Article

An Overview of the Fake News Phenomenon: From Untruth-Driven to Post-Truth-Driven Approaches

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Abstract
"Fake news" was chosen in 2017 as the word of the year by the Collins Dictionary and the American Dialect Society, due to its extraordinary popularity. However, its relevance has been called into question due to its controversy and ambiguity. We have compiled herein 30 definitions from selected dictionaries, academic papers, news agencies, influential media observatories, and independent, certified fact-checkers over the last six years and have carried out a manual relational content analysis on them. We also collected data from four bibliometric studies from academic literature and five surveys on how the general public perceived fake news. In keeping with this three-level systematic review (lexicography, bibliometrics, and public perception) we detected some trends, including a growing drift towards a post-truth-driven conceptualization of fake news. Results also show that the "viral" and "memetic" quality of a rumor prevail over the demonstrable credibility of a source and even the factuality of a reported event; the element of surprise or outrage in the heat of the moment is more powerful than the ironic detachment elicited by news satire and parody; and sharing motivations are definitely less concerned with perceived accuracy than with partisan support, community sentiment, emotional contagion, and a taste for the sensational or bizarre.

Issue
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1. Introduction: Fake News as a Controversial Issue

"Fake news" was chosen as the word of the year in 2017 by both the Collins Dictionary and the American Dialect Society, among others. Both justified this decision as their occurrence in public discourse had multiplied since the Brexit referendum campaign in the UK (June 2016) and the US presidential election campaign (November 2016). The latter stated that fake news was first considered in the voting for its 2016 Word of the Year Award, but "at the time its meaning was restricted to fictional or embellished stories presented as authentic news, disseminated for financial gain or for propagandistic purposes; in 2017, however, the meaning of *fake news* shifted and expanded, in large part due to

its repeated use by President Donald Trump" (American Dialect Society, 2018).

However, even earlier, in 2016, it had already been chosen by the fact-checker Politifact as "lie of the year" (Holan, 2016). The notion behind this was to call out the use of this term which, in itself, had begun to be fraudulent or, at least, misleading. This brand-new word "fake news," as well as the related term "post-truth" (Harsin, 2015; McIntyre, 2018; Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2019; Waisbord, 2018), have been at the center of the maelstrom the media ecosystem is in, the so-called "information disorder" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

In itself the expression "fake news" is nothing new. In fact, it dates back to the beginning of the 20th century (McNair, 2018). In early mass communication research,

fake news meant false content, "which covered not only inaccurate news coverage but also encompassed entertainment-oriented content, such as news satire and parody" (Tong et al., 2020, p. 756). At the turn of the 21st century, this ambivalence persisted. "Fake news programs" was the label to refer to high-rating TV formats that mimicked the news (offering satirical news instead) such as *The Daily Show* (1999–2015) and *The Colbert Report* (2005–2014), both broadcast by the US cable channel Comedy Central, and the "Weekend Update" segment of NBC's *Saturday Night Live*. The same model was used in print magazines, such as the satirical *The Onion* (Baym, 2005; Day & Thompson, 2012; Holt, 2007).

Nowadays, the popularity gained by the expression "fake news" has little to do with its location within parody or satirical cognitive frameworks. On the contrary, it is associated with bitter political controversy, partisanship, and polarization. Fake news connotes intent to deceive and often to do harm. We may well regret such a loss. The capability satirical fake news has to highlight the limits or commitment to real news without aiming to be confused with them is praiseworthy (Baym, 2005, p. 273). Berkowitz and Schwartz (2016, p. 4) argued that "fake news does not exist independently of real news; instead, it exists as a critique of real news, a farcical watchdog that lampoons both journalists and the subjects they cover." As stated by Marnie Shure, *The Onion*'s managing editor: "We train readers on our brand of satire rather than trick them. And when we have the readers trained it speaks a greater truth to power" (as cited in Purcell, 2017). A 2004 Pew survey stated that 21% of people aged between 18 and 29 said they regularly learned about news and politics from comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live*, and 13% reported learning about them from late-night talk shows such as NBC's *Tonight Show* with Jay Leno and CBS's *Late Show* with David Letterman. Among the programs regularly cited as a rising source of political information was Comedy Central's mock news program *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart (Baym, 2005, p. 260). In its traditional definition, which is declining, the word "fake" retains a nuance that subtly distinguishes this sort of content from falsehood, lies, deceit, imposture, and fraud, becoming instead a tool for creativity and a reactive, subversive process. Its purpose is not to perpetually falsify the truth (an unmasked lie is a deactivated, failed lie); disclosure is rather an essential part of its strategy: Essentially, if "fake news" are not identified as such, they are unsuccessful, and its beneficial effects are not triggered.

