

# Fake news as a Distortion of Media Reality: Tell-truth Strategy in the post-truth era

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**Abstract:** The article deals with fake news which has been considered one of the greatest threats to information security. The expansion of digital technologies and the development of communication networks have contributed to the spreading of misinformation. In particular, the emergence of different sources of information on the Internet, the growing polarization of opinions in the political and socio-economic dimensions, the devaluation of the fact, and the widespread fake news on the Internet (e.g., social media) form the question of revision of the process of collecting, verifying presenting information, methods, and technologies for verifying facts, including methods for countering fake news. Although this issue has been widely investigated in academic discourse, there are still controversial arguments regarding which elements should form a tell-truth strategy. This paper focuses on recent research that reflects trends and patterns in this field and on the author's empirical survey - interviews with university professors and media experts (N=6), journalists (N=6), and students (N=14) in Russia. In this study, the author describes the key characteristics of fake news and the elements of this tell-truth strategy. It is intended that this paper focuses on both professional journalists and professors who may use the results of this investigation in such courses as political science, sociology, philosophy, and journalism.

**Keywords:** fake news, Internet, journalism, social media, truth, post-truth era.

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## 1. Introduction

The essential transformations that have taken place in the mass media sphere over the past decade are due to the diffusion of the Internet and widespread social practices online. This has caused a number of alterations in the journalists' professional culture. In particular, the accustomed algorithms for gathering and presenting news have been modified because of appearing to new actors in the media environment - the people who began to exercise the ability to express themselves online, therefore, boundaries between journalists and their audiences have blurred. As far as traditional dichotomies between message senders and receivers are blended (Marshall et al., 2003), almost everyone who has the access to the Internet can disseminate information creating multiple channels of information and opportunity to present alternative views regarding a certain issue. In these conditions, a "post-truth era" has been formed that is the crossing at times conflicting perspectives, perceptions, and approaches. The post-truth phenomenon reflects the transformation of public discourse that deals with the distortion of media reality. It causes problems and obstacles that prevent the media from exercising their professional activity in the digital space because truth, facts, and analytical conclusions have less persuasive power than ready-made interpretations. Post-truth is a consequence of occurring postmodern processes (in particular, mediatization), technological transformations (the widespread use of digital means of communication), changes in social communication (competition of influential actors in the information space), and a general decline in trust in social institutions. The destructive consequences of post-truth (in particular, spreading fake news, devaluation of facts, etc.), which destroy public discourse in the media environment, and exacerbate political and social differences, and the resonance that arises around these consequences speak to the growing need for relevant research. Therefore, the main aim of this investigation is to describe specific features of fake news and identify which elements constitute the truth-telling strategies based on the results of theoretical and empirical studies.

## 2. Literature review

The term "post-truth world" was first introduced by the American publicist S. Tesich in his essay "The Government of Lies" (The Nation, 1992). The attention was paid to not the dishonesty of politicians but the indifferent attitude of voters that try to "escape from the truth". Citizens "didn't want bad news anymore, no matter how true or vital to our health as a nation" (Grachev, Evstifyev, 2020). The term "post-truth" appeared in political discourse later when in December 2011 the economist P. Krugman used this term to describe the statements of the Republican candidate M. Romney, discredited the incumbent President of the USA B. Obama (Krugman, 2011). In 2016, during D. Trump's campaign, the term "post-truth" was widespread because it reflected the political situation in America at that time. Today this term has been widely discussed in academic research because the Internet makes a great contribution to the existence and dissemination of the post-truth. Digital technologies and the destruction of the vertical structure of knowledge production facilitate a more

flattened structure with multiple nodes of information and expression (Waisbord, 2018, p. 5). Digital technologies have given the users of the Internet access to the ability to create and distribute information (Martin, 2017; Pak, 2017). Hence, many actors are involved in the content creation process. The production of a massive flow of information leads to the fact that objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (Sales, 2017). In the context of the post-truth growing number of fake news makes to revise the value of information, facts, and truth.

