Forthcoming in: Inquiry

**Fake News: The Case for a Purely Consumer-Oriented Explication**

Thomas Grundmann, University of Cologne

*Abstract.* Our current understanding of ‘fake news’ is not in good shape. On the one hand, this category seems to be urgently needed for an adequate understanding of the epistemology in the age of the internet. On the other hand, the term has an unstable ordinary meaning and the prevalent accounts which all relate fake news to epistemically bad attitudes of the producer lack theoretical unity, sufficient extensional adequacy, and epistemic fruitfulness. I will therefore suggest an alternative account of fake news that is meant as an explication rather than a traditional conceptual analysis of the term and that understands fake news solely from the consumer’s perspective. I will argue that this new account has the required theoretical unity, that it is epistemically highly fruitful, and that it is still very close to the ordinary usage. I conclude with addressing some of the main objections to this view.

Keywords: social epistemology - explication - consumer - bullshit - deception

**1. Problems with the Prevailing Definitions of Fake News**

*Fake news* has attracted a lot of attention over the last few years. In politics, the term ‘fake news’ has been excessively and increasingly used by Donald Trump to discredit his political enemies and to denigrate the quality media that criticize him (Keith 2018). But fake news is also hotly discussed in the media sciences and philosophy. The promise here is that the term ‘fake news’ introduces a new and elucidating epistemological category that deepens our understanding of misinformation in the age of the internet and social media (Lazer et al. 2018). But there are also problems with analyzing ‘fake news’. In ordinary language, a well-entrenched common usage of this expression is missing. Different people use the term differently (Habgood-Coote 2019). Sometimes it is even claimed that ‘fake news’ lacks descriptive content altogether and is primarily used as a rhetorical device to discredit one’s enemies in the political arena (Coady 2019, 40-41; Habgood-Coote 2019). Among those who believe that conceptual analysis of the term ‘fake news’ will provide us with a fruitful definition, there is no clear consensus either. The prevailing accounts are almost all hybrid views.[[1]](#footnote-1) They combine a necessary requirement on the part of the producer (or production process) with a necessary objective requirement. Concerning the latter, some accounts require false news reports (Rini 2017, 45; McIntyre 2018, 112), others require that the news (typically) leads to misrepresentations in its target audience (Gelfert 2018, 108), still others permit the disjunction of both (Jaster & Lanius 2018). Concerning the requirement on the part of the producer, practically everyone believes that fake news results from epistemically bad attitudes on the part of the producer (Lazer et al. 2018, 1095).[[2]](#footnote-2) It is, however, highly controversial what kind of attitude is required. There is broad agreement that a producer of fake news must possess some kind of deceptive intention, but there is no agreement whether the relevant attitudes include an intention to deceive about the content of the reports (Rini 2017, McIntyre 2018), an attitude of indifference to truth*—*associated with what is often called ‘bullshit’ (Mukerij 2018)*—*that is masked as truthful, the attitude of pretending to disseminate real news (Fallis and Mathiesen forthcoming), or a disjunction of either an intention to deceive about the content or an intention to bullshit (Gelfert 2018, Jaster and Lanius 2018). Moreover, there is the more fundamental concern that we do not need ‘fake news’ as a theoretical term, since all theoretically relevant features can be captured without using it (Habgood-Coote 2019; for critical discussion, see Brown 2019, Pepp et al. forthcoming, and the reply by Habgood-Coote forthcoming).

 The main goal of my paper is to establish a viable alternative to the orthodoxy of hybrid views that has been completely neglected so far. On my view, the crucial aspect of fake news is that it systematically misleads its target consumers, no matter whether it is produced by a liar, through practices that deviate from journalistic standards, or on the basis of unreliable sources. I will argue that this non-hybrid alternative is more unified, copes better with our intuitive verdicts about cases, and is explanatorily more fruitful than any of the orthodox hybrid accounts.

