A conceptual analysis of fake news

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An important way in which philosophy can contribute to public discourse is by clarifying concepts that are central to it. This paper is a philosophical contribution in that spirit. It offers a conceptual analysis of fake news – a notion that has recently entered public debate following the 2016 US presidential election. In essence, I suggest analysing fake news as a species of Frankfurtian bullshit. This analysis allows us to distinguish it from similar phenomena like bad or biased journalism and satire.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: In the first section, I introduce four test cases. The first three are intuitively not cases of fake news, while the fourth one is. A correct conceptual analysis should, hence, exclude the first three while including the fourth. In the second section, I go through a number of factors that could explain the difference between the first three cases and the fourth one before I offer my explanation. In the third section, I propose an analysis of fake news and show that it matches our intuitions about the four test cases. In the fourth section, I consider a possible objection to my proposal.

1. Four test cases

Before we can analyse a concept, we need to be sufficiently familiar with it. We can certainly assume the required degree of familiarity when it comes to concepts that are in frequent use and to which we have been sufficiently exposed. Regarding the concept of fake news, however, this assumption may be questioned because the notion has only recently risen to prominence.[1] I believe, nevertheless, that the idea of fake news has solidified in our understanding to such an extent that it makes sense to analyse it. To this end, I will, as a first step, introduce four test cases and suggest whether, intuitively, the concept of fake news applies here.

Case 1: In early 2006, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) featured a three-part series on alternative medicine. One of the episodes shows how acupuncture is used in China alongside orthodox medical treatments. Much to the viewers' amazement, a team of doctors in Shanghai performed open-heart surgery on a 21-year-old woman who has opted to receive acupuncture in place of a general anaesthetic. While footage of the operation is being shown, narrator Kathy Sykes, who is Professor of Sciences and Society at the University of Bristol, explains that the young woman's doctors have performed 300 similar operations. "What could possibly explain what's going on?", she asks. Simon Singh, a science journalist, asked himself the same question and set out to investigate the case. As he found, the documentary did not make false claims. The young woman did undergo open-heart surgery, and she did receive acupuncture in place of an orthodox general anaesthesia. However, the documentary left out one crucial part of the story, viz. that the doctors gave their patient very powerful sedatives as well as local anaesthetics. Accordingly, Singh argued that the documentary created the false impression that acupuncture was able, by itself, to replace anaesthesia in complicated surgical operations – a claim for which there is no evidence (Singh 2006).[2]

Intuitive Judgement: Intuitively, Case 1 is not an instance of fake news, but merely an example of *bad journalism*. The documentarians appeared to attempt to report the facts but

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failed to tell us all of them. Thus, they conveyed the false impression that acupuncture can be a powerful anaesthetic.

Case 2: In May 2016, Sean Hannity of Fox News reported that Donald Trump once sent a private aircraft to help out 200 marines. These Marines had come back from a military operation during the second Gulf War of 1991 and were waiting to be flown back home from Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. But their flights were delayed, and well-wishers back home had to wait for hours. Donald Trump allegedly heard about this and decided to help. So he diverted one of his aeroplanes to pick the men up. Except that he did not actually do that. According to *The Fact Checker* of the Washington Post, the story relied mainly on the recollection of a former marine, who reported being flown out from Camp Lejeune in a Trump jet. That part is true. But it was not because Trump had graciously decided to help, which Hannity simply inferred. Instead, the "aircraft that ferried the troops was part of the Trump Shuttle fleet, at a time when Trump barely had control over the airline and was frantically trying to negotiate deals with bankers to prevent the collapse of his business empire." (Kessler 2016)

Intuitive Judgement: Case 2 also seems to be an instance of bad journalism. More specifically, it seems plausible to categorise it as a case of *biased journalism*.[3] Hannity is known for his favourable attitude towards Trump. This bias presumably led him to accept the story based on a single eye-witness report.

Case 3: In May 2015, *The Onion* reported that FIFA had just announced to hold yet another Soccer World Cup in the United States, which had already begun. If true, this would have been highly unusual because the FIFA World Cup is a quadrennial tournament that had already taken place the year prior in Brazil. Of course, the "news" was not to be taken seriously. The Onion, after all, is a satire website. It fabricated the story in an attempt to poke fun at the FIFA organisation which, at the time, was drowning in corruption charges. In fact, it was effortless to see that the story was a hoax. All of its parts appeared to be deliberately crafted to make the story look utterly absurd.[4]

Intuitive Judgement: Case 3, I take it, does not strike us as a fake news story either. It is an instance of *satire*. Unlike the BBC in Case 1 or Sean Hannity's case in Case 2, the Onion did not even try to get the story right. There was no story. It was just made up. The sources cited were fictitious, and the details were not even based on rumours or hunches. This was obvious because The Onion does not cover up the fact that their stories are fictitious.

