

## **The Definitional Issue of Fake News**

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### **Abstract**

The complex issue of fake news has been approached extensively by many disciplines in academia. Despite this variety of approaches, the concept of fake news still lacks a reasonable degree of definitional unicity. This paper critically analyzes a sample of definitions from the current literature. By diving into the set of definitions, it will exhibit a total of ten necessary conditions that scholars generally consider: imitation, falsity, deception, bullshit, purpose, morality, assessability, virality, channel, and appeal. Current definitions of fake news have certain blindspots and leave too much leeway for interpretation. This leeway is utterly problematic because it creates a grey zone in which articles are left stranded halfway between fake news and factual news articles. However, it has the crucial advantage of opening up new epistemic paths of inquiry regarding fake news. As a conclusion, we will summarize the conditions one can accept or reject to define fake news.

**Keywords: fake news, disinformation, social epistemology, definition**

## **1 Introduction**

With its roots going back to the nineteenth century (Posetti and Matthews 2018), the term “fake news” is by no means new. However, it has gained immensely in popularity since the last few years. The most obvious explanation for this resurgence of interest is to be found in two recent events, namely the 2016 US presidential election (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) and the Brexit referendum (Rawlinson 2020). Trump’s supporters and pro-Brexiteers were accused of producing and sharing fake news on a massive scale via social media in order to manipulate public opinion for electoral purposes. In a strange twist, the term soon changed sides and was used by Republicans to bash “mainstream fake news media” on the Left (Coady 2021: 68).

The issue of fake news has been approached extensively by philosophers, sociologists, communication scientists, historians, and political scientists. Despite all these approaches, the use of the term by academics is contested. On one side of the spectrum, Habgood-Coote (2019) argues that academics and journalists should refrain from using it for reasons. Firstly, “fake news” does not have a stable meaning, which leads to nonsense, context sensitivity, and contested usage. Secondly, philosophers already have good words for describing this epistemic phenomenon, such as “epistemic dysfunction”, “lies”, “misleading information”, “bullshitting” or “false assertion” (see, for instance, Jack (2017)). And finally, “fake news” is susceptible to propagandist purposes, as evidenced by its use in legitimizing anti-democratic propaganda. Relatedly, Coady (2021: 81) states that both epistemically and ethically, “the term serves no good purpose while doing considerable harm”. So, according to both Habgood-Coote and Coady, one should stop trying to define fake news, or at least, one should avoid putting too much emphasis on this so-called new epistemic vice.

On the other side of the spectrum, Jaster and Lanius (2021: 40) argue that the use of this term by academics is not only valid but also necessary. They argue that there is an urge and a duty to give fake news a stable definition. A clear definition fixes the epistemic standard for the sake of a clear and open public debate. “Boundary work is therefore essentially important for the protection of epistemic standards in journalism and science alike.” (Jaster and Lanius 2021: 40) According to these authors, defining fake news will help us put up a more effective and incisive fight against this detrimental phenomenon.

This paper does not take a position in the debate over whether one should continue to use the term fake news or not. However, we deem that this debate points out that there is a definitional issue of fake news at stake in the literature. This paper will contribute to this debate by rendering the many strands of this definitional issue. In order to accomplish this objective, an analyze a sample of definitions from the literature will be performed. For each definition, we will delineate the condition(s) under which they consider a particular content as fake news. If one decides to accept or reject one specific condition, one has then to stick to it and sometimes qualifies a certain content as fake news even if most of the authors do not consider it as such. It will be made explicit, with ample recourse to concrete examples, what the acceptance or rejection of even one condition implies. By diving into the set of definitions, a total of ten necessary conditions that scholars generally consider will be exhibited. They rarely impose the ten of them together and instead, cherry-pick from the most crucial ones.

Analyzing selected definitions of fake news from the literature in their recent article, Jaster and Lanius (2021) extracted seven possible conditions for a piece of information to be qualified as fake news. This article refines their work by adding three other conditions (assessability, appeal, and

morality) as well as by considering the definitions they left out. For each of these definitions, it will be stressed the condition they enclose. These definitions have some blind spots and leave too much leeway for interpretation. This leeway is utterly problematic because it creates a grey zone in which articles are halfway between fake news and true news article. Examples of such articles will be given in the text. Even if this grey zone is problematic, it nevertheless has the advantage of opening up new epistemic avenues about fake news. Is a factually false but morally valuable piece of information fake news? Is a true but misleading piece of information fake news? How to assess an article's willingness to deceive? Is a false article creating unattended harm fake news?

