



## Understanding Fake News: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we made a distinction between the concept of fake news and the phenomenon of fake news. Since there are several definitions of fake news, we noticed that the concept is often confused with the phenomenon. Using the philosophical method proposed by R.G. Collingwood, we proved that fake news can be approached as a philosophical concept. At the same time, we also analysed the fake news phenomenon, through which we highlighted its effects on daily life. In a first stage, we reviewed several definitions and theoretical aspects related to fake news, then we argued that this distinction leads to a second one: between combating and prevention. If in the case of the phenomenon we refer to a post-factum combat, then in the case of the concept, we can prevent the phenomenon following a good theoretical knowledge of it. The interdisciplinary approach we proposed in this paper with a focus on studying fake news has the advantage of opening the field of analysis, and the clarification we made can be a starting point in differentiating between theory and practice when the issue of fake news is studied.

**Keywords:** fake news; fake news concept; fake news phenomenon

### 1. Introduction

Fake news is one of the current challenges of the world and it is characterised by a multitude of negative effects. These can range from effects on individuals (identity-

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psychological) to effects on society and political and economic life. Therefore, this challenge is identified as a major dilemma in our research. Thus, we consider it as being a bipartite issue: on the one hand, the main aspect is to combat fake news, and on the other hand, in order to combat fake news, we need to have the necessary (theoretical and practical) means.

However, we noticed that there is no consensus among researchers regarding the definition of fake news. Some researchers discuss fake news as a phenomenon (Paławska & Popielska-Borys, 2018; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), others discuss the concept of fake news (Gelfert, 2018; Molina et al., 2021). But what is fake news? And how can we approach it theoretically? Is there any difference between the concept of fake news and the fake news phenomenon? We tried to offer answers to these questions in this paper.

The working hypothesis is that in the studies regarding fake news there is no distinction made between the concept of fake news and the phenomenon of fake news. However, there is a distinction between these two - at the theoretical level, we discuss about the concept of fake news and we refer to the effects, consequences and combating fake news, and on a practical level, we go into the phenomenon of fake news (i.e., what the concept represents on a practical level through its social, political and economic implications).

Thus, in order to discuss the concept of fake news, we must use the necessary instruments, in this paper these are of a philosophical nature, and for the purpose of studying the phenomenon of fake news, we need sociological instruments which, for example, can measure certain social, political and economic dimensions.

In an attempt to demonstrate the thesis proposed in the present research, i.e. to justify the distinction between the concept of fake news and the phenomenon of fake news, first of all, we propose a philosophical approach for the concept as follows: since there are different definitions given to fake news and these definitions are not mutually exclusive, nor they are exhaustive, but rather subordinate to each other, we can explain the concept of fake news using the philosophical method proposed by Robin George Collingwood. Also, we consider that the phenomenon of fake news represents the way in which fake news manifests itself (Heidegger, 1996).

Thus, we consider it is appropriate to operate the distinction between concept and phenomenon, as this confusion leads to divergent perspectives which complicates the process of combating fake news.

The proposed distinction between the concept of fake news and the phenomenon of fake news leads us to a better understanding of fake news and, as we cannot combat the concept of fake news, we can only combat the phenomenon of fake news. The concept is an abstraction, the phenomenon is a concrete fact, with real consequences. So, this distinction proposed in this paper has the role to improve the future research in this vast field, because understanding fake news means a first step in combating it.

## 2. About the Method

With an eye to justify the approach discussed in the introduction, we will present the method used for this, more specifically, we will briefly describe the definitions used in philosophy compared to those used in science (Collingwood, 2005). Then, we will have to ascertain how can we research a philosophical concept (Goldstein, 1990). As this matter requires a wide field of analysis, we will focus on Collingwood's perspective and add several comments made by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1994). Using the above, we will elaborate the analysis of the mentioned distinction.