Case 4: In early November 2016 (shortly before the 2016 US presidential election), 4chan[5] users concocted the story that Hilary Clinton and her campaign manager John Podesta were part of a child trafficking ring that was allegedly operating out of a pizzeria in Washington called Comet Ping Pong. They went through Hilary Clinton's emails, which had famously been leaked by Wikileaks, and found James Alefantis among Podesta's email contacts. Alefantis owned Comet Ping Pong and had previously organised an event there to support Hilary Clinton's presidential campaign. He posted a note Clinton had sent to thank him on his Instagram account. Alongside it, he also posted photos of children. 4chan users

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[3]   Note that bias should not be mistaken for ill intent. The fact that somebody is biased in telling a story does not entail that they forge it. It suggests, rather, that they do not weigh the evidence impartially.

[4]   The last sentence, e.g., read: "At press time, the U.S. national team was leading defending champions Germany in the World Cup's opening match after being awarded 12 penalties in the game's first three minutes." (The Onion 2015)

[5]   4chan is an imageboard website, which has become notorious as the birthplace for outrageous web content.

"connected the dots" and inferred that Alefantis, Clinton, and Podesta must have been conspiring in a child trafficking. This unbelievable tale became known as "pizzagate". Dubious websites began breaking the story. In November alone, almost a million messages using the hashtag #pizzagate circulated on Twitter.[6]

Intuitive Judgement: Case 4 seems to be the quintessential *fake news* story. It is not just bad journalism because those who made it up did not, plausibly, try to get the story right. And it does not appear to be satire either because its details seemed to be designed to shock rather than to humour and because the fictitiousness of the story was not evident.

2. Explaining the difference

What can explain the difference between these cases? Why are Cases 1, 2, and 3 not instances of fake news, while Case 4 is?

Explanation 1: Fake news can be identified by its truth value.

On Explanation 1, a fake news story is merely a false news story. Though plausible in the abstract, this suggestion does not stand up to scrutiny. All cases contain (or implicate) incorrect information, but only one of them strikes us as a fake news story. Hence, Explanation 1 does not appear adequate.

Explanation 2: Fake news can be identified by its source.

Another initially plausible attempt to explain fake news puts its source at the centre. There are, we might argue, more or less credible news sources. The Cable News Network (CNN), e.g., can be considered a reliable news source, while some dubious board on the web is not. This theory, however, does not seem to capture what fake news is either. It is at least conceivable that reputable news outlets participate in its propagation, too.[7] So it appears the reputability of a media source is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for fake news. It is, of course, plausible to suspect a strong correlation between the respectability of a media outlet and the likelihood that it will disseminate fake news.[8] However, we should not mistake this empirical link for a conceptual connection.

Explanation 3: Fake news can be identified by its distribution channels.

In the recent past, fake news stories were communicated almost exclusively through the internet and, more specifically, through social media websites, such as Facebook and Twitter. They spread rapidly through these sites because, at the time, social media companies did not do any quality controls. Their websites would simply serve out any story according to its user engagement. Perhaps, then, the fake news character of a message is conceptually connected to its dissemination through social media? Again, there is surely an empirical connection between the recent rise in fake news and the growing importance of social media websites as content disseminators. However, once more, we should not

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[6] Following the blow-up of the story, the owner of the pizzeria, James Alefantis, received hundreds of threatening messages on Facebook and Instagram. On 4 Dec 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch, a 28 year old from North Carolina, took matters into his own hands and decided to "self-investigate." He stormed Comet Ping Pong armed with an AR-15 assault rifle and a revolver.

[7] In fact, CNN arguably came at least quite close when they interviewed an alleged eyewitness of the Munich Shooting of 2016. While police investigations of the incident were still in progress, they brought on a young woman who reported that the gunman yelled "Allahu Akbar" before he attacked his victims (Shoichet et al. 2016). This turned out to be a complete fabrication.

[8] Therefore, it does seem reasonable to compile lists of websites that are unreliable and might, hence, have a tendency to disseminate fake news. One such service is offered by *The Daily Dot*: https://www.dailydot.com/layer8/fake-news-sites-list-facebook (accessed 15 Dec 2017).

misidentify this empirical link for a conceptual connection. It is perfectly conceivable that fake news would be spread using more traditional means of mass communication, such as radio or newspaper.[9]

Explanation 4: Fake news can be identified by the way in which it is presented.

