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So What if 'Fake News' is Fake News?

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de Ridder, Jeroen. 2019. "So What if 'Fake News' is Fake News?" *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8 (10): 111-113. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4zu>.

David Coady (2019), in his contribution to this issue, joins a small but growing number of people expressing misgivings about the current hype surrounding fake news, alternative facts, and other post-truthy phenomena in society and academia (cf. also Habgood-Coote 2019). He points out—correctly—how the term ‘fake news’ has been adopted by various state actors and media corporations to impose more or less far-reaching forms of state censorship, to curtail free debate, or to white-wash the sometimes questionable legacy of major American news corporations when it comes to reliable and fair reporting.

To the worry that such misappropriations don’t show that there is anything wrong with the term as such, Coady replies that there is good reason to think there simply is no legitimate use of ‘fake news’ at all. That’s because the contrast class, ‘real news’, is just as fraught with problems. The norms of objectivity and balance that are supposed to govern the production of real news and to safeguard its epistemic reliability are a fairly recent invention and in practice often serve to avoid taking sides in political controversies even when doing so would have been fully epistemically warranted, and to protect establishment interests.<sup>1</sup>

I found myself in the remarkable position of agreeing with many of the substantive considerations Coady marshals for his conclusions, but disagreeing with those conclusions themselves.

### **Fake News Scare Overhyped**

I think Coady is right that the whole fake news scare has been overhyped. In fact, there is by now also pretty good direct empirical support for this claim. Analyses of big data sets about news consumption and social media use reveal that the quantities and effects of fake news are relatively small.<sup>2</sup> For example, in the 2016 US election cycle, fake news consumption on Twitter “accounted for only 6% of total news consumption but it was heavily concentrated—only 1% of users were exposed to 80% of fake news and 0.1% of users were responsible for sharing 80% of fake news” (Grinberg et al. 2019: 374). Similarly for Facebook (Guess et al. 2019): only 8,5% of respondents (n=3500) shared at least one fake news story.

There was a strong age effect: regardless of ideology or partisanship, users over 65 were seven times more likely to share fake news than those in the youngest age group (18–29). Nelson and Taneja (2018) compared visitor numbers of established news websites and (clear) fake news websites and found that the audience for fake news is small and consists mostly of heavy internet users. No matter how you feel about misappropriations of the term

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<sup>1</sup> See also Gerken (forthcoming) for how (certain interpretations of) the norm of balanced reporting similarly creates trouble for science journalism.

<sup>2</sup> For those worried about problems with defining fake news: the studies I cite rely on what I take are uncontroversial and minimalistic assumptions about what counts as fake news: demonstrably false and unfounded stories mimicking genuine news content in form, produced either for the purpose of deceiving people or purely for generating clicks.

‘fake news’ or the difficulties in characterizing it, these numbers hardly seem to warrant the air time ‘fake news’ has been getting in academia and society at large.

Does that mean we should quit talking about fake news altogether, because it’s “yet another distraction from our desperate need for a radical rejection of the political and media establishment that got us into this mess” (Coady, this issue: 52)? Here’s where I disagree. I think there are a number of reasons why ‘fake news’ may turn out to be good news after all.

In philosophy, the fake news and post-truth scare has led to a rising interest in better understanding various kinds of misinformation, disinformation, lies, bullshit, propaganda, and ideology. Coady is right that traditional news media have sometimes peddled deliberate misinformation and have sometimes sacrificed sensible forms of objectivity and balance to commercial interests. But citing some anecdotal evidence to this effect isn’t to establish that there is no epistemic difference between the *modus operandi* of, say, the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* and purely fake news outlets such as the (now defunct) *Denver Guardian* website or extremely biased news purveyors such as Breitbart or Infowars. Distinguishing between various forms of misinformation might in fact help us to identify more clearly what can be wrong with news production, sharing, and consumption and to develop more defensible interpretations of journalistic norms and practices.

### **Beliefs in Online Environments**

This work in philosophy is part of a broader trend in epistemology and elsewhere towards more applied and ameliorative projects, which seek to understand how belief, justification, and knowledge fare in online environments, how political beliefs are formed and maintained, how the social contexts of our belief-forming practices can lead to distinctly epistemic forms of injustice, etc. (cf. Coady and Chase 2018; Hannon and De Ridder forthcoming; Kidd et al. 2017). Luckily, a lot of this work has a broader and more relevant focus than the admittedly futile project of uncovering the necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept of fake news. Such socially engaged philosophical research projects strike me as a marked improvement over the days of Gettierology and other ivory tower pursuits. Even if not all the work that’s being done is of high quality (but when was that ever the case?), at least philosophers are reflecting on relevant issues.

As far as I can tell, several social scientific disciplines are going through similar developments. Psychologists, sociologists, communication scientists, political scientists, and economists, sometimes with the help of computer scientists, are investigating the actual extent of fake news production, sharing, and consumption, as well as the underlying social, political, psychological, and economic processes accounting for various forms of misinformation and their spread and uses. The papers I cited above are just the top of the tip of an iceberg; a quick search for ‘fake news’ or ‘misinformation’ on the [Social Science Research Network](#) manuscript repository quickly reveals hundreds of relevant recent papers. Some of them will no doubt suffer from the problems Coady identifies: dubious characterizations of fake news or uncritical opposition between epistemically bad fake news and epistemically good traditional news. Even so, questions about news production,

distribution, and consumption; trust in new and old media; political communication; biased information processing; etc. are high on the social scientific agenda.

If we—like Coady—hope to do something about problems like highly partisan and biased news production and consumption, poor political information, the influence of vested commercial interests in media corporations and big tech, the rise of populism, selective science skepticism, or any of the other big problems in our allegedly post-truth society, then we’re going to need the concerted efforts of scientists and scholars to better understand the real issues. I have hope that the ‘fake news’ hype is instrumental to these purposes. So I say: so what if ‘fake news’ is fake news? As long as it’s helping science and society to refocus its attention on important concerns, that’s improvement.

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