Fake news is the pivotal topic of relevant research on communication and mass media (Loveless, 2020; Waisbord, 2018; Fitzpatrick, 2018). In academic discourse, scholars face the acute problem of defining fake news. The heterogeneity of the term "fake news" leads to it becoming "a catch-all term with multiple definitions" (Lilleker 2017, p. 1), hence, different approaches to defining specific characteristics of fake news as a phenomenon. For instance, Gelfert (2018) suggests considering a definition of the term "fake news" depending on the context which determines the content of fake news and its pivotal features. Within the first direction, the digital environment (in particular, social media) has been conducive to the creation and distribution of fake news. "Fake news" may be understood as "the online publication" of false statements of fact (Klein et al., 2017, p. 6). Furthermore, a "core feature of contemporary fake news is that it is widely circulated online" (Bakir et al., 2017, p. 1). Some definitions underline the role of the medium, which is a platform by which fake news is distributed: fake news is "authentic material used in the wrong context, news products disseminated on websites that specialize in false news and use layouts similar to those of real media sites and all false information and contents intended to manipulate public opinion, journalism deception as an act of communicating messages either verbally in the form of a lie or non-verbally by withholding information in order to initiate or uphold a false belief" (Sutu, 2019, p. 83). Second, fake news doesn't really have a whole lot to do with the situations that occur in the world. Fake news consists of stories "invented entirely from thin air", to be "completely fabricated", to transmit "new content [that] is 100% false", and to have "no factual basis" (Gelfert, 2018, p. 96). The third direction makes focuses on the purpose of fake news, which is to mislead readers, distort reality, and manipulate public opinion. "An element of deliberateness is imputed to the creation and circulation of fake news, which in turn is deemed "deliberately misleading" and involving "intentionally or knowingly false statements of fact", "deliberate spread of misinformation", along with the "intention to deceive"" (Gelfert, 2018, p. 96). Recent studies also identified a few crucial intentions that motivate the creation and dissemination of fake news: financial, ideological, and entertainment. The first one refers to the production of fake news with the intention to earn money, converting clicks on the Internet into advertising revenues (Tandoc, 2019). The ideological aspect is manifested in situations when creators try to discredit certain political actors or states (Allcott, 2017). Entertainment can be noticed in the situation when a product does not have a certain aim as earning money or defaming some actors in the social or political sphere because the motivation is the desire to make a joke to the audience.

Particular attention is paid to the social and political preconditions for the emergence of fake news, the methods, and procedures for creating fake news, and the threats posed by fake news: the spread of the phenomenon of blogs and UGC (Hellmueller, 2013), and increasing competition, especially from social media, which have become a powerful competitor for journalists (Hannan, 2018), the threat of manipulation (Fitzpatrick, 2018) and competition because competition is a factor in driving journalists to "break" a story before anyone else can do this (Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 10). As a result, many scholars point to a paradigm shift that actualizes the question of articulation of a new occupational norm plays an important role in establishing it (Elliot, 2008; Hellmueller, 2013).

There are currently different approaches to defining truth-finding strategies in the academic literature. For instance, Karlsson draws attention to two different strategies: "the traditional strategy, <...> in which accurate information is conveyed to the audience; and the newer transparency strategy, where truth-telling is created through forthrightness and discourse and is subject to change over time. The first relies on journalists' scrutiny and the second on openness and user participation" (Karlsson, 2011, p. 284). Other academic research suggests other journalistic normative guidelines that could form the basis of truth-finding strategies: transparency (Allen, 2008; Kovach et al., 2001), objectivity (Hellmüller, 2013), interactivity (Lasica, 2004); accuracy (Fitzpatrick, 2018, p.5), openness and accountability (Karlsson, 2011). At the same time, scholars emphasize that "empirical research now is needed that can systematically explore the many ways in which that is happening" (Singer, 2007, p. 91). This is a fair point because so far there is a small number of studies (Widholm et al, 2019; Hellmueller, 2013) that summarize empirical developments on the topic of truth-telling strategies that have been involved by journalists in their professional activity. Moreover, in these papers also some of the elements of tell-truth strategies have been considered. For instance, it is necessary to pay attention to Widholm's research (Widholm

et al, 2019) which focuses on objectivity and transparency only but considering these aspects throughout the gender problem that is also important. Other elements of tell-truth strategies are beyond the author's attention. Therefore, there is also a lack of empirical research that reveals the content of methods and algorithms that are used today by professional journalists and ordinary users of the Internet to verify information, as well as which elements should constitute the tell-truth strategies. It is these gaps that the present study aims to fill.

### 3. Method

The author conducted a survey (November 2022, Yekaterinburg, Russia) - the interview with university professors and experts in the sphere of mass media, communication, sociology, and political science (N=6), professional journalists who work in news outlets (N=6), and students (specializations - journalism; sociological and marketing research) (N=14). Males are three respondents; females are 26 respondents. Age of respondents: from 15 to 20 years old (10 respondents), from 21 to 30 years old (8 respondents), from 31 to 40 (6 respondents), and from 41 to 50 years old (2 respondents). The sample was random. The specialization and the sphere of an occupation of a respondent were considered first. Two research questions were posed: RQ1: How do you understand the term "fake news"? RQ2: In your opinion, what elements (apart from, objectivity and transparency) should constitute the tell-truth-telling strategies? The survey was organized online and conducted using digital platforms (Facebook, and What's app).

