

How to confront fake news through news literacy? State of the art

¿Cómo afrontar las noticias falseadas mediante la alfabetización periodística? Estado de la cuestión



José Manuel Pérez Tornero. Professor of Journalism at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. A program creator and director in RTVE (Spanish Radio and Television Corporation). He is a Doctor in Communication and is a graduate in Spanish Studies. He is the main researcher of Chair UNESCO-UAB on Media and Information Literacy and Quality Journalism. He is the chair of RTVE-UAB (Autonomous University of Barcelona) and member of the Observatory for News Innovation in the information society. He is the director of the Scientific Research Group-Communication and Education Cabinet. Also a member of the ATEI (Association of Ibero-American Educational TV and Culture). He forms part of a group of UNESCO experts and the European Commission for News Literacy. An advisor appointed by UNESCO in the Global Alliance Media and Information Literacy Partnerships. A member of the advisory board of the network of Universities of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations-UNESCO and an honorary doctor of the Aix Marseille University.

Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain

josemanuel.perez@uab.cat

ORCID: 0000-0002-8198-3648



Sally Samy Tayie. She is a university professor at the Arabic Academy of Sciences, Technology and Maritime Transport in El Cairo, Egypt. She obtained a B/A in Arts and finished her studies at the American University in Cairo with a Masters in Journalism and Communications. She is currently researching at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in order to complete her Ph.D, while giving online classes in Communication and Education in Online Masters programs. She also participates as a researcher in the Scientific Research Group- Communication and Education Cabinet. Her primary fields of interest are journalism, Media and Information Literacy (MIL), new literacy and youth's political and civic commitment.

Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain

sallytayie@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-0094-0863



Santiago Tejedor. Adjunct Professor of the Department of Journalism and Communication Sciences of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. He is a Dr. in Journalism and Communication Sciences from the UAB and a Dr. in Engineering Projects from the Politècnica University of Catalonia (UPC) where he did a thesis about the Web 2.0 in Ibero-America. He has participated in several investigations funded by public calls: "DINAMIC, Development of individual media literacy indicators, corporate and citizens" (2012-2014); "Showing films and other audio-visual content in European Schools - Obstacles and best practices" (2013-2014); "EMEDUS, European Media Literacy Education Study" (2012-2014). His research lines are mainly focused on cyberjournalism. Media convergence and the new transmedia narratives.

Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain

Santiago.Tejedor@uab.cat

ORCID: 0000-0002-5539-9800



Cristina Pulido. Doctor in Communication from Barcelona University. She is currently a professor in the Department of Journalism and Communication Sciences of the Aut3noma University of Barcelona. She is a researcher in the Scientific Research Group-Communication and Education Cabinet and member of the Chair UNESCO UAB on MIL for Quality Journalism. She is currently participating in the R&D INFO/EDU: Collaborative Ecosystem of news audiovisual resources for education, and the network of excellence INNONEWS, innovation in audiovisual news. Her work has been published in different reviews with international impact. Her current research lines are focused on quality journalism regarding fake news, and the prevention of sexual harassment through the media.

Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain
Cristina.Pulido@uab.cat
ORCID: 0000-0001-8630-7529

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Abstract:

There is currently an essential social debate concerning the proliferation of fake news in the media and on social networks, primarily due to the deterioration that it poses to democratic systems in general and journalism. For this reason, studies on journalism and communication face the challenge of urgently re-conceptualizing a phenomenon that has always existed but has recently resurged in the current media environment. In this context, theory and practice have emerged from the recent sub-field known as news literacy.

We briefly examine state of the art from a conceptual point of view. We review the recent and classic theories regarding fake news based on a review of the main bibliography on the subject. In conclusion, we propose a conceptual basis that can bridge the cited theories and the practice of news literacy in the broader framework of media literacy policies.

Keywords:

News literacy, fake news, journalism, media literacy

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Resumen:

Existe en la actualidad un importante debate social sobre la proliferaci3n de noticias falseadas (fake news) en los medios de comunicaci3n y en las redes sociales, especialmente, por el deterioro que estas suponen para los sistemas democr3ticos, en general, y para el periodismo, en particular. Por esta raz3n, los estudios sobre periodismo y comunicaci3n afrontan con urgencia el reto de re-conceptualizar un fen3meno que ha existido siempre, pero que cobra nueva vida en el actual entorno medi3tico. En este contexto, emerge la teor3a y pr3ctica de lo que ha venido a llamarse alfabetizaci3n period3stica (news literacy).

Realizamos aqu3 un breve examen del estado de la cuesti3n, desde un punto de vista conceptual. Repasamos las teor3as, recientes y cl3sicas, referidas a las noticias falseadas, a partir de una revisi3n de la principal bibliograf3a sobre el tema. Como conclusi3n, proponemos una base conceptual que puede establecer un puente entre las citadas teor3as y la pr3ctica de la alfabetizaci3n period3stica en el marco m3s amplio de las pol3ticas de alfabetizaci3n medi3tica.

Palabras clave:

Alfabetizaci3n period3stica, noticias falseadas, periodismo, alfabetizaci3n medi3tica.

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1. Introduction

Fake news has erupted into the political debate in recent years, consequently journalism and academic studies about journalism and media too. Trump's surprising election to president of the United States (2016), the referendums regarding Great Britain's exit from the European Union (2016), the plebiscite about the peace agreement in Colombia (2016) or the Russian State's alleged tampering in the French presidential election campaigns (2017) and the Catalanian autonomous community elections (2017) as well as the increase in populist, nationalist and xenophobic movements in different European countries, manifested in the formation of the Italian government (2018) have demonstrated the vulnerability and weakness in democratic political systems. It has also shown an increase in the intentional and systematic manipulation of information. Therefore there have been innumerable news reports, research, studies and essays published on this matter. As a result, there have also been many proposals and initiatives that have attempted to tackle a phenomenon considered by a broad consensus to be a severe threat to the democratic system

The impact of fake news has been so significant that it has not only strengthened the debate about the need to reform political systems- especially election campaigns- but it has also led to the emergence of a new theoretical and practical field within studies of communication, media, and journalism. Fake news, disinformation, propaganda or indoctrination are studied within this field as well as hate speech, the culture of controversy (Tannem, 1999) or the degeneration of political language (Thompson, 2016). Different knowledge from varying disciplines such as media theories, political science, semiotics, discourse analysis, etc. has converged.

