

Deliberate Misinformation in Media:

A Qualitative Content Analysis of Trends and Factors that Influence Deliberate Misinformation
in Media

Abstract

This research will extensively identify several factors that influence and contribute to deliberate misinformation in media using a qualitative content analysis approach. Communication of misinformation is a common practice in the business and political field as it significantly influences public perception with a particular agenda. Hence, this study aims to organize differently the existing literature and research efforts concerned with deliberate misinformation in the media. A significant literature search and analysis of case studies will be used to investigate how factors of anonymity, lack of control and regulation in media, and lack of critical thinking in the audience contribute to the spread of several types of fake news. These types include news parody, news satire, fabrication, propaganda, manipulation, and advertising. Other sources of misleading information include rumors and conspiracy theories. This study will address some of the consequences associated with fake news and how the public often reacts to such news. Fake news can at times be nonfactual information created by news media to influence certain perceptions of the public in a specific topic, while other times it can be used as a method used by politicians to disregard specific news contradicting their positions by branding the news as fake. The purpose of this research is to gather a better understanding of the ways in which factors influencing ‘fake news’ entail false context, false connection, as well as misleading or manipulating content.

Introduction

The deliberate misinformation in the media, or what is commonly referred to as ‘fake news’, is one of the most analyzed topics in the field of journalism. Generally, this term entails all inaccurate information in the media industry (Tambini, 2017; Mele et al., 2017). However, the

term also covers public and political perceptions of what news and journalism represent and how information and facts are acquired in the digital world.

The aim of this paper is to organize differently the existing literature and research efforts concerned with deliberate misinformation in the media. I propound that the term fake news is a two-dimensional public communication phenomenon that entails: 1) fake news genre, which is deliberate misinformation by the media, and 2) fake news label, which is a measure used by politicians to delegitimize certain news. Hence, this term has been repeatedly used by political groups to attack some news media. There are numerous literature on political science and journalism that address the issue of fake news in the media industry. Similarly, several cases have been reported on the matter, including the impact of fake news in the 2016 United States general elections. This report entails a significant literature review and case study analyses to provide evidence on the existence of deliberate misinformation in the media and how to prevent it.

Research Problems

While there exists numerous literature on the fake news topic, there is limited research on political instrumentation of fake news (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Hence, it is important to examine the issue of fake news on both sides and how to manage the deliberate misinformation in the media.

Research Questions

- Which factors contribute to and encourage the transmission of misinformation in the media?
- How does lack of control and regulation in the media impact the issue of deliberate misinformation in the media?

Deliberate Misinformation

Many research studies discern that misinformation in the news media is deliberately based on the supposition that nobody mistakenly creates inaccurate information (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Many scholars perceive that the primary reasons for the production of fake news are financial or ideological/political purposes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Lazar et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018). As a result, some people have been deceived by fake news because of their targeted political or financial vulnerability. However, Wardle (2017) highlights that some fake news is created for humorous purposes and can be used to entertain and provoke. Nonetheless, while the creation may be intentional, the spread of fake news may be unintentional.

Existing studies mention that other sources of fake news include mainstream journalism, pro-governmental, satirical, and alternative and partisan (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Political satire uses factual information via T.V. news broadcasts, but hides objectivity and deviates from the truth (Tandoc et al., 2018). Hence, the information is neither produced for deception purposes, nor is it low in facticity. On the other hand, news parody entails nonfactual content presented as news articles. Thus, whereas news parody does not deceive, it distorts facts of the information for amusement. Naive advertising is created to trick readers into believing that the article is a professional researched product by incorporating a lot of facts. Bad journalism is also a result of alternative, state-owned, or mainstream media. Sometimes, journalists mistakenly introduce nonfactual content into their coverage because of misconceptions caused by little resources and time for research. Such mistakes are, however, not considered fake news but human errors in the field of journalism. Nonetheless, some journalists intentionally alter facts with the organizational or personal intention of deceiving the public.