To conclude, the conditions that one can accept or reject in a definition of fake news will be summarized. This list can be useful not only for proposing a new definition but also for analyzing the debates in the literature and discovering which definition is at stake in an author's argumentation. Furthermore, it will be shown how an article can switch from a news article to fake news when one accepts only an extra necessary condition in one's definition and vice versa. For convenience, the term "article" will be used in the text, but the argument can be equally applicable to other any kind of piece of information: printed article, tweet, post, press release, video, etc.

We will now analyze several definitions in turn and note which conditions they encompass. We do not aim here at performing a comprehensive review of all the definitions in the literature, nor to know how much a given condition is common or not. Merely, we use these definitions as an input material to explore the variety of possible features that fake news could encompass. At the end of this process, a total of ten conditions will have been encountered: imitation, falsity, deception, bullshit, purpose, morality, assessability, virality, channel, and appeal.

## 2 Levy and Gelfert: the imitation and falsity conditions

As a first step, we consider the definition offered by Levy (2017: 20), who states that:

“fake news is 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.”

We can deduce two necessary conditions here: **imitation** (“resembles the format and content of legitimate media”) and **falsity** (“false claim”). For each encountered definition, we will report such conditions in Table 1. The check marks denote the presence of the condition in the definition. The interrogation marks denote an ambiguity (for instance, if a condition is implicitly stated or unclear). Finally, note that the conditions are always understood as necessary and never as sufficient.

The imitation condition describes the format that fake news adopts in order to mirror the standards of classical journal articles. For instance, by making the sources explicit, using identical writing and style layout, showing pictures (either deep fakes or taken from an unrelated event), using comparable vocabulary and language as classical media, and fabricating pieces of evidence (fake or misleading statistics, or wrongly summarizing scientific papers, etc.). All these tricks aim to win the readers’ trust. *Mutatis mutandis*, pseudoscience proceeds in the same manner by presenting a theory using a scientific presentation format. If one decides to take imitation as a necessary condition for fake news, then all the short tweets of Donald Trump containing false or misleading information will not be counted as fake news. Indeed, the rawness and shortness of the tweet format are a far cry from the conventions of classical media presentation. Furthermore, according to Levy, fake news has to obey a falsity condition. They need to be false, i.e. asserting  $p$  when  $p$  is not the case. One can also add that this falsity should not be acknowledged by the author, either implicitly or explicitly. Were that the case, it would be obvious to everyone that the content

is false and it would thus be impossible to confuse it with factual news. In fact, this type of obviously false information imitating classical media have already been in existence for a long time. It is nothing but satire. Satirical journals (e.g., *Charlie Hebdo*, *Le Canard Enchaîné*, *The Onion*, *The Babylon Bee*, etc.) present false information in the shape of a rigorous article to criticize or ironize a given social fact. These journals generally employ tactics such as exaggeration, irony, and absurdity (Jack 2017). Even though the piece of information is presented as true, it is glaringly obvious to the reader (who is aware that these media are not usual newspapers) that this truthfulness is fake. This fakeness is part of the typical ironical feature of satire and is precisely what makes it funny. In this sense, satire — even though it consists of deliberately false articles — differs markedly from fake news. Note that satire is not always written solely for the sake of entertainment. It can also favor certain political aims over others. For instance, *The Onion* is more liberal, while *The Babylon Bee* is more conservative.

Although falsity is a common feature one has in mind when speaking about fake news, some authors argue that fake news need not be false, but can also be misleading (i.e. true but ambiguous). For Gelfert (2018: 108),

“fake news is the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design”.

