



HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE FAKE NEWS PHENOMENON

Kamoliddinova Shukrona

Kokand State Pedagogical University

Student of the Foreign Language and Literature Department

Abdupattayev Xasanboy Abdurakhmonovich

Teacher of Kokand State Pedagogical University

ABSTRACT. *The phenomenon commonly referred to as “fake news” has attracted considerable scholarly and public attention in recent years, particularly in the context of digital media and political communication. This article offers a historical-developmental overview of the fake news phenomenon, tracing its roots from early mass-communication tactics through its current digital-era manifestations, and then examining its evolution in the so-called post-truth era. Through a review of key literature, we explore definitional challenges, drivers (technological, social, political), and consequences for democracy and public discourse. The discussion highlights how fake news is not simply a new phenomenon but a transformation of longstanding practices. Findings suggest that the phenomenon’s characteristics have shifted, with virality and affective contagion becoming as important as factual falsity. The conclusion points to implications for media literacy, regulatory policy, and further research.*

KEY WORDS: *fake news; disinformation; misinformation; post-truth; media history; digital media; public discourse*

INTRODUCTION. The term “fake news” entered mainstream discourse in a forceful way around the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum, and in 2017 was selected as Word of the Year by major dictionaries. [Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2023, p. 15] Yet the broader practices of misleading, deceptive or strategically manipulated news-style content are far from new. [Fox, 2020, p. 172] This article aims to situate the fake news phenomenon in a longer historical context



and show how its development has been shaped by technological, social and political transformations. We begin with a literature review of definitions and historical trajectories, proceed to a discussion of developmental phases, present key results of the review, and conclude with implications for theory, policy and future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW. Definitions and conceptual challenges. One major scholarly challenge is definitional: what counts as fake news, and how does it relate to misinformation, disinformation and hoaxes? [Mureşan, 2022, p. 18] Rodríguez-Ferrándiz (2023) compiled 30 different definitions from dictionaries, agencies and fact-checkers, finding movement from an “untruth-driven” conception toward a “post-truth-driven” framework in which the emotional and sensational qualities matter more than veracity per se. [Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2023, pp. 17-19] Furthermore, Miró-Llinares & Aguerri (2023) reviewed empirical studies and raised the question of whether fake news is primarily a “threat” or a symptom of broader information disorder. [Miró-Llinares & Aguerri, 2023, p. 4]

Historical antecedents. Historians emphasise that fake-news-like practices date back centuries: for example, the printing-press era enabled sensational falsified reports, and nineteenth-century newspapers engaged in circulation-boosting hoaxes and exaggerations. [Longwood HIST150, 2018] Fox (2020) describes fake news as the “perfect storm” of history, media and politics: although the label is recent, the mechanisms are longstanding. [Fox, 2020, p. 173] Digital acceleration and the post-truth context. With the advent of internet and social media, the speed and reach of deceptive content have increased dramatically. Urusova (2024) describes how crises (e.g., pandemics, political upheaval) amplify online disinformation and require epistemic vigilance by audiences. [Urusova, 2024, p. 1] Meanwhile, technological and algorithmic factors give fake news the capacity to “go viral” and bypass traditional gatekeepers. [Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2023, p. 21] Consequences and research directions. Research has linked fake news to political polarisation, erosion of trust, and democratic vulnerability. [Miró-Llinares & Aguerri, 2023, p. 9] At the same time, computational methods (machine learning, stylometric analysis) have



emerged to detect and mitigate fake news, though with significant challenges. [Shu et al., 2020, p. 3]

DISCUSSION. Phase 1: Pre-digital and early mass media period. In the era of print and early broadcasting, news publishers sometimes used sensational hoaxes and fabrications to boost circulation or advance propaganda. [Longwood HIST150, 2018] For example, nineteenth-century newspapers in the U.S. published exaggerated or entirely invented stories to attract readers. The term “fake news” was not used, but the core practice of presenting false or misleading information as news was already present.

Phase 2: Propaganda, cold war and early disinformation. The concept of disinformation was formalised in the mid-20th century, especially in the context of propaganda campaigns. [Pacepa & ... via Wikipedia, 1952] Although not always labelled fake news, the tactical use of false information for strategic purposes fits the pattern. This phase emphasises intent, institutional backing and political aim.

Phase 3: Digital media and the explosion of fake news (2010s onward). With the rise of social media platforms, fake news gained new dynamics: low cost of publishing, high speed of spread, algorithmic amplification, and emotional engagement. In this phase, the term “fake news” became widespread, and the notion of “post-truth” emerged—where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. [Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2023, p. 20] Here the defining features shift: not only is the factuality of the report contested, but its affective and share-worthiness dimensions become central. Drivers and mechanisms. Key drivers include economic incentives (click-bait revenue), political motives (propaganda, manipulation), technological affordances (social media, bots, networks), and cognitive-social factors (confirmation bias, echo chambers, emotional contagion). Rodríguez-Ferrándiz (2023) found that the viral and memetic quality of a piece matters more than factual credibility. [Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2023, p. 22]

Impacts and challenges. The impacts are multi-fold: erosion of trust in institutions, polarisation of public discourse, damage to electoral integrity, and



challenges for fact-checking and regulation. Miró-Llinares & Aguerri's review emphasises the methodological difficulties in measuring the real impact of fake news, and the need to see it as part of an "information disorder" rather than a standalone phenomenon. [Miró-Llinares & Aguerri, 2023, p. 8] Towards a typology and future orientation. Based on the review, one can delineate a typology of fake news forms: (a) sensational hoaxes for profit, (b) politically-motivated disinformation, (c) algorithmically-amplified misinformation, (d) post-truth style content where belief and shareability override truth. These forms overlap and evolve. The future research agenda includes deeper longitudinal studies, better operational definitions, and multi-disciplinary approaches (communication, psychology, data science).

RESULTS. From the literature review and discussion, the following key results emerge: The phenomenon of fake news is not new, although the label is; historical antecedents stretch back to the invention of the printing press and early mass media. The evolution of fake news shows a structural shift: from institutional propaganda and sensational print hoaxes to algorithmically-enabled, socially-mediated, emotionally-driven dissemination.

In the current era, the shareability and emotional resonance of content often matter more than factual accuracy in driving spread. [Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2023, p. 21] The conceptual framing of fake news is shifting from lying/misinformation to post-truth dynamics—where facts are secondary to belief and ideological alignment. This complicates definitional clarity and empirical measurement.

Despite considerable attention, effective responses (media literacy, regulation, algorithmic mitigation) remain nascent and face significant challenges; the phenomenon is highly adaptive and context-sensitive.

CONCLUSION. This article has traced the history and development of the fake news phenomenon, showing that it is both deeply rooted in media evolution and newly transformed by the digital era. Understanding fake news requires acknowledging its historical continuity while also recognising the distinct dynamics



of the 21st-century information environment. The implications are significant: media literacy must emphasise not just fact-checking but critical understanding of the mechanisms of virality and affect; regulation and platform design must account for speed, emotion and networked sharing; and researchers must refine conceptual tools and empirical methods to keep pace with evolving forms. As democratic societies grapple with the consequences of information disorder, a historically informed and multi-disciplinary approach to fake news is essential.

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