As we know, in just a few years, the meaning of "fake news" as it was associated with critical subversion through humor has diminished greatly. Undoubtedly, comedic and satirical fake news can often be retweeted and shared on Twitter and Facebook feeds. However, social networks such as these look more realistic and could be misconstrued as being true. Indeed, these contents are shared, whether knowingly or unknowingly, as factual (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). As Harsin (2018b,

p. IV) has stated: "While fake news increasingly refers to deceitful, if not completely false/invented, content, fake news as comedy lives on, but now as a problem: millions of social media users (and occasionally politicians) misrecognize it as professional journalism."

Fake news points out new directions. In the following sections, we intend to give an account of four bibliometric studies on fake news (Section 2) and show the methodology used to compile 30 selected definitions of the term (Section 3, Table 1). We also provide a content analysis of these definitions following five different variables (Section 4). Finally, we set out and compare five studies on how the public perceives fake news (Section 5). Our aim is to observe how the term has evolved from multiple perspectives. As barely six years have passed since it became a buzzword, it is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, this short lifespan has provided a surprising number of controversies and raised a number of social concerns.

Our secondary aim is to try and characterize, by way of exploration, what different research questions have been raised around fake news. We intend to correlate these different and sometimes conflicting interests with the perspectives of what fake news is, its scope, its coverage, and the measures taken, if any, to counteract it, combat it, or moderate its effect.

2. Analysing Bibliometric Data

Fake news has become a matter of scientific research. Although it has mainly concerned political communication scholars, this phenomenon has also interested a broader range of researchers: It first drew together experts from the social sciences in general (philosophers, semioticians, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, pedagogues); secondly came the doctors, biologists, environmentalists, economists, computer science and AI technologists, and generally almost any practitioner from the "hard" sciences (Lazer et al., 2018; McIntyre, 2018; Oreskes & Conway, 2010).

Regarding what the term means and the extent of its scope, a study published in 2018 analyzed 34 academic publications between 2003 and 2017 that used "fake news" as one of their keywords. Six different meanings were given to the term: news satire, news parody, news fabrication, photo or video manipulation, advertising and public relations presented as if they were information, and political propaganda (Tandoc et al., 2018). Looking at these labels, we will see that two out of the six are concerned with textual genres close to literature or narrative fiction: satire and parody. By no means can these texts be accused of mendacity since they were never intended to be factual. Two more (advertising and propaganda) correspond to textual genres that are motivated by commercial or political interests (not news contexts), so we are aware we are possibly being manipulated. Therefore, only news fabrication and photo or video manipulation can be deemed as genuine lies in public communication, albeit these border on the other

types, especially in such a ductile or malleable medium as the internet.

A more recent bibliometric study of texts indexed in the Web of Science conducted in 2020 collected 1,147 documents in which fake news appeared either in their title, abstract, or keywords. From this figure, 640 were articles in scientific journals (Alonso García et al., 2020). "Fake news" is first mentioned in 2005, but it only took off in 2017 (77 articles), with ever more mentions in 2018 (250) and 2019 (283). Between 2005 and 2017 the word was linked to "parody," "Jon Stewart" (*The Daily Show*'s anchor) and "literacy." However, from 2018 onwards it became mainly associated with "political communication," "bias," "verification," "Twitter," "social networks," "populism," and also "Russia." Alonso García et al. (2020, p. 14) concluded that, at first, "the term referred to news that express facts in a parodic and comic way." However, at present, "the phenomenon of fake news is associated with populist messages, mostly related to the political sphere" (p. 16).

A similar study, in this case retrieving data from the scientific database Scopus, was conducted by Nicola Righetti (2021). Here, 2,368 documents were collated in which "fake news" was mentioned in the title or abstract. In keeping with previous studies, this one shows that the term became popular from 2017 onwards, being virtually unused by scholars before that. The first occurrence in the data set is in 2005 (three documents), but until 2016 there were less than 10 documents a year that included it. In 2017, this number shot up to 203, reaching 477 in 2018, 694 in 2019, and 951 in 2020. Interestingly, compared with the number of documents mentioning "social media," another steadily growing topic, those mentioning "fake news" were 0.1% on average between 2010 and 2016, 2.5% in 2017, 5.1% in 2018, 6.5% in 2019, and 7.1% in 2020.

By considering the keywords used to describe document topics, there is a focus on social media (including Twitter, with 86 occurrences, and Facebook, with 64 occurrences). Also, there is a methodological interest in the detection of fake news (with keywords such as "machine learning," "deep learning," "learning algorithms," or "artificial intelligence"), and in computer programming ("natural language process," "text processing"). Righetti (2021) remarks this picture is consistent with the high number of contributions published in computer science-related fields, which is a top discipline by number of contributions (1,138 documents). Social sciences come in second (939 documents), and among the top ten academic areas are featured scientific, social, and humanistic disciplines such as engineering (346), mathematics (320), and arts and humanities (300). Keywords such as "journalism," "information system," "communication," and "politics" also imply there is special interest in the socio-political and communicative aspect of the problem, just as "pandemic" and "Covid-19" highlight the importance of misinformation during the current epidemiological crisis due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

This growing attention from 2017 onwards means that the phase in which fake news shot up occurred only a couple of years after the beginning of the "post-truth politics" era. This took place between 2015 and 2016. In fact, the adjective post-truth experienced similar exponential growth in that period.

