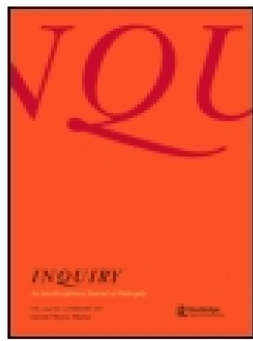

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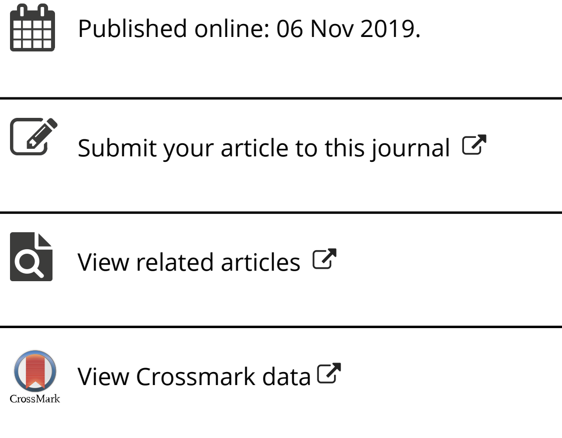
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Fake news is counterfeit news

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ABSTRACT
Fake news poses a serious threat to knowledge and democracy. In order to address this threat, it is important to understand exactly what fake news is. After surveying the various definitions that have been proposed in the philosophical literature, we argue that fake news is best understood as *counterfeit news*. A story is *genuine news* if and only if it has gone through the standard modern journalistic process involving professionally trained reporters, fact checkers, and editors. And a story is counterfeit news if and only if it is not genuine news, but is presented as genuine news, with the intention and propensity to deceive. This analysis is a contribution to 'systems-oriented social epistemology' (Goldman, Alvin I. 2011. "A Guide to Social Epistemology." In *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings*, edited by Alvin I. Goldman, and Dennis Whitcomb, 11–37. New York: Oxford University Press). Various social institutions, such as science and journalism, provide important epistemic benefits to society. But unscrupulous agents are often motivated to leverage the epistemic authority of these institutions by counterfeiting them. People can thereby be misled and/or lose faith in these institutions. Thus, society may suffer significant epistemic costs when such counterfeits proliferate.

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1. Introduction

While people have always wanted to know 'What's new?,' our modern concept of 'the news' first developed in the early twentieth century with the rise of non-partisan papers, the National Press Club, and schools of journalism (see Kaplan 2002; Lazer et al. 2018, 1094–95). Today in the United States, people collectively spend almost 80 billion minutes per week consuming the news from newspapers (see Statistica 2018), radio, TV, and their smartphones (see Ingram 2017). The news, and the members of the press who report it, are essential to creating an informed populace (see Gelfert 2018, 87–88). People rely on the news for accurate information about what the weather will be, what their government

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officials are doing, and what is happening in their local community and around the world.

Unfortunately, many people looking for the news now end up consuming *fake news*. During the 2016 Presidential election, for instance, the made-up story 'Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Trump for President' received 960,000 'engagements' (e.g. clicks, likes, shares, and comments) on Facebook (see Silverman 2016). The fake news entrepreneur, Jestin Coler, created a website for the bogus *Denver Guardian* newspaper and used it to publish the fabricated story 'FBI Agent Suspected In Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead In Apparent Murder-Suicide,' which was shared over half-a-million times on Facebook (see Sydell 2016). Many other false stories about Hillary Clinton were posted on the internet by teenagers from a small town in Macedonia in order to generate thousands of dollars a month in advertising revenue (see Associated Press 2016; Silverman and Alexander 2016). Finally, more than half-a-million Americans followed Twitter accounts, such as @TodayPittsburgh and @TodayMiami, which appeared to belong to local news outlets, but which were actually operated by the Kremlin-backed Internet Research Agency (see Wang 2017).

Such fake news has real consequences. The obvious danger is that many people will acquire false beliefs from fake news (see Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016a). Moreover, people may also end up being overly skeptical and fail to acquire many true beliefs from legitimate news outlets (see Fallis 2004, 465). And these epistemic downsides can have serious practical implications. For instance, recent research suggests that fake news had an impact on the 2016 Presidential election (see Benkler et al. 2017; Chalfant 2018) and there are concerns about its potential impact on future elections (see Siddiqui 2019).