We notice here the imitation condition (“as news”). Concerning the falsity condition, news does not need to be false; it can also be misleading. Consider an example given by Bernecker (2021: 289). A news article claims that burglaries in the neighborhood increased by 20% after migrants entered the city. Assume that this claim is factually true: the police reported a 20% increase in burglaries and the city administration simultaneously recorded a significant rise in the number of

foreigners. However, such a claim implies that migrants are causally connected to this rise in burglaries, which might not be true. The information is not false but just misleading and might depend on extra information (the full text, the context, etc.). It relies on the famous paralogism post hoc ergo propter hoc (in Latin: after this, so because of that). Gelfert's definition catches this kind of scenario but Levy's fails to do so. Indeed, for Levy, the burglary article will not be considered fake news because all the data are correct. Another case involving a misleading message is a tweet from the European Commission posted on the 23rd of November 2021. The tweet consists of a graph ranking the EU countries according to their Covid vaccination rate and their respective relative deaths due to Covid. Above the graph, the Commission wrote: "Data shows us that the higher the vaccination rate, the lower the death rate. #COVID19 #VaccinesWork."<sup>1</sup> It is true that the plot shows an anticorrelation between the percentage of vaccinated people and the relative number of deaths: the more vaccinated the population, the less deaths. The hashtag #VaccinesWork suggests that the correlation proves that vaccines are effective at reducing the death rate. However, correlation does not imply causation. Less economically developed countries such as Romania and Bulgaria are less vaccinated but also less equipped to provide emergency health care. This graphic is therefore not a scientific proof of vaccine efficiency even though it constitutes a valid political argument in favor of it. Even if vaccines are scientifically proven to work by other arguments (such as clinical trials with a control group), this graph cannot be considered scientifically relevant. This brings us to the critical question: is this tweet fake news? The premises (i.e. the data) are true and so is the conclusion (assuming that vaccines' efficiency has been demonstrated by other scientific means), and yet, jumping directly from these premises to the conclusion is a fallacy. Such a tweet

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<sup>1</sup> [https://twitter.com/EU Commission/status/1463119478099693571](https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1463119478099693571)

teeters at the very edge of truth, misleadingness, and falsehood. The epistemological status of the EU Commission's tweet raises issues about the efficiency of the falsity condition. The degree of misleadingness which renders an article fake news is not easy to gauge. Otherwise, to be consistent, any article with a logical fallacy should be considered fake news (and there are a lot). We encounter here the first grey zone in the falsity condition.

### **3 Lazer et al.: the deception and bullshit conditions**

We already notice here the consequences of choosing a condition for the effectiveness of a definition. According to Levy's definition, none of these two examples are considered fake news, whereas Gelfert's is prone to categorize both of them as fake news. Of course, one can argue that the nature of these articles is quite different because there might be, behind one of the articles (or perhaps both), a willingness of the author to deliberately deceive. Gelfert's definition seems to suggest that a deceiving posture must be present in the author's mindset ("misleading by design"). Accounting for such a design, Lazer et al. (2018: 1094) offer a more precise (and more restrictive) definition:

"We define 'fake news' to be fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational processes 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 problems, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people)".



Notice that one of the previous conditions is present: imitation (“mimics news media”). It is unclear whether the presence of the falsity condition is also present: fake news needs to be “fabricated” and to lie between “false or misleading information” and “false information”. The third new condition, as added by Lazer et al., is the **deception** condition (“intent”): the fact that the aim of the writer is not to inform the reader about the actual event but instead to deliberately fake information. Fake news has to violate not just truth but also trustworthiness. According to this definition, if an article contains false information by error — meaning that the author is honest and committed to the truth —, it is not considered as fake news. For instance, on the 11th of October 2019, the French newspaper *Le Parisien* claimed the arrest of Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès in Glasgow. Dupont de Ligonnès is the main suspect in the murder of his own family in 2011. Since then, he has been on the run. Actually, the correct information was that the Glasgow police arrested a man suspected to be Xavier Dupont de Ligonnès. After DNA testing, he turned out to not be the right man. In the meantime, however, the case made the headlines. There was no clear intention of deception in *Le Parisien*’s article. Therefore, according to Lazer’s definition, this article should not be considered as fake news.