However, the most significant aspect in this process is that these debates and new theoretical approaches have resulted in the emergence of a specific area of media literacy, which until recently had little relevance. We are referring to the field of news literacy¹.

2. Methodology

This paper is the result of revising classic theorists' contributions as well as recently published scientific articles related to the subject matter. The selection of documents has been carried out following a criterion of relevance and quality.

We will briefly and succinctly describe the theoretical and conceptual basis of the studies regarding fake news. Basic concepts in this new area known as news literacy are explained through an analysis of the primary published bibliography on it. In doing so, we will highlight some significant policy examples that correspond to this new subject discipline.

¹ We prefer to use the term news literacy because we refer to the literacy that takes all genres and journalistic or informative media into account, and not only news, which is only one genre within the broader area of information.

3. The coordinates of the new theoretical field.

From a historical viewpoint, we have identified three traditional areas of theoretical knowledge and practice when describing conventional theoretical approaches dealing with fake news.

- Theories about the mediatization of the political sphere
- Theories about journalism and finally,
- Theories about media literacy in a broad sense.

We will go on to consider news literacy as a new discipline and reflect on its interrelation with policies.

In any case, to fully understand the importance of the current theoretical phenomenon regarding fake news, firstly we must emphasize that we are facing a theoretical convergence that could very likely open up a new interdisciplinary investigation area shortly. These areas of knowledge would involve different language disciplines- linguistics, semiotics, pragmatics, among others such as sociology, social psychology, and political sciences, as well as educational and media policies, in addition to Data Science or even Artificial Intelligence and robotics.

Similarly, it would also be anticipated and meaningful to promote new journalism practices, political participation, and media education in a broad sense together with the development of this new interdisciplinary area

To describe and understand the scope of this new theoretical-practical field we will:

- Put fake news into the framework of the relationship between politics and the media, which is known as the political mediatization phenomenon. Next,
- We will connect fake news to its immediate context: the transition from a mass media system to a multimedia digital network system- mainly organized by the Internet and Social Networks-. We will then examine,
- How fake news involves a broad re-conceptualization that affects a.) news media practices, b.) media policies and c.) how media literacy and news literacy initiatives are designed and mapped out.

3.1. *The post-truth era*

In 2016 the Oxford dictionary² declared the term post-truth as the Word of the Year, therefore expressing its alarm about the effect of the proliferation of fake news. It is a word that denotes the remarkable and widespread phenomenon in which objective facts are gradually losing influence to discourses that introduce a great deal of ideality or lack of reality and manipulation. This type of discourse is usually accompanied or reinforced by the appeal to emotions, personal beliefs, and extremist political ideologies. In this sense, the Oxford dictionary's decision elevates fake news to the status of a key process of our time. In doing so, it indicates a social tendency, characterized by the increasing importance or hegemony of the emotional component in political discourse, which contributes to diminishing the rational dimension and empirical

² <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016> [Consulted 05/04/2018]

analysis. At the same time, it has been noted that there is a new type of discursive engineering fundamentally based on manipulating feelings, beliefs and the most profound convictions of public opinion. It also systematically uses stereotypes, clichés, and subjects better established in the social imaginary and at the same time detached from the individual's conscience.

In this context, we cannot overlook the need that has emerged to coin the term post-truth in the midst of the information age. (Tsipursky, 2017). On the one hand, it is a term that serves to verify the severe alarm that it has caused –both in the academic and political areas– because of the strength that processes are acquiring, such as manipulating information and poisoning political discourse with sentimentality (Castells, 2017). This aspect shows an apparent contradiction in the supposedly open and scientific nature that corresponds to the ideology of the information society (Mattelart, 2007) para enfrentar el futuro, es disponer de informaci\u00f3n pertinente en el momento oportuno. Esto implica la necesidad de conceptualizar la gesti\u00f3n y al gestor de la informaci\u00f3n frente al nuevo entorno profesional. Sin pretender hacer c\u00e1tedra, se plantean algunos requerimientos de ese profesional que enfrenta un camino de doble v\u00eda porque debe aprovecharse el uso de la tecnolog\u00eda sin perder de vista el aspecto humanista de la atenci\u00f3n al usuario. Un profesional que centra su inter\u00e9s en el usuario y por tanto requiere: conocimiento, libertad, voluntad, responsabilidad (deberes). However, why does the emotional dimension of the discourses tend to crush the factual one in the framework of an information society such as ours?

From our perspective, this is the fundamental question that has its origins in the re-emergence of the criticism of fake news and consequently in the emergence of the new news literacy phenomenon.

Next, to respond to the concern that has already been identified, we will synthesize different theoretical explanations that create the exponential increase in the emotive dimension of current public discourses. We will thus study what we call *emotional hypertrophy*.

3.2. *Emotional hypertrophy of discourses*

Suiter (2016) links new political discourse tendencies to the conditions in which the new digital ecosystem produces media discourses, in an attempt to explain the reasons for the increase in the emotional dimension of the discourses. Thus, the post-truth phenomenon can be interpreted as a combination of what it calls toxic

- The defense in light of austerity policies in a deepening context of globalization, economic crisis and an increase in armed conflicts, a war against terrorism, local wars, among others, and
- The appearance of a new media ecosystem dominated by reality shows, social media and the existence of filter bubbles (bubbles that filter information).

According to the cited author, the convergence of these factors is what has: a.) strengthened the emotional dimension of the discourses, b.) weakened trust in what is true or the reality of any discourse –in other words, the connection between the discourses and the facts–, c) undermined institutions and their legitimacy, especially political ones, and d) created a

severe skepticism towards the media and journalism. Thus, the legitimacy of the liberal order loses importance, according to (Suiter 2016:25) “it opens the door to the anti-liberal forces whose populist and national appeals are gaining in power.”