Of course, even highly reliable news sources sometimes publish inaccurate stories, despite doing their very best to get it right. For instance, the *Chicago Tribune* famously reported in 1948 that Dewey had defeated Truman for President (see Jones 2007). More recently, a White House correspondent for *Time* mistakenly reported that Trump had removed a bust of Martin Luther King Jr. from the Oval Office (see Gibbs 2017). It is true that people can be misled by such errors. But with fake news, it is *no accident* that people are misled (see Fallis 2016, 338; Gelfert 2018, 105).

Given the ongoing threat to knowledge and democracy that fake news poses, an ever increasing number of proposals for what to do about it have been made by social media companies (e.g. Facebook 2017), public policy institutes (e.g. West 2017), congressional committees (e.g. United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence 2018), and academic researchers

(e.g. Lazer et al. 2018). In order to effectively address this threat, it is helpful to know exactly what fake news is.

2. Conceptual analysis and fake news

As far back as Socrates and Plato, philosophers have tried to find concise definitions that help us to better understand important concepts, such as justice, knowledge, and beauty. In line with this tradition, a number of philosophers (e.g. Levy 2017; Rini 2017; Gelfert 2018; Aikin and Talisse 2018; Jaster and Lanius 2018; Mukerji 2018) have recently proposed definitions of fake news.

As usual with conceptual analysis, we would like a definition of fake news that agrees with our intuitions about whether particular cases are or are not instances of fake news. For example, the definition should count 'Pope Endorses Trump' as fake news, but should not count 'Dewey Defeats Truman' as fake news. Also, we would like a definition that can help us deal with the threat to knowledge and democracy posed by fake news (see Gelfert 2018, 101–02). In this paper, we propose a new definition of fake news. We argue that it satisfies these two desiderata better than the previous proposals.

It should be noted at the outset that carrying out a conceptual analysis of fake news is a particularly difficult task. Indeed, a few philosophers (e.g. Talisse 2018, Habgood-Coote 2019) have suggested that such a project is doomed to failure. Unlike many other terms of philosophical interest, such as *knowledge* and *lying*, fake news is a fairly new term.[1] Moreover, what people take to be prototypical instances of fake news has changed over time (see Gelfert 2018, 92). A few years ago, the term *fake news* was more likely to be applied to satirical news sources, such as the *Daily Show* and *The Onion*, than to fraudulent news sources, such as the *Denver Guardian*. And even now, different people use the term in apparently different and incompatible ways (see Habgood-Coote 2019). Furthermore, Robert Talisse (2018) argues that the phenomenon of fake news is so politically charged that we cannot agree on what counts as fake news. For instance, people of different political persuasions clearly disagree about whether or not CNN is a source of fake news. Thus, we might worry that, in the case of fake news, competent speakers of the language do not have the stable and shared intuitions about cases that conceptual analysis requires.

[1]The term *fake news* does go back at least as far as the 1930s. American newspapers applied it to propaganda produced by Joseph Goebbels that was disguised as radio news reports (see Lepore 2018, 454).

Despite these difficulties, we think that enough clear cases of fake news and non-fake news can be identified to guide our conceptual analysis. Moreover, it is important to remember that the goal of conceptual analysis is not simply to capture how people use a term. That is just a means to an end (see Austin 1956, 8). The goal here is to understand an actual phenomenon in the world that clearly has important epistemological implications. And, contra Joshua Habgood-Coote (2019), we argue that the phenomenon of fake news is not adequately captured by existing epistemological terminology, such as 'lies, misleading, bullshitting, false assertion, false implicature, being unreliable, distorting the facts, being biased, propaganda, and so on.'

3. Previous definitions of fake news

3.1. False news

One common definition has it that fake news is simply *false news* (see, e.g. Levy 2017). This seems to be how President Trump uses the term, calling any reporting with which he disagrees 'fake news.' This definition certainly captures the aforementioned examples of fake news. For instance, the Pope did not endorse Trump for President. But this definition is too broad. It incorrectly counts honest mistakes, such as the 'Dewey Defeats Truman' headline, as fake news (see Rini 2017; Gelfert 2018, 99; Jaster and Lanius 2018).

Depending on how the details of this definition are cashed out, it may also incorrectly count stories published in satirical news sources, such as *The Onion*, as fake news. On rare occasions, false stories like 'Rural Whites Prefer Ahmadinejad to Obama' do mislead people who do not get the joke (see Fallon 2012). However, unlike fake news, these false stories are meant to be seen through—otherwise, they would not be funny. Consequently, these false stories do not pose a serious threat to knowledge and democracy.

3.2. Intentionally deceptive news

The very term *fake* implies an effort to fool people. Thus, another possible definition is that fake news is *intentionally deceptive news* (see, e.g. Rini 2017; Gelfert 2018). On this view, what is definitive of fake news is that the purveyors intend people to acquire false beliefs—such as that the Pope endorsed Trump—from reading their stories. Roughly speaking, the suggestion here is that the purveyors of fake news are *lying*.