### 4. Results

Based on the results of our research, it was advisable to distinguish three main groups that show the opinions of (a) professors and experts; (b) professional journalists; (c) students.

#### 4.1 Fake news as a concept

(a) According to the opinions of professors and experts in the sphere of mass media and communication, it is noticed that there are two essential lines that are aligned with the core directions presented in our analysis of academic research. On the one side, respondents underline that fake news is a complete distortion of reality where information, facts, and opinions are fabricated in order to mislead the audience and affect public sentiment.

*"Fake news is false information, not supported by facts, evidence, photos, or videos. This is a hoax. Often, fake news is planned, deliberately distorting information for certain purposes of a certain social or public group"* (female, 47, associate professor, Russia)

*"Fake news is an informational message that can have a strong impact on society's moods and is based on information that cannot be unambiguously verified"* (male, 35 years old, Ph.D. in sociology, independent researcher, Russia)

Respondents admit that apart from fake news that is entirely invented and has no connection with real facts and events, there is news that may be based on real facts, opinions, and events. In this case, fake news may be a partial distortion of reality that can reflect real situations in the world and at the same time include other misinformation.

*"Fake news is news that partially misrepresents the real state of affairs or constructs an alternative, completely simulated reality in order to form among the general public or certain target social groups a worldview and behaviour beneficial to certain financial, industrial, political, and other interest groups"* (female, 37 years old, Ph.D. in political science, Russia)

*"Fake news is news or reports of past events that contain a false interpretation in order to obtain the necessary publicity in order to influence political decisions or public opinion"* (male, 47 years old, director of the autonomous non-profit organization "Centre for European and Asian Studies", senior lecturer, Russia)

b) Professional journalists emphasize two different types of fake news. On the part, fake news is information that may be fabricated without references to the real facts, opinions, and facts in order to cause resonance in society. Conversely, it may consist of real facts on which misinformation can be constructed.

*"I understand the concept of "fake news" as a deliberately false message about an event or character that did not exist. That is, for me, "fake news" is still more about something that in reality did not exist or did not happen at all. There is a second version of fake news when the event took place. It was "overgrown" with non-existent details that were given out in the news feed as having happened"* (female, 31 years old, journalist)

Respondents also point out that the process of distortion of fake news may be unintended when an author does not have the aim of misleading the audience.

*"Fake news may be distorted in a natural way (for example, someone misunderstood something, someone paraphrased something, etc.)"* (female, 23 years old, journalist)

*"<Fake news> may simply be unverified information gained from the source, while the source itself could be mistaken, and in this case, it turns out to be a fake"* (male, 25, journalist)

In terms of another view that is along with the normative approach. The main accent is made on ways of creating such news when the basic principles of journalism are violated or neglected.

*"Fake news is publications that violate the basic journalistic principles as the publication of different opinions in equal proportions, the absence of an imposed assessment on the part of the author, and social responsibility"* (male, 31 years old, journalist)

c) Based on the answers of the students surveyed it was reasonable to identify the following groups in which various features of fake news are underlined.

Fake news is information that comprises non-existing facts and it does not have a link to the world or information that can include content (e.g., facts, opinions, and events) that may be partly true. Besides, some respondents noted that the distribution of such fake news can have unintended effects.

*"Fake news is information that is not true"* (female, 19 years old, student, specialization - journalism)

*"Fake news is information that is completely or partially untrue"* (female, 19 years old, student, specialization - journalism)

*"Fake news is information that is not true. This can be both unintended and deliberate dissemination of fake news"* (female, 19 years old, student, specialization - journalism)

According to another view, one of the essential components of fake news is appealing to emotions instead of facts.

*"Fake news is a circumstance in which objective facts are less important in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs"* (female, 19 years old, student, specialization - journalism)

The next crucial and integral component of fake news is vague sources of information.

*"Fake news usually has a very vague source. It seems to me that this is one of the main characteristics"* (female, 24 years old, student, specialization - sociological and marketing research)

*"In fake news, the author does not indicate the source from which the information was taken, does not provide expert comments"* (female, 19 years old, student, specialization - journalism)

## 4.2 Elements of the tell-truth strategy

a) The significant number of professors and experts surveyed underline that objectivity and transparency are indeed the most essential aspects that should be considered in the work of professional journalists. Submission of different views on the same issue is a guarantee of a more accurate reflection of situations, their consequences, and their subsequent impact on certain aspects of life. Appealing to the different sources is also one of the crucial steps in the preparation of a text. More specifically, it is necessary to pay attention to the wide set of original information (e.g., official reports and statements, links to online list archives, and statistics) that can help avoid misinformation. For instance, one of the experts pointed out that nowadays one of the main sources of fake news is social media (e.g., Telegram channels) where it is complicated to identify if the news is true or not.