This theoretical approach is not new. The concern about emotional discourses contaminating rational ones- or in other words, the hegemony of passion over reason -and the detachment of the political discourse from reality have been the basis of the discussion about the relationship between communicative and political systems for a long time. It is advisable at this point to look back on what has been a tendency in social sciences for a long time: to attempt to find an accurate relationship between false information and the aforementioned hypertrophy of sentiment.

4. Different theoretical-practical paradigms of information distortion

We can distinguish three prominent paradigms that correspond to a different development in the media system throughout the long tradition of studies that connect the public sphere, communication, and mobilization- or participation- politics, and emotional hypertrophy

- The paradigm of the social mass
- The paradigm of propagandistic manipulation, and
- The paradigm of spectacular mediatization

Next, we will analyze the role that the hypertrophy of the emotional dimension plays in each.

The first paradigm, the social mass, probably has its origins in the studies of the phenomenon of mass which were produced in modern societies at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Both the democratic and communication systems were in a new stage of growth in that period. In fact, this occurs in societies that we now consider to be pre-democratic, and pre-media contexts- in other words, those in which the development of the media is emerging and depends on mechanical systems such as the press and paper, that is to say, there are no available media relying on electricity. As such is the case, we need to locate the psycho-sociological and psychoanalytic or merely sociological approaches, which appeared at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Their main theoretical references come from authors such as Gustave Le Bon (1947), Sigmund Freud (1963), Ortega y Gasset (2002), Karl Mannheim (1936) or Elías Canetti (2013), among others.

The second paradigm, propagandistic manipulation, firstly corresponds to the analysis of the role that the media plays in societies with authoritarian political systems, which do not have means and profusely use political propaganda and disinformation. Harold Lasswell (1927), Sergei Tchakhotine (1952); Jean Marie Domenach (1950) and, in the 20th century, Guy Durandin (1982) are theoretical references for this paradigm.

Finally, the third paradigm, spectacular mediatization is reinforced by the study of media systems- in particular, those relying on electricity, but which are not yet digital-, in the framework of the capitalist societies of liberal democracy and the context of a consumerist culture. Here respective academic studies tend to highlight and emphasize the close connection between the increasing tendency to commercialize public discourse- in mainly advertising and marketing and

its consequences in the profound transformation of the political discourse. Authors such as Stuart Ewen (1976), Lucien Lefèvre (1977), Roland Barthes (1994), Edgar Morin (1981), J. Baudrillard (1991), Umberto Eco (1990), among others can be highlighted here.

In any case, the appeal to the steady development of the emotional dimension-that is to say not rational -of the discourses- and designation of the essential role of distortion and misrepresentation of reality are fundamental in the three cited paradigms

At the same time, each of these paradigms attempts to describe the close relationships that exist between emotional hypertrophy of the discourse on the one hand and the other hand, the features of the media ecosystem to which they correspond.

4.1 Emotional hypertrophy and media ecosystems

In the first paradigm, the social mass, different authors highlight:

- The loss of autonomy and individual critical thinking.
- The systematic manipulation of an individual's psychology and passions
- Charismatic leadership understood as a kind of distortion of a realistic account,
- the tendency towards rhetoric and exaggeration and even violent or aggressive discursive, present in many massive declarations, and finally,
- the importance of profound psychology and culture structures in collective action. We are referring to the unconscious, legends and myths, and in general, to the discursive clichés most rooted in the collective imaginary.

Indeed, the breeding ground for the fake news phenomenon must be located in the intersection of all these factors, and the consequent proliferation of the anti-realist or counterfactual discourses.

In the propagandistic manipulation paradigm, the context of distorting reality is explained by referring to the following factors;

- the lack of freedom and forced submission to the violence of the system: unwavering social control exerted by the systems and strengthened by police surveillance and repression,
- the control of information and censorship by the system,
- the role of indoctrination, in other words, the systematic and repetitive instilling of ideas through systematic propaganda,
- the extreme irrational and emotional content of public discourse,
- the loss of individual autonomy

This second paradigm analyzes and describes discursive engineering in particular without eroding the first, which arises in a context of an absence of freedoms and suppression of social pluralism. It is with good reason that most of these studies refer to Nazi and fascist propaganda from the mid 20th century, or the propaganda in the Soviet regime or Maoist China in the cold war period. In these contexts, the information distortion and disinformation are converted into the sociopolitical system's legal tender. It is what Edgar Morin deemed as "totalitarian information" (1982: 44-45).

Finally, in the system of spectacular mediatization, disinformation and information distortion and the sentimentality in discourses refers to the following group of factors;

- the mediatization of politics, that is to say, politic's loss of autonomy and its subjection to the media system (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995:16),
- the increasing commercialization of the media system, which favors aspects of spectacularization (Debord, 1967) and the dramatization of information (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995:23),
- the colonization of politics through advertising and public relations both in culture and consumption (Ewen, 1976) such as in political culture (Blumler y Gurevitch, 1995; McCombs, 2006; Noelle-Neumann, 1995; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

In the last paradigm, the mediatization of the spectacular, theoretical knowledge and practices from the first and second paradigms are maintained and polished in contrast to previous paradigms. However, in this case, such theories and practices are etched into the acceptance of the norms and rules that liberal democratic political systems establish. We could thus discuss a certain softening and self-limitation of propagandistic techniques.

In any case, in the third paradigm –the spectacular mediatization– the most significant aspect is the systematic subjection of factual and rational discourse to another type that is emotional and theatrical, primarily designed to strengthen the spectacle and dramatization. Ultimately, it is a system that is managed through advertising and marketing engineering, which tends to transform any factual representation into a story of a spectacular nature (Gurevitch and Kavoori, 1992).

