

Chapter 6

Fake News for Whom?

Discussing Types, Political Appropriation, and Consumption of False Contents

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ABSTRACT

Fake news is a problematic concept with multiple meanings for diverse persons. Journalists, politicians, academics, and even laypeople use it on a daily basis. However, more often than not they refer to different things. Therefore, in order to elaborate a more robust analysis of the term, it is important to clarify who utilises it and for what. Hence, the aim of this chapter is threefold: firstly, considering its content, this study proposes an updated typology of fake news that integrates humorous messages, disinformation, and unethical journalism practices. Secondly, it establishes a distinction between the message as such and its weaponization by populist political leaders. Thirdly, it reflects on the reasons why the audience constantly look for - and share - this kind of stories. In doing so, it draws on a comprehensive literature review.

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INTRODUCTION

What are we talking about when we talk about fake news? Fake news is a problematic concept. It is difficult to define due to the excessive use by media, politicians, scholars, social media users, and even regular people (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Baptista & Gradim, 2021). Thus, it has become a sort of umbrella term utilised by different actors to describe a diverse set of supposedly false content (Farkas & Schou, 2018; Molina et al, 2021; Carson & Wright, 2022). As a result, this buzzword can be considered a hallmark of contemporary political communication (Tandoc Jr. et al, 2018; Molina et al, 2021; Freelon & Wells, 2020). Nonetheless, it merely offers a simplistic understanding of journalism, politics, and digital communication technologies (Camargo & Simon, 2022). Furthermore, its constant presence in popular conversations, political debates, media content, and academic research has fostered a largely exaggerated sense of informational moral panic (Lazer et al, 2018; Wahutu, 2019; Cabañes, 2019; Paolucci, 2023; Murphy, 2023).

This is precisely the reason why fake news is a catch-all term, with multiple definitions (Farkas & Schou, 2018; Mutahi & Kimari, 2020). Having conflicting and ambiguous meanings poses evident conceptual problems, which hinder its correct interpretation (Mutahi & Kimari, 2020; George et al, 2021; Camargo & Simon, 2022; Carson & Wright, 2022). In that sense, Habgood-Coote (2019: 1034) argues that fake news is a “linguistically defective” term, because it does not have a stable meaning and, hence, it is not always clear what it refers to. Therefore, “when a word or phrase can be applied to anything, it means nothing” (McNair, 2017).

It is worth stressing that fake news is not exactly a new phenomenon, because the manipulation of information has a very long history around the world (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Lazer et al, 2018; Bakir & McStay, 2018; Tandoc Jr. et al, 2018 and 2019; Humprecht, 2019; Panagopoulos & Roozenbeek, 2020; Freelon & Wells, 2020; Giusti & Piras, 2020; Baptista & Gradim, 2021; Carson & Wright, 2022). Consequently, the origins of this kind of messages can be tracked down to the development of the writing system, when falsehoods could be registered and kept for longer periods of time (Tandoc Jr. et al, 2018; Fallon, 2019). The arrival of the *penny press* in the XIX century witnessed famous cases of fabrication of

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