

# How Is Fake News Spread? An Analysis of the Dissemination Process: Actors, Channels, and Motives

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**Abstract:** Even though fake news is widely recognized as one of the most serious threats in the post-truth era, there are still some gaps regarding fake news dissemination. To address these gaps, it is necessary to conduct theoretical research revising and analyzing the latest scientific developments on this topic paying attention to social, psychological, and technological contexts in which fake news is constructed and spread. Understanding this process might help to improve the media literacy of users by raising awareness and forming critical attitudes to by-products of the information environment. This article presents a literature review on fake news dissemination based on an analysis of 106 papers extracted from the Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar databases. The author focuses on identifying the main actors who spread fake news. Additionally, a typology is proposed to organize knowledge about the motives behind creating fake news, based on social, psychological, and cognitive factors.

**Keywords:** Fake news, Deed fake news, Disinformation, Dissemination, Social media

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## 1. Introduction

The issue of fake news is by far one of the most acute problems of the post-truth era, not only at a practical level when the fact-checking process requires particular attention to the facts but also at a conceptual level. The latter, in turn, is determined by the difficulty that arises from the definition of the term fake news, as no generally accepted definition has yet been proposed. Generally, fake news can be considered as a publication circulated online (see Rocha et al., 2021; Bakir & McStay, 2017) that is completely or partially fictitious, dealing with real events and situations. To establish credibility, fake news adopts such a journalistic format as news, employing titles, images, and content designed to capture readers' attention, inspire confidence, and consequently mislead them. Fake news is always deliberately generated to manipulate the targeted audience's opinion for some reason. To achieve this goal different platforms, algorithms, and approaches are utilized. Therefore, this paper will focus on the sources of fake news and the motives of people for spreading fake news.

## 2. Methodology

For this research, literature analysis as a qualitative methodology has been used to interpret the existing body of research on the topic. First, the author identified sources: 106 papers related to fake news were collected from the Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar databases. Most of the articles were published after 2016, a period when "fake news" gained significant prominence and was even named Word of the Year by Collins (since 2016, the usage of the term has surged by 365%). Then, a comprehensive reading of the collected sources was organized, focusing on two main areas: (1) the participants involved in spreading fake news, and (2) the primary motives behind its dissemination. The author considered the arguments, methodologies, and findings on these aspects and combined insights from different sources to identify key trends and gaps in the research. Finally, the author used techniques such as interpretation and categorization to expand existing knowledge and address gaps in the dissemination process of fake news, forming a comprehensive view of the actors, channels, and motives in a coherent and organized manner.

## 3. Literature Analysis Results

### 3.1 Actors: Real Human Beings or Non-Humans

Zhang and Ghorbani (2018) suggested two main actors: real humans and non-real humans.

*Real humans* are crucial in fake news dissemination. These individuals can be categorized into two groups: malicious and benign. The former deliberately share content recognized as false for different motives: political or ideological (Di Domenico et al., 2021). Some malicious users are paid to disseminate fake news (Zannettou et al., 2019). The intentional generation of fake content by malicious online users makes it challenging to distinguish between fake and true information based solely on content and linguistic analysis (Shu et al., 2017). Moreover, benign online users contribute to the spread of fake news by sharing fake news across social media platforms, believing it to be true.

*Non-real humans* indirectly contribute to the spread of fake news as carriers on the Internet. These automated accounts are programmed by real humans to disseminate fake news. Whether fake news is spread manually or automatically, real humans aiming to disrupt the credibility of online social communities are the ultimate creators (Zhang & Ghorbani, 2018).

### 3.2 Spreading Channels Features

There are different types of accounts and platforms used for spreading fake news. This research consolidates all currently used channels and platforms for fake news dissemination, categorizing them as follows:

*Social Bots*: common non-human agents exist in the form of social bots, involving computer algorithms that are designed to exhibit human-like behavior, artificially produce content, and interact with humans on social media (Ferrara et al., 2016). By artificially performing actions such as liking, sharing, and commenting, social bots are known to accelerate the spread of fake news (Lazer et al., 2018, Shao et al., 2018). Social bots play a significant role in spreading fake news on social media for two reasons. First, they amplify fake news in the early spreading moments and spearhead the fake narrative to go viral (Azzimonti & Fernandes, 2018). Second, they can recognize and target influential users through replies and mentions, so influential users are involved in the spreading process (Shao et al., 2017). Social bots can perform a wide range of activities and have become increasingly sophisticated or 'smart' since they can scout the Internet for information to fill their profiles and post collected materials at a scheduled rate (Ferrara et al., 2016). Given the vulnerability of social media to large-scale infiltrations, social bots are often organized in networks, resulting in hundreds of unique accounts being managed by only one computer (Boshmaf et al., 2011).