*"...it is important for experts to treat such messages <on telegram> with a certain degree of skepticism. The corporate standards of many media require the presence of the points of view of all participants in the conflict. However, the main way is still the creation of legal mechanisms for mandatory verification of information."*

*Additionally, it is still worth starting a discussion about the regulation of the information flow in telegram channels and social networks” (male, 47 years old, director of the autonomous non-profit organization “Center for European and Asian Studies”, senior lecturer at the university, Russia)*

Apart from these elements, the respondents pointed out other ones that may be a basis for the tell-truth strategy.

*“The competent selection of information sources (both documentary and human) by a journalist. Second, the involvement of unbiased experts, if possible (if still such a phenomenon still exists). Third, the journalist's own competence in the issues covered. Finally, the building of an effective mechanism for checking the work of journalists within the editorial office” (female, 37 years old, Ph.D. in political science, Russia).*

*“I would add here only one more element - the designation by the author of the material of his own position on the issue, which can be taken out in a separate section. Obviously, the personal beliefs of the author of the material can greatly influence how he prepares this material and what conclusions he comes to. Reading such materials, the reader should make an amendment to this” (male, 35 years old, Ph.D. in sociology, independent researcher, Russia)*

b) Journalists surveyed also shared the view that the presence of multiple points of view (objectivity) and pointing of source information (transparency) are core elements of tell-truth strategies. For example, some respondents decided to reveal this issue by appealing to the professional aspects of their activity such as technologies of work with information considering these elements.

*“You can double-check the information in a higher authority. If, for example, it is said that evidence is being collected on some fact that will be submitted to the international court, then you can go to the website of the court of human rights and see if this is true. All references to alleged documents are also easily verified by official authorities” (female, 31 years old, journalist)*

*“Presenting multiple points of view is reasonable. If there was any conflict, it is important to reflect on all points of view and request comments from both or all parties. The main thing is to remember that refusal to comment is also a point of view” (female, 22 years old, journalist)*

However, along with objectivity and transparency respondents specified the references to other crucial aspects such as numbers, quotes, the principles of openness, and non-value.

*“In addition to transparency and objectivity, I would also call reliance on facts (numbers, quotes, examples), otherwise the text looks empty and does not inspire confidence” (female, 23 years old, journalist)*

*“Valuelessness (if not an author's column), social responsibility, understanding the impact of the text on society, the ethical aspect” (female, 25 years old, journalist).*

c) Drawing on the results of the survey with students, it is noteworthy that they concentrate mainly on clarifying features of such elements as objectivity and transparency (additional elements of tell-truth strategies were not suggested in their answers). Respondents describe technologies for obtaining information, paying attention to two specific aspects - the references to the factual material and attracting competent experts.

*“It seems to me that it is worth adding more reinforcement of information with photos, videos, and voice recordings of conversations. This will not only attract an audience but will act as an additional “airbag” for the journalists themselves” (female, 19 years old, student, specialization - journalism)*

*“When preparing journalistic material, it is necessary to study to the smallest detail the problem that needs to be reflected in the publication, turn to experts and get their opinion, find heroes who understand the problem and take their comments. It is also necessary to consider how competent the speaker is in a particular area, that is, to conduct a pre-interview” (female, 19 years old, student, specialization - journalism)*

*“Sources of information can always be bought by someone, so I think it is necessary, in addition to testimonies, to consult with professionals in this field” (female, 19 years old, student, specialization - journalism)*

## 5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the results of the analysis of academic literature regarding the following issues: fake news as a concept and the main elements of the tell-truth strategy. It was determined that there are different contexts in which fake news may be defined (e.g., technological, social, or cultural conditions). Then, there are various

approaches to defining the essence of fake news. It may be identified as completely fabricated information or as partially invented content where the real facts, situations, and events are preserved but there is also misinformation that leads to the distortion of the presented reality in the news. Furthermore, the scientific paper is devoted to the elements of the tell-truth strategy: transparency, objectivity, interactivity; accuracy, openness, and accountability.

The author conducted an empirical survey - interviews with Russian university professors and media experts, journalists, and students to describe the key characteristics of fake news and determine elements of this tell-truth strategy. Regarding the first question, it is revealed that the respondents understand the phenomenon of fake news as information that is completely or partially fabricated. At the same time, respondents surveyed underline that the distribution of fake news does not always have intentional character because sometimes it may have an unintentional effect. As for the elements of tell-truth strategies are concerned, the respondents notice the following ones: the competent selection of information sources; the involvement of unbiased experts; the building of an effective mechanism for checking the work of journalists within the editorial office; the scepticism regarding unknown source; paying attention to the references to the factual material (e.g., statistics, foto- and video-materials).

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