4.2 The digital media ecosystem as a new context for the phenomenon of fake news

Analysing this triple change –political, media and theoretical– which corresponds to the development of the cited paradigms, the idea of a gradual progressive and irreversible evolution can tend to be automatically accepted. Thus, we would be inclined to think that our societies –at least, democratic and especially European ones– have progressed from the first phase of pre-democratic mass and pre-media to a media situation and democratic-liberal end, to an intermediate stage of profound crisis and a regression of the system towards that of the one around the second world war and the cold war.

Therefore, if we accept this evolutionary logic, we should recognize that at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century we have comfortably settled into a liberal democratic system, which despite being accompanied by the development of consumerist cultures and welfare states- we would have overcome the dangers of authoritarian political propaganda and the systematic manipulation of information.

Following this reasoning approach, but referring to the phenomenon of fake news, we should accept then that the circumstances that would have encouraged the fake news phenomenon would be the following via;

- A spontaneous, passionate discourse –and at times violent-which generates in itself a process of establishing the mass (multitude) on particular occasions and in specific contexts (Canetti, 2013), to
- a passionate discourse intentionally distorted by discursive, oppressive and violent engineering (Tchatkhotine, 1952); until it finally achieves
- a state of emotional discourse –deliberately distorted– but softened. This softening would stem from its inclusion in a liberal-democratic context, due to the significance that advertising and consumerist discourse obtain in a specific phase of capitalist development- at the end of the 20th century.

Meanwhile, does this evolution correspond to an imperative logic? Does this development explain what is happening with fake news in the second decade of the 20th century? Or should we think that this logic is only provisional and that social discourses do not have to always evolve in this way? If this is the case, won't we need to be able to identify other factors and new circumstances that acknowledge the singularity of the recent emergence of fake news? Won't we need to describe new evolutionary logic for the social discourses that do not have to always lead to the last stage of spectacular mediatization?

From our point of view, categorically yes. We need a new theoretical approach. Particular factors explain the radical novelty of the fake news phenomenon as they are presented in the 21st century. They are factors that force us to consider that the evolution identified can revert at any time and lead to other developments that we believe to have already been overcome. In large part, it is indeed due to the transformations that are taking place both in the political and media system.

4.3 Signs of regression

Firstly, what appears to accompany the abrupt appearance of fake news in our current media and social panorama is the media and political systems' palpable regression towards stances that were thought to have already been overcome. It seems that we are going back to situations in some circumstances and certain respects, as many studies highlight, appropriate to the years previous to the Second World War (Snyder, 2017). In a sense, we are therefore again witnessing the rise of a communicational device that reminds us of propagandist engineering rooted in authoritarian and non-authoritarian systems (Chomsky, 1989).

This leads us to believe that the spectacular mediatization in a liberal capitalist context is not, as we may say, the end of History, but perhaps the prelude to a regression to the past.

This phenomenon has been evidenced in recent events that have given rise to very critical approaches to the media system at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. In this sense, we must take criticism from authors such as Baudrillard (1991), Chomsky (1989), and Bauman (1993) into consideration, among others. In general, this criticism refers to specific empirical processes that show how public discourses tend to radicalize –in the form and the content– and how propagandistic methods which were thought to be overcome in the context of liberal democracy reemerge

In an initial approach, these studies draw attention to the return to propagandist models appropriate to authoritarian contexts; they attempt to analyze the so-called media war which came about during the Gulf War and the use that the television made of it.

Later, attention was drawn to the attacks on the Twin Towers and how this event served to strengthen a discourse of security and fear.

That same discourse of fear later served to focus, frame and subsume phenomenon so disparate such as terrorism and immigration, questions of identity and damage caused by the economic crisis. This is what in a way explains the resurgence of certain populisms in Europe and for example the emergence of white supremacy in the United States. Naturally, fake news has found its breeding grounds in these varied environments.

A context susceptible to fake news that is known as media populism is fostered nowadays as a consequence of this evolution in the theoretical approach. This context, which could also be called a media war, is characterized by increasing power over the control of the media and the return of propagandist strategies based on fear, as well as the implementation of monitoring and surveillance systems.

Concerning the Gulf War, A. Mattelart (1992) analyzed how it was a communication war in two ways:

- Due to the establishment of a “military censorship” of the information imposed on the media (Hallin, 1991).
- Owing to the staging of a type of “intelligent war” because of the constant magnification of the *intelligent weaponry* employed in the battle and its inherent characteristics. This enabled the connection of the warlike discourse with the information society, video games, artificial intelligence, neurological networks, etc. (Mattelart, 1992:140–141).

The most striking result of this real and discursive process was the construction of a sort of global entertainment, presenting a distorted discourse by constructing a spectacle of reality before global spectators. A development which, despite not being entirely false, was sufficiently distorted to distract spectators’ attention and insert a prophylactic and sterilized vision of the war into public opinion. In essence, a discourse which besides being misconstrued as Baudrillard (1991) explains, contained a good dose of simulation.

However, beyond the first and initial warlike shift of the discourse that occurred during the Gulf War, the explosion of the Twin Towers in New York introduced new discursive strategic components. Here are some of the main ones,

- The promotion of a security discourse in exchange for a restriction on freedoms,
- An acceleration in the implementation of active surveillance systems, which allowed all citizens to be spied upon.
- The strengthening of an uncritical “trust” in intelligent systems that were implemented in the information society and which, in some ways, foreshadow a state of naivety and trust in light of exponential growth and a continuation of digital intelligent systems in all areas of life, which is going to characterize the second and third decade of the 21st century.
- Besides this discursive and semiotic transformation, authentic propaganda engineering closely related to authoritarian regimes is promoted and superimposed.

- These are the features combined with the tendency towards sentimentality and demagoguery that characterizes the current media neopopulism, which drives and is driven by fake news.

Media neopopulism is characterized by; 1.) the emphasis on the spectacularization of politics that had already been established as an emerging phenomenon in the previous period, 2.) the continuous erosion of classic media as sources of information and as quality filters for the information that citizens receive, 3.) the hegemony of social networks as partly horizontal communication systems for citizens (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016; Fletcher, R. et al. 2018). Increasing personalism in politics that favors leaders with media charisma, superimposing traditional political institutions, 4.) and the emergence of the emotional dimension of the discourses-as aforementioned-in detriment to realistic and rational analysis.