This definition captures the 'Pope Endorses Trump' story, which was spread by a young Romanian, Ovidiu Drobota, in order to get people to vote for Trump (see Townsend 2016).[2] It also captures the fake news spread by the Internet Research Agency. The main goal of the Russian government may be to make it harder for us to sort fact from fiction by destroying our faith in the traditional news media (see Giles 2016, 58–59). Nevertheless, disseminating information that is intentionally misleading is a necessary means to that end.

In addition, unlike the *false news* definition, this definition correctly *excludes* honest mistakes and satire, as there is no intention to deceive in these cases. It might be suggested, however, that it is too broad because it does not require fake news to be false. But while fake news typically is false (such as the Pope story and the FBI agent story), it is not always false (see Fallis 2016, 338–39; Gelfert 2018, 100; Aikin and Talisse 2018; Mukerji 2018). As Yochai Benkler et al. (2017) point out, fake news can involve 'the purposeful construction of true or partly true bits of information into a message that is, at its core, misleading.'

Still, even if the *intentionally deceptive news* definition is not too broad, it is too narrow. Not all purveyors of fake news intend to deceive people into believing the stories that they post. Take, for example, the Macedonian teenagers who are just in the fake news business for the money.[3] They do not care whether people believe their stories. They just want to get as many people as possible click on them, because each click means more advertising money in their pockets.

Now, it may be that people are more likely to share stories with friends if they believe that these stories are true. With this in mind, even if she ultimately just cares about making money, a Macedonian teenager might intend people to believe her stories. But this intent does not seem to be required for fake news. For instance, instead of thinking explicitly about the beliefs of their readers, most of the Macedonian teenagers appear to be working by trial-and-error to find stories that generate more clicks and shares. As Craig Silverman and Lawrence Alexander (2016) report,

[2]This story did not originate with Drobata, but his website made it popular (see Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016b). Even though this story was completely made-up, it might have been true, for all Drobota knew, that the Pope endorsed Trump. However, *knowing* that the claim in question is false is probably not necessary for deception (see Mahon 2015, §3.1).

[3]As it happens, the Macedonian teenagers may have been supported by people who did intend to deceive the public (see Silverman et al. 2018). Nevertheless, the Macedonian teenagers themselves are only in it for the money generated by clicks. Also, there are purveyors of fake news who are not influenced by political motivations at all (see Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016b).

> the best way to generate shares on Facebook is to publish sensationalist and often false content that caters to Trump supporters … some in Veles [Macedonia] experimented with left-leaning or pro-Bernie Sanders content, but nothing performed as well on Facebook as Trump content. (see also Sydell 2016)[4]

Moreover, research indicates that purveyors of fake news can get many of their readers to share fake news even when these readers are aware that the stories are made up (see Barthel, Mitchell, and Holcomb 2016).

3.3. Bullshit news

Another possible definition is that fake news is *bullshit news* (see, e.g. Mathiesen and Fallis 2017; Mukerji 2018). The philosophers who propose this definition have in mind Harry Frankfurt's (2005 [1986], 33–34) idea that 'it is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that [is] the essence of bullshit.' Unlike the *intentionally deceptive news* definition, the *bullshit news* definition captures the case of the Macedonian teenagers. While they may not be trying to get their audience to believe false stories, they publish whatever stories are likely to generate the most clicks. Thus, the Macedonian teenagers clearly do not care whether they are conveying the truth.

Admittedly, the Macedonian teenagers may not be *prototypical* bullshitters. Frankfurt (2005, 18) claims that a bullshitter is typically trying to 'convey a certain impression of himself.' As he points out, many politicians certainly fit this mold. They 'talk a lot of crap' (another term for bullshit) in order to convince us that they are the kind of people who share our values. Yet there are all sorts of reasons why people say things without caring whether what they convey is true. For instance, advertisers talk a lot of crap, not in order to bolster their image as politicians do, but just in order to sell products. Similarly, the Macedonian teenagers write a lot of crap just in order to get people to click on their stories. Unlike politicians, advertisers and the Macedonian teenagers do not really want to be noticed at all. Nevertheless, they are bullshitters on Frankfurt's analysis because they are not concerned with the truth of what they convey (see Frankfurt 2002).

