



Fake News in Context: Truth and Untruths

Haris Alibašić & Jonathan Rose

To cite this article: Haris Alibašić & Jonathan Rose (2019) Fake News in Context: Truth and Untruths, *Public Integrity*, 21:5, 463-468, DOI: [10.1080/10999922.2019.1622359](https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2019.1622359)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2019.1622359>



Published online: 24 Jun 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2922



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

GUEST EDITORIAL

Fake News in Context: Truth and Untruths

Haris Alibašić

University of West Florida

Jonathan Rose

De Montfort University

Fake News appears to be the most modern of social problems. After bursting onto the scene in 2016, spurred in no small part by then Presidential candidate Trump and his commitment to a post-truth style of politics, Fake News has become a key battleground in many contemporary societies. Nonetheless, in this context it is not always clear what Fake News, as a concept, actually means. In recent academic work, Tandoc Jr., Lim, and Ling (2018) identified a typology of Fake News that covered activities as diverse as legitimate expression (e.g., news parody and satire) to all-out propaganda. Yet, at least from recent political usage, it now seems clear that the concept of Fake News now refers to two different things: (1) an ostensibly “real” news report, which aims to mimic the style and presentation of ordinary news, but which reports on things that did not happen; and (2) an allegation levelled against legitimate media, usually by a politician, aiming to discredit a report that portrays their actions in a negative light. While these two issues are clearly distinct in theory, in practice, the lines between each have always been blurred. It is widely understood in contemporary societies that Type-1 Fake News exists, and therefore, even seemingly legitimate reports must be viewed with caution. However, given the existence of Type-1 Fake News, malicious politicians have been able to confidently, and seemingly legitimately, use Type-2 Fake News allegations to cover up their own misdeeds. Even though the truth may eventually emerge, the confusion caused by Type-2 Fake News allegations may significantly reduce the impact of accurate reports. An assertion that a report is Fake News, therefore, becomes a useful

political tool, and in the case of some politicians, has become a standard part of their rhetorical repertoire.

To make matters worse, the phenomenon of Fake News is co-occurring at a time when the ability of politicians and their supporters to tell lies has never been greater. Social media, in particular, have no substantive filter for quality or content, and lies can sit next to truths without an easy way to be detected and appropriately addressed. In this context, Fake News has become a threat not only to the integrity of political debate, but also to the broader health of society in general. These same mechanisms are used to spread information by seeking to undermine scientific truths on issues as important as climate change negation and vaccination, as well as seeking to spur hatred between people through genocide denial and racist messages.

WHAT IS [A] TRUTH?

Fake News and allegations thereof have led to significant popular and critical discussions, ranging from the sanguine to the apocalyptic. At the most extreme, there has been a persistent fear that we are witnessing the end of truth and the final decline of modernity. And yet, despite the hyper-contemporary feel to much of this discussion, the issues raised by Fake News significantly predate modern society. Nearly 2,000 years ago, Pontius Pilate, when deliberating at the trial of Jesus, famously asked: “What is truth?” While Pilate did not wait for an answer to his question, from the late Mediaeval period, governors have been attempting to enforce truth and restrain Fake News through comprehensive legislation. Indeed, the 1275 Statute of Westminster (3 Edw. I. c.34) expressly outlawed spreading of what would now be called Fake News, noting:

For as much as there have oftentimes found in the Country Devisors of Tales, whereby Discord, or Occasion of Discord, hath many times arisen between the King and his People, or great Men of this Realm; For the Damage that hath and may therefore ensue, it is commanded, That from henceforth none be so hardy to tell or publish any false News or Tales, whereby Discord, or Occasion of Discord or Slander may grow between the king and his People, or the great Men of the Realm; and he that doth so, shall be taken and kept in Prison, until he hath brought him unto the Court which was the first Author of the Tale. (Ruffhead, trans. 1763, p. 53)

Here, the terminology refers to false news, because this law significantly predates the word *fake*, and yet the concern remains the same we face in modern society. In a similar way, *Scandalum Magnatum*, a report of a trial in Essex (England) in 1682, starts with the claim:

“Was there ever more need than now (to prevent false Reports) when every Coffee-House Table (instead of a better Carpet) is cover’d and pester’d with false News?” (*Scandalum Magnatum*, 1682, p. 3)

Phrasing aside, such a report could easily be made today. Similar to the modern concern, in both cases, there exists the plausible claim of the Fake News being either of Type-1 or

Type-2. Both could be earnest attempts to prevent Fake News spreading to a population who have a right to expect the information they consume to be accurate, while at the same time, both could represent an attempt by established politicians and judges to curate reality and prevent legitimate criticism.

