

Journalists' Reflections on Fake News: Insights from Qualitative Interviews

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Abstract: Although fake news is not new, its prominence has surged with the widespread adoption of technology, the intensification of diplomatic crises, and escalating conflicts between states. Given the significant negative impact of fake news on individuals and society, it is essential to understand the strategies professional journalists utilize to identify and counteract it. This research examines journalists' perspectives on recognizing and detecting fake news online. Based on qualitative interviews with journalists from leading Italian media outlets, the study highlights the distinguishing characteristics of fake news and key detection strategies that form the foundation of contemporary media literacy.

Keywords: Fake news, Disinformation, Journalism, Social media, Digital communication

1. Introduction

Fake news primarily leads to the distortion of the authenticity balance within the news ecosystem, posing significant risks to society (Shinde & Sathyaprakash, 2023). Deliberate deception and malicious claims propagated through fake news undermine democratic principles (Nyhan et al., 2017) and have serious consequences for individuals and society. Given the increasing prominence of fake news, a vast body of academic literature highlights its harmful effects on various facets of social reality, focusing on diverse concerns and utilizing various research methodologies. As a result, identifying common analytical frameworks within this range of research remains a challenge. Moreover, this task is further complicated by the fact that, even though fake news has become a far-reaching element of the media landscape, the absence of a universally accepted definition hinders efforts to fully comprehend the phenomenon since academic literature presents different perspectives on the definition of fake news. Lilleker (2017) states that the heterogeneity of the term "fake news" has led it to become "a catch-all term with multiple definitions" (p. 1).

The literature analysis revealed two main research approaches how scholars define fake news: one emphasizing its technological nature and the other focusing on its content characteristics.

The first group of studies highlights the role of digital platforms in the spread of fake news, underscoring the technological mechanisms that facilitate its dissemination. For example, Sutu (2019) states, "Fake news refers to authentic content used in an incorrect context, news items spread on websites dedicated to false information, employing layouts that resemble legitimate media platforms" (p. 83). Similarly, Bakir and McStay (2017) assert that a defining characteristic of modern fake news is that "it is widely disseminated online" (p. 1). Other studies emphasize the mechanisms through which fake news spreads, particularly highlighting the pivotal role of technological communication, with social media serving as a primary vehicle for its distribution (Aldwairi & Alwahedi, 2018).

In contrast, the second group of research shifts attention from the medium through which fake news spreads to its intrinsic characteristics. For instance, Levy (2017) points out that fake news imitates the format and substance of credible news outlets. Brennen (2017) characterizes fake news as "fabricated content, manipulated to resemble legitimate journalistic reports designed to deceive" (p. 180). Some scholars define fake news "as wholly or partially false information, typically presented as news, often expressed through textual, visual, or graphic content to mislead or confuse audiences" (Kalsnes, 2018).

Therefore, to enrich literature with new insights about defining fake news, the research aims to gather and interpret definitions of fake news provided by professional journalists. As a result, the study seeks to contribute to systematizing the definitions of fake news used in the professional media environment and the development of conceptual frameworks related to fake news.

2. Data Collection

To gain a comprehensive understanding of fake news, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with professional journalists in Italy (see Table 1) from September to December 2024. First, the research utilized the classification of media outlets commonly adopted in media studies, which identifies six main types: public service media (PSM), private TV or radio outlets, press (leading dailies), digital-native news media, local/regional media

(press, radio, or TV), and community/non-profit media. This classification is particularly suitable for several reasons, including its ability to encompass various business models of media organizations, which reveal distinctions between different types of outlets. Second, the interviewees were carefully selected from a pool of professional journalists, all based in Italy. Most of the respondents are prominent figures in the media landscape, with extensive experience and recognition in the field. The empirical research program consists of several stages. The first stage involved conducting interviews based on a structured questionnaire. The interviews were conducted orally (as opposed to in writing), online, and were audio-recorded. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were carried out in the respondents' native language (Italian), allowing them to fully express their opinions. In the second stage, the interviews were transcribed and translated into English. Transcription was performed using automated audio-to-text software available in Microsoft Word. In the third stage, key excerpts from the interviews were selected according to a table for identifying significant quotes. This step helped highlight the most relevant statements from the interviewees and organized the material effectively. Finally, in the fourth stage, the responses were analyzed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the professional journalists' perspectives on the current state of the mass media system.