### 2.1. Two Types of Definitions

The philosopher R. G. Collingwood makes a significant observation, as follows:

*“As applied in exact science, definition carries a special meaning. Definitions here define absolutely. A person possessing a definition knows the essence of the concept perfectly, one who does not possess it does not know that essence at all. In order that this should be possible, two conditions must be fulfilled. First, the essence must be something capable of final and exhaustive statement, and therefore sharply cut off from mere properties. Secondly, an equally sharp line must be drawn between knowing something and not knowing it. Owing to the differences in the structure of their concepts, both these conditions are fulfilled in exact science, neither in philosophy.” (Collingwood, 2005, p. 94)*

It is clear that the multitude of definitions of fake news (see 3.2) is due to its philosophical nature of this concept. Therefore, the issue generated around the definition of fake news falls, as we anticipated, in the philosophical sphere of

analysis. To further clarify this, we have to address the nature of philosophical concepts.

## **2.2. How can we research a philosophical concept? A philosophical understanding of the concept of fake news**

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1994) discuss what a philosophical concept is, highlighting its specificity. There are no “simple” concepts in philosophy as in science. For the authors,

*“There are no simple concepts. Every concept has components and is defined by them. It therefore has a combination. It is a multiplicity, although not every multiplicity is conceptual. There is no concept with only one component. Even the first concept, the one with which a philosophy “begins,” has several components, because it is not obvious that philosophy must have a beginning, and if it does determine one, it must combine it with a point of view or a ground.”* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 15)

They also note that:

*“Every concept is at least double or triple, etc. Neither is there a concept possessing every component, since this would be chaos pure and simple.”* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 15)

Furthermore,

*“Every concept has an irregular contour defined by the sum of its components [...]. The concept is a whole because it totalizes its components, but it is a fragmentary whole. Only on this condition can it escape the mental chaos constantly threatening it, stalking it, trying to reabsorb it.”* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, pp. 15-16)

Clearly, the debate around philosophical concepts is not new at all. An approach suitable for the analysis of the concept of fake news is Collingwood’s perspective, where we can identify two fundamental notions which will help us to motivate the thesis developed in *Introduction*.

### **2.2.1. The Overlap of Classes**

For Collingwood, a concept is a class of objects grouped by a common feature. Any concept is both *general*, when it’s a class composed of specific instances, and *generic* when it is a genus for its species. If we take as example the concept of triangle, we

can say that it is general because it brings together all the existing triangles – both those triangles belonging to geometry and the triangles with flowers in parks, or road signs. But it is also generic, representing a genus for the individual triangles: isosceles, equilateral etc.

It is quite interesting that by philosophical concepts Collingwood understands those concepts refer to reality as a whole, while the scientific concepts refer to certain parts of the whole. That's why,

*“The traditional theory of classification and division, however true it may be as an account of the logical structure of all concepts belonging to science, exact or empirical, must be modified in at least one important way before it can be applied to the concepts of philosophy.”* (Collingwood, 2005, p. 31)

In maths, the concept of triangle excludes the concept of square; however, if we focus on philosophical concepts, we can notice that they don't exclude each other, actually they overlap. According to the British philosopher, the specificity of the philosophical concepts consists in this overlap of classes. Also, the overlap of classes is useful when we need to distinguish between philosophical and non-philosophical concepts. There are several concepts with double meaning. For example, Collingwood states that the word “matter” is used in physics as well as in metaphysics. In the first case, the word “matter” is used in a scientific way, and in the second case, in a philosophically way. These modes undergo a regular and uniform change of direction as they move from one sphere to another; so the question of equivalence between them cannot be raised. In each of these cases, the word takes on a different meaning. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to talk about two stages of a concept than about two meanings of a word.

According to the overlap of classes hypothesis, any philosophy that wants to conceive its object as a classification system or aggregated by parties is erroneous, because it misunderstands its nature, method and purpose. For Collingwood:

*“Thinking philosophically, whatever else it means, means constantly revising one's starting point in the light of one's conclusions and never allowing oneself to be controlled by any cast-iron rule whatever.”* (Collingwood, 2005, p. 52)

### **2.2.2. The Scale of Forms**

As we have noticed so far, Collingwood sees in the overlap of classes an overlap of extension of concepts. In the following, we will discuss the overlap of their intensions. We could also notice that the species of a non-philosophical concept are

excluded and that the classes of a philosophical concept overlap. How is this overlap possible?