 Let us look more closely at worries concerning the analysis of ‘fake news’ as it stands. One worry is that any of the prevalent definitions of fake news given *partly* in terms of the producer’s epistemic attitude will be either clearly *too narrow* or hopelessly *disjunctive*.[[3]](#footnote-3) One can express this worry in the form of a tetralemma for hybrid views: either (i) fake news is based on an intention to deceive about the content (Rini 2017), or (ii) it is based on an attitude of indifference to truth (Mukerij 2018), or (iii) it is based on an intention to deceive about its status as news (Fallis and Mathiesen forthcoming), or (iv) it is based on either an intention to deceive consumers about the content of the story or an attitude of indifference to its truth (Jaster and Lanius 2018). As I will argue next, none of these options is fully convincing.

 First, fake news need not be based on deceptive intentions concerning the content.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is illustrated by the case of the Macedonian teenagers who, back in 2016, fabricated exciting stories, including one according to which Pope Francesco endorsed Trump as the next US president, and spread them via the internet in order to attract as much attention and make as much money as possible (Silverman and Alexander 2016). Obviously, the teenagers did not have any intention to deceive their readers when they fabricated exciting news. They simply did not care about the truth of their stories with which they wanted to attract attention (Fallis and Mathiesen forthcoming: 5). Intuitively, this was fake news. Rini (2017: 45) argues that even in cases like this one, the producer intends to deceive her consumers because she wants to make them believe a story that she knows to be fabricated. However, if the producer primarily intends her news to be widely shared by the community, it seems sufficient for her to attract attention. Actually, even stories that are not believed by the users of, e.g., social media can be widely shared (cf. Fallis and Mathiesen forthcoming: 5). So, bullshitting can result in fake news, even without involving any intention to deceive the consumers about the content.

Second, fake news need not be based on indifference to truth either. This is so because news that is fabricated in order to deceive the consumer about its content also counts as fake news. Now, it has just been argued that bullshitting need not involve any such intention to deceive about the content of the disseminated story. Moreover, even if it does, a bullshitter will never have deception as her primary goal (Mukerij 2018, 941). However, there are cases of fake news that is primarily intended to deceive its consumers (cf. Fallis and Mathiesen forthcoming, 7). Consider typical cases of disinformation. When Nazi Germany was disseminating the news that they were returning fire to the Polish troops, when they had in fact attacked Poland back in 1939, the primary intention behind this fake news was to make people falsely believe that Germany was going to war as an act of self-defence. So, an attitude of indifference to truth is also too narrow to cover all cases of fake news.

Third, it has been suggested that fake news is counterfeit news that is falsely presented as genuine news, with the intention of deceiving its consumers about its status as news (Fallis and Mathiesen forthcoming). The idea here is that whereas genuine news relies on modern standard journalistic practices (e.g., the work of trained journalists, fact checking and editorial processes), fake news is falsely presented as having this origin.[[5]](#footnote-5) Again, this suggestion seems to be too narrow because it rules out cases that we intuitively classify as fake news. For example, Claas Relotius was a highly renowned and frequently awarded writer of reports for the German journal *Spiegel*. Although his stories were checked through the standard journalistic processes, many of them were unnoticedly fabricated by Relotius. Intuitively, these stories were fake news, but they do not satisfy the definition proposed by Fallis and Mathiesen. Hence their suggestion is too narrow.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The fourth alternative, i.e. the disjunctive account, looks most attractive. On this account, fake news results either from an intention to deceive consumers about its content or from bullshit intentions. However, even if this account was extensionally adequate, which I will subsequently show not to be the case, it would still lack theoretical unity. Jaster and Lanius (2018) use the term ‘lack of truthfulness’ to cover both attitudes. Being truthful amounts to communicating only what one believes. Deceiving and bullshitting both fail to satisfy this condition. When one deceives, one communicates something that is in conflict with what one believes; and when one bullshits, one communicates without having any firm belief about the issue. However, violating truthfulness can still be motivated by very different attitudes: an attitude of deceiving or lying about the content, or an attitude of not caring about the truth. There simply seems to be no fundamental unity here. Now, although there is nothing wrong with ordinary terms that possess a disjunctive meaning, it is a vice to use a single scientific term for different things. So, Habgood-Coote’s claim that we do not need ‘fake news’ as an additional theoretical term would be strongly supported by this disjunctive account.

