016 US presidential elections as well. In Romania, a similar case could be that of the social protests from 2017 to 2019—see Raluca Mureşan, "The Interplay Between Social Movements and Media: From Creative Ways to Grab Media Attention to Spreading Fake News", *Transilvania*, no. 3 (2021): 76–82.
29. Rini, "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology", 45.
30. Lazer et al., "The Science of Fake News", 1095.
31. Pepp, Michaelson & Sterken, "What's New About Fake News?", 68.
32. Gelfert, "Fake News: A Definition", 98.
33. Lazer et al., "The Science of Fake News", 1095.
34. Rini, "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology", 44. This convinced Rini to include virality in the very definition of fake news: „A fake news story is 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.” (*Ibid.*, 45)
35. Gelfert, "Fake News: A Definition", 111.
36. *Ibid.*, 111–112.
37. Jaster & Lanius, "Speaking of Fake News: Definitions and Dimensions", 20.
38. Dentith, "What Is Fake News?", 25.
39. Gelfert, "Fake News: A Definition", 100.
40. Mukerji, "What Is Fake News?", 928.
41. Heather C. Hughes and Israel Waismel-Manor, "The Macedonian Fake News Industry and the 2016 US Election", *Political Science & Politics* 54, no. 1 (2021): 19–23.
42. See Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand, "The Psychology of Fake News", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 25, no. 5 (2021): 388–389.
43. Dentith, "The Problem of Fake News", 67.
44. Rini, "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology", 50–51.
45. Jaster & Lanius, "Speaking of Fake News: Definitions and Dimensions", 21.
46. *Ibid.*, 21–22.
47. Among the new notable exceptions from this rule are Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken, who argue that "fake news is best conceived of as something that can arise independently of anyone's having intended to produce it" (Pepp, Michaelson & Sterken, "What's New About Fake News?", 90).
48. Lazer et al., "The Science of Fake News", 1095.
49. Dentith, "What Is Fake News?", 24.
50. *Ibid.*, 25.
51. Gelfert, "Fake News: A Definition", 108
52. Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 33–34.
53. Mukerji, "What Is Fake News?", 923.
54. Virginia Hale, "Revealed: 1,000-Man Mob Attack Police, Set Germany's Oldest Church Alight on New Year's Eve", *Breitbart*, 3 January 2017, <https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2017/01/03/dortmund-mob-attack-police-church-alight/>
55. Gregor Aisch, Jon Huang, and Cecilia Kang, "Dissecting the #PizzaGate Conspiracy Theories", *The New York Times*, 10 December 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/10/business/media/pizzagate.html>
56. Pepp, Michaelson & Sterken, "What's New About Fake News?", 74.
57. Mukerji, "What Is Fake News?", 926.
58. *Ibid.*, 941.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Gelfert, "Fake News: A Definition", 103.
61. *Ibid.*, 105.
62. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 101.
63. Robert N. Gaines, "Doing by Saying: Toward a Theory of Perlocution", *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65, no. 2 (1979): 209.
64. Bernecker, Flowerree & Grundmann, "Introduction", 6.
65. Dana Dovey, "Ancient Egypt Artifacts Depicting Ramses the Great as Victorious General Were Spreading Fake News", *Newsweek*, 29 January 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/ramses-great-ancient-egypt-fake-news-lying-pharaoh-794025>

Bibliography:

- Aisch, Gregor, Jon Huang, and Cecilia Kang. "Dissecting the #PizzaGate Conspiracy Theories." *The New York Times*, 10 December 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/10/business/media/pizzagate.html>
- Allan, Stuart. *News Culture*, second edition. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004.
- American Dialect Society. "'Fake News' Is 2017 American Dialect Society Word of the Year", 5 January 2018, <https://www.americandialect.org/fake-news-is-2017-american-dialect-society-word-of-the-year>
- Anderau, Glenn. "Defining Fake News." *Kriterion. Journal of Philosophy*, online first, 2 September 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1515/krt-2021-0019>
- Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Bernecker, Sven Amy K. Flowerree, and Thomas Grundmann. "Introduction." In *The Epistemology of Fake News*, edited by Sven Bernecker, Amy K. Flowerree, and Thomas Grundmann, 1–16. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Busioc, Costin, Stefan Ruseti, and Mihai Dascalu. "A Literature Review of NLP Approaches to Fake News Detection and Their Applicability to Romanian-Language News Analysis." *Transilvania*, no. 10 (2020): 65–71.