4.4 Media neopopulism and the transition to a digital multimedia ecosystem

It seems fair to accept that this media neopopulism would not have flourished without the existence of a new media ecosystem. A system that although does not entirely determine, it does at least safeguard and strengthen neopopulism.

The features identified in the neopopulism media paradigm can connect with many of the features that have already been found in the media spectacularization paradigm, but from our perspective, they directly relate to three elements of the current media ecosystem.

- The disruptive impact of new media on journalism K. Viner (2016:1) thus explains the situation:
“Now, we are caught in a series of confusing battles between opposing forces, between the truth and falsehood, facts and rumour, kindness and cruelty, between the few and the many, the connected and the alienated, between the open platform of the web as its architects envisioned it and gated enclosures of Facebook and other social networks, between an informed public and a misguided mob.

In other words, we find ourselves caught between radical underlying tension and the overly simplistic, where one of the things that leaves a mark corresponds to the least rational dimension of human beings.

- The hybrid character that media and political systems adopt. Chadwick (2017) refers to the hybridization of political systems highlighting the difficulty in separating political and pure communicational models and defining systems. He indicates how political democratic and authoritarian theories can converge simultaneously and co-evolve, superimposing old and new institutional behaviors, and the gradual appearance of new norms

Based on Chadwick's idea of hybridization, media hybridization can be referred to as the following:

- The phenomenon of systematic confusion between different discursive genres, norms, and opinions, which make it very difficult to distinguish between fiction and reality and the ordinary and the extraordinary,
- The confusion and the intersection between different media and communicative situations- intimate, personal, public, dual, collective, etc. All of which contributes to the increasing complexity of the technological and media system with the natural and social order (appealing to Bruno Latour's (2005) theory of the social actor),

- The new role that algorithms and robots are playing in the dissemination of information particularly in the propagation of fake news.

Indeed, there is not a lack of empirical evidence about the new shift that current political discourses are adopting and some of the main features manifesting in the media environment.

In a recent investigation by the New York Times³ about the Russian intervention in the last North American presidential elections campaigns showed that both Facebook and Twitter had been the favored media for contaminating the public sphere with fake news. It has been confirmed- as the same newspaper stated- that many of these accounts were constituted by bots that systematically disseminated fake news in a programmed way. Although its direct impact on the population was diminished- as the NYT explains- nobody doubts that they contributed to polarizing the debate and radicalizing a good part of the electorate's stances.

Russia's activity in disseminating fake news through social networks has been verified as being premeditated and systematic in the case of the French presidential elections, and the campaigns in favor of Catalonian independence. According to El País ⁴, the strategy is the same as that employed in the United States and consisted of combining fake and biased news sources through an automated campaign of dissemination via social networks.

5. Fake news as a symptom of vulnerability in the media and news system

Based on the development of the studied theories, fake news must be considered not only as the result of falsehoods, malice or intentional deceit- naturally it is, but it also the consequence of a communicative ecosystem that presents enormous weaknesses and risks when serving as a basis for democratic political systems and it generally strengthens them enormously.

Nowadays, the existence of global networks and the swift dissemination of information seems to be undisputed, revealing that the system of disseminating fake news is similar to a virus epidemic, as Kucharski (2016) highlighted. The contagion and the alarming reproduction of a virus in different versions represents a danger on a sheer scale. Next, we highlight some of the circumstances that favor this phenomenon.

Firstly, the almost complete lack of filters and information verification systems is becoming apparent, and the classic criterion and procedures for news information verification have either disappeared or become so weak or powerless that they work insufficiently.

To a certain extent, it is what a plethora of studies have generally denounced concerning the media bubble that filter information that individuals receive, known as a filter bubble (Pariser, 2015) or what Carr (2014) has called the glass cage.

³ https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/opinion/campaign-stops/adventures-in-the-trump-twittersphere.html?_r= [Consulted 05/04/2018]

⁴ https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/09/22/actualidad/1506101626_670033.html [Consulted 05/04/2018]

The media, in general, is also showing a deep-seated weakness when maintaining what were quality standards for journalism, at least those that are theoretically defended by the newspaper community. Trump's success in the presidential elections is not the result of a conspiracy by a big media organization but according to the New York Times⁵, a result of its weakness. Similarly, C. R Sunstein's (2001) claim that the danger of the Internet consists in its fragmentation and the subsequent deterioration of the public sphere is gradually being confirmed, thus allowing for what Putnam (1995) declared some time ago as the loss of social capital and Sennet (2011) as the decline of a person's public role.

It is precisely in this context in which fake news adapts to dissemination. It occurs within a media environment that is in transition and unregulated.

Next, we examine the concern about fake news and the subsequent effort through theories to understand its social meaning and explain how it has led to developing initiatives and actions to counteract its harmful effects.

5.1. Ways of confronting fake news

Coinciding with the debate about fake news, politicians, journalists, and experts have attempted to propose initiatives and strategies in recent years to counteract the damage that distorted news could cause to democracies. Next, we will study some of the most significant ones.

These initiatives range from tentative attempts at participating in the social debate to launching strategic actions backed by international organizations that have devoted substantial effort to confront the matter. At the same time, a theoretical approach and accurate communication practices have unfolded in all the initiatives, which must be examined.

In this sense, we will begin to review one of the initiatives of broader scope, which presumes to have greater continuity, and corresponds to the European Union initiative. It is the most systematic and recent strategy for this issue adopted by an international organization that groups several European Member states. Hence, its importance.

The strategy adopted by the European Commission began in 2018, together with some official statements, with the creation of a group of high-level experts. This should open channels to establishing a systematic policy for the matter.

This expert commission wrote a report (European Commission, 2018) that allows us to visualize many of the potential actions regarding fake news. These initiatives can be summarized as the following:

- Initiatives designed to improve the transparency of online news, involving a fair exchange and data privacy for the systems that allow it to circulate online.
- Initiatives designed to promote media and information literacy to counteract disinformation and help users to browse in the digital media environment.