Another contemporary bibliometric study on fake news (Park et al., 2020) reached similar findings, in this case expanding the search of relevant scholarly contributions not only to "fake news" but also "post-truth," "post-fact," "truthiness," and "deep fakes/deepfakes" as related keywords. The data source included documents indexed in the Web of Science database and the initial search resulted in 1,119 documents in a period of 20 years (2001–2020), which were further filtered to include only academic articles (editorials, book reviews, and commentaries were excluded). The final sample of 479 documents showed little occurrence of "fake news" and the related terms above-mentioned before the 2016 American presidential election and a breathtaking rise in academic mentions from 2017 onwards. Moreover, via VOSViewer, Park et al. (2020) also analyzed the co-occurrence in keywords, that is, the number of documents in which two keywords are found together. The most common keywords ranked by number of occurrences were "fake news," "social media," "misinformation," "media," "information," "policies," "internet," and "disinformation." Other relevant co-occurring keywords were "propaganda," "information literacy," "media literacy," and "fact-checking.''

As we can see, the more recent the bibliometric studies and the documents retrieved, the less the terms "parody" and "satire" appear as related keywords: Such tendency is in gradual decline since 2017. In this vein, two different meanings have been accepted for "fake news" once its parodic or humorous quality has been ruled out. According to Tamul et al. (2019, p. 2), fake news can refer to (a) deliberate and demonstrably false information and (b) the derogatory way in which the media or news that do not conform with the position of the speaker is dismissed. Thus, it is an expression of political disagreement (dressed up as an accusation of falsehood) in which no supporting evidence is provided or the counterarguments to which are merely ignored.

3. Methodology: Retrieving and Assessing Definitions of Fake News

To gain an insight into the variety and nuances of meanings that fake news has both in non-specialized dictionaries and in the literature, be it academic, professional (newspapers, fact-checkers, news agencies, journalistic observatories), or institutional (official reports, analyses, guides, and recommendations), we have compiled 30 definitions of "fake news" (see Table 1).

For scholarly publications, we used the Web of Science Core Collection search engine and gathered data from the Social Science (SSCI), Science (SCI), and Art and Humanities (A&HCI) Citation Indexes on 15 May 2022.

We retrieved a huge number of academic documents on "fake news," by which we mean texts including this compound word in the author's keywords as well as in the title of the works. These were further filtered to include only academic articles (*N* = 510; editorials, book reviews, and commentaries were excluded). After a preliminary review, we concluded that only a minority proposed an original and well-grounded definition of the expression and, consistently, a considerable quantity of scholars resorted to very few baseline studies. Out of the 510 results from the search, the most recurrent Web of Science categories were communication (23.3%), computer science information systems (18.4%), computer science artificial intelligence (12.7%), and information science and library science (12.3%). The fields of management and business (10.2%), psychology (10%), political science (3.3%), sociology (2.4%), and philosophy (2.2%) scored slighter but equally significant values. We tried to represent in the selected definitions this wide variety of fields that have addressed the issue.

For general dictionaries, we chose those especially mindful of disinformation as a matter of concern. The Collins Dictionary and the American Dialectal Society chose the expression "fake news" as their word of the year in 2017; the Oxford English Dictionary did the same with "post-truth" only a year earlier, and Dictionary.com chose "misinformation" one year after, in 2018.

For traditional media outlets and institutions, we chose some that are generally respected and especially committed to fact-checking, such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, fact-checkers certified by the independent International Fact-Checking Network (Politifact, Snopes), and accredited media observatories and research institutes (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and the Internet Policy Observatory at the Annenberg School). We also collected definitions from large international institutions concerned about the "new information disorder," such as UNESCO, and grassroots initiatives led by volunteers from academia and industry around the world (Fake News Challenge).

These 30 definitions were entered into a manually encoded relational content analysis to identify five variables:

1. Its intentional nature—or *fakeness*—meaning the definition is based on content that is misleading by design or that is an expression of partisan controversies or battles of narratives, as opposed to fake news that are so by mistake (misinformation; see Fallis, 2014, 2015; Harsin, 2018a, pp. 9–10) or as a joke (news satire, news parody). We named the former (intentional, misleading by design) an "untruth-driven definition" and the latter (partisan, ideologically fake news) a "post-truth-driven definition."
2. Its capacity to resemble real news (its *news-ness*), mimicking news reporting in format, content, values, etc.

3. Its online nature and viral quality (its *shareworthiness*), which points to a distributed form of influence, being social media an ideal platform to accelerate (fake) news dissemination, providing rich platforms to share, forward, vote, and review, and encouraging users to participate and discuss online news.
4. Its political motivation.
5. Its financial motivation.