Collingwood's argument is that the philosophical concepts differ from each other both in degree and in kind (the qualitative concepts). It can easily be noticed that the simple difference in degree cannot provide valid arguments. If we choose a generic concept and exemplify it in different degrees and if these degrees have one and the same attribute, there cannot be any overlaps.

Let's suppose that we are dealing with a philosophical concept. Each species of this concept differs from the others both in degree, in terms of variable propriety, as well as by its kind, since the generic essence of the concept is specified is unique. However, in the system of specifications, these two sets of differences are connected, because whenever a variable increases or decreases, it reaches different critical points on the scale. Therefore, some specific forms appear and the others disappear. This system where the forms keep appearing and disappearing is defined by Collingwood (2005) *scales of forms*.

As we will present in section 3, the concept of fake news can be easily approached if we consider it as a philosophical concept. In fact, this is the first objective of this research.

Let's see what we understand by the phenomenon of fake news.

### **2.3. What Do We Mean by the Fake News *Phenomenon*?**

We mentioned earlier that there is a distinction between the concept of fake news and the phenomenon of fake news and we justified above that the concept of fake news is entirely a philosophical concept. But what is the fake news phenomenon? For a better understanding of it, we can utilize an observation made by Heidegger. In an attempt to justify what we should understand by phenomenon, the German philosopher mentions:

*“The Greek expression phainomenon, from which the term “phenomenon” derives, comes from the verb phainesthai, meaning “to show itself.” Thus phainomenon means what shows itself, the self-showing, the manifest. Phainesthai itself is a “middle voice” construction of phainō, to bring into daylight, to place in brightness. Phainō belongs to the root pha-, like phōs, light or brightness, that is, that within which something can become manifest, visible in itself. Thus the meaning of the*

*expression “phenomenon” is established as what shows itself in itself, what is manifest. The phenomena, “phenomena,” are thus the totality of what lies in the light of day or can be brought to light. Sometimes the Greeks simply identified this with ta onta (beings).” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 25)*

As such, in this paper, we refer to the “phenomenon of fake news” as the way fake news manifests itself in society, more exactly “to bring into daylight, to place in brightness” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 25). It is necessary to mention once again that the phenomenon of fake news has social, political and economic implications. Of course, fake news is spreading in each of these dimensions, so it would be appropriate to distinguish a specific method for each of them in order to combat fake news. Such research on combating fake news could have as a starting point the distinction developed in this paper.

We can notice there is a clear difference between the “fake news concept” and the “fake news phenomenon”. In the following, we will add some clarifications regarding the concept of fake news

### **3. Clarifying the Concept of Fake News**

The problem of defining fake news has aroused, with its rise in the public sphere and its increasing in the research agenda, long debates regarding to its characteristics, existence and evolution. In the first part of this section, we will approach several definitions given to fake news, noting that these – if the concept of fake news is taken into account – qualify it as a philosophical concept.

We can also find definitions where the fake news concept is mixed up with the fake news phenomenon and that is why we must constantly pay attention to what a certain definition refers to.

We consider some clarifications are needed regarding the related concepts, in order to see the specifics of the fake news concept, as this fact is also necessary and it can lead to a misunderstanding of the concept.

A first matter is related to the distinction between fake news and false news, where an analogy with disinformation and misinformation can be made. Then, we will review some of the definitions given to fake news, on the one hand, to comprehend what it signify, and on the other hand, to show that these definitions are different and there is no consensus on them. Last, but not least, we can remark that fake news is

often confused or defined using other connected concepts. We will address them further in the second section of this part.

In the last section, we will resume the discussion regarding the dimensions of the fake news phenomenon and we will highlight several characteristics of it.

### **3.1. Towards an Understanding of the Concept of Fake News**

Even though fake news became a topic intensely discussed, analysed and debated in the scientific community, we can observe that there is no consensus on defining this concept. To exemplify this, we illustrate some definitions found following the literature review.

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 213) define fake news as: “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers”. This definition is vast and it can lead to confusion when the outputs which can be labeled and treated as fake news are brought into discussion.

On the other hand, Gelfert (2018, p. 108) defines fake news as “the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design”.

In this case, the emphasis is on the way fake news is presented, reproducing almost perfectly the format of the real media products.