Propaganda reports deliberately shape perceptions, direct behavior, and manipulate cognitions in order to cause an outcome that was intended by the perpetrator (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018). Propagandists are more concerned about their intentions, so they can create any information, whether factual or nonfactual, to achieve their goals. The true reason for propaganda is always sealed; it is not to convince the audience. Hence, the propagandists disrupt the flow of information by incorporating distorted content from a perceived, valid and credible source. Similarly, fake news that follow journalistic format can be created by propagandists and disseminated to the public in order to achieve a hidden agenda.

Furthermore, conspiracy theories and rumors are also present in the context of nonfactual news. Rumors are highly transmitted information by social means which lack evidence. On the other hand, conspiracy theories are deliberate efforts to put meaning to some practices or events by referring to powerful figures, who try to hide their role. Fake news is effective in spreading rumors and conspiracy theories.

Literature Review

Numerous researchers argue that fake news entails false information reported by the news media. Bakir & McStay (2018) describes the term as wholly untrue or accommodating deliberately misleading components within the context or content of the news. Thus, the authors reiterate that news can be fake even if it contains facts. Some content may be true but incorporated with fabricated information. Hence, the challenge lies in measuring the ratio of untrue to true content in the news in order to determine if the entire report could be termed as true or fake.

Tandoc Jr, Lim & Ling (2018) also provide an efficient way of defining fake news. According to the article, this news has low levels of facticity. The study involves a review of 34 academic sources between 2003 and 2017 which have used the term “fake news”. The results showed that there are several types of fake news: news parody, news satire, fabrication, propaganda, manipulation, and advertising. The types are all dependent on two factors: deception and levels of facticity. Therefore, both wholly and partly untrue content can be termed as fake news. Some scholars argue that just like normal news, fake news follow the same journalistic format by mimicking the content form of news media(Lazer et al., 2018). This article suggests that fake news can either be false information or imitation of news. News follows a specific format such as headlines, text bodies, and pictures, and many creators of fake news deliberately follow this format to ensure that it can be confused by actual news with facts. Additionally, some news can contain videos, especially in today’s internet-based media. The emergence of technology in the news media has led to faster and more effective ways of coming up with fake news such as propaganda. Content creators follow the news media pattern to act as professionals who have followed all the necessary journalistic standards. Consequently, recipients of fake news can easily deem the news articles as credible sources of information. Tandoc et al. (2018) highlight that new technology has led to the existence of ‘news bots’ which are capable of imitating omnipresence of news by creating a network linking several false sites. These advanced measures make it difficult for the audience to distinguish fake and genuine news.

Case Studies

There are several instances that demonstrate how the media can influence the perception of the public in regard to certain topics. An example is the Mayan Calendar incident, which suggested that the world was going to end at the end of the year 2012. Christians and non-believers had varying thoughts from the prediction. The theory behind the perception that the end of 2012 would mark the end of the world was based on the Mayan Calendar. This ancient Calendar which is based on the cycle of the sun and the moon was perceived to end on December 12, 2012. Hence, a lot of people became anxious. The majority had little understanding of the Mayan Calendar, and their thinking could easily be swayed by fake news. This case shows how misleading information can cause panic and anxiety in society as it separated people into believers and non-believers.

Another critical instance of deliberate misinformation in the media occurred in 2016 during the United States general elections when the pizzagate conspiracy theory went viral on social media. The theory linked Hillary Clinton to allegations of child sex ring and human trafficking (Metaxas & Finn, 2019). In March 2016, Jon Podesta's email was hacked for phishing purposes.

WikiLeaks published the emails and necessitated the theory that the emails had coded messages that linked high-ranking Democrats to the mentioned allegations. One of the proponents of this conspiracy theory walked into one of the restaurants where the alleged sex ring occurred and fired his rifle. Fortunately, no one was injured, but this scenario is yet another example of misinformation in the media in the form of conspiracy theories. Misleading information affects public perception and behavior as evidence in this case study.

Furthermore, a common case of how the media influences public perception is on the reports that asteroids will hit the earth in the near future (Alhasi & Mohamed, 2017). According to scientists at NASA, the asteroids are headed to the earth and will eventually cause an impact. The exact

date of the impact has not been provided. Some people have used the opportunity to create a fake website and publish nonfactual information for amusement purposes.