Consistently with what has been stated above, there are no entries between 2017 and 2022 except one of those offered by Dictionary.com, which provide any definition for the humorous or parodic transformation of real news. This one was—it's worth remembering—the most popular meaning for fake news for at least a decade (2005–2015; Baym; 2005; Day & Thompson, 2012; Holt, 2007).

4. Results

A more detailed analysis based on the identified variables shows, first, that most definitions describe "fake news" as being exclusively misleading by design (19 out 30 definitions); they concern intentional falsehoods or disinformation and focus on *fakeness*. This implies two things: It can be proved that they are false and they can reasonably be assumed to have been formulated to mislead. Fake news are "stories" (definitions no. 2, 5, 7, 12, 14, 22, and 28) or "claims" (definitions no. 8, 10, 14) that are characterized as "misleading," "fraudulent," "false," "fabricated," "made-up," or "invented from whole cloth." Diverging definitions either introduce relativism (definitions no. 5 and 19), according to which fake news are rhetorical strategies to sow doubt, clashes of narratives with different geopolitical points of view (that is, they are not malicious but express truly opposing perspectives), or they encompass two or three different definitions, among which the will to deceive is just one of them (definitions no. 4, 10, 13, 14, 17, 23, 25, 26, and 29).

Our detailed analysis also show that slightly less than one-third of the definitions (9 out of 30) openly allude to the internet or any of its related phenomena (clickbait headlines, social sharing, web traffic, viral posts) when characterizing fake news (definitions no. 2, 8, 11, 12, 14, 16, 22, 28, 29). This seems to indicate that the phenomenon still has a largely neutral definition, not linked to any particular period but to the information system in general. It also remarks on an awareness that the scope of the social media ecosystem may have helped it spread.

Finally, only seven definitions mention political reasons and another six financial motivations, while both are mentioned in four cases (definitions no. 21, 23, 24, 26).

These results refer to *what* fake news is, *how* it attains its goals, and *why*. However, a Lasswellian questionnaire should also consider four more questions: *who* delivers fake news, to *whom*, *how* fake news manages

Table 1. Definitions for "fake news" and salient traits.

Reference	Year	Outlet/Publisher	Definition	Intentional Falsity (*fakeness*)	Disguised as news (*news-ness*)	Online & viral (*shareworthiness*)	Political ends	Financial ends
Allcott and Gentzkow	2017	*Journal of Economic Perspectives*	News articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers.	X	—	—	—	—
American Dialect Society	2017	American Dialect Society	(1) Disinformation or falsehoods presented as real news; (2) actual news that are claimed to be untrue.	X	X	—	—	—
Collins Dictionary	2017	Collins Dictionary	False, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting.	X	X	—	—	—
Dalkir and Katz	2020	IGI Global	A potentially contradictory term, one that has some use in identifying and critiquing false claims that masquerade as news while also serving as a useful weapon by which motivated—and often biased—speakers attack traditional journalistic bodies attempting to report accurately on events.	X/—	X	—	—	—
Dentith	2017	*Public Reason*	An allegation that some story is misleading; a rhetorical device, one designed to cast doubt on what would otherwise be some received story.	—	—	—	—	—
Dictionary.com	n.d.	Dictionary.com	(1) False news stories, often of a sensational nature, created to be widely shared or distributed for the purpose of generating revenue, or promoting or discrediting a public figure, political movement, company, etc.; (2) a parody that presents current events or other news topics for humorous effect in an obviously satirical imitation of journalism; (3) a conversational tactic to dispute or discredit information that is perceived as hostile or unflattering (sometimes facetious).	X/—	—	X	X	X
Fake News Challenge	2017	Fake News Challenge	A completely fabricated claim or story created with an intention to deceive, often for a secondary gain.	X	—	—	—	—

Table 1. (Cont.) Definitions for "fake news" and salient traits.

Reference	Year	Outlet/Publisher	Definition	Intentional Falsity (*fakeness*)	Disguised as news (*news-ness*)	Online & viral (*shareworthiness*)	Political ends	Financial ends
Finneman and Thomas	2018	*Newspaper Research Journal*	Intentional deception of a mass audience by nonmedia actors via a sensational communication that appears credible but is designed to manipulate and is not revealed to be false	X	X	X	—	—
Gelfert	2018	*Informal Logic*	Deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design.	X	X	—	—	—
Hinsley and Holton	2021	*International Journal of Communication*	Information spread through news-oriented sources that knowingly or unknowingly contain misinformation with the potential to misconstrue otherwise legitimate information in ways that may confuse news consumers and spread false information.	X/—	X	—	—	—
Holan	2016	*Politifact*	Made-up stuff, masterfully manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are easily spread online to large audiences willing to believe the fictions and spread the word.	X	X	X	—	—
Hunt	2016	*The Guardian*	In its purest form, fake news is completely made up, manipulated to resemble credible journalism and attract maximum attention and, with it, advertising revenue; hosted on websites that often followed design conventions of online news media to give the semblance of legitimacy, the stories are geared to travel on social media.	X	X	X	—	X
Ireton and Posetti	2018	UNESCO	So much more than a label for false and misleading information, disguised and disseminated as news. It has become an emotional, weaponised term used to undermine and discredit journalism.	X/—	X	—	—	—

Table 1. (Cont.) Definitions for "fake news" and salient traits.

