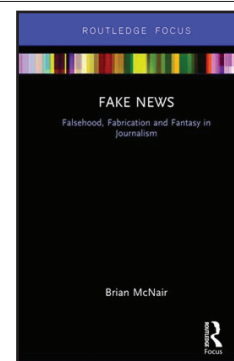


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The concept of fake news became forever associated with Donald Trump at the press conference on 11 January 2017 during which, once already president and at a time when it was thought his behaviour would become more moderate, he refused to respond to CNN journalist Jim Acosta, saying “... *You are fake news*”. The book written by Brian McNair, begins by a recounting this event, which we feel is a very interesting approach to this phenomenon from a geographic distance. We say geographic distance because when he wrote the book, which was published in 2018, the author was a professor at the Queensland University of Technology in Australia, and although some of the examples he cites are from that country, the bulk of the content pertains to the United States. This is appropriate in this case, since this is where the wave was generated which afterwards spread to the French elections, Brexit, and the annexation of Crimea by Russia, as well as the elections in Germany in September 2017 and in Catalonia on 01 October, though the book does not mention the last two since it was completed in August 2017.

In chapter 1, very aptly named #FakeNews, McNair takes a theoretical approach to fake news while also reflecting on the profession of journalism. According to the author, we are faced not only with a deep debate about what truth is, but also about the role of journalists in the current democratic game. Although *fake news* was already mentioned as such in 1926 (p. 17), the author places the origin of this phenomenon in 2014 in an article in the Washington Post which talks about a ‘*propagator of false alarms*’ (hoaxer) (page 6). Rochilin (2017) thus describes fake news as deliberately false headlines and stories published on a website appearing to be a source of real news. Within this context, fake news is positioned as a kind of meme with a very high potential for dissemination.

Once the framework has been established for understanding what fake news is, in the second chapter the author identifies what it is not. This vision is supported by the fact that in the political arena fakes news can be used (and in fact *is* used) along with many other things. The author goes on to describe

some examples of fake news, often juxtaposing *fake* in relation to *fact*. In this sense, fakes news is considered part of the same information ecosystem as false alarms, conspiracy theories, journalistic errors, political satire, and state propaganda, though with a few differences. The author describes how “on the one hand, the concept of *fake news* has become a political tool for denouncing journalistic content with which there is disagreement, yet it is also a way to attack independent and free means of information” (p. 37). As such, sometimes in the game of politics everything becomes fake, as if finding ourselves in a mental framework in which the opposing position is framed as far from certainty. As a result, the press as a ‘*fourth power*’ is judged by its ideological framework rather than by the validity and objectivity of its content. It is at that moment that the author forgoes descriptions of the right-left or liberal/conservative perspectives to describe fake news, but instead what seems more important to him is to reflect on the nature of journalism.

In the third chapter the author delves deeper into the *post-truth* notion and the various factors, both philosophical (increase in relativism), cultural (loss of prestige of the elites), technological (the arrival of social media), and political (increase in nationalism, populism, and the alt-right) (p. 41). Alsius has also pondered the implications of post-truth and post-ethics in our country (2017). In fact, Alsius notes the importance of media literacy as a mechanism of reaction and counterbalance to this *post-truth* era. McNair concludes that although fake news has always existed, as it is currently described it is part of a “unique cultural moment in our common history, reflecting a transformed environment in which political actors are enabled by the existence of the Internet and social media to turn information into a weapon potentially more damaging than at any other time” (p.89).

In chapter 4, *Makers, Fakers, Sharers*, there is a description of a few of the actors who are known and necessary for the existence of fake news. This includes websites like Infowars and Breitbart, in addition to elements of dissemination through social media

such as cyberwarriors (p.66) with regard to Russian propaganda and the effects this has had in American politics, as has already been addressed in other studies (Journell 2017). Since merely analysing and diagnosing the causes will not automatically solve the problem, in chapter 5 the author proposes some measures to manage the phenomenon in the short and medium term. He feels that there must be several approaches, some of which include government administrations and regulatory measures. Civic and cultural organizations also play their part, as well as professionals in the fields of communication and journalism who must continue to equip themselves with tools of verification and validation in order to serve as social beacons to distinguish what is true from what is not. In this sense, he emphasizes once again the importance of training citizens to be able to discern between truth and falsehood and to be able to recognize fake news and the intentions behind it.

### **Fake news is just a symptom of a wider crisis of liberal democracies**

One noteworthy point of the aforementioned book is the fact that fake news is not the disease but the symptom. It is an expression of a wider crisis involving the elite, whose members do whatever they can to maintain their traditional roles in liberal democracies. It is thus a symptom of a deeper crisis in society. However, in the broth in which fake news is cooked up, one can also find populism and a loss of prestige of the elites and of mass media, and by extension a debasement of journalists as well. It is in this new environment, full of new digital media which are not well-referenced, that it is more important than ever to evaluate sources of information. At the global level, social media such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as Google – all of which are very fast-acting, since their survival depends on their strategy (López-Borrull *et al.* 2018) – have taken a step forward, at the real-world and media level, to fight against fake news since they have been deemed the necessary collaborators of ‘*viralisation*’ (Bessi 2016). It should also be taken into account that recent studies have shown that fake news is disseminated virally more quickly than the truth (Vosougui *et al.* 2018).

We believe that these types of works, with a suitably academic format, are appropriate and advisable to properly contextualise the phenomenon they describe, in which former certainties and traditional sources of information are questioned and threatened by new and often more collaborative ways of producing and disseminating content. Not only is it important to know the source, but one should also understand the scope and depth of such information and try to conceive of its future implications. The dissemination of allegedly true information and the social impact thereof is relevant to a range of disciplines from sociology and journalism to politics, which have all seen how information and communication technologies have changed the pre-existing social uses. In short, this book is a quick read though it takes time to digest and it may serve as a benchmark in the global arena. Nevertheless, it requires – in addition to

dialogue – new works carried out in two specific ways: firstly, a European perspective with the necessary cultural nuances, and, secondly, an attempt to capture the effects of the evolution of artificial intelligence and the manual handling of content, both of which are strategies prioritized by the media and social networks to respond to this phenomenon. This book is therefore an excellent initial examination of this phenomenon but new works are needed in order to reflect further on these issues.

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