Furthermore, even though a bullshitter may not always intend to deceive with respect to the content of her statement, Frankfurt (2005 [1986], 54) claims that a bullshitter 'does necessarily attempt to deceive

[4]Of course, fake news is not limited to one end of the political spectrum. For instance, fake news about the Trump-Russia investigation has gotten traction among Democrats (see Beauchamp 2017).

us about his enterprise.' The Macedonian teenagers, for instance, do intend to deceive people about what they are up to. In particular, they try to make their websites look like legitimate news outlets when they are not.

This definition captures Drobota's 'Pope Endorses Trump' story as well as the stories from the Macedonian teenagers. Although Frankfurt (2005 [1986], 59–61) treats bullshitting and lying as distinct categories in his book, Frankfurt (2002, 341) later admitted that there can be overlap. For example, advertisers are bullshitting if they do not care whether they are conveying the truth, but they are lying as well if they are highly confident that they are saying something false. In a similar vein, Drobota was bullshitting and lying.

However, even though it captures many instances of fake news, this definition is too narrow. Some purveyors of fake news *do* care whether they are conveying the truth. In particular, some purveyors of fake news are what Saint Augustine (1952 [395], 87) calls 'real liars,' who care very much that they convey something *false*. For instance, Coler, a registered Democrat, does not just publish fake news in order to make money like the Macedonian teenagers. He says that

> the whole idea from the start was to build a site that could kind of infiltrate the echo chambers of the alt-right, publish blatantly or fictional stories and then be able to publicly denounce those stories and point out the fact that they were fiction. (quoted in Sydell 2016)

Since Coler is concerned that (at least some of) his readers believe something false, he is not a bullshitter on Frankfurt's analysis.

3.4. News that lacks truthfulness

Another possible definition is that fake news is *either intentionally deceptive news or bullshit news* (see, e.g. Jaster and Lanius 2018). This definition captures all of the aforementioned examples of fake news. For instance, Coler is producing intentionally deceptive news, the Macedonian teenagers are producing bullshit news, and Drobota is producing both.

A potential worry regarding this definition, however, is that it is disjunctive. If a definition appeals to two or more independent criteria, it is reasonable to worry that we are really dealing with two or more separate phenomena (see Kingsbury and McKeown-Green 2009). But as Romy Jaster and David Lanius (2018) point out, intentionally deceptive news and bullshit news do have something in common. Those who produce such news do not have any commitment to the accuracy of what they

publish. Thus, this disjunctive definition is really equivalent to the suggestion that fake news is *news that lacks truthfulness*. On this view, what is definitive of fake news is that the purveyors do not intend people to acquire true beliefs from reading their stories.

In section 5 below, we discuss a case that suggests to us that this definition is too narrow. And in section 6 below, we discuss a case that suggests to us that this definition is too broad. But even if the *news that lacks truthfulness* definition captured all and only fake news, we claim that it does not get at the essence of what makes fake news dangerous. It fails to explain why fake news, in particular, is so pernicious. After all, a lot of information on the internet is less than truthful.

4. Counterfeit news

Our preferred definition is that fake news is *counterfeit news*. In other words, a story is fake news if and only if it is not genuine news, but is presented as genuine news, with the intention and propensity to deceive. By *genuine news*, we mean stories that have gone through the *standard modern journalistic process* (see Mathiesen 2019, Pepp et al. forthcoming, section 3). That is, genuine news has been produced by professionally trained reporters, fact checkers, and editors, who are attempting to provide fair and accurate accounts of current events (see American Press Institute 2018).

Philosophers (e.g. Goodman 1968, 122; Wreen 1980, 147) typically define *counterfeit* (or *forged*) Xs by contrasting them with genuine Xs. In particular, a counterfeit X is something that is intended to make people believe that it is a genuine X when it is not.[5] So, for instance, 'counterfeit coins are coins which are not genuine but which are represented as genuine, with the intention to deceive' (Wreen 1980, 147). And being a genuine X requires having a certain *history of production*. Thus, 'a counterfeit coin is a coin which does not have, but is represented to have the requisite, sometimes rather complicated, history of production, and is so represented with the intention to deceive' (Wreen 1980, 149).[6] So, for example, a genuine United States quarter must have been produced by

[5]In addition to being intended to deceive, we require that fake news actually have the *propensity* to deceive (see Fallis 2016, 338; Gelfert 2018, 102–03). After all, if someone unreasonably tries to pass off a completely unconvincing fake—such as a child trying to pay for candy with Monopoly money, does it really count as a counterfeit?

[6]Strictly speaking, even though having a certain history of production *is* what makes something a genuine X, people can be fooled by counterfeit Xs even if they do not know that this is what makes something a genuine X. They just have to know that there are genuine Xs (coins, Swiss Army knives, news stories, etc.) and how to identify them. Counterfeiters fool people by faking the indicators of genuineness that people look for.

the United States Mint, and a counterfeit United States quarter is something that is made to convince people that it was produced by the United States Mint even though it was not.