 Here is a second worry. Consider the (perfectly realistic) possibility of FILTERDECEPTION, i.e. a case in which, as an unintended and unexpected by-product of the technical architecture or its algorithms, our internet browsers filter stories in such a way that their users receive mostly false news.[[7]](#footnote-7) The production of this news does not need to involve any epistemically bad intentions. Let us assume that the stories that are disseminated were originally just meant as fiction or satire. Although, in this case, no epistemically bad intentions are involved on the part of the producer or designer, I am strongly tempted to classify this as a case of fake news (for a somewhat similar case, see also the bot-generated fake news in Pepp et al. 2019: 75.[[8]](#footnote-8) As this judgment suggests, the extension of the term ‘fake news’ is significantly broader than hybrid definitions allow. CONSPIRACY THEORY is a second case in point: a fringe group of people does not intend to deceive, nor is it indifferent to truth. In fact, the members of this group believe that only they can inform the public about what is going on in current politics. However, the methods they use are epistemically inadequate.[[9]](#footnote-9) This group releases political stories via its own channel (for a similar case, see Mukerij 2018, 940; Pepp et al. 2019, 73-74). Again, this seems to be a case of fake news without any bad intentions.[[10]](#footnote-10)

 My third worry concerns the significance of the term ‘fake news’ for epistemology, if it is analyzed partly in terms of the producers’ intentions and attitudes. On the one hand, one might ask whether, from a purely epistemological point of view, the motivational aspects of forming judgments and publishing news need to be addressed at all. All that matters from this perspective is whether the news is reliable or trustworthy, not whether it is generated with good intentions.[[11]](#footnote-11) On the other hand, one might reply that epistemically bad intentions are responsible for the unreliable processes of certain news outlets. But if this were the whole truth about the epistemological dimension of fake news, it would not be any more significant to epistemology than other deceptive acts, like lying. If fake news has some deeper significance for epistemology, this should be made transparent.

 The lesson to be learnt from the above considerations is primarily a methodological one: the definition of ‘fake news’ should be understood as a Carnapian explication (Carnap 1950), rather than as the result of traditional conceptual analysis. Explications in Carnap’s sense make the imprecise meaning of a pre-theoretical term more precise and stable. This is clearly required for the term ‘fake news’, given its semantic instability in ordinary language. The explication should also lead to a fruitful and simple meaning for the term. Applied to ‘fake news’, this would require that we come up with a partly stipulative definition (see also Gelfert 2018, 95; Pepp et al. 2019, 91; Pepp et al. forthcoming) that delineates an epistemically fruitful and unified notion. Furthermore, the explication must preserve a sufficient degree of similarity to the ordinary meaning of the term.

A successful explication of ‘fake news’ thus needs to satisfy the following three criteria:

* It must deliver a unified definition of the term.
* The definition must be epistemologically fruitful and elucidating.
* The definition must preserve sufficient similarities to our imprecise and vague ordinary usage of the term.

In order to proceed, one therefore needs to articulate some relevant features of the ordinary meaning of ‘fake news’. I think that the following four features are particularly relevant here:

1. Fake news is an untrustworthy source of information for the consumer of news. That there is an implicit relation to the consumer is suggested by the fact that fake news can deceive us by being misleading (i.e. by communicating something false) without being literally false (Gelfert 2018, Jaster and Lanius 2018).
2. ‘Fake news’ involves an evaluative component such that fake news is assessed as improper news, i.e. news as it should not be.
3. Although fake news is typically false or misleading, this need not generally be the case. For example, if a journalist fabricates a story that happens to be true and happens to be non-misleading, this is still a case of fake news (Mukerij 2018: 927).
4. It seems conceptually coherent for fake news to be unintentionally produced by systemic features of information technology (see, e.g., FILTERDECEPTION).