*Cyborgs*. If the social bot refers to computer software that generates messages automatically, the cyborg refers either to a bot-assisted human or a human-assisted bot. It means that these media accounts are not always bots and are not always people. As a rule, cyborg accounts, being registered by humans as camouflage, start to disseminate information (e.g., post tweets) and communicate with the social community, blending automated activities with human input. "They are a hybrid of both: accounts that are detected as bots in one time window but identified as humans in another" (Shu et al., 2017).

*Trolls* are real human agents. They work to disrupt online communities, provoking people into an emotional response, and hindering mature discussions (Kim et al., 2021). Trolling behaviors are highly affected by people's moods and the context of online discussions, which enables the easy dissemination of fake news among otherwise "normal" online communities (Shu et al., 2017). For instance, trolls may provoke discussion on a particular topic in the comments to the news (most often, fake news), spreading false information and inciting conflicts between users. Active discussion brings this news to the "top," resulting in the news appearing in the feeds of many users. According to social media algorithms, high activity in comments (positive or negative) increases the relevance and popularity of the news overall. Furthermore, troll armies might be active on social media to advance political agendas and cause social turmoil. They also might spread fake news, significantly impacting people's beliefs.

*Fake news media* is a website that contains false information intended to mislead readers. The main goal of such resources is to increase traffic and, as a result, gain financial profit or political benefits. These news media exist in two forms. First, some web pages often resemble legitimate news organizations because of their structure, but they are established purposely to publish fake news (Zhang & Ghorbani, 2018). Second, some websites are portrayed to be spinoffs of other legitimate news sites with high reputations. They are structured in such a way (style, visual design, etc.) to make visitors believe they are visiting major news outlets like BBC News or The Sun (Gilbert, 2016). Tandoc and Albright (2016) note that fake news sites regularly rely on an "ecosystem of real-time propaganda." Both forms of these websites might be managed by real users or networks of bots that automatically disseminate fake news on these websites and social media (Tandoc & Albright, 2016). "This gives the reader the sense that many others are also reading and liking the item, and if they go to another site to verify the item, they will likely find it there, again adding a veneer of legitimacy to the piece" (Edson et al., p. 144, 2017).

*Search engines and aggregators*: search engines, such as Google Search and Yahoo, have become crucial intermediaries to guide users to online news articles. For example, the Google search engine accounts for an average of 30% of traffic to news websites (Olmstead et al., 2017). In recent years, more than 99% of respondents surveyed in 2017 used Google Search to find information at least once a day (Finkel et al., 2017). Search engines that provide news are multi-sided markets because they create a space for the interaction between media producers and readers. Search engines generate an algorithm-driven search ranking of articles

from which consumers can choose. However, ranking articles lead to a situation where frequently read articles get to the top and therefore become more popular compared to lower-ranked articles because they are rarely read. Among such articles might be fake news, as proven in the report Fake News and Misinformation (Finkel et al., 2017). It was noted that Google Search plays a critical role in the misinformation landscape spreading fake news. Companies pay Google to place the companies' advertisements on relevant search results. This system allows malicious websites that spread fake news get the possibility to be seen by users.

*Deepfake news:* In this section, attention is paid to using artificial intelligence to create fake news. These non-human agents are managed by humans who utilize a wide range of tools suggested by various websites on the Internet to develop media products called "deepfake news" which is considered as the next generation of fake news (see Nguyen et al., 2022). The term combines "deep learning" and "fake" – deepfakes rely on artificial intelligence and machine learning. This phenomenon refers to the use of artificial intelligence to alter images and photos in multiple directions to manipulate public opinion. The appearance of this type of material was due to social and technological factors. Last few years it is noticed the popularity of images and videos that are shared by users on social media frequently. Hence, there is a tendency to widespread different formats of presentation of this visual content as reels on Instagram or shorts on YouTube. The high popularity of such types of consumption content led to the creation of malicious tools that are designed to manipulate these materials altering them for mercenary purposes.

### **3.3 Motives for Creating and Spreading Fake News**

#### *3.3.1 Motives for creating fake news: theoretical grounds*

First, to understand the nature of the process of creating fake news by users, it is necessary to consider the social and economic science foundations that describe the intrinsic motives of people creating news and influencing the media ecosystem. To describe the social dynamics that contribute to the proliferation of fake news, this paper refers to the rational theory of fake news interactions. "It is modeled from an economic game theoretical perspective by formulating the news generation and consumption cycle as a two-player strategy game" (Shu et al., 2017).

To explain fake news, this research assumes that the publisher plays a key role in the information ecosystem, and this media environment can benefit them in two ways: (1) short-term utility: the incentive to maximize profit, which is positively correlated with the number of consumers reached; and (2) long-term utility: their reputation in terms of news authenticity. Fake news occurs when the short-term utility dominates, and there are several aspects to this: (i) publishers who create fake news think in terms of the short-term perspective, which also explains why the life expectancy of fake news is short; (ii) there is a desire to maximize profit, which drives the publisher to make the fake news more attractive to the public (e.g., the author focuses on "hot" topics in politics, economics, and social life, since fake news is mainly generated around the most discussed topics, which are relevant for search queries). Various tools might be used: flashy headlines, bias, and changes to the intended or true meaning of something, etc.