The willingness to deceive is not always unambiguous. Many mainstream media are considered partisan: *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, and *The New York Times* are more left-wing, whereas *The Daily Telegraph*, *Le Figaro*, and *Fox News* are more right-wing. One expects them to treat information from different perspectives. Although not lying, these media choose to shed more or less light on certain subjects, which is called editorial bias. The question is how strong can the editorial bias be before something falls under fake news. In any given article, what is a brute fact and what an opinionated description of said fact is not always clear (Stewart 2021). To what extent is the writer free to choose the angle of the presentation without turning out to produce fake news? This

definition does not give us the answer. If a media produces a fake news article, why is part of this falsity attributed to the editorial bias and to the conscious willingness to deceive? The question on this occasion is epistemological: which pieces of evidence are sufficient to decide if an author is lying on purpose? Once again, this definition does not provide any answer and creates a new grey zone.

Several examples can be cited where there is no willingness to deceive even though the author is conscious of not producing true information. For instance, during the 2016 US campaign, Macedonian teenagers were asked to create and share fake news and were paid in proportion to the clicks they received (Silverman and Alexander 2016). The Macedonian case is interesting because the willingness to always deceive one every single piece of information is lacking in this case. The teenagers do not want to produce false information for the love of spreading counter-picture of the word. They just did not care about the truth, they just wanted to create appealing news regardless of their truth value. They were creating what Harry Frankfurt calls “bullshit”: “[The bullshitter] does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose” (Frankfurt 2005: 55). By chance, the Macedonian teenagers might produce true information, but it is not their aim. Their aim is to create the most appealing content to earn money thanks to the click it will receive regardless of its truth. Jaster and Lanius (2021: 26) call this condition the **bullshit** condition which accounts for indifference to the truth. It is worth noticing that a bullshitter’s goal is not deception. A rumor perfectly illustrates how bullshit functions: the author of the rumor does not care whether the rumor is true or false. On the contrary, the point is to produce the most gossip possible (for many possible reasons: hurting the people involved, improving his/her social standing, etc.). The bullshitter does not have the intention to deceive (i.e., producing a falsity) but rather to share viral content. This content can be true or false,

but it is not the focus of the bullshitter. In that respect, the bullshit condition is opposed to the deception condition, albeit they both demonstrate a lack of truthfulness. This condition is not present in Lazer et al. and Gelfert because these examples both underlie an intention to deceive. However, this condition is consistent with Levy's definition although it is not explicitly mentioned. We put an interrogation mark in Table 1 to take into account this possibility. One has then to be careful when encountering fake news examples in the literature and keep in mind if the intention to deceive or not (i.e., to bullshit) is present or not.

#### **4 McIntyre: the purpose condition**

In addition to the willingness to deceive, the precise aim of this manipulation is what we call the **purpose** condition. Next to the imitation, falsity, deception, and bullshit conditions, purpose is the fifth condition. Previous definitions do not make explicit what kind of purpose(s) fake news accounts for: political (creating distrust towards the government, changing elections' outcome or covertly influencing opinion), economic (generating revenue), etc. Note, however, that even if the purpose of fake news is sometimes clear, it does not mean that this goal will be achieved. For instance, counter-intuitively, anti-Clinton fake news during the 2016 US campaign (probably) did not change the election's outcome (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). Furthermore, writing an article with a clear and strong purpose does not necessarily imply a deceptive posture. One can think about investigative journalists whose aim is to shed light on a hidden reality: denouncing conspiracies, conflicts of interest, threats to human rights, pervasive corruption, money laundering, and the like. An excellent example of the success of such investigative journalism is the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, which published a tremendous amount of investigations that made the headlines: Panama Papers, Paradise Papers, Pandora Papers, to name just three. On

their website, they stress the social impact their articles generate: better regulations, trials for corrupted leaders, recognition of oppressed people, and so on. These articles are not only compliant with the truth (often documented with extensive evidence: the “leaks”), but also have as their explicit aim the production of social change. In this respect, McIntyre’s definition is more specific:

“Disinformation that is deliberately created to look like actual news in order to have a political effect” (McIntyre 2018: 173).