And yet there remains something new about the modern (re)emergence of Fake News. Firstly, there is a difference in quantity. Distributing information in the 1270s was expensive and slow; the printing press did not exist, so everything was handwritten, and likely could be read only by a small section of the population. Any other transmission of information would have to be spoken in person, which significantly limited transfer in an age when extended travel was not common and, moreover, provided a measure of accountability for what was said. The news could be spread much faster by the 1680s, with the invention of the printing press and notable economies of scale in paper production. Yet even in the 1680s, distribution of Fake News was still a complex and challenging undertaking when compared with the ease of sending a Facebook message. While setting up a Website now may be as difficult as printing a single sheet of Fake News in the 1680s, a single Website can reach limitless people around the world, while even at a well-attended Coffee-House in the 1680s, the potential audience would be many fewer than 1,000 people, and in practice, would be read by very few.

Secondly, there is a difference in quality. Fake News (of Type-1) is increasingly making use of sophisticated tools, including artificial intelligence, to microtarget specific groups of individuals; reinforcing their existing beliefs or subtly creating new ones. In addition to fake written stories, sophisticated computer programs increasingly allow the creation of counterfeit pictures that are almost indistinguishable from real ones. Moreover, the emergence of so-called “deep fake” video allows the production of seemingly authentic video footage of a real person, in their voice-style, which is entirely fabricated. We are still in the early days of fake video, but it is already clear that it has the potential vastly to increase the believability of Fake News.

At the same time, the overhead costs for creating such a video are rapidly falling. Indeed, it is likely already possible to create a hyper-realistic fake video by using only consumer hardware. While the creation of this video form of Fake News continues to become easier, detection concomitantly grows harder. We are rapidly approaching the point at which detection of fake videos would require sophisticated analyses using specialized hardware and software. Once we reach this point, it will be virtually impossible for an ordinary citizen to know whether any given video is real. At the same time, this vastly increased uncertainty will also provide plausible deniability for politicians, the military, the police, and so on, to discount genuine videos of their adverse actions: the mere existence of these tools will significantly increase the efficacy of type-2 Fake News allegations.

When citizens are in a position to no longer know what is real and what is fake, they may respond by attempting to turn toward the “legitimate” media; news that is published by established publishers with proven track records. This process undoubtedly will provide some protection from both kinds of Fake News. However, even a small measure of protection from the harmful effects of Fake News is helpful, it in no way solves the problem that we, as a society, face. Firstly, because Fake News can fool even “legitimate” media. In a situation in which the media become the gatekeepers of truth, misleading the media will dramatically

increase the efficacy of Fake News, and secondly, because it remains entirely possible that individuals will disagree about which media are “legitimate.” Coupled with the different approaches and political biases of various media outlets, we may still end up in a situation in which even citizens acting in good faith may be unsure about what is true. The existence of state-backed media in many jurisdictions poses further challenges. Despite many such outlets having an outstanding reputation for impartiality, the potential for inappropriately close relationships with politicians will remain; which may well make some reluctant to be imbued with confidence in state media. And yet the problems of inappropriately close relationships between the media and the government can also exist even with fully private media, including through corruption or intimidation.

THE REAL-WORLD IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS

As is apparent from the discussion above, fake news can undermine the accountability of politicians, and potentially make it harder for citizens to know what is true. On its own, this is a serious concern, but perhaps the most serious concern is the ability of Fake News to create an artificial worldview for specific groups of citizens that systematically distorts reality. There have been several recent examples where precisely this kind of distortion has led to devastating consequences. In Mexico, a Fake News report spread by WhatsApp led to two men being burned to death following rumours of their being child snatchers. The so-called Pizzagate story—Fake News purporting to show that senior members of the Democratic Party were part of a secret child sex ring—led in 2016 to a shooting at the Pizza restaurant purported to be the site of the criminal activity. While the child sex story was extensively debunked in 2016, the same restaurant was the victim of an arson attack in 2019. Fake News professing to cover blasphemy in Pakistan has led to distrust between communities and several subsequent murders. Fake News alleging that vaccination is dangerous to children has seen vaccination rates fall notably in many parts of the world, creating communities without the necessary levels of vaccination to hold back illnesses like measles or whooping cough.