The fourth explanation that might be proposed to explain the nature of fake news is to identify it in terms of its mode of presentation. This, too, is at least initially plausible because recent instances of fake news that come to mind were all presented similarly. They were carefully crafted to optimise for user engagement and to increase the likelihood that the stories would get clicked on, liked, and shared. This strategy is often pejoratively referred to as "clickbait," which essentially means that the stories' headlines and preview photos give just enough information to raise the user's attention but not enough to satisfy their curiosity, thus maximising the likelihood that users will click on them. However, though the clickbait strategy is indeed a common feature of fake news stories, this characteristic is not unique to them and, hence, cannot be a sufficient condition for fake news. Due to economic demands, legitimate news outlets also depend on user engagement and thus resort to sensationalist presentations of their content to clickbait potential readers. Furthermore, the clickbait strategy appears not to be necessary since a fake news story that does not use clickbait seems not to be a contradiction in terms. Accordingly, the fourth explanation does not hold either.

Explanation 5: Fake news stories can be identified by its intent.

On the fifth explanation, the difference between a real news story and a fake news story is the intent that lies behind its publication. Or, to be more precise, it lies in part thereof. To be sure, both purveyors of fake news and legitimate media companies aim to increase the number of clicks on their stories. But the latter has further goals, while the former does not. Arguably, legitimate media companies follow an ethos of truth-telling. Though they do need to make money, sell advertisements, and break stories that excite their readers, they also aim to get the story *right*. Granted, they might occasionally fail to honour this obligation. But the idea of reporting what happens in the world constitutes the essence of the media business. Hence, if no media company ever did what we ethically expect it to, we would have no media companies in the first place.[10] In contrast, "fake news is completely made up and designed to deceive readers to maximise traffic and profit," as Elle Hunt (2016) of *The Guardian* explains. Those who peddle fake news are entirely indifferent to the truth. To be sure, this does not mean that they always lie. If it suits their purpose, purveyors of fake news will, on some occasions, sprinkle some truths on top of their stories, e.g., to make them more credible. Whether what they say is true, however, just does not matter to them. Importantly, however, purveyors of fake news seek to deceive us about their intent.[11]

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9   During the 1930's and 1940's, e.g., the Nazis used false information to manipulate the masses in an attempt to garner support for their political agenda. In doing that, they relied heavily on the radio (the "Volksempfänger") as a medium. In 1782, Benjamin Franklin famously produced an entire fake issue of a newspaper, the *Boston Independent Chronicle,* in an attempt to sway peace negotiations with Britain (see Mulford 2008).

10 This line of reasoning bears resemblance with Kant's (1785/1996) argument for an injunction against promise-breaking. Kant argued that there is a perfect duty to keep one's promises because it would not be conceivable that everybody acted from the maxim to keep promises only when this suits the agent's aims. For, in that case, the institution of promising would disappear. Similarly, the media would disappear as an institution if media companies never did their duty, viz. tell us the truth about the world.

11 They do this, e.g., by mimicking website addresses and designs of acknowledged news sources. One example that illustrates this is the hoax that George H. W. Bush had died. It was distributed through

Hence, fake news is essentially characterised by two features: those who publish it are indifferent to the truth, and they try to avoid letting us know this.

These two features are, of course, the hallmark of Frankfurtian bullshit. According to Frankfurt (2005), bullshit is characterised, firstly, by an "indifference to how things really are" (p. 34). This does not mean that what a bullshitter says is always false. It might well be true. What it does mean, however, is that, unlike a liar, who tries to convince us that a given statement he believes to be false is true, a bullshitter simply does not care whether what he says is true or not.[12] The same is true of the purveyor of fake news. Secondly, the bullshitter misrepresents "in a certain way (…) what he is up to." (p. 54) As we have established, the purveyor of fake news does so, too.

3. The analysis of fake news

Having established that fake news is a species of Frankfurtian bullshit, I can proceed to give a conceptual analysis of it.

> *(FN) Fake* news *is BAP – bullshit asserted in the form of a publication.*

FN contains three conditions that are taken to be necessary and jointly sufficient for fake news. These are the Bullshit Condition (B), the Assertion Condition (A), and the Publication Condition (P).

According to B, something qualifies as fake news only if it contains bullshit in the Frankfurtian sense. The publisher has to be indifferent to the truth (B1) and cover up this fact (B2).

According to A, it is necessary for fake news that the bullshit contained in it is asserted, i.e. not only derived by conversational implicature. Frankfurt, in his original essay, does not distinguish between bullshit assertions and implicatures (Webber 2013). As we will see in the next section, this is important, however, to account for the phenomenon of *bullshit journalism*.