This definition implies the imitation, falsity, and deception conditions, but not that of bullshit. The purpose condition as a “political effect” is central to this definition, although it is silent about whether this effect is morally desirable or not. Note that disinformation is not defined here (nor throughout his book), but we assume that McIntyre uses the term in its commonly recognized meaning, namely that of information which is falsified with the intention to deceive (deception and falsity conditions), and presented in the way the media present news, which refers to the aforementioned imitation condition. According to this definition, a (false) article claiming the discovery of extraterrestrial life or a famous athlete’s extramarital relations will not be considered fake news, since it (probably) has no noticeable political impact. Furthermore, this definition does not state if this impact is an actual impact or only the willingness to have an impact. Stated differently, if a content is designed to have a political impact but fails to produce any, is it still considered fake news? MacIntyre’s definition is not entirely clear on this score. Moreover, according to this definition, a fabricated piece of information aiming at no political impact and only accidentally creating some political outcome will not be considered fake news. For instance, according to McIntyre’s definition, the Macedonian teenager (who is driven by financial incentives rather than political ones) can not be accused of fake news production — irrespective of whether

his article produces (unwanted) political effects. We notice another grey zone here that calls for clarification.

Before proceeding any further, let us make clear the distinction between the deception and purpose conditions. Deception pertains to the fact that the author is aware of presenting a false or misleading content. Of course, they might commit deception for several reasons: having political or economic outcomes, boosting their journalistic career, creating gossip, etc. This information is contained in the purpose condition.

## **5 European Commission: the morality condition**

Diving into the fake news literature, one discovers that most academic citations of fake news come from the same (in)famous sources: climate deniers, antivaxxers, conspiracists, Donald Trump and his supporters, far-right activists, etc. Of course, these groups do not have a monopoly on fake news production, and many other groups are responsible for producing fake news (although with different frequencies). So far, none of the definitions we have covered justifies why the aforementioned specific pieces of fake news should be deemed relevant and pressing instead of the multiplicity of other ones. Yet another condition is often underlined in the literature: the **morality** of the fake news' purpose. Indeed, fake news production can lead to morally harmful consequences: discrimination, hate speech, violence, social chaos, and the list goes on. The definition of the European Commission encompasses this condition of fake news (which they identify as disinformation):

“In this Report, we favour the word ‘disinformation’ over ‘fake news’. Disinformation, as used in the Report, includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information

designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit”  
(HLEG 2018: 3).

In the previous definitions, the moral value of the political aim, if any, was not stated. In the above definition, however, morality takes centre stage. The information can only be called “fake news” when it is intended to cause harm. This is a strong requirement. Indeed, taken literally, it would imply that a fake article stating that the atmospheric temperature will rise by 1 C in five years (provided the correct answer is many more years) would not be considered fake news because it serves a morally valuable aim (urging people to immediately fight climate change). In the same way, an NGO claiming false data about poverty in Africa in order to gain more donations, should not be considered fake news. Or, still according to the European Commission’s definition, UK propaganda meant to jeopardize Germans’ trust in their dictatorial leader during World War II should not be considered fake news either. Moreover, it is not clear which moral values are considered as desirable in this definition. More recently, the morality argument has extensively been used by some governments (Hungary, Russia, Malaysia, Singapore, Zimbabwe, etc.) in their fight against “harmful” fake news to justify an undemocratic press regulation and a control of the freedom of speech (Neo 2020; Fernandez 2019; Yadav et al. 2021).

## **6 Allcott & Gentzkow: the assessability condition**

To fight fake news propagation and avoid their supposedly harmful consequences, some scholars and journalists got involved in fact-checking: assessing the truth of suspicious content and debunking it if it fails the test. This enterprise presupposes that fake news is assessable. In other words, that it is possible to decide whether the content of fake news is true or not. In that respect,

the definition of Allcott and Gentzkow includes the **assessability** of fake news as a seventh possible condition. Assessability pertains to the claim that a piece of information can be proven, after the appropriate investigations, to be either true or false. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017: 213) define fake news as:

“news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers”.

We notice here the falsity (“false”), deception (“intentionally”), and imitation (“news article”) conditions that we have already met, but not the purpose, bullshit, or morality conditions. In addition, one has the requirement that these news articles can be proven to be false. This condition is more demanding than the falsity condition: articles need not only be false, but it must also be possible to prove them so. Notice that neither the purpose nor the morality condition is required here.