⁵ https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/opinion/campaign-stops/adventures-in-the-trump-tweetsphere.html?_r=0 [Consulted 05/04/2018].

- Actions orientated towards the development of tools that empower users and journalists to address disinformation and foster definite commitment to rapidly evolving information technologies.
- Strategies to safeguard diversity and sustainability in the European media ecosystem.
- Movements orientated towards promoting continuous research about the impact of disinformation in Europe. Evaluating the measures adopted by different players as well as a constant adaptation to innate responses.

In short, the European Commission promotes measures in two broad fields through its group of experts; a) the media ecosystem: in questions such as transparency, diversity and technology and b) media literacy.

However, what theoretical and practical implications does the approach defended by the Commission have?

It is significant that the EC locates fake news in the broader field of disinformation. It is also interesting that by doing so, it only selects one type of information from the group of fake or distorted news. It is also notable that in the process of contextualizing, the EC has not considered the political context- which, as we have seen in different cited paradigms- is essential for understanding the explosion of the fake news phenomenon. Therefore, it disregards the connection between disinformation and propaganda and thus eclipses the biased relationship that many of the fake news that circulates have.

Next, we will carefully examine these facts.

Firstly, the group of experts, on the one hand, highlights the actual difference between fake news- which can be classified into low to high-risk news to those that affect crucial issues in the political and social system and damage them. In doing so, the concept of disinformation is preferred to refer to only one type of distorted information (European Commission, 2018:35):

“false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit. The risk of harm includes threats to democratic political processes and to democratic values that shape public policies in a variety of sectors such as health, science, education, finance and more”.

Thus, a criterion of information harm is established, which is directly related to the continuity of the establishment. In addition to highlighting the misrepresentation of disinformation, it continues to be done from a certain conservatism in the system. In other words, we run the risk of leaving fake news out of focus, which despite its potential harmfulness, does not impinge directly on the established system, or in any case, that which impinges on other aspects of the system less associated with power.

Secondly, the European Expert Commission does not link fake news to the workings of the political system but considers it to be a product of the media system and only tends to consider its negative impact on politics. However, owing to the theories aforementioned the origin of fake news tends to be explained as a causal relationship between the political system and the production of fake news, both when we talk about the mediatization of politics and when political propaganda techniques or the engineering of consent are studied (Bernays, 1947).

Due to of all this, we cannot forget to draw attention to and consider that the European Expert Commission's decision presents a considerable void, it downplays the current political system's critical role in the explosion of fake news.

It is to our understanding; as we have previously highlighted that it would be more accurate to put the fake news phenomenon and disinformation in the intersection of three spheres that are currently experiencing a series of transformations;

- The crisis of the communicational ecosystem, which is experiencing a period of transformation, from the electronic mass media paradigm to the digital multimedia system,
- The crisis in the political sphere in the liberal democratic system, which is essentially experiencing an increasing process of mediatization where political institutions hybridize with media ones.
- Journalism theory and practice, which is suffering a severe crisis both politically and economically.

From our viewpoint, the fake news phenomenon should, therefore, be also analyzed as a cause of the crisis in the public political sphere and the transformation of language and social discourses. It should therefore never be analyzed as a simple derivation of the dysfunction of media and journalistic systems. This prevents us from acknowledging that all these phenomena are closely related.

On the other hand, there are many reasons to credit the idea that fake news responds to a serious deterioration in the political and public sphere. Beyond classic studies by Sennet (2011) on the subject, there are many studies such as Tannen's (1999), M. Thompson's (2016) and Sherry Turkle's (2015) which refer to this inextricable relationship.

All these studies mention the deterioration in the public and political sphere, and emphasize three key issues;

- The worsening and growing semiotic or verbal radicalization (Thompson, 2016) in the political sphere.
- The lack of an authentic social dialogue- or social conversation, as Turkle states (2015) and,
- The increasing discursive aggressiveness in our societies that escalates alongside an increase in social anonymity derived from individualism and personal isolation, its growth is due to new communication networks (Tannen, 1999).

Undoubtedly, the global deterioration in the political and public sphere- in which the electoral system is of vital importance- creates the breeding ground conducive to the unfiltered circulation of fake news. However, the European Expert Commission's report does not emphasize this enough; on the contrary, it seems to ignore it.

We need to broaden our focus of attention and address more phenomenon related to the emergence of fake news.

5.2. *A global vision of fake news*

To find a broader and more explanatory view of fake news in contemporary culture, we must refer to the most recently published bibliography regarding it. Next, we will do this, to lay the foundations for a new approach to the phenomenon.

Firstly, we need to broaden the definition of fake news and associate this distortion with strategist discursive.

Neilsen and Graves (2017) have progressed in this sense, they have provided a new classification of fake news, connecting them with the insight that audiences have of the information. Specifically:

Figure 1. Fake news classification (Nielsen and Graves, 2017)



As shown here the discursive continuum ranges from satire, which the public does not see as news (even though it contains some elements of a referential relationship to reality) to intentionally fake news with political motivations. The authors draw our attention to other news, which could be for the public, it presents opposing attributes to the adequate representation of reality: a) poor journalism: superficial, inaccurate and sensationalist; b) propaganda: biased, political lying, extremist; c) specific advertising surrounding information which then appears as a surreptitious component of it.

We might think that this information continuum is what the EC is attempting to call disinformation. However, it is evident that the Commission does not make the relationship between fake news and the political sphere explicit as its focus is not as articulated as the cited authors' is. Also, it is evident that this approach reveals a concern as it does not only deal with journalistic information but an infinity of media discourses that are not strictly informative. The different styles of information, in one way or another, fulfill referential tasks regarding reality and therefore can lead to a distortion of what is real.

In any case, this new and broader approach proposed by Nielsen and Graves (2017) allows us to adequately contextualize some of the proposals made by the EC.