At the same time, it is difficult to predict when fake news will become more popular, because a high level of distortion does not guarantee the rise in popularity or profit. However, there is a direct correlation between profit margin and the number of people who see and share the fake news.

#### *3.3.2 Types of motives for creating fake news*

Most studies identify a few crucial motives for the creation and dissemination of fake news as political and financial. According to our perspectives, motives are a great deal more profound and might relate to other social dimensions like entertainment, fear and panic, social status, and prestige.

It has been suggested that the fake news genre is created deliberately to deceive. This intention can be seen as a defining element of fake news. For this reason, the author will not consider misinformation based on religious, social, or political bias when a person genuinely believes it. Unintentionally presenting false information based on bias and personal beliefs is not considered fake news but rather misinformation (e.g., errors that journalists unintentionally make).

#### *Political intention*

This intention has been examined extensively in highly cited research (see Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bakir & McStay, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; Cheuk Hang Au, 2018; Weir, 2009). Based on the analysis of these papers, it is

necessary to highlight the following points. First, fake news is designed to get people to change their minds about their political beliefs and uses falsehoods to manipulate public opinion quickly and across a wide audience. Rather than delivering arguments to persuade people to adopt new beliefs, it uses false events to turn people away from existing beliefs (Townsend, 2017). Fake news might be created to support or promote political figures, political movements, social policies, political ideologies, or election candidates, often involving discrediting or undermining those on the opposing side. Historically and currently, political actors may disseminate false information to gain public support. This negatively affects people by reinforcing and worsening in-group biases. Hence, a major impact of fake news is ideological polarization, a condition under which opinions on an issue are opposed to some theoretical maximum, and polarization is a process that refers to the increase in such opposition over time (Cheuk Hang Au, 2020). In highly ideologically polarized contexts, users tend to confirm their pre-existing views by communicating with others with similar views inside a closed system, rather than attempting to understand the complete picture by appealing to alternative opinions or convictions. As a result, people may become more radical, avoiding exposure to opposing viewpoints and preferring to stay inside a closed system with limited alternative opinions or convictions. Ideological polarization may reinforce existing cognitive biases, while the digital media environment may only foster this effect. Furthermore, news feeds on social media algorithms usually create an environment that is comfortable for us by suggesting and showing us like-minded information. According to Cheuk Hang Au (2020), when political issues are not too divisive, people tend to be more accuracy-oriented when looking for relevant information. However, “when the issue has received substantial attention, people may be more likely to engage in biased information search and processing, and hidden conflicts in values between each other may become more visible” (Cheuk Hang Au, p.12, 2020). As a result of ideological polarization, the diversity of opinions and arguments may be compromised. People in extremely homogenous groups may ignore facts that would prove their arguments wrong, and the dissemination of online disinformation may increase.

#### *Financial benefit*

Financial benefit is another strong motive for fake news creators (Rochlin, 2017; Kasra, 2017). Nowadays, on the Internet, two formats of disinformation compete for the right to make a profit: clickbait and fake news. Despite having a common financial goal, it is necessary to pay attention to the differences between them. First, clickbait is a type of content that includes sensational headlines that encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page that usually does not have satisfactory content (usually it looks like advertisement-like content or just a headline and short description of a fabricated event published on suspicious websites that do not pretend to be reliable mass media sites or masquerade as legitimate news publishers). On the contrary, fake news mimics the news format and is not usually perceived as second-rate material. It is comprised of a headline and body of text that are both misleading and composed of fabricated facts. Fake news containing a headline and body text as the main elements of this format can be posted on social media. Fake news may contain links to websites that either masquerade as legitimate but are fake, or to sites with advertising content. For example, media publishers that mimic a prominent one may create fake news to gain more readers and attract more clicks across social media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Spammers also can make money by publishing fake news on social media that has the form of legitimate news publishers and leads to websites, which are often mostly ads. In both cases, social media manipulation can be used to drive traffic to a particular site. Hence, creators of fake news can draw significant advertising revenue when users click and go to the website since many conversions to a site are the crucial reason for advertisers to place advertisements on this site. Another example is how fake news regulates stock prices in financial markets. Kogan et al. (2021) show that fake news is a “part of a pump-and-dump scheme to defraud securities markets. (...) fake news induces abnormal trading and temporarily drives up the prices of small stocks, whose recent prior performance was deteriorating. These patterns are consistent with a motive to hire authors to write fake news to prop up the stock price” (Kogan et al., 2021).