One might expect two further features that are typically associated with fake news to appear on this list. First, it is often assumed that ‘fake’, as used in the phrase ‘fake news’, plays the role of a privative adjective. Privative adjectives have the effect of *denying* that the referent of the noun phrase (‘fake news’) belongs to the extension of the noun (‘news’). ‘Merely apparent’ and ‘imaginary’ are generally privative in this sense: a merely apparent x is not a real x. Some uses of ‘fake’ are also privative: fake guns are not real guns, and fake windows are not real windows. However, not all uses of the adjective ‘fake’ seem to be privative (Cappelle, Denis and Keller 2018: 19).[[12]](#footnote-12) Fake websites are real websites with fraudulent content, fake emails and letters are both real and deceptive; and something similar is true of fake articles. So one cannot argue that fake news is counterfeit news on the grounds that ‘fake’ is a generally privative adjective. There is even some evidence that ‘fake’ primarily indicates that the referent is deceptive. Things that have cognitive content can be deceptive without being unreal. This might suggest that fake news is real news with a deceptive content (ibid.). In the remainder of the paper, I will assume that ‘fake’ in ‘fake news’ is not privative and that fake news is real news.

 Second, one might think that ‘fake’ in ‘fake news’ indicates that something has been *faked* by someone. Then some kind of fraud or intention to deceive would always be involved in the production of fake news. This in turn would suggest that the attitude of the producer should be central to the definition of fake news. I resist this move for two reasons. First, instead of interpreting ‘fake’ in the suggested sense, one can alternatively interpret it as ‘being deceptive without necessarily relying on an intention to deceive’. In this sense, the symptoms of an illness may be deceptive without involving any kind of bad intention. Second, if I am right in claiming that FILTERDECEPTION and CONSPIRACY THEORY are both cases of fake news, then ‘fake’ cannot indicate an intention to deceive, because there is no such intention involved in these cases.

**2. A Consumer-Oriented Explication of Fake News**

On my view, news involves official media reporting about current events that are disclosed through established communication channels to a broader audience of news consumers.[[13]](#footnote-13) The goal of news is to inform these consumers or, more broadly, the relevant public. Since the ordinary meaning of the term ‘fake news’ suggests that fake news is improper news (see feature 2, as listed above), i.e. news that does not achieve its goal, the following explication of the term ‘fake news’ seems natural:

Fake news =Df. news that is produced or selected in general ways such that it has the robust disposition to lead, at the time of publication and under normal conditions, to a significant amount of false beliefs in a significant number of the addressed consumers.

This new definition is a non-hybrid account of fake news. It does not combine subjective aspects of the news production with additional aspects of its consumption. Rather, it defines fake news solely in terms of its typical effects on the consumers.[[14]](#footnote-14) The basic idea here is that any type of news (individuated by a process of formation or selection) that tends to mislead the relevant consumers will count as fake news. In order to delineate a non-relative concept of fake news, one has to determine the relevant group of consumers, because the same news might be misleading for one group (e.g., children, badly educated people, non-native speakers) but not misleading for another group (e.g., adults, well-educated people, native speakers). It seems natural to determine the relevant group as the group of people to whom the news is addressed. It also might be the case that the effects of a certain type of news on the addressed consumers are mixed, such that it will lead one subgroup to form mostly true beliefs but another subgroup to form mostly false beliefs. In order to rule out any relativisation of fake news to times or subgroups, the definition requires fake news to have robustly misleading effects on a significant number of addressees.[[15]](#footnote-15) Finally, fake news must be defined in terms of dispositions to mislead rather than being actually misleading, since we want to respect the intuition that, for contingent reasons, some news can be completely ignored by its consumers and still be fake. Normality conditions are added because there can be highly atypical situations in which the consumers are just too smart to be fooled by what is still fake news. Moreover, it is important to relativise the misleading effect to the time of publication because fake news will typically be uncovered as such, sometime after dissemination.

 A clear advantage of this consumer-oriented definition is that it unifies different ways of news production and selection solely in light of their effects on the consumer. A number of very different practices of news disclosure can have the same cognitively misleading effects on consumers, e.g., unreliable sources or testifiers, bad journalism, publishers who want to deceive their audience or who are indifferent to the truth, unreliable technical devices or procedures, journalistic practices that select news in ways that mislead consumers, etc. In contrast to the hybrid accounts, this approach can subsume different attitudes had by the producer in a non-disjunctive way, and it can also be more liberal by including cases of unintentional production of misleading news such as FILTERDECEPTION and CONSPIRACY THEORY.