Finally, according to P, for something to be fake news it is necessary for it to be a *publication*. That is, any bullshit uttered in private is not fake news. For bullshit to qualify as fake news, it has to be made available publically, e.g. in paper form, on the radio, on the internet, etc..

This explanation, I believe, elucidates the difference between the four cases that we considered above.

Case 1 is not an instance of fake news because the dubious suggestion that acupuncture is a powerful anaesthetic is not explicitly asserted, but only implicated. But even if this claim had been asserted, the case would not qualify as a fake news story because the documentarians plausibly did at least try to get the story right.

In contrast, Cases 2, 3, and 4 do contain explicit, problematic assertions that were published. So conditions A and P are fulfilled here. However, condition B is fulfilled only in

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websites with names like TV-CNN.com and Fox-Channel.com, which mimicked the well-known channels CNN and Fox News (Evon 2017).

[12] Note, however, that there are different theories of lying. On the standard analysis, lying involves the making of a statement, which is believed false, to another person with the intention to make her believe that statement to be true (Cohen 2002). This standard analysis of the meaning of lying is undoubtedly widespread. It is not without problems, however. As Mahon (2016) explains, it can be argued that all of the conditions it involves are, strictly speaking, neither necessary nor sufficient for lying.

one of the cases. To see this, consider, first, Case 2, which is, intuitively, merely an instance of biased journalism. In this case, the journalist Sean Hannity did not get the story right because he did not dig deep enough or fell for the pitfalls of his cognitive psychology (or both). Nevertheless, he plausibly aimed at the truth. This is supported, e.g., by the fact that he did bring on a genuine eyewitness to back up his story. In other words, Hannity failed to exhibit condition B1. There was no indifference to the truth, no bullshit, and, hence, no fake news story.

Consider next Case 3, which is a satire story. The difference between it and fake news does not lie in B1. The two seem are alike to the extent that both the satirist and the purveyor of fake news do not aim to report the facts accurately. They are both indifferent to the truth and up to something else. The satirist seeks to ridicule, mock, parody, or caricature.[13] To this end, he helps himself rather liberally to stylistic devices (e.g. hyperbole and provocation). He does this as it helps him to make his point more effectively. But, of course, this is not the best way to communicate information accurately. Hence, a satirist will tend to run the risk of misinforming his audience. In that regard, what he does is akin to what the purveyor of fake news does. However, there still is an essential difference between the two regarding condition B2. Satirists usually do not cover up their motives – at least not systematically. This holds in the online sphere as well, as Gillin (2017) explains. Satire websites, he says, "may or may not make it clear on individual links that their stories are fake, but will almost always say in a disclaimer somewhere on their site that their content is exaggerated or fictional." In contrast, purveyors of fake news keep their cards close to their chests. As I pointed out above, they intend to fool readers into thinking that what they report is actual news when, in fact, it is entirely confabulated. Though the satirists in Case 3 were indifferent to the truth like the purveyors of fake news, they were not disingenuous about that fact, while purveyors of fake news are. The latter, in other words, exhibit both B1 and B2, while satirists fulfil only B1.

Finally, consider Case 4. This pizzagate story evidently fulfils both B1 and B2. Those who made it up were arguably indifferent to the truth and were dishonest about that fact.

4. Fake news vs. bullshit journalism

One might object that, according to my account, it would be impossible for there to be bullshit journalism that is not fake news. But, intuitively, there should be such a category. In some cases, we would probably go so far as to call some bad journalism bullshit, without going so far as to call it fake news.

To answer this objection, I need to distinguish between bullshit assertions and bullshit implicatures (Webber 2013). When somebody *asserts* bullshit, they are indifferent regarding the truth of the proposition stated. In contrast, when somebody *implicates* bullshit, they are indifferent about the truth of the implicatures of their statements. Note, now, that on my account it is a necessary condition for fake news that the bullshit content is asserted rather than merely implicated. Thus, it makes room for the category of bullshit journalism. If journalists assert bullshit in their publications, they peddle fake news. If they merely implicate it, they practice bullshit journalism.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed to construe fake news as Frankfurtian bullshit asserted in the

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[13] In fact, it is far from easy to tease apart the motives of online satirists. According to Gillin (2017), "[t]hey could be writing stories purely for entertainment, or they may be trolling a particular set of voters."

form of a publication. If correct, this analysis will, I hope, help us to think more clearly about fake news, e.g., when we investigate it from a psychological or political perspective.[14]

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[14] For a psychological study, see Pennycock et al. (2017).