#### *Entertainment*

Fake news can be created for humorous reasons or to entertain. This news also may be popular and attract the attention of users who may share this content with friends, comment, and get likes. This motive is different from the previous ones because a creator “does not have a certain aim as earning money or defaming some actors in the social or political sphere because the motive is the desire to make a joke to the audience” (Edson & Tandoc, 2019). People use the technologies simply for the fun of it or escapism. This phenomenon is quite widespread since user-generated content is omnipresent online, and the Internet allows everyone to create their own information on different topics. The appearance of the first “life journals” and blogs gave users the chance to be authors writing texts and communicating with others. Jenkins (2005) introduced such a concept as “participatory culture,” which is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, and strong

support for creating and sharing one's creations. It means the process of connecting people on the Internet from different parts of the world, blurring the physical boundaries between countries, and giving people the unique opportunity to communicate and take part in the process of creating various elements to entertain users (comics, fanfic stories, etc.). At that time, people created this for fun and to express their creativity. At that time, despite the widespread UGC, the line between fantasy, unreal stories, and the real world was visible. Over time, the line between unreal and real worlds is blurred, and the reason for this is information overload. It has negative consequences because it leads to the appearance of different co-products as fake news. Creating fake news for entertainment motives is an example of when readers cannot understand the difference between real and unreal/fabricated elements. In turn, it might have a harmful effect: creators of fake news use the format of "news" as a format of information that a priori is considered reliable for mercenary purposes. This news pretends to be true, and it tends to convince people of its credibility and make them share it on the Internet. In this case, there is another hidden motive to mislead people that has a harmful effect and leads to "information pollution" and a decline in the quality of information in general.

#### *Fear and panic*

In this case, the desire to spread fear and panic among the public prevails. More often, it is typical for situations regarding health-related social issues, conflicts, wars, as well as natural disasters. It occurs due to the absence of verified information and the opportunity to check incoming information about events because of, mostly, physical distance and the inability to visit the scene of events. For this, social media are full of unverified content that may easily attract the attention of the public. On top, users are increasingly dependent on social media feed algorithms, which may create bubbles of news stories that only support personal beliefs. So, users may be misled upon reading the fake stories inside the bubble (Cheuk Hang Au, 2020). According to Kim et al. (2021), when epidemics become more common around the world, rumors of absurd and false medical tips spread rapidly on social media. When there is a lack of verified information, people feel great anxiety and fear and easily believe such tips, regardless of whether they are true (Hu et al, 2020; Jakovljevic et al, 2020). The period of COVID-19 also was noticed by spreading fake news about the virus and its negative consequences (Van Bavel et al., 2020; Pennycook et al., 2020). Another example is fake news about global warming, its reasons, and its possible impact in the future. It also gives rise to many conspiracy theories around environmental issues by presenting negative scenarios associated with natural disasters, water shortages soon, etc.

#### *Status, attention, and identity building*

Social needs might also be motives for producing fake news, such as status, attention, and identity building (see Wilson, 2020, Bente, 2021). Actors may create and share fake news to gain acceptance within online communities. Some scholars point out (e.g., Carey 1989; Bente, 2021) that communication is not the act of imparting information, but rather the representation of shared beliefs—communication draws people together in fellowship and commonality. In other words, writing fake news is a certain way of communication between a creator and the public. Creating fake news is a specific way to express yourself, draw attention to your personality, and a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed, and get feedback from the online community. By producing and sharing fake news (with a particular slant), users are connecting with other users. The second aim is to earn fame (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 36). Social media users are incentivized through likes, shares, and comments to "create content that will resonate with their friends, followers, and groups," and media manipulation might be a way to gain status and express identity (Warwick & Lewis, 2017, p. 31). "Taken as a whole, these communities may feel that by manipulating media outlets, they gain some status and a measure of control over an entrenched and powerful institution, which many of them distrust and dislike" (Warwick & Lewis, 2017, p. 31).

## **4. Conclusion**

This research has been conducted to generalize scientific knowledge on fake news, clarify different aspects regarding the features of its dissemination at different levels, and address some gaps. The main focus was on the motives of creators of fake news and the digital platforms and applications utilized in this process. The author provided a typology of actors (real human beings or non-humans), formats, and channels (social bots, cyborgs, trolls, fake news media, search engines and aggregators, deepfake news) through which fake news is disseminated. Second, the motives of the creators of fake news were shown, including political intentions, financial benefits, entertainment, fear and panic, status, attention, and identity building. Still, there is a need for further research. First of all, it is crucial to pay attention to the main reasons why people read, believe, and share

such news. To do this, it is necessary to conduct analyses on this topic at both theoretical and empirical levels. Additionally, another direction in which current academic knowledge is needed is conducting empirical research to gather relevant data about the influence of fake news on professional journalistic activity and the use of the latest approaches and applications for fact-checking.

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