 As a further advantage, this definition is epistemically fruitful in more than one way. First, relating fake news to the unfavourable truth-ratio of the resulting consumer beliefs renders reliance on fake news automatically unreliable. This explains why a consumer’s reliance on fake news cannot lead to knowledge (even if the fake news happens to be true) or, given a reliabilist framework, why relying on fake news cannot produce justified beliefs. Even an epistemological internalist can claim that when one discovers that one’s beliefs rely on fake news, they lose their prima facie justification.

 Second, it turns out that fake news need not be unreliable as such. Even if what is explicitly said in the news is always true, the story may pragmatically convey false information to the consumer. For example, it might be claimed in a news item that the number of crimes went up with the number of refugees in a certain area. And this might be correct, although the increase in crime had nothing to do with the increase in the number of refugees living in that area. But the consumer will naturally understand this utterance as conveying that the number of crimes went up *because* the number of refugees increased, which would be false. This effect will become systematic only if the producer chooses her words carefully, so that her true statements convey misleading information. Such a choice would involve an intention to mislead. However, there is another cognitive mechanism that can also explain how consumers can be systematically misled by the news without any deceptive intention on the part of the news producer. Typical examples come from journalistic practices. Consider again a case of news about refugees’ crimes. The consumers of newspapers or TV are clearly interested in being informed about acts of murder, manslaughter or rape committed by refugees. However, if the news report is only about these crimes, an availability bias will quite naturally lead these consumers to the false belief that crimes such as murder, manslaughter and rape are mostly committed by refugees. Here, the apparently innocent journalistic practice of reporting only those true crime stories that are of public interest leads systematically to false beliefs in the consumers, because of a prevailing bias. This is a case in which reliably true news can be fake without the producer having any epistemically bad intentions. Another example is the journalistic tendency to report on controversies impartially. This often means that both sides get equal opportunities to defend their views. When a controversy is presented in this balanced way to the consumer, she quite naturally gets the impression that both sides are equally respectable or equally well supported, even if they are not because, e.g., one side represents an exotic minority view only held by fringe pseudo-experts while the other side holds the majority view shared by most true experts. The consumer-orientation makes it possible for the primary source of qualifying as fake news to lie in the consumer herself. Fake news is news that systematically misleads the consumer, no matter whether this results from unreliable sources, bad intentions or the consumer’s own biases.

 Third, the consumer-oriented explication of fake news suggests an epistemic consequentialist perspective on news that holds journalists and the press responsible for checking the expected cognitive effects of disclosed news on the audience before releasing it. This facilitates a fruitful change of perspective in epistemology.

 Finally, let me address the question of whether my suggested explication of ‘fake news’ is sufficiently similar to the pre-theoretic meaning of this term. According to the above list of relevant meaning-aspects of the ordinary term, fake news (1) is an untrustworthy source of information for the consumer, (2) is improper news, (3) need not be actually false or misleading, and (4) can be unintentionally produced. Obviously, my suggested explication of this term can accommodate aspects (1), (3) and (4) quite well. In order to avoid a thick concept that combines descriptive and evaluative components, it only leaves out aspect (2). However, this is no great cost, since the negative assessment of fake news will follow from my definition, as soon as we take into account the fact that news has the goal of providing its consumers with reliably true beliefs.

**3. Objections and Replies**

Let me address four objections to my purely consumer-oriented explication of fake news. First, there will be the worry that the proposed definition is too narrow, in the sense that it excludes clear cases of fake news. Here is one example of what I have in mind. Suppose a Fox News-reporter claims on TV that Trump warned about the Corona pandemic early on. One natural response would be: ‘No. That’s fake news.’ In this context, this means nothing more than that this is clearly *false* news. However, the definition proposed here requires more than that. It also requires that the news is embedded in a generally unreliable source of information. So, isn’t this definition too restrictive? The answer to this is not as straightforward as one might think. Much depends on the further details of the case. Suppose first that the Fox News-reporter does not have any bad intentions but simply happens to misremember the facts in this particular case. Then the mistake is a sporadic performance error; and it is thus, according to my definition, not a case of fake news. But that is in line with what many people tend to judge about news that happen to be inaccurate (see, e.g., Gelfert 2018, 99-100). Now suppose that the reporter is deliberately lying on TV. This seems to be a clear intuitive case of fake news. However, the definition suggested by me can adopt this intuition since successfully lying on TV is a *general* way of releasing news that tends to mislead the consumers.