5.3. Reconsideration of the mission of journalism

We will focus our attention on two essential fields in the fake news phenomenon

- the precariousness and weakness of the traditional business model, upon which journalism has relied.
- The enormous challenge that the Internet and social networks present. They do not only bring the traditional information system into question, but also systematically interfere with journalistic tasks and affect the credibility of journa-

lism, questioning some of the privileges that it has traditionally enjoyed such as the priority access to information, and the lack of sources that traditional publics relied upon, etc.-

In this reconsideration, the analysis of social debate and the study of the initiatives launched in news media reveal that there are strategies and actions in three dimensions;

- The renewal of objectives and ethical principles, and the Independence of journalism.
- The implementation of new practices to form relationships with audiences, which assume readers' and spectators' ability to start a dialogue and co-operate with the media- and vice-versa-,
- Finally, the new technology renewal tools which reinforce journalists' tasks and the public's abilities.

The director of *The Guardian*, K Viner (2017: 1) has clearly expressed the mission for the renewal of journalism:

“Now we are living through another extraordinary period in history, one defined by dazzling political shocks and the disruptive impact of new technologies in every part of our lives. The public sphere has changed more radically in the past two decades than in the previous two centuries- and news organizations, including this one, have worked hard to adjust. But the turbulence of our time may demand that we do more than adapt. The circumstances in which we report, produce, distribute and obtain the news has changed so dramatically that this moment requires nothing less than a serious consideration of what we do and why we do it”.

In this context, different studies and essays have focused our attention on the renewed mission that corresponds to journalism in today's world. This mission could center on four points:

- Make the world more understandable and intelligible, offering reliable quality information,
- Regain readers' and audiences' trust
- Strengthen fact verification mechanisms for information and news,
- Involve public and readers in a continuous dialogue with media, improving the contrasting of information, as well as cooperation in the construction of discourses.

In conclusion, actions directed at improving journalism quality- intelligible discourse and fact verification. Secondly, actions orientated towards refounding a new dialogue with audiences that helps to revive trust.

However, nowadays we know about these themes, especially about what is known as the relationship with readers. The trusted conversation that is needed can only come from readers' increased level of participation and the improvement in their abilities to do so. In other words, so-called empowerment based on the strengthening of media competences. This is what media literacy deals with.

A large part of the initiatives that are proposed or carried out in this area correspond to both media education tasks and more specifically to what we call news literacy.

For this reason, we will succinctly present what it is and what news literacy consists of regarding fake news.

5.4. *Facts, fake news, and alternative facts*

The European Expert Commission appeals to the importance of media literacy. However, it is also true that this interest comes from the field of media literacy in general. And it is precisely this interest that allows us to describe how within this discipline, the area of what we call news literacy is more clearly defined.

The concept of fake news is being worked on via different academic initiatives in the field of news literacy.

Primarily, we can find on the one hand,

- An instrumental model, solely based on showing the technical difference between fake news and verified news information, and on the other hand
- A news literacy model that is more connected to the construction of democratic societies that respect human rights.

In the first model, we must highlight Himma-Kadakas's (2017) and analyzed their performance using self-reflection in focus group interviews. Two groups of students, whose assignments were geared toward the outcome, focused more on front stage performances and underestimated back stage performances, e.g. the evaluation of sources, background information gathering, and fact checking. One group, which was taught news reporting as a process of information filtering, perceived and reflected both front and back stage performances. The results indicate that (online recommendations.

The author highlights the importance of showing the difference between what is a fact, fake news and alternative facts.

A fact is checked and contrasted, it offers indications of its integrity and can be consulted or checked by anybody. In contrast, fake news is information that imitates an informative style of news but gives false information. On the other hand, an alternative fact is an interpretation of reality, but in no case can be considered a fact.

Therefore, for this author, fake news is that which contains false information and is disseminated mainly by social networks, even though as she says, they have also been evidenced in newspapers and other media in recent times.

On the other hand, alternative facts are interpretations of facts and can only be intentional or not.

But many authors highlight the inadequacy of this approach, the broader context is forgotten and the connection between the activity of criticising fake news and recognizing it with other more general critical thinking abilities, and with other civic values related to something other than values of truth or falsehoods.

Thus, other scholars highlight the relevance of linking literacy to news literacy with traditions from other fields.

As (Maksl, Craft, Ashley, and Miller, 2017) have highlighted if literacy for news information is the final destination then the path to arrive to it includes other environments, such as more general media literacy, information literacy as well as civic, etc. Among all of these, as we will see, there is a same shared conceptual terrain through which to address the problem of this phenomenon.

In the same sense, considering the need to broaden the focus of the reflection, it is thought-provoking to consider Dyer's (2017) proposals.

According to this author, it is essential to reflect on whether fake news is more than the result of an epistemological error or a possible social request. If this is the case, we should recognize that fake news finds a fertile breeding ground and a certain complexity in social psychology. In this sense, is it enough to discover and denounce the unreality of these news items? Therefore, would the solution be media literacy solely focused on the verification of discourses?

Thus, we should ask ourselves whether media literacy directed at students and centered only on the value of the truth in the discourses would be sufficient. Ultimately, we should ask ourselves whether in this case news literacy is a solution or not, if for example whether, as in the case of students it enables them to assume journalistic information critically. There is not always an almost constitutional tendency to prevent themselves from being influenced by fake news and the mystification and surreptitious indoctrination processes that it involves.

Although Dyer's concern must be confirmed with empirical research, it seems reasonable that the idea stems from among the quite extended news literacy policy, from which a redeeming instrument can be created.

It does not seem that it could be the case and many support this idea. Thus, as (Mihailidis and Viotty 2017) highlight, news literacy must never remain to be conceived as a solely mechanistic conception, but it is necessary to always place it within a broader framework of actions that are focused on the defense of the public sphere and common interest.

From a similar viewpoint, Pérez-Tornero and Varis (2010) had already introduced the need to link not only news literacy in particular but also media literacy in general with the much broader framework of sustaining essential values of humanity, in particular, humanism. In other words, turn an unfinished task into a system that is a global and exhaustive vocation. Thus, reconstructing the factual dimension of discourses- and only news information being the fundamental pillar.