It is worth focusing our attention on one of the most common conceptual matters when approaching fake news, namely the usage of the *false news* concept as an equivalent. We can use this association to clarify this conceptual definition - understanding fake news as a type of disinformation, where the agent who distributes the distorted information intentionally seeks to deceive or manipulate the receiver(s), while in the case of false news, we can discuss about a form of misinformation, where the erroneous information is not spread with the intention of harming (Wardle, 2020).

Beyond those presented up until this point, Mukerji (2018) identifies several characteristics which can be used in defining and differentiating fake news: by truth value, content, source, distribution channels, the way it is presented and by the intent of the publisher. Each of these characteristics can be used to understand and analyze fake news. However, we can notice these characteristics are specific to any media



product, hence one of the characteristics we can find in all definitions: the fact that fake news imitates, clones and presents itself as a real media product.

We can use this characteristic when we discuss the phenomenon of fake news and its effects in everyday life.

To clarify what fake news represents, we turn to Baptista and Gradim (2020, p. 5) who define the fake news as:

*“a type of online disinformation, with totally or partially false content, created intentionally to deceive and/or manipulate a specific audience, through a format that imitates a news or report (acquiring credibility), through false information that may or may not be associated with real events, with an opportunistic structure (title, image, content) to attract the readers’ attention and to persuade them to believe in falsehood, in order to obtain more clicks and shares, therefore, higher advertising revenue and/or ideological gain.”*

We note in the above definition a more specific definition of fake news. We will briefly introduce several concepts that are often confused or presented as forms of fake news, in order to understand the necessity for clarification of the fake news concept and the fake news phenomenon.

### **3.2. Related Concepts to Fake News**

The need for a theoretical consensus, at least a partial one, becomes more prominent when there are brought into discussion some related concepts, which are sometimes presented as fake news.

Thus, Wang (2020, p. 148) presents some of these concepts, as it follows:

*“News satire, yellow journalism, junk news, pseudo-news, hoax news, propaganda news, advertorial are terms with similar meaning to fake news. Some people may consider these terms as synonyms for fake news”.*

As far as we can see, some of these concepts mentioned by the author are close to fake news, covering a wide range of media products. In a similar way, Molina et al. (2021) conducting a literature review, identified several types of content shared in online environments which were labelled as fake news, such as: false news, polarized content, satire, misreporting, commentary, persuasive information and citizen journalism.

In order to have a better understanding of how the literature refers to fake news, it is worth bringing into discussion the results of research conducted by Alonso Garcia et al. (2020), from where we can extract the *key descriptors* as follows: in the first class we can find – *news, social medium, journalist and user*; followed by – *truth, society and journalism*; we can also find *information, source, student and education*. Alonso Garcia et al. (2020) analysed 640 articles published in the Web of Science, between 2005 and 2019. Furthermore, we can use their analysis to explain how fake news is understood by the scholars from various fields of studies.

Finally, but not least, we consider it necessary to add the concept of malinformation to the already mentioned concepts of misinformation and disinformation. Wardle (2020) defines the malinformation as the situation where the information distributed has the clear purpose of attacking a person, a social category or a social group.

Based on everything that has been presented so far, we can move on to the issue represented by the fake news phenomenon.

### **3.3. From Theory to Practice, from Concept to Phenomenon: Dimensions and Characteristics of Fake News**

Summarising what has been presented so far in this paper, we can advance the idea that the diversity of the definitions given to the concept of fake news leads us to address the *phenomenon* of fake news. Thus, it is imperative to identify the dimensions of this phenomenon, but also some criteria that can help us differentiate what is fake news and what should be included in the sphere of this phenomenon.

Tandoc et al. (2017) present an analysis of the publications where the fake news concept was approached, selecting 34 articles published between 2003 and 2007, and their analysis resulted in a typology of fake news definitions, which can be also understood as a classification that can be applied to the phenomenon: news satire, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, propaganda.

Reviewing this typology, we can note that the fake news phenomenon can be very diversified and it makes it difficult to reach a minimum consensus on the theoretical view of fake news, but it also limit the processes aimed at detecting, combating and preventing the effects of this phenomenon.