 Second, there is the reverse worry that my definition is too permissive. Philosophers hesitate to classify results of sloppy journalism as fake news. For example, Gelfert (2018, 110) claims that even ‘chronically sloppy journalism, which may result in a large number of false or misleading claims being presented as news, does not in and on itself qualify as fake news […].’ For the sake of argument, I will grant this to Gelfert. But does his verdict conflict with my definition? I argue that this is not the case. In order to see why this is so one has to distinguish three different sources of false news. First, there will be cases of false news where the journalist is relying on extremely reliable methods, is using these methods very carefully and still ends up with false reports. This is possible because even the proper use of reliable methods does not guarantee truth. Even under optimal conditions, journalistic practices remain fallible. Second, there are cases in which false news is the result of an improper use of generally reliable methods. Third, false news may be due to the use of generally unreliable methods. Now, the case of sloppy journalism is one in which false news is explained by performance errors of a careless journalist. In other words, it is a type 2 case of false news. However, my definition requires type 3 cases of false news for fake news. For this reason, my definition allows the verdict that sloppy journalism does not result in fake news, unless sloppy journalism is understood as journalism that relies on systematically unreliable methods. As far as I can see, it is much harder to deny that news based on generally unreliable methods is fake news.[[16]](#footnote-16)

 Third, one might worry that my proposed definition is also too liberal, in that it classifies too much as fake news. If the relevant group of news consumers is, for contingent reasons, deeply irrational, then any reliably produced news may count as fake news, which is clearly counterintuitive. Imagine, for example, a case in which the journalists and the editorial team of a newspaper is extremely careful in cross-examining their sources, conducting costly inquiries of their own, and factoring in all well-known selection biases in the news release. Suppose that, nevertheless, the disclosed news causes massively false beliefs in its consumers, because they happen to be highly irrational, polarized or ideological. Although the newspaper people do their job in an extremely responsible manner, they would, according to the proposed definition, still disclose fake news. This is highly implausible. In reply, I have to admit that one should not classify this as a case of fake news. However, the proposed definition can accommodate this case. Situations in which consumers react in highly irrational ways should not be classified as ‘normal conditions’. So even if the news in this case leads to a high number of false beliefs in most addressees, this is not sufficient for being fake news, because the news only has this effect under irrelevant conditions. Alternatively, one might reply that the primary addressee of news is a group of political partisans. In this way, polarization effects can be ruled out by restricting the set of addressees.

 Finally, there is another reason why one might worry that my definition is too broad. There is some evidence that we are generally misled by the media, even including quality media outlets. According to this evidence, there is a selection bias among news producers, called ‘negativity bias’, favouring bad or dramatic news, which, together with an availability bias among consumers, makes us believe that the world is getting worse and worse all the time, even though it isn’t (Pinker 2018, Rosling 2018). But then all or at least most news would count as fake news. That’s hard to believe. In this case, one had better not reply that these effects are once again partly due to abnormal conditions, because they are not. The availability bias is deeply rooted in normal human cognition (Kahneman 2012). A more promising way to respond here is that the question of whether news is fake news is also a question of degree. If the news only has weakly misleading effects, then it is fake to a lesser degree than if it has strongly misleading effects. One might argue that the negativity bias turns all news into at least *slightly* fake news.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**4. Conclusion**

It is hard to deny that the ordinary term ‘fake news’ is not an apt tool for theoretical investigation. It has no stable common usage, and it is sometimes even used in an purely pejorative sense. In order for it to gain some scientifically respectable status, we therefore need to come up with a satisfactory explication of this term. The success criterion of such an explication is that it provides a unified meaning for the term that is epistemologically fruitful and sufficiently similar to the ordinary notion. As I have argued, my purely consumer-oriented account of fake news is an optimal choice in these respects.