Note that this requirement is quite strong. Many false stories are impossible to prove false. An article announcing the death of Donald Trump can be easily proven false if, say, Donald Trump appears publicly after this announcement. This article is fake news according to this definition. However, an article claiming that Donald Trump is sent by Opus Dei to rule the world and that all pieces of evidence have been destroyed for the sake of secrecy is not fake news according to this definition — simply because it cannot be proven to be false. Intuitively, we are prone to labeling the latter as fake news not because we have objective elements to argue against it, but because we deem it utterly implausible.

This last example demonstrates that humans do not always use assessability conditions for acquiring knowledge about the world. In the Donald Trump and Opus Dei case, we can rely on Ockham’s economic criterium. The simpler the explanation, the more credible it is. From Allcott

& Gentzkow’s definition, the epistemic status of these examples remains unclear. Be that as it may, this nonassessability is not a problem for all the other definitions we have encountered so far. Once again, we notice that the choice of condition among the seven we have encountered so far (imitation, falsity, deception, bullshit, purpose, morality, and assessability) impacts the set of articles one will categorize as fake news. We will now focus on two conditions relative to the behavior of fake news in their epistemic ecosystem: the virality and the propagation channel.

## **7 Rini: the virality condition**

The eighth condition current in the literature is the **virality** condition. Virality pertains to the propensity of news to be viral: to spread like wildfire and be fastly and widely shared among the epistemic community. This feature is taken into account in Rini’s definition:

“A fake news story is one that purports to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage, yet is known by its creators to be significantly false, and is transmitted with the two goals of being widely retransmitted and of deceiving at least some of its audience” (Rini 2017: 45).

Yet again, we find the falsity (“significantly false”), imitation (“mimic”), and deception (“known by its creators to be significantly false”) conditions. The purpose, morality, assessability, and bullshit conditions are, however, absent. But an extra requirement is at stake. Fake news must not be simply transmitted, it must also be transmitted massively: retweeted, shared, printed by other media, etc.

The virality of fake news is not simply proportional to the number of users who share it. On top of that, virality is also catalyzed by the mechanics of social media or search engine algorithms.



Naturally, the more a piece of information is “juicy” (i.e. has an appealing content or echoes prior beliefs), the more the user will be prone to sharing it. But the mere fact of sharing fake news is not purely human-based. Algorithms and bots propose content to individual users based on the success said content has enjoyed with similar user profiles — often in complete disregard of the truth of this information. Such algorithmic prejudices made the headline with their alleged harmful consequences in the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US elections.

Furthermore, there is an extra grey zone: it is not clear after how many readers or shares a piece of news can be termed viral. According to Rini’s definition, an article fulfilling all the conditions except the virality will not be considered fake news if it is published in a low-audience blog or in a limited visibility medium. According to her definition, virality is a necessary feature of fake news. As for the purpose condition, the virality condition is also unclear. If some false content unintentionally becomes viral, does it fulfill the virality condition and then is treated as fake news? Conversely, if an author designs his article to go viral but this strategy goes awry and no viral effect occurs, can he still be accused of producing fake news?

## **8   Baptista & Gradim: the channel and appeal conditions**

Baptista and Gradim (2020: 5) offer a very precise definition, synthesizing several conditions previously encountered (falsity, imitation, deception, purpose, and virality), except the morality and assessability condition. According to their definition, fake news is:

“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".

The quote unambiguously affirms that this definition requires fake news to be online. We call it the channel condition, which is the ninth condition for fake news one can detect in the literature. The channel designates the way through which fake news is disseminated: newspapers, online media, social media, spamming, and other similar means.

In most academic definitions, the channel is not specified. Although mentioning the channel is restrictive, it stresses the specific ecosystem in which fake news recently developed (the retweet and spread thanks to algorithms during the 2016 US election and Brexit). However, fake news is not a new phenomenon and each era developed its unique channels for propagating false information. Towards the end of the ancient Roman republic, Octavian spread rumors about a liaison between Cleopatra and his chief political opponent, Mark Antony. For this aim, he made use of poetry and slogans carved on coins he distributed to the public. In the fifteenth century, the invention of the printing press offered a cheaper and quicker communication medium. In France between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, canards were inexpensive newspapers which propagated scandalous rumors using explicit and poorly crafted illustrations. These canards also played a role in the French Revolution by broadcasting rumors about the egregiously expensive lifestyle of the then-queen Marie Antoinette. During the Second World War, radio waves emerged as a novel channel of strategic misinformation. The Overseas News Agency, assisted by UK information services, broadcasted information in the US media which aimed to discredit Hitler and urge the US to get involved in the conflict. On the other side of the Atlantic, the British medium