Without this perspective, we can run the risk of accepting only one instrumental vision, when one of the current needs is to increase the commitment to universal values, human rights, and democracy.

Consequently, it is essential to defend the notion that news literacy will only make sense in the context of an intervention policy that prioritizes the construction of many public spheres which undoubtedly needs to strengthen itself through a social dialogue based on:

- Rational argumentation
- Human rights
- A critical sense considering emotional discourses detached from reasoning.

The European Expert Commission appeals to the importance that news literacy acquires. However, it is also true that this interest also emerges from the field of media literacy in general. It is precisely this interest that allows us to describe how within this discipline that we call news literacy, is more clearly defined.

Numerous authors have reflected on how the phenomenon of fake news is affecting the journalism sector in general and how it must be connected to a new public literacy in the journalism studies field.

From an optimistic viewpoint, Beckett (2017) claims that fake news represents an opportunity for journalism to improve and that it is promoting an accelerated change in the sector.

The media that wants to take advantage of this defiance must respond by offering a service of more transparent, relevant, rigorous information adding value to people's lives (Beckett, 2017: 1) thus enabling the recuperation of the founding values of journalism.

From a lesser optimistic viewpoint, other authors have warned of the harm that the proliferation of fake news implies for journalism. Richardson (2017) reflects on how the survival of traditional media has been based on a commercial model to compete with information disseminated on social networks and how this has inevitably undermined journalists' credibility. In this sense, fake news would be a natural by-product of a general deterioration in journalism.

Without undermining the underlying risks analyzed, and indulging in innocent optimism, it is necessary to acknowledge that fake news represents a challenge to be confronted and that its consequences are already being noted in every social area. Therefore it is imperative to establish both global policies and local initiatives directed at news literacy.

In this sense, a more significant advance is required, working from educational systems and the media. More than at any other time close collaboration between journalists, researchers, educators, and citizens is crucial to progressing and overcoming this problem. In this sense, we must highlight UNESCO's initiative to strengthen Media Informational Literacy through the Global Alliance for Partnership in Media and Information Literacy, alliances' actions and means to confront fake news, the international network Poynter's International Fact Checking Network, as well as the creation of specific chairs intended for the study of quality journalism, such as the recently created UNESCO-UAB of MIL (Media Information Literacy) for Quality Journalism. This chair was formed on the basis that a news literacy model encompassing contributions from media and informational literacy, critical and committed thinking developed from a humanistic perspective was preferred, and in particular the collaboration between journalists, academics, educators and citizens, as well as the development of policies aimed at this objective, the creation of a less intoxicated and disinformed public sphere that is more democratic and human.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis of the matter of fake news highlights some significant consequences from a theoretical and practical point of view:

- There is a clear theoretical connection between analytical approaches of historical phenomenon such as propaganda, indoctrination, disinformation, and fake news. It has been demonstrated how classic theories applied to the psychology of the masses, discursive irrationality, and political manipulation- many of them derived from periods of totalitarian propaganda- still has an effect and an explanatory scope when addressing the current phenomenon of fake news.

- It has been verified that the explosion of the fake news phenomenon has its roots in a triple crisis: globalization, quality journalism and the deterioration of the public sphere. Only a holistic approach to the subject will allow us to obtain a more accurate view of the facts.
- On the other hand, we have seen how reducing the matter of fake news to a simple contrast between truth and falsehoods-fact checking-is very limited. It does not consider the discursive hybridization, which is characteristic of the present, nor the complexity of discourses in the context in which news and other journalistic discourse are developed. Only a global vision of the phenomenon will allow us to have a comprehensive understanding.
- The need to link the political, media and discursive systems have been demonstrated when examining the role that fake news play. It is especially visible if we adopt a historical perspective that enables us to see how we have gone through different discursive phases in recent times: the mass, political engineering, spectacularized mass and recently the mass in a digital context. The role that fake news play can only be defined from this perspective.
- There are different initiatives for media literacy that range from the limited field of fact-checking to a broader one of critical thinking and humanist and civic values. Only a comprehensive view of the phenomenon that takes the public's motivations for consuming fake news into account will be effective.
- On the other hand, it is a fact that journalists and political and media institutions are starting to work collaboratively with researchers and citizens to confront the fake news phenomenon.
- News literacy initiatives are promoted in all their dimensions; transparency is a crucial element among both public and private interactions. But, the diversity of experiences is extensive, and there is no authentic guiding principle, even despite the reports and the efforts that the EC, as well as other international organizations, have made in this respect.
- A higher number of initiatives have begun based on how to confront fake news, through news literacy fostering participation and citizens' collaboration with the media.

As a strategic conclusion, news literacy attempts to regain the value of professional journalism and its founding values before becoming imbued by the particular dynamics of a consumerist and spectacle society. Therefore, it aims to establish systematic policies in favor of informative pluralism and the active role of public media and the policies of news literacy. And on the other hand, boosting policies for the development of technological instruments that strengthen quality journalism. What seems to mark the near future in the field of fake news will be a group exercise by political media and educational institutions to develop what we have called news literacy.

We are thus facing a new period in the study of the media and the politics of mediatization. If the emphasis had been previously put on information rights and expression, media literacy has begun to be heard as a new civil right.

On the other hand, beyond understanding journalism as an institutionalized practice, which only corresponds to journalists, in light of the fake news phenomenon only a strong alliance between citizens and journalists can lay the foundations for an authentic renewal of journalism.

All of this occurs in a context in which the connection between politics and the media and the political and media discourse is more evident and problematic than ever. This means that there will not be a possible change or a reform in any of the fields mentioned if they do not collaboratively organize themselves.

Media literacy is a field that has emerged strongly, but not only as a task that competes with educational institutions but also the media itself, which increasingly corresponds to political authorities and different social players.

Finally, after carrying out this review, the appearance and consolidation of a new field of knowledge have been denoted, which develop very different politically strategic initiatives, from which a profound development in news literacy seems fundamental.

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