One of the remarkable contributions made by Tandoc et al. (2017) is defining two dimensions of the fake news phenomenon identified in each article which were

included in their literature review: the level of facticity and the intention to deceive. Using these two dimensions, we can better understand and distinguish between the various types of fake news. In addition, Tandoc et al. (2017) note that any form of fake news, regardless of the environment where this is spread or of its format, closely respects the structure of real news. Whether it is a fake written media or a fake news broadcasted on a TV news journal, or a documentary that seeks to spread false information, any of these looks like real media products, thus creating a false idea of credibility.

Egelhofer & Lecheler (2019) propose a clear distinction between these two dimensions of the phenomenon of fake news: we can discuss about fake news as a journalistic genre, as a media product (news or other type); also, we can mention how fake news is used as a weapon, especially in the political world, it is being used to discredit media institutions or to delegitimize media discourse in general. Both of these dimensions must be taken into account when we analyse the phenomenon of fake news, and the impact of fake news weaponization as a label can be treated both as an effect and as a possible cause of how trust in media is affected by this phenomenon (Gavriliuță & Bortoș, 2021).

We can't ignore a question directly related to one of the characteristics that turned the phenomenon of fake news into a global problem, namely which are the characteristics that make news to be shareable or viral? Based on the literature review, Baptista & Gradim (2020) describe the following characteristics: the use of an emotional content which provokes direct and strong feelings; the use and the resort of heuristic persuasion, e.g., the use of a simple language, understood by everyone, without any specialised terms or demonstrations that require high intellectual capacities; imitation of a veridic journalistic format, e.g., the use of typical structure and typical elements of a real news; the mix of clickbaits and attractive images – these can be used as a technique to turn any topic into a newsworthy, regardless of its content or its truth value.

Anderau (2021) mentions four of the characteristics of fake news: falsity, intentionality, minimum audience and dynamics. Following the clarification of these characteristics, it results in a definition of fake news: *“Fake news is misleading information intentionally published and presented as news which has the function of deliberately misleading its recipients about its status as news”* (Anderau, 2021, p. 14).

We can thus conclude that beyond what would seem to be a theoretical definition and a reference to fake news as a concept, it is hidden a phenomenon that camouflages itself in various forms, posing serious problems when its amelioration is discussed.

#### **4. Implications – Fake News: Concept and/or Phenomenon?**

Gathering all the information presented up to this point, we consider the thesis proposed at the beginning of this paper is supported – the distinction between the concept of fake news and the phenomenon of fake news can be made. As we noticed, there are several definitions given to the fake news concept and this can be studied following the philosophical method proposed by Collingwood (2005), as these definitions are not mutually exclusive, nor is there an exhaustive definition. So it is clear that we discuss a philosophical concept, as we have previously shown.

Also, when we discuss fake news as a phenomenon, we have in mind the way this manifests itself. More specifically, the fake news phenomenon is actually related to the practical dimension of the concept, i.e. how this phenomenon produces negative consequences on individuals and society as a whole, respectively how this phenomenon can be combated. In other words, in order to understand fake news, respectively to combat fake news, it is necessary we refer to it as a phenomenon, and the contributions in combating fake news that have been made from a theoretical point of view must be adapted practically, referring to the *phenomenon*.

Therefore, the distinction we made helps to understand fake news, as the concept is related to a theoretical understanding, which is why there are several definitions and theoretical guidelines, while the phenomenon, as already noted, consists in understanding the social, political, psychological, economic and any other implications. By understanding these, we can combat the fake news phenomenon, and even more, a prevention component can be developed - this way, the society and its citizens can develop an “immunity” from fake news and disinformation.

The concept and the related theories can be used to create and develop educational instruments available to social agents, who also can collaborate in preventing fake news. In other words, the whole theoretical framework helps to correctly inform the citizens, because at stake, beyond combating fake news, is its prevention. On the other hand, as long as a phenomenon manifests itself, for example, as in the case of the United States presidential election in 2016, there is no time for reaction and prevention and the only solutions are to combat it post-factum.

**In conclusion**, the interdisciplinary approach in the present article and the distinction proposed by us also require the distinction between prevention and control; thus, theoretical knowledge related to the concept is associated with the prevention of the phenomenon, while the study of the phenomenon leads to combating it through methods and techniques that can limit the possible effects, both now and in the future.

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