Factors that Encourage Transmission of Fake News

Research shows that fake news travels faster because many people cannot distinguish fake news from legit news. According to Silverman & Singer-Vine (2016), the majority of Americans are likely to believe fake news, especially when it is presented through Facebook. The use of social media to public news has created an efficient platform to propagate fake news to many people. Anonymity in social media enables people to publish nonfactual information without fear of victimization. Moreover, there is minimal fact-checking such as the use of computer-aided techniques for detecting fake online news. Shao, Ciampaglia, Flammini & Menczer (2016) highlights that many people do not want to experience the delay associated with fact-checking of website news. In addition, a lack of critical thinking by the audience has led to the weaponization of fake news by politicians. Politicians have used the strategy of provision of misleading information to expand their following. Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral (2018) state that such politicians disregard any information provided by their media to contradict their positions as fake news. The primary aim of this political measure is to undermine public trust in the news media. This way, news media are portrayed as institutions that spread information to deceive the public. Another factor is the lack of control and regulation in news media. Jang, & Kim (2018) suggest that third-party perception used to combat fake news in the U.S. leads to dismissal of media regulation measures. However, while there are significant rules to regulate the press, television, and radio, it is very difficult to control social media, because it is available for everyone to

express their freedom of expression. This lack of control exposes the public to risks of fake news, especially through rumors and propaganda.

Results and Findings

Deliberate misinformation in the media is a common practice in today's society because of its potential impact on people's perceptions. There exists numerous studies that help in the understanding of fake news. These studies have divided the deliberate misinformation in media into two forms; the fake news genre and the fake news label (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Wardle, 2017). The fake news genre entails information that is wholly untrue or accommodating deliberately misleading components within the context or content of the news (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Thus, it is not strange for fake news to contain factual information. On the other hand, the fake news label is a strategy used by political figures to disregard news media that contradicts their position. While some of the claims of the news being fake are true, some leaders have weaponized this strategy to promote their agendas.

There are several types of fake news: news parody, news satire, fabrication, propaganda, manipulation, and advertising. These types depend on the intent of the creator of the fake news. For instance, business people may create misleading information to promote their commodities and attract the public. Content creators usually rely on the public's lack of critical thinking since fake news can be deceiving in nature. Other forms of fake news include rumors and conspiracy theories such as the 2016 "Pizzagate", which was facilitated by the factor of anonymity in the media. This conspiracy theory went viral through social media when WikiLeaks published coded emails intercepted from an email account of Clinton's associate. Hence, the inability to control social media creates a platform for transmitting rumors and conspiracy theories.

The labelling of fake news by politicians creates public distrust towards certain news media. If the journalism practice is perceived to be characterized with disinformation or misleading content, then the public might be less interested in critically evaluating news media. As a result, citizens may be easily misled through other ways such as propaganda.

Conclusion

In conclusion, deliberate misinformation in the media is a critical topic, especially in today's society that is characterized by the popularity of social media. The term fake news makes the news media both perpetrators and victims. Some news media deliberately mislead information to manipulate an individual's understanding and direct public behavior. On the other hand, political figures have used fake news to advance their agendas. President Trump is an example of a leader who has disregarded specific news contradicting his position by branding the news as fake. While neither of the two dimensions, fake news genre and fake news label, is likely to disappear, it is important to research how to address this issue. Since the issue of deliberate misinformation is not only concentrated in a single place but rather exists in many nations, there is a need to study the issue of fake news in specific countries and in a cross-national comparative way throughout the world. In the past, most studies have focused on the content and capacity of fake news while neglecting its potential effects, such as misperceptions of the public, which can be easily formed, particularly after any slight exposure. If the journalism practice is perceived to be characterized with disinformation, then the public might be less interested in critically evaluating news media, potentially resulting in believing false information. Therefore, there is a need for research on how misperceptions as a result of fake news might impact long-term political behavior. Also, some authors have argued that deliberate misinformation in the media targets people's emotions (Bakir & McStay, 2017), and

that the attempts to delegitimize news media have increased over the years is merely an assumption in the field of journalism. There is a need for research to support or disregard these claims. Such studies will be essential in managing people's emotions and maintaining the public trust in the news media (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen & Steindl, 2018). Correcting misperceptions is difficult, therefore future studies should focus on effective ways of correcting misperceptions caused by deliberate misinformation in the media.

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