- Collins Dictionary. "Collins 2017 Word of the Year Shortlist", 2 November 2017, <https://blog.collinsdictionary.com/language-lovers/collins-2017-word-of-the-year-shortlist/>
- Dentith, M. R. X. "The Problem of Fake News." *Synthese* 8, no. 1–2 (2017): 65–79.
- Dentith, M. R. X. "What Is Fake News?" *University of Bucharest Review: Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 8, no. 2 (2018): 24–34.
- Dovey, Dana. "Ancient Egypt Artifacts Depicting Ramses the Great as Victorious General Were Spreading Fake News." *Newsweek*, 29 January 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/ramses-great-ancient-egypt-fake-news-lying-pharaoh-794025>
- Frankfurt, Harry G. *On Bullshit*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Gaines, Robert N. "Doing by Saying: Toward a Theory of Perlocution." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65, no. 2 (1979): 207–217.
- Gelfert, Axel. "Fake News: A Definition." *Informal Logic* 38, no. 1 (2018): 84–117.
- Habgood-Coote, Joshua. "Stop Talking about Fake News!" *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 62, no. 9–10 (2019): 1033–1065.
- Hale, Virginia. "Revealed: 1,000-Man Mob Attack Police, Set Germany's Oldest Church Alight on New Year's Eve." *Breitbart*, 3 January 2017, <https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2017/01/03/dortmund-mob-attack-police-church-alight/>
- Hughes, Heather C. and Israel Waismel-Manor. "The Macedonian Fake News Industry and the 2016 US Election." *Political Science & Politics* 54, no. 1 (2021): 19–23.
- Jaster, Romy and David Lanius. "Speaking of Fake News: Definitions and Dimensions". In *The Epistemology of Fake News*, edited by Sven Bernecker, Amy K. Flowerree, and Thomas Grundmann, 19–45. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Lazer, David M. J., Matthew A. Baum, Yochai Benkler, Adam J. Berinsky, Kelly M. Greenhill, Filippo Menczer, Miriam J. Metzger, Brendan Nyhan, Gordon Pennycook, David Rothschild, Michael Schudson, Steven A. Sloman, Cass R. Sunstein, Emily A. Thorson, Duncan J. Watts and Jonathan L. Zittrain. "The Science of Fake News." *Science* 359, no. 6380 (2018): 1094–1096.
- Macquarie Dictionary. "The Macquarie Dictionary Word of the Decade Winner Is...", 4 February 2021, <https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/blog/article/780/>
- Martin, Anca-Simina. "Antisemitic or Bordering on Antisemitic? Grey Areas in Romanian Fake News Discourses in the Wake of the Covid-19 Pandemic." *Transilvania*, no. 11–12 (2021): 121–127.
- Martin, Anca-Simina and Simina-Maria Terian. "Știrile false: limite și perspective ale analizei lingvistice." *Transilvania*, no. 10 (2020): 72–77.
- Merriam-Webster. "The Real Story of 'Fake News'", 23 March 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-real-story-of-fake-news>
- Mukerji, Nikil. "What Is Fake News?" *Ergo* 5 (2018): 923–946.
- Mureșan, Raluca. "The Interplay Between Social Movements and Media: From Creative Ways to Grab Media Attention to Spreading Fake News." *Transilvania*, no. 3 (2021): 76–82.
- Pepp, Jessica, Eliot Michaelson, and Rachel Katharine Sterken. "What's New About Fake News?" *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 16 (2019): 67–94.
- Pennycook, Gordon, and David G. Rand. "The Psychology of Fake News." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 25, no. 5 (2021): 388–402.
- Rini, Regina. "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology." *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 27 (2017): 43–64.
- Stephens, Mitchell. *A History of News: From the Drum to the Satellite*. New York: Viking, 1988.