Reference	Year	Outlet/Publisher	Definition	Intentional Falsity (*fakeness*)	Disguised as news (*news-ness*)	Online & viral (*shareworthiness*)	Political ends	Financial ends
Irwin	2017	*The New York Times*	Before the term "fake news" became an all-purpose insult for news coverage a person doesn't like, it had a more specific meaning: stories invented from whole cloth, designed to attract social shares and web traffic by flattering the prejudices of their intended audience.	X/—	—	X	—	—
Jaster and Lanius	2018	*Versus*	News that does mischief with the truth in that it exhibits both a lack of truth and a lack of truthfulness. It exhibits a lack of truth in the sense that it is either false or misleading. It exhibits a lack of truthfulness in the sense that it is propagated with the intention to deceive or in the manner of bullshit.	X	—	—	—	—
Klein and Wueller	2017	*Journal of Internet Law*	The online publication of intentionally or knowingly false statements of fact.	X	—	X	—	—
Lazer et al.	2018	*Science*	Fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake news outlets, in turn, lack the news media's editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information. Fake news overlaps with other information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people).	X/—	X	—	—	—
Levy	2017	*Social Epistemology Review*	The presentation of false claims that purport to be about the world in a format and with a content that resembles the format and content of legitimate media organizations.	X	X	—	—	—

Table 1. (Cont.) Definitions for "fake news" and salient traits.

Reference	Year	Outlet/Publisher	Definition	Intentional Falsity (*fakeness*)	Disguised as news (*news-ness*)	Online & viral (*shareworthiness*)	Political ends	Financial ends
Marda and Milan	2018	*Internet Policy Observatory at the Annenberg School*	A battle of and over narratives. It is a clash of narratives as it contrasts information about geopolitical viewpoints that are not conformant with the perceived interests of the security apparatus in the state where the alleged fake news is spread.	—	—	—	X	—
McGonagle	2017	*Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*	Information that has been deliberately fabricated and disseminated with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts.	X	—	—	—	—
McNair	2018	Routledge	Intentional disinformation (invention or falsification of known facts) for political and/or commercial purposes, presented as real news.	X	X	—	X	X
Mikkelson	2016	Snopes	Fabricated stories set loose via social media with clickbait headlines and tantalizing images, intended for no purpose other than to fool readers and generate advertising revenues for their publishers.	X	—	X	—	X
Newman et al.	2017	Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism	(1) News that is "invented" to make money or discredit others; (2) news that has a basis in fact but is "spun" to suit a particular agenda; and (3) news that people don't feel comfortable about or don't agree with.	X/—	—	—	X	X
Oxford Dictionary	2017	Oxford Dictionary	False information that is broadcast or published as news for fraudulent or politically motivated purposes.	X	X	—	X	X
Oxford Dictionary	2019	Oxford Dictionary	News that conveys or incorporates false, fabricated, or deliberately misleading information, or that is characterized as or accused of doing so.	X/—	—	—	—	—

Table 1. (Cont.) Definitions for "fake news" and salient traits.

Reference	Year	Outlet/Publisher	Definition	Intentional Falsity (*fakeness*)	Disguised as news (*news-ness*)	Online & viral (*shareworthiness*)	Political ends	Financial ends
Oxford Institute for the Study of Computational Propaganda	2018	Oxford Institute for the Study of Computational Propaganda	Misleading, deceptive or incorrect information, purporting to be real news about politics, economics or culture.	X/—	X	—	X	X
Rini	2017	*Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*	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.	X	X	—	—	—
Tamul et al.	2019	*Mass Communication and Society*	(1) The unprecedented proliferation of disinformation campaigns spreading fraudulent news about political candidates and other campaign-related information, in particular on social media sites such as Facebook; (2) President Trump has appropriated the term "fake news" and applied it to news stories or news organizations in an effort to delegitimize reporting, journalists, outlets, and journalism broadly.	X/—	—	X	—	—
Tandoc et al.	2018	*Digital Journalism*	Viral posts based on fictitious accounts made to look like news reports.	X	X	X	—	—
White	2016	*Ethical Journalism Network*	Information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts.	X	—	—	—	—

Notes: The symbol X means that this specific feature is contained within the definition; the symbol – means that this is not. The symbol X/– means that the definition includes two or more meanings, and the feature is assumed by one of them and is absent or rejected by other(s).

to impact public perception, and *what effect* does fake news have on users' sharing activity. If we analyze these traits, we can observe the following patterns:

1. In general, definitions do not identify a characteristic agent for disseminating fake news. The exceptions include a somehow abusive appellative ("non-media actors," as in definition no. 8) and mere truisms ("fake news outlets," as in definition no. 17). A third definition (no. 29) mentions "fictitious accounts." It seems obvious that, in keeping with fake news' presumable will to deceive, often authorship can neither be identified nor traced, either because it has been made up for the occasion, is anonymous, or supplants another reputable source.