**Acknowledgements.** Early versions of this paper were presented as part of the CLIP Lecture Series at the University of Cologne in May 2018, at the Bled Epistemology Conference in June 2018, as part of the Lecture Series DenXte at the University of Düsseldorf in November 2019, as part of the Lecture Series EXTRA at the University of Bochum in May 2020. Very helpful comments from and extensive discussions with the following colleagues enabled me to work out the final version of this paper: Dominik Balg, Sven Bernecker, Elke Brendel, David Christensen, Daniel Cohnitz, Jan Constantin, Anna-Maria Eder, Cathrine Elgin, Branden Fitelson, Elizabeth Fricker, Axel Gelfert, Sanford Goldberg, Daniel Gutzmann, Rainer Hegselmann, Frank Hofmann, Joachim Horvath, Romy Jaster, Geert Keil, Jens Kipper, Steffen Koch, Igal Kvart, Jack Lyons, Giulia Napolitano, Nikolaj Nottelmann, Jakob Olhorst, Markus Schrenk, Erik Stei, Emmanuel Viehbahn. I am extremely grateful to all of them. I would also like to thank one anonymous reviewer of this paper.

**Disclosure of Interest.** The author reports no conflict of interest.

**References**

Brown, E. 2019. ‘Fake News’ and Conceptual Ethics. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 16: 144-154.

Carnap, R. 1950. *Logical Foundations of Probability.* Routledge.

Coady, D. 2019. The Trouble With ‘Fake News’. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8: 40-52.

Cappelle, B., Denis, P. and Keller, M. 2018. Facing the Facts of Fake: A Distributional Semantics and Corpus Annotation Approach. *Yearbook of the German Cognitive Linguistics Association* 6: 9-42.

Cassam, Q. 2019. *Conspiracy Theories*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Fallis, D. and K. Mathiesen forthcoming. Fake News is Counterfeit News. *Inquiry*: Online. DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2019.1688179.

Gelfert, A. 2018. Fake News: A Definition. *Informal Logic* 38: 84-117.

Habgood-Coote, J. 2019. Stop Talking About Fake News! *Inquiry* 62: 1033-1065.

Habgood-Coote, J. forthcoming. Fake News, Conceptual Engineering, and Linguistic Resistance: Reply to Pepp, Michaelsen, and Sterken, and Brown. *Inquiry*.

Jaster, R. and D. Lanius 2018. What is Fake News? *Versus* 2: 207-227.

Kahneman, D. 2012. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. London: Penguin.

Keith, T. 2018. President Trump’s Description of What’s ‘Fake’ is Expanding. *National Public Radio*: Sept. 2. https://www.npr.org/2018/09/02/643761979/president-trumps-description-of-whats-fake-is-expanding.

Lazer, D.M. et al. 2018. The Science of Fake News. Addressing Fake News Requires a Multidisciplinary Effort. *Science* 359: 1094-1096.

Levy, N. 2017. The Bad News About Fake News. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6: 20-36.

McIntyre, L. 2018. *Post-Truth*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Mukerij, N. 2018. What is Fake News? *Ergo* 5: 923-946. DOI: 10.3998/ergo.12405314.0005.035.

Nguyen, T. forthcoming. Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles. *Episteme*: Online. DOI: 10.1017/epi.2018.32.

Partee, B. 2009. Formal Semantics, Lexical Semantics, and Compositionality: The Puzzle of Privative Adjectives. *Philologia* 7: 11-23.

Pepp, J., E. Michaelson and R.K. Sterken 2019. What’s New about Fake News? *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 16: 67-94.

Pepp, J., E. Michaelson and R.K. Sterken forthcoming. Why We Should Keep Talking about Fake News. *Inquiry*: Online. DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2019.1685231.

Pinker, S. 2018. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. New York: Viking.

Rini, R. 2017. Fake News and Partisan Epistemology. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 27: 43-64.

Rosling, H. 2018. *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong about the World—And Why Things are Better Than You Think*. London: Sceptre.

Silverman, C. and L. Alexander 2016. How Teens in the Balkans are Duping Trump Supporters with Fake News. *Buzzfeed News*: November 3.