While many examples of Fake News have the feel of old-style conspiracy theories given new life through modern media, Fake News also has been used systematically to undermine countries or attack specific groups. While Fake News has been used in this way against many ethnic and religious groups—not least historically against Jewish people—in recent years, Muslims have been subject to well-organized Fake News campaigns. Indeed, Muslims have been on the receiving end of libellous, dangerous propaganda, lies, and misinformation from Myanmar where Buddhist monks spread fake news about Muslim communities, to India where (often fake) allegations of Muslims slaughtering cows can become a genuine security concern. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the neighbouring Croatian security apparatus tried to implement a structured campaign of Fake News by setting up and recruiting agents to plant weapons and explosives inside mosques, which could then be used against the Bosniak [Muslim] population in Bosnia and Herzegovina to create discord and undermine postwar recovery. Despite the atrocities suffered by the Bosniak population during the 1990s, including over 100,000 deaths and more than a million people displaced, Fake News has been used systematically by hostile actors

in the region to create the impression that Bosniaks are a danger to the rest of Europe, and that the Muslim population is arming itself for holy war. More recently, infamous anti-Muslim Australian politician Fraser Anning blamed Muslim immigration for the shooting by a white nationalist terrorist in New Zealand's Christchurch mosques that killed 49 Muslims. Such defamatory and irresponsible statements lead to further erosion of public trust, demoralization of a particular segment of society, and lead to potentially further bloodshed.

CONCLUSION: NO EASY ANSWERS

The ultimate outcome of Fake News, and the intentional blurring of the line between legitimate critique and deliberate lies is that the public will find it increasingly difficult to hold public officials to account, or to trust anything that is said. At any time, this would pose an extremely serious challenge to good governance, but the fact that it is concurrent with a time of increased concern about the integrity of politicians around the world and a rising trend of populist politics in many countries, make the situation more serious still. Fake News appears to significantly reduce the ability of citizens as a whole to demand that their governments act with integrity, and to hold those governments to account when they do not. With mounting evidence of the Russian government's concerted efforts to interfere in both the United States and in other democracies, the need to address the distortion and half-truth campaigns seems more pressing than ever.

And yet, despite the importance of the challenge, there are no easy answers to the problems Fake News poses. Guarding against Type-1 Fake News requires perpetual vigilance from citizens who will have to become more committed to cross-checking information and evaluating sources. We should not underestimate the scale of this challenge. It is not easy to cross-check information, and in a fragmented media landscape in which legitimate news is not always reported by all outlets, it will be genuinely arduous at times for even conscientious citizens to work out the truth of the matter. Education and enhanced media literacy will undoubtedly be part of the solution, but it is a long-term solution to a current crisis. Moreover, asking for such a critical approach will undoubtedly also mean asking citizens to accept that sometimes information that they have come to believe is untrue, and what reinforces their sincerely held beliefs is not factual and should be disregarded. Given what we know about human psychology and the reluctance of people to disregard information that reinforces their beliefs, this is genuinely asking a lot. While guarding against the malicious use of Type-2 Fake News allegations may seem easier, it ultimately may be akin to asking for less tribalism and more critical reflection in political debate. This has, of course, been an ideal for generations—the fact that we still seem so far away from that ideal suggests that the answer again will not be easy.

REFERENCES

- Ruffhead, O. (1763). *The statutes at large, from Magna Charta to the end of the eleventh Parliament of Great Britain, anno 1761*. Cambridge, UK: J. Bentham.

Scandalum Magnatum (1682). *Scandalum magnatum, or, The great trial at Chelmesford assizes: held March 6, for the county of Essex, betwixt Henry, Bishop of London, plaintiff, and Edm. Hickersingill rector of the rectory of All-Saints in Colchester, defendant, faithfully related*. London, UK: E. Smith.

Tandoc, E. C. Jr., Lim, Z. W., & Ling, R. (2018). Defining “fake news”: A typology of scholarly definitions. *Digital Journalism*, 6(2), 137–153. doi:[10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143](https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143)