2. Regarding the recipients (or victims), they are either generic or not mentioned ("readers," "mass audience," or "news consumers," as in definitions no. 1, 8, and 10), except in three cases: One refers to "large audiences willing to believe the fictions and spread the word" (definition no. 11); another refers to an "intended audience" that is mobilized by "flattering their prejudices" (definition no. 14); the last one is more precise, in that it mentions former President Trump as a (self-proclaimed) victim of fake news (definition no. 28). However, in general, the victims are the media themselves.

3. Fake news either "mimics" (definitions no. 17 and 27), "resembles" (no. 12 and 18), "looks like" (no. 11 and 29), is "under the guise of" (no. 3), or "masquerades" as news (no. 4); is "information" that tries to pass itself off as "news reporting," "journalistic reports," or "media reportage" (no. 3, 11, and 27). In other words, we can say fake news have great *news-ness*. This feature, which is mentioned by a significant percentage of definitions (16 out of 30, which represents 53%), is a double-edged sword: Fake news are misleading because there is a resemblance between them and real news, but the criterion to distinguish the two lacks consensus. Interestingly, the most disruptive definitions—those that provide various meanings that are partly contradictory—suggest that fake news are not demonstrably false. Since it is "the people" who designate certain news items as fake when they "don't feel comfortable or don't agree with them" (definition no. 23); since fake news are "all-purpose insult for news coverage a person doesn't like" (definition no. 14); if we only can say "alleged" fake news (definition no. 19); if the former president of the US Donald Trump can blame the press for spreading fake news when it gives unfavorable reports about him or his policies—how can we unequivocally expose the *fakeness* of these news?

4. Fake news are "disseminated" (definitions no. 3, 13, and 20), "widely shared or distributed" (no. 6), "spread through news-oriented sources" (no. 10), "easily spread online" (no. 11), "geared to travel on social media" (no. 12), to "attract social shares and web traffic" (no. 14) or "maximum attention" (no. 12), and "propagated" (no. 15) as "viral posts" (no. 29), "being widely re-transmitted" (no. 27). This point, which is supported by a significant number of definitions (9 out of 30, or 30%), highlights the more important role audiences have as users, distributors, and gatekeepers of content. The dynamism of fake news is reflected in other viral posts or memes (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz et al., 2021, Rodríguez-Ferrándiz et al., in press). Any concern with *fakeness* seems to be eclipsed by their potential to become *shareworthy*, because high shareability is verified and measurable, and fakeness is alleged and even contested.

5. Impact on Public Perception

Studies on the perception of fake news among the general public show that the effects of information disorder are highly pervaded. Results from focus group research conducted in mid-2017 by Nielsen and Graves (2017) in the US, the UK, Spain, and Finland show that (a) informants see a difference in degree—and not an absolute one—between fake news and real news; (b) they spontaneously equate fake news with poor journalism, propaganda (including both lying politicians and hyperpartisan content), and some kinds of advertising, an association which is more typically made than one with false information masquerading as news reports (Nielsen & Graves, 2017, pp. 3–4); and (c) the controversy over fake news is seen as a symptom of a general discontent with traditional media, political communication, and the role of new stakeholders in the digital ecosystem. Evidence suggests that the public has internalized fake news as being a weapon in political debates (electoral or parliamentary) but also in public and civic spaces. They assume that what is fake news from one perspective could be (real) news from the opposing view and vice versa.

In the same vein, a study was carried out in March 2017 on a sample of 1,339 tweets that included the term "fake news" (Brummette et al., 2018). Most participants were private users who had no special credentials in politics or journalism. The authors determined that these "general social media users who dominate these discussions…influence others to use the term fake news to challenge the opposition and support beliefs and opinions that resemble their own ideologies" (Brummette et al., 2018, p. 510). Only a minority of the tweets were neutral or only descriptive when reporting cases of fake news debunked by evidence. Conversely, an overwhelming majority took sides in a vehemently partisan manner and contained negative valences, to such an extent that "necessary discussion of 'fake news' on social media may be drifting further to a point of obscurity or no return" (p. 510). The study concluded that a high

degree of polarization and non-negotiable homophily had metamorphosed fake news and had turned it into the very opposite of pluralism. In other words, brand new fake news has downplayed or diminished the concept of "truth" and has boosted or reinforced the concept of "opinion" (blended with subjectivity and sincerity) or at least has turned it into an absolute news value—"Everything against my opinion is fake news."