Table 1: Sample of Italian media outlets

Type of media outlet	Media outlet	Position
Press (leading dailies)	La Repubblica	Editor-in-chief
	Corriere della Sera	Journalist
Private TV	Mediaset	Editor-in-chief
	La 7	Journalist
Public Service Media	RAI	Editor-in-chief
	RAI	Journalist
Digital native news media	Follow Up News	Editor-in-chief
	Valigia Blu	Journalist, editor
Local/regional media	Nord Est Multimedia S.p.A. (NEM)	Editor
	Milano Free, Musica 361, 7 Giorni	Journalist Freelance
	Milano today	Journalist
Community, non-profit media	Internazionale	Journalist Freelance

3. Results of Analysis

The interview questions are organized into six key themes that reflect various aspects of fake news, the fact-checking process, professional journalism standards, and the assessment of potential risks for professional media activities in the future. In-depth semi-structured interview was selected as the method for gathering data for several reasons: it offers a flexible interview structure, guiding the conversation logically; it enables a deeper exploration of the respondents' most critical and significant statements, allowing a focused discussion on specific issues; and it helps uncover additional factors that contribute to constructing a comprehensive understanding of the media landscape. For the purposes of this research, the author will focus on two primary research questions:

(RQ1) What is fake news from the perspective of journalists?

(RQ2) What are the features of fake news, and how can it be identified on the Internet?

3.1 Fake News: A Definition

In order to compare the various definitions of fake news provided by the surveyed journalists, a table was constructed to illustrate the similarities and differences between media outlets (see Table 2). Based on the responses collected, the author selected the most notable quotes from the experts that best capture the defining characteristics of fake news.

Table 2: The key definitions of “fake news” given by representatives of media outlets

Type of media outlet	Media outlet	Position	Quotes from respondents
Press (leading dailies)	La Repubblica	Editor-in-chief	<i>“...an alternative truth when talking about an event.”</i>
	Corriere della Sera	Journalist	<i>“Fake news is fake.”</i>
Private TV	Mediaset	Editor-in-chief	<i>“Fake news is false news that has no real foundation, that did not really happen, but that can direct thought in a certain way.”</i>
	La 7	Journalist	<i>“Fake news has various shades. Well, fake news is basically a lie, or a news item presented as totally false, which is a lie, or manipulated so that it may seem true, but isn't.”</i>
Public Service Media	RAI	Editor-in-chief	<i>“Fake news is the spread of false news, intentionally or unintentionally, through the Internet.”</i>
	RAI	Journalist	<i>“It is news that does not exist and is invented.”</i>
Digital native news media	Follow Up News	Editor-in-chief	<i>“From a technical perspective, should we separate real fake news made to be fake news from news that is steered? Because if I, as a journalist, am aware that I am writing a piece of news steering toward a certain side, making sure the reader understands only what I want and not what actually happened... So, that is biased news, and that can also be considered fake news because I am not doing my job. I am giving false information because I am not giving the real news. In the real sense, fake news can refer to things like those fabricated stories, such as the absurd ones about the deaths of people or the ridiculous idea of “killer bees” — it's a phenomenon that will always be there.”</i>
	Valigia Blu	Journalist,	<i>“So, basically, fake news is a hoax, a piece of news that makes people believe something that isn't true. <...> Basically, fake news is information that is 100% false or with a grain of truth but manipulated that is then basically thrown into a strange game.”</i>
Local/regional media	Nord Est Multimedia S.p.A. (NEM)	Editor-in-chief	<i>“...clearly the term fake news is very tied to new media.”</i>
	Milano Free, Musica 361, 7 Giorni	Journalist Freelance	<i>“For me, it's information that is given inaccurately, without carrying out due checks with authoritative sources, without investigating whether there is a science communicator, a university professor, a ministerial source, or a technical source behind that news.”</i>
	Milano today	Journalist	<i>“...that is, something that may appear true, but maybe isn't true.”</i>
Community, non-profit media	Internazionale	Journalist Freelance	<i>“News that has not been verified or that has been shared very quickly and in a hasty manner.”</i>