wave transmitter Aspidistra broadcasted fake bad news about the difficulties and failure of the German army in order to discredit Hitler in the minds of the German people. Given the wide variety of the aforementioned channels of diffusion, Baptista Gradim's definition proves restrictive because it excludes all the previous examples from the category of fake news.

Additionally, in Baptista and Gradim's definition, one can distinguish what we call the appeal condition of fake news, which requires that fake news be visually and rhetorically appealing and have a provocative title in order to trap people's clicks ("an opportunistic structure (title, image, content) to attract the readers' attention"). Appealing news is news on which a large number of users click on (fishing) and potentially share. More clicks translate to a larger audience and, potentially, a greater influence on people's minds — and what is more, a bigger chunk of money.

It is worth noting that the appeal condition is of course not sufficient to decide whether an article is fake news or not. Some pieces of factual news can have a very appealing appearance as well. Indeed, due to the economic reconfiguration of media in the Internet age, some freelance journalists nowadays are paid according to the number of clicks their articles generate. Note that the appeal condition is not specific to online fake news but also extends to a printed fake news article with an appealing presentation meant to entice customers to buy the issue.

## **9 Conclusion**

To sum up, we encountered ten conditions for qualifying a given article as fake news: falsity (Does the information have to be false or partially false? Can it be partially true as well?), imitation (Does the information have to mimic the format used by classical media?), deception (Is there a clear intention to deceive the reader? Is the falsity created on purpose?), bullshit (Can fake news

be produced by authors who are completely unconcerned with the truth? Does the author consciously want to propagate falsehood?), purpose (Does the author have a specific aim in producing this article? Is this aim motivated by economic or political factors?), virality (Does the information have to spread quickly and widely throughout the epistemic community?), channel (Are specific channel better suited for spreading fake news? Exclusively online or offline?), assessability (Does the information need to be verifiable?), appeal (Must the article be appealing in its format or content?) and, last but not least, morality (Should something be qualified as fake news only when it has harmful consequences? Or, do any type of consequences, good or bad, have to be considered?). The three last conditions were not mentioned by Jaster and Lanius and constitute, among others, a new contribution of our article.

We saw that the extant definitions cherry-pick among these ten conditions — as demonstrated in Table 1. From the preceding pages, it is clear that the more conditions a definition includes, the more articles will the definition exclude. To avoid pitfalls regarding fake news in the scientific community, such knowledge about the wide variety of definitions is urgently needed. In light of this urgency, the aim of this article is not only to point out the lack of univocity in definitions of fake news, but also to provide the necessary tools to anyone with an interest in fake news to navigate this field or analyze which conception of fake news is at stake in a given public debate. Furthermore, our set of ten conditions can be used by anyone who wishes to propose a new definition of fake news. As we have seen, special care must be taken when selecting among these conditions for two reasons. First, picking a certain set of conditions will discard articles that ought to be considered fake news, or include ones which did not intend to be anything but factual. Second, the contours of each condition are to be carefully defined in order to avoid any grey zone: What do we mean by morally good? How do we demonstrate the willingness to deceive an author? How

viral should a piece of content be to count as fake news? Is a factually false but morally valuable piece of information fake news? And is a true but misleading piece of information fake news? What about a false article creating unattended harm? Our definitional journey in this article has attempted to clarify the fake news landscape, but certain salient underlying questions still deserve further attention.

	Levy	Gelfert	Lazeretal.	McIntyre	HLEG	AllcottandGentzkow	Rini	BaptistaandGradim
Falsity	✓	?	?	✓	?	✓	✓	✓
Imitation	✓	✓	✓	✓	?	✓	✓	✓
Deception		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bullshit	?							
Purpose			✓	✓				✓
Morality				✓				
Assessability					✓			
Virality							✓	✓
Channel								✓
Appeal								✓

Table 1: The ten conditions

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