This trend was consolidated within only a year of Trump taking office. A nationwide survey in the US carried out by Monmouth University in April 2018 found that only 25% of 800 informants stated that the term "fake news" applies only to news based on false or wrong facts, while 65% said it also concerns how news media make editorial decisions about what to report on. In other words, for an overwhelming majority, fake news involves editorial decisions as well as inaccurate reporting (Murray, 2019).

Figures were not so alarming in the survey conducted by Tong et al. (2020) in May 2018. The sample (*N* = 447) answered the question: There has been increasing discussion about fake news. For you, what are fake news?

Coders separated descriptive answers, i.e., when informants made an effort to define or explain fake news ("news that are not true," "news that can't be verified"), from politicized answers, if they mentioned specific political figure(s), news media source(s), or political issues (e.g., "Trump," "Fox," "CBS," "NBC," "what Trump doesn't like," and "mainstream media"). In their sample, 294 responses (65.8%) lacked a subject to blame, articulating fake news in a descriptive, neutral, nonpolitical way, whereas 153 responses (34.2%) identified at least one subject to blame and thus were considered politicized definitions.

However, Tong et al. (2020, p. 765) concluded that "the politicized definitions as a whole implicitly (or sometimes even explicitly) promoted the idea that fake news is a report that opposes one's viewpoint." In the second part of their research, they also showed that the tendency to politicize the definition of fake news is more likely among those who show high political interest. It is also linked to the strength of partisanship, and especially the high perception of fake news exposure (p. 766). Moreover, they observed that the "strength of partisanship and fake news politicization positively correlated with affective polarization" (p. 768). In other words, not only affective polarization is more likely to be found among strong supporters of political parties; what is more, this animosity, a by-product of partisan social identity in which the outgroup is viewed negatively and co-partisans positively, is at risk of spreading like wildfire and hinders our capacity to evaluate news as accurate or deceptive.

The polysemy—or, to be precise, the ambiguity of the expression—has caused cynicism in academic circles (Fuchs, 2020; Kellner, 2019; Levinson, 2019; Vosoughi et al., 2018). This is because the term has been abused so much that it has been rendered unusable. Journalists

and fact-checker managers, such as Snopes' Mikkelson (2016), BuzzFeed's Silverman (2016), Politifact's Holan (2016), and First Draft's Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) already expressed their disaffection towards it, since "[the word fake news] has also begun to be appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news organizations whose coverage they find disagreeable…it's becoming a mechanism by which the powerful can clamp down upon, restrict, undermine and circumvent the free press" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5). Instead, they prefer to use the expression "information disorder." The US Pew Research Center began its surveys by asking about fake news (Barthel et al., 2016) only to later reject the term and replace it with "made-up news" (Mitchell et al., 2019).

It is very significant that the Oxford English Dictionary modified its definition in 2019 (see Table 1) by attempting to blend two competing definitions into one. To a certain extent, the update asserts that falsehoods can be real and demonstrable, or rather that they represent a partial or subjective view. Interestingly, political and financial goals, which were apparent in 2017, are absent in the 2019 definition. These changes, in turn, partially deactivate or render the adjective "fake" irrelevant and grant legal status to a "post-truth" approach to fake news.

Furthermore, a report by the European Commission proposes subsuming the term fake news under the broader category of disinformation. They define it as "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (European Commission, 2018, p. 35). As they stress:

> It does not cover issues arising from the creation and dissemination online of illegal content (notably defamation, hate speech, incitement to violence), which are subject to regulatory remedies under EU or national laws, nor other forms of deliberate but not misleading distortions of facts such as satire and parody. (European Commission, 2018, p. 35)

UNESCO's *Journalism, "Fake News" & Disinformation Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* was published with the expression crossed out on the front cover, precisely to stress the term is useless (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

Despite the objections and attempts to replace the term with other, more precise ones, the vitality of fake news in public discourse remains strong, at least when confronted with its potential competitors. Tandoc and Seet (2022) observed from a survey carried out in March 2021 how the public (a representative sample of over 1,000 informants in Singapour) reacted to "fake news" in comparison to other alternative terms, namely "misinformation," "disinformation," and "online falsehoods." They were divided into four groups, and they were asked to evaluate, on a scale from 1 to 7, to what extent they

agreed with certain phrases in which some terms were replaced with others. For example: "X refers to information that is false," "X is intentionally created to deceive people." In the five items considered (falsity, intentionality, concerning, severity, and need of response) the expression "fake news" received a greater response than the other three options.

6. Discussion and Conclusions: Post-Truth Driven Approaches Gain Ground

The ambivalence of fake news confronts us with competing interpretive patterns when it comes to explaining the new informational disorder. So far, we have compiled and analyzed definitions of fake news in the specialist (theoretical) literature and general dictionaries. In addition, we set out and assessed four bibliometric studies on the topic and five surveys on how the general public perceives the phenomenon.