Source: The author’s elaboration

Based on these responses, the following conclusions can be drawn.

a) The content of fake news may be entirely or partially fabricated. In the former case, fake news might consist of fabricated facts that do not align with reality and fail to represent actual events or situations. In the latter case, it may include some factual elements, but these are presented in a misleading manner. The real facts might be distorted, inaccurately presented, or selectively framed to manipulate the reader’s perception.

b) Fake news may be perceived as credible content. Fake news often imitates real news by adopting its format and structure (headline, visuals, body, and conclusion). This 'legitimized format' exacerbates the issue, as individuals or organizations exploit it to present the news as authentic, thereby misleading and confusing the audience.

c) Fake news is inaccurate or unverified information that is disseminated without proper verification of its sources. In this case, professional journalists draw a distinct line between verified news and fake news. Fake news is characterized by the absence or vagueness of source attribution and the lack of factual evidence supporting its validity.

d) Some journalists noted that fake news is information intended to “*make people believe something that isn’t true*” (journalist, native digital news media, “Valigia Blu”). Here, the primary aim of the creators of fake news is emphasized: to persuade the public to believe the information, elicit a response (such as commenting, sharing, or forwarding), and generate widespread attention, thereby achieving the desired outcome. The viral spread of fake news often benefits its creators politically, economically, or socially.

e) Several interviewees referenced scientific approaches, indicating that they are examining the issue to develop a comprehensive understanding of the risks posed by fake news and to raise awareness about its identification online. For instance, the journalist from native digital news media, “Valigia Blu,” referenced the findings of First Draft, which conducted an extensive study on fake news and identified seven distinct types of misinformation. According to this journalist, this typology aids in understanding the various facets of fake news, other forms of misinformation, and their potential consequences. They provided an illustrative example of how fake news is created and spread: “*As we discussed earlier regarding climate change, one might start with a kernel of truth and then add false information. Or consider the infamous memes—images accompanied by phrases referencing a news item, but both the headline and the image are false. Then, there is 100% fake content, which presents itself as true with a link to a legitimate site, but is, in fact, false. This is misleading content. Lastly, true content may be used but in a context that misleads the audience.*”

3.2 Identifying Fake News in Cyberspace

This subsection explores the primary criteria that professional journalists evaluate when assessing potentially unreliable news stories online. Drawing on the participants' responses, several key factors emerged that aid in identifying fake news:

a) The credibility of the source: the surveyed journalists emphasized the significance of the source in identifying fake news. Several characteristics of sources were identified as crucial indicators of potential disinformation: a lack of a source, a suspicious source (such as an obscure media outlet or an unknown website), or a source posing as an authoritative one. For instance, a link may appear to lead to an official, reputable media outlet, yet it could be a fake site, often containing small typographical errors in the outlet's name, while closely mimicking the original site's layout. Additionally, legitimate websites may be hacked, allowing malicious actors to spread false information under the guise of authenticity.

“...the official account of the Israeli government or the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that is a verified source, net of the fact that it may have been hacked, as happened, for example, to the Juventus website in the English version a few days ago. It was hacked and they announced the purchase of a player, but obviously, it was a joke. Does anyone who sees the official account believe that the news is true? And in fact, the news circulated for an hour, until the communication arrived that the account had been violated <...> “And on the Internet, if we take social media or the web as a point of reference, obviously, if a site is not official, or in any case, if it is a newspaper that is not very well known, or in any case, a newspaper that is not registered, for example, that does not have an editorial director, a responsible director, or if the account is suspected of being a bot, or in any case, of a person not attributable to an institution, etc. So, there are some news that are clearly false, that you can see with the naked eye, others that need to be verified, that's all.” (journalist, private TV, “La7”).

