Response to Jeroen de Ridder's "So What if 'Fake News' is Fake News?"

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It is tempting to accept the studies de Ridder (2019) cites in support of my position that the fake news scare has been "overhyped". However, since I have argued there is no fake news problem at all, I cannot accept studies according to which there is such a problem, albeit one that it is not as bad as is commonly supposed. It is true that I am opposed to overhyping the problem of fake news, but it is a misleading truth, because it doesn't go far enough.[1] For precisely the same reason, it is true, but highly misleading, to say that the witch problem in medieval Europe was overhyped. It was overhyped, not because it was only a minor problem, but because it was not a problem at all. Now, as then, the real problem was not the alleged phenomenon ("witches" or "fake news"), but widespread hysteria, and consequent repressive measures, over a non-existent problem. It's true that Pope Alexander VI overhyped the witch problem, but any hype at all would have been overhype.

I have argued that there is no fake news problem on the ground that the term "fake news" has no legitimate meaning, and so should not be used. The term does not correspond to any new phenomenon; nor does it refer to any phenomenon that we cannot talk or think about without resort to neologisms. In short the term serves no valuable function at all. That is not to say that it serves no function. On the contrary, it serves two objectionable functions: it pathologizes views that people using the term disagree with, and it marginalizes the voices of relatively powerless participants in public discourse. In short the term serves no good purpose while causing considerable harm.

Defining Fake News

In response to those, like me, who are "worried about the problems with defining fake news", de Ridder assures us that the studies he cites use only the following "uncontroversial and minimalistic" definition of 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 (de Ridder 2019, fn 2).

This is certainly more minimalistic than some definitions in the literature. Unlike some definitions (e.g. McIntyre 2018, 112) it doesn't stipulate that the content of a fake news story must be intentionally false. It is surprising, however, that de Ridder describes this definition as "uncontroversial" since he is aware of people like myself who think that there is (and can be) no acceptable definition of the term "fake news", and who therefore will reject even this minimal definition. It is even more surprising, given his awareness that I reject the term in part because I find the supposed contrast class "real news" to be equally fraught with problems, that he relies on a definition which uses the term "genuine news" (which is surely a synonym for "real news"), apparently assuming that we all know what it refers to. Speaking for myself, I do not know what it refers to, hence I do not understand, still less accept, this supposedly uncontroversial definition.

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[1] In Gricean terms, if I were to assert that the fake news scare is overhyped, I would be violating the pragmatic conversational rule that I should assert the strongest claim I am in a position to make (Grice 1975).

Some clue about what de Ridder might mean by "genuine news" can be found in his characterization of what he supposes to be the beneficial aspects of the current hype around "fake news':

> If we—like Coady—hope to do something about problems like highly partisan and biased news production and consumption … 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 (de Ridder 2019).

I am all in favor of scientists, scholars, and everyone else for that matter, trying to understand the real issues, but I disagree with almost everything de Ridder says about what those issues are. For example, contrary to what de Ridder supposes, I do not hope to do something about the alleged problem of highly partisan news.[2] As I argued in Coady 2019, the idea that news should avoid partisanship is both recent (though not so recent that we can blame the internet) and misguided.

Journalistic and Editorial Judgment

Good journalism is almost always partisan journalism.[3] Assuming that a given story is true, a journalist (and/or an editor) is inevitably confronted with issues of *newsworthiness*. Should it be published at all, and if so what prominence should it be given (the front page, the top of the webpage, with a big headline, etc.)? [4] These judgments are value judgments (or at least they involve value judgments), such as the judgment that the story is important, or something the public has a right to know, or just that it is interesting. Such judgments will almost always be, to one degree of another, controversial. In short good journalism (and good editing) almost always involves taking sides on controversial issues; in other words, it involves partisanship. Whether journalists or editors should be partisans of a particular cause depends entirely on the merits of that cause.