Analogously, genuine news must have been produced by professionally trained reporters, fact checkers, and editors, and counterfeit news is made to fool people into thinking that it has this history of production.[7] As the Associated Press (2016) points out, fake news websites 'tend to follow one of two patterns: Some masquerade as well-known outlets like the *New York Times* or *Fox News*, while others operate under made-in-America-sounding names like *USA Daily News 24*.'

Defining fake news as counterfeit news captures all of the aforementioned examples of fake news. Drobota, Coler, and the Macedonian teenagers clearly try to make their websites look like legitimate news outlets when they are not. In addition, this definition correctly excludes honest mistakes and satire. Despite its famous mistake, the *Chicago Tribune* was (and is) a legitimate news outlet that implements the standard modern journalistic process. And while the stories in *The Onion* are not genuine news, the publishers do not intend to convince anyone that they are.

It is worth emphasizing that defining fake news as counterfeit news means that fake news is necessarily intended to deceive. While it is not always intentionally deceptive with respect to its *content* as Regina Rini (2017) and Axel Gelfert (2018) hold, it is always intentionally deceptive with respect to its *source*. Much like a bullshitter, the purveyor of fake news does 'necessarily attempt to deceive us about his enterprise.'

Even though a number of different definitions of fake news have been offered, falsely purporting that a story has been produced by the standard modern journalistic process is widely taken to be a core feature. In a recent review of academic articles that define the term fake news, Edson Tandoc Jr. et al. (2018, 147) found that

> what is common about these definitions is how fake news appropriates the look and feel of real news; from how websites look; to how articles are written; to how photos include attributions. Fake news hides under a veneer of legitimacy as it takes on some form of credibility by trying to appear like real news.

[7]That United States currency has monetary value is what John Searle (1995, 26) calls a 'social fact.' Certain bits of printed paper and round bits of metal produced by the United States Mint count as legal tender in the context of the United States economic system simply because we collectively treat them as valuable. In contrast, given the evidence gathering and fact checking that produced it, a genuine news story has epistemic value whether or not anyone treats it as having epistemic value. Thus, a closer analogy would be between fake news and counterfeit versions of brands that are valued for their quality. For example, a cheaply produced army knife made to look like a Victorinox AG Swiss Army Knife trades on the fact that Victorinox knives are produced through a process that results in knives of superior quality.

In particular, most philosophers who have offered a definition say that fake news has this feature. For instance, they claim that purveyors of fake news use 'a format and with a content that resembles the format and content of legitimate media organisations' (Levy 2017, 20), engage in 'mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage' (Rini 2017), 'pose as journalistic' (Aikin and Talisse 2018), and 'mimic the appearance and markers of credibility of established news sources' (Gelfert 2018, 101). It is just that these philosophers failed to see that this feature is *definitive* of fake news.

Some of these other definitions of fake news end up being too broad. For instance, some do not explicitly require that fake news mimics the traditional news media *in order to deceive*, which allows *The Onion* to count as a source of fake news. Also, Rini (2017) only claims that fake news 'typically' mimics the traditional news media. And some of these definitions end up being too narrow. For instance, some require an intention to deceive *with respect to the content of the story* and, thus, fail to count the Macedonian teenagers as purveyors of fake news. Also, Scott Aikin and Talisse (2018) claim that fake news mimics the traditional news 'with a view towards facilitating some decidedly political objective' which also rules out the Macedonian teenagers.

Admittedly, we have not given a precise analysis of what the standard modern journalistic process consists in. Moreover, whatever the exact details of this process, there will inevitably be borderline cases of counterfeit news.[8] For instance, reporters who work for legitimate news outlets, such as Jayson Blair of the *New York Times* and Janet Cooke of the *Washington Post*, have fabricated stories in order to further their own careers (see Farquhar 2005, 25–29). Unlike the prototypical instances of fake news from the 2016 Presidential election, these made-up stories have actually gone through many parts of the standard modern journalistic process. All the same, there is someone, the individual reporter, who does intend to deceive people into believing that *everyone* involved was attempting to provide fair and accurate accounts of current events.

Nevertheless, we think that there are enough clear cases to support defining fake news as counterfeit news. And unlike Talisse (2018), we do not think that political disagreements prevent agreement on such a definition. People at opposite ends of the political spectrum sometimes

[8]The opinion pages in newspapers are clearly not fake news. But cable news outlets are not always careful to clearly distinguish when they are offering news produced by careful