We have shown that the most fundamental division between approximations, whether these are in the academic world, in the lexicon, among journalists, or even among the general public, is what we have termed "untruth-driven" and "post-truth-driven" definitions. Although most definitions compiled (up to two-thirds) are closest to the former, our hypothesis is there is a gradual move toward the latter.

This implicitly leads either to the loss of the sense of the adjective "fake" and the entire compound word (which causes the term to be rejected and replaced by another one, judged to be more accurate) or implies a *resémantisation*, as supported by some dictionaries (like Oxford and Dictionary.com) and some academics (Mourão & Robertson, 2019; Tandoc & Seet, 2022).

In truth, the problem will not be solved by avoiding using the term, which has become very popular (Tandoc & Seet, 2022). Instead, the issue becomes clear when there is an overt recognition that a paradoxical collision and collusion of two uses has occurred, one as a genre ("the deliberate creation of pseudo journalistic disinformation") and the other as a label which is also a weapon ("the political instrumentalization of the term to delegitimize news media"; see Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

When addressing fake news, researchers focus on three main issues: There is (a) an intentional falsity to it (*fakeness*) that is veiled by its (b) disguising as news (*news-ness*), and (c) it spreads online quickly, going viral (*shareworthiness*). We have encoded these three variables in Table 1. Nevertheless, this "compound" definition only holds up on a superficial level but is problematic when we dig deeper.

Each of these approaches implies the search for specific aims and the adoption of concrete methodologies; it also implies having a previous stance on what "fake news" means, its effects, and possible ways of tackling the term. Those who reflect on fake news' *fakeness* (i.e., research on deception detection accuracy, people's confidence in identifying fake news and cues more relevant

to them to assess credibility; see Hinsley & Holton, 2021), fake news early detection through AI (Bonet-Jover et al., 2020; Saquete et al., 2019; Shu et al., 2017), or even the prediction of future fake news topics and early warnings of potential targets through timely identification of polarizing content (Del Vicario et al., 2019), cognitive processes, and skills that enable readers to assort the true and the untrue (Pennycook & Rand, 2019) are generally confident that falsity can be demonstrated and assume the user will not knowingly share fake news. This has been called "ignorance theory" (Osmundsen et al., 2021). Those who reflect on fake news' *news-ness* consider fakers can replicate newsworthy features from authentic news, so it is not always possible to identify fake news by formal features, contents, or values (timeliness, negativity, prominence, human interest, opinion), which may be shared both by real and fake news (Tandoc et al., 2021) to the extent that fake news websites may draw the attention of other media outlets on certain issues and certain cognitive frameworks, affecting the whole agenda setting (Guo & Vargo, 2020). Finally, those who reflect on fake news' *shareworthiness* focus on the influence of motivated reasoning, partisanship, populism, and emotiveness on the willingness to share ("partisan theory"; see Osmundsen et al., 2021), or compare real and fake news sharing taking into account sentiment analysis or basic emotions conveyed by news content: anger, fear, anticipation, trust, surprise, sadness, joy, and disgust (Metzger et al., 2021; Vosoughi et al., 2018). They also reflect on "sharing" as a polysemic and complex activity, which includes not only endorsing, republishing, or quoting, but also questioning the news or denouncing fake news taking stances in a battle of narratives (Arielli, 2018; Metzger et al., 2021).

It stands to reason that if fake news' (presumed) *fakeness* doesn't stop them from being shared, and fake news' *news-ness* doesn't fully account for this mass sharing, being both incapable of explaining why fake news are shared more than real news (Silverman, 2016; Vosoughi et al., 2018), even knowing their untruthfulness (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Pennycook et al., 2021), then we need to reflect on the extent to which online news sharing is detached from truthfulness and reliability.

The point is not only to recognize that some factors that make real news worth sharing (acting as an opinion leader, advocating for one's own beliefs, socializing, gaining social status, sharing experiences with others, self-disclosure, fear of missing out, relevance to the receiver) are precisely the factors that make fake news shareable (Duffy et al., 2019; Metzger et al., 2021), that is, the fact that they possess similar newsworthiness. The point is to assess to what extent known or suspected falsehoods restrain or, conversely, encourage sharing intentions or have no remarkable impact on them.

In this panorama, we can speak about a trend toward an ethically and politically alarming post-truth conceptualization of fake news. In other words, fake news has become a sociotechnical phenomenon in which

"viral" and "memetic" quality prevails over reflecting on whether the source is credible and the reported event consistent; on whether the element of surprise or outrage in the heat of the moment is more powerful than the ironic detachment elicited by news satire and parody, and sharing motivations are definitely less concerned with perceived accuracy than with partisan support, community sentiment, emotional contagion, and a taste for the sensational or bizarre.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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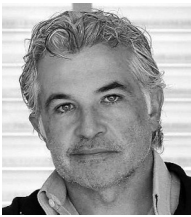
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