“It's clearly very difficult. My method is to evaluate the source—whether the source has a good reputation or not. Reputation is not something objective, but there are filters that can be applied. It is rarer for a university professor, for reasons of reputation, to invent data. It is rarer for a newspaper that answers to a direction to invent a news item because it would have consequences. The journalist is subject to the discipline of the order of journalists” (journalist, public TV, “RAI”).

“...check the link, because very often they are links similar to those of well-known newspapers, but with small errors.” (journalist, digital native news media “Valigia Blu”)

“When an article contains data without sources, or the sources are, for example, investigations carried out by private entities that perhaps have an interest in that same topic, those should be verified better” (freelance journalist, community media, “Internazionale”).

b) Sensational headlines are often crafted to capture the public's attention and evoke emotional responses in readers, aiming to generate reactions such as likes, shares, or comments.

"The first thing to do is to see if there are any sensational headlines <...>. Basically, you have to pay attention to the title: the more sensational and unlikely the news item seems, the more likely it is to be false." (journalist, digital native news media "Valigia Blu")

"Or even news items that speak in a sensationalist way: sometimes you just have to click to see that those sensationalist headlines are not verified. There are many ways." (freelance journalist, community media, "Internazionale").

c) Absurd presentation of news: fake news often contradicts common sense, raising doubts about its reliability. It may also include irrelevant or fabricated details that do not correspond to reality, describing events or phenomena that are impossible or highly unlikely.

"If we start from the absurd fake news, precisely, there is some pretty absurd or unreal stuff described. I mean, if you analyze it for a moment, precisely, let's take the stupid example of the red sky that rains blood: it's quite complicated. <...>. But let's say that it's already a bit strange at first glance, I mean, you read "red sky, it rains blood" and you say "how is that possible?". It sounds strange, then anything can be. So, given how I am, but this is my deformation, I go and see if it's possible, but in any case, it already sounds strange. Just reading it, you say that there are some absurd things." (editor, native digital news media "Follow Up News").

d) Inconsistency between types of information: mismatches between visual content (such as photos or videos) and their corresponding captions are another indicator of fake news. Discrepancies between the imagery and the text can signal that the content has been manipulated.

"Let me give you an example: if there are writings in the photo, such as elements that indicate which part of the world it comes from, and maybe there are writings in Arabic but the news claims that the image comes from Paris, this is a sign. You have to doubt; it could very well be a fake." (editor, public TV, "RAI").

Based on collected data, the author defines fake news as a form of disinformation that may be wholly or partially fabricated, often relating to real events, situations, phenomena, or individuals. It is deliberately created to mislead or manipulate a specific audience. To enhance its perceived credibility, fake news adopts the format of a recognized journalistic genre (e.g., news reports) and follows a specific structure. This includes elements such as headlines—typically exaggerated, inaccurate, or sensational—along with the main text, which generally lacks a systematic, cohesive, and well-supported evidentiary basis, such as official documents, critical data, statistics, or scholarly papers. While multimedia elements like photos or videos are not mandatory in fake news, they are often used to reinforce its impact. The topics addressed in fake news are strategically selected to align with the interests and values of a specific audience segment, thereby amplifying its potential for virality. Additionally, fake news frequently exploits cognitive biases, reinforcing pre-existing informal beliefs and undermining critical thinking.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, fake news is a multifaceted phenomenon that can involve entirely fabricated content or the manipulation of factual elements to deceive audiences. It often appears credible by mimicking the format and structure of legitimate news, complicating its identification and dissemination. Key factors in distinguishing fake news include the reliability of sources, the presence of sensational headlines, and inconsistencies in the information presented. Journalists rely on various strategies to verify the authenticity of content, such as evaluating the reputation of sources and checking for mismatched or absurd details. Despite the challenges, media professionals emphasize the importance of thorough verification to mitigate the spread of misleading information. Understanding and identifying fake news is crucial for maintaining the integrity of the news ecosystem and protecting democratic discourse. Future studies could focus on investigating other types of disinformation (e.g., deepfakes) that could serve as theoretical and empirical material for analysis. This would allow for a more detailed consideration of the content of this disinformation, its characteristic features, main forms, and distribution channels.

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