One particularly important cause that journalists and editors should be partisans for is press freedom. The reporting (and even more often the reporting omissions) of corporate and state media in the West (i.e. the kind of media that academic purveyors of the fake news hysteria invariably think of as real news) relating to the persecution of Julian Assange demonstrates particularly vividly that the media's problem is not partisanship, but a lack of

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[2] The question of the whether biased news production is a problem requires some disambiguation of the word "bias". In one sense, a bias is a disposition which leads away from truth (e.g. sampling bias). In this sense of course bias is objectionable. But in another sense of the word, to be biased is just to be in favor of a certain cause that is more or less controversial. In this sense, to be biased just means to be partisan, which is not objectionable.

[3] The converse of this is of course not true.

[4] There is also the issue about what order to present the reported facts in.

partisanship for good causes, including, in this case, a lack of partisanship for a cause on which their continued existence depends.[5]

I also don't accept, contrary to de Ridder, that "selective science skepticism" is a problem. Selective skepticism is precisely the attitude we should have toward science, as it is toward the media and other sources information. Science is not always a reliable guide to truth (or even approximate truth). Clarity about this issue is often obscured by the practice of putting scare quotes around the word "science" (or of using the word "pseudo-science" in place of "science") when, referring to sciences that have been debunked, such as scientific race theory of phrenology. In this way we effectively make science unfalsifiable (there is some irony in this). We would do better to think of science simply as the set of practices that attract the label "science" at a given time. In this sense, a lot of past science merited skepticsm, and it is reasonable to think that a lot of contemporary science, especially social science, does too.

A Science of Fake News?

As I have argued in Coady 2019, and in greater detail in Coady 2020, we should be especially skeptical of the burgeoning science of fake news.[6] de Ridder accuses me of relying on "anecdotal evidence" (de Ridder 2019),[7] and points out that of there are hundreds of papers devoted to the alleged phenomenon of fake news listed by the *Social Science Research Network,* apparently assuming this flurry of activity is evidence that there must be some underlying phenomenon which would justify it. He does concede that "some of them [social science papers about fake news] will no doubt suffer from the problems Coady identifies" (de Ridder 2019); the conversational implication is that some of them don't suffer from these problems, yet he doesn't identify any such papers. This puts me in a somewhat awkward position. I have at least discussed some of the social science literature on this topic, outlined its unsatisfactory nature, and given some general reasons for believing that no satisfactory definition of the term "fake news" is possible. I might yet be proven wrong, but I don't think the fact that there are a lot of social scientists who think I'm wrong (or would think I'm wrong if they knew what I think) constitutes evidence that I am wrong.

Turning from the science of fake news to the philosophy of fake news, de Ridder has the following to say in defense of the latter:

> Such socially engaged philosophical research projects strike me as a marked improvement over the days of Gettierology and other ivory tower pursuits.

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[5] I also do not think, contrary to de Ridder, that "the rise of populism" is amongst our "big problems". In fact I don't think it is a problem at all. Populism is the politics of hostility to political and/or media elites, and such hostility is palpably justified.

[6] I have also argued that we should be skeptical of the burgeoning science of conspiracy theories.

[7] In particular, he says that my anecdotal evidence doesn't 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" (de Ridder 2019). I never suggested that there was no epistemic difference between these news outlets. In fact I devoted several paragraphs to discussing the difference.

> 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.

I find this quite unconvincing. I'm not opposed to philosophers coming down from the ivory tower, in fact I'm doing it myself here. Nonetheless the actual results of socially engaged philosophical research have been decidedly mixed. At least in the days of Gettierology, philosophers were a fairly harmless bunch. In the case of philosophical research on so-called "fake news" at least, several philosophers have contributed to the harms caused by this term. If socially engaged philosophy encourages attitudes of uncritical deference to formal authority, as I have argued the literature on so-called "fake news" inevitably does, then it would be better for its practitioners to return to their ivory tower.

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