1. One notable exception is Mukerij (2018, 929) who claims that the subjective requirement for fake news is sufficient. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Among the rare exceptions is Pepp et al. (2019, 71): ‘Finally, our definition does not require any intentions to deceive or mislead on the part of those who originate or spread fake news. This makes it quite different from several other definitions recently advanced by philosophers.’ In contrast with my own definition, Pepp et al. suggest that fake news is counterfeit news that is treated as real news (p. 87). See also Levy (2017, 20) who thinks that fake news is not always produced deliberatively. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In what follows I focus my criticism solely on the necessary subjective condition of the prevailing accounts. For this reason, I will not engage here with any of their further conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Pepp et al. (2019: 73) make the same point quite explicitly: ‘But its seems to us that neither intentional deception, nor deliberate use of a process designed to result in false or misleading claims […] should be built into the definition of fake news.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In contrast to Fallis and Mathiesen, Pepp et al. (2019) analyse fake news as counterfeit news without the need of deceptive intentions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Fallis and Mathiesen (forthcoming, 16) suggest the following definition: ‘[I]t is best to simply define fake news as counterfeit news. That is, a story is fake news if and only if it has not gone through the standard modern journalistic process, but is presented as if it has, with the intention and propensity to deceive [about its source, TG].’ On this view, it is *sufficient* for being fake news that the reports are falsely presented as resulting from the relevant journalistic processes. This can hardly be true, as the following case may illustrate. Imagine a situation in which public reports are falsely presented as originating from standard journalistic processes. The motivation for this deception is that the information was in fact acquired from an illegal yet fully reliable source. According to Fallis and Mathiesen, this is fake news. However, even if it was fully disclosed to the public that this is fake news in this sense, no one would have a reason not to rely on it. To me, this sounds like a contradiction. It seems necessarily (and a priori) true that one should not rely on what is known to be fake news. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Notice that FILTERDECEPTION is distinct from the phenomenon of filter bubbles that protect the internet user from exposure to opposing views and disconfirming evidence. The latter need not deceive the user if she already uses reliable methods herself. For a comprehensive discussion and taxonomy of related phenomena, see Nguyen forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. When I presented this case to a large audience (> 100 people), more than 60% claimed it to be fake news. Of course, this is non-representative and purely anecdotic evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In this paper, I cannot engage with the large body of literature on this topic. Let me just flag that I side with those who claim that conspiracy theories are, by definition, based on specifically improper epistemic methods. For one such account, see, e.g., Cassam 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I do not want to suggest that fake news should be defined in terms of conspiracy theories. Reporting a conspiracy theory is neither necessary nor sufficient for disseminating fake news. It is not necessary since there can be other sources of fake news. Neither is it sufficient since conspiracy theories must be disseminated in a specific way, i.e. as news, to count as fake news. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Of course, things would look quite differently, if the term ‘fake news’ were used with a political function. Then one might argue that the motivational aspect behind fake news is highly important because we want to sanction or even punish disinformers and public liars. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For some more general doubts about the privative character of the adjective ‘fake’, see also Partee 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In contrast with Fallis and Mathiesen forthcoming and Pepp et al. 2019, I take the way of dissemination rather than of production to be essential to news. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. One might worry that this definition closely resonates the following one suggested by Gelfert (2018, 108): ‘Fake news is the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design.’ However, this is clearly a hybrid account of fake news, according to which the producer’s *deliberate* use of misleading claims as news is essential. Whoever deliberatively presents misleading claims as news accepts that these news may mislead the audience. This part of Gelfert’s definition is cut out in my definition. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. One might be tempted to think that the news must have its effects on a clear majority of addressees rather than just a significant number of them. But this would require too much. Consider, e.g., the case of Pizzagate. This is clearly a case of fake news, but it did not mislead the majority of its consumers. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Not even denying this much would be a decisive objection to my definition. One has to keep in mind that the definition is introduced as an explication that need not reflect our ordinary case intuitions with 100% accuracy. It is a clear advantage of the explication strategy that it can sacrifice perfect similarity to the ordinary meaning in order to improve in the dimensions of theoretical unity and fruitfulness. This is exactly what happens here. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. A related worry is that scientific publications generally lead to a significant amount of false beliefs in a significant number of the addressed consumers, since the majority of scientific theories are false. Given my account of fake news, scientific publications would thus count as fake news. This is hard to swallow. I am not sure how to answer this objection appropriately. However, it seems to me that we might be able to save scientific publications from counting as fake news by introducing some measure for being approximately true. What seems to be different in the case of (respectable) science publications is that most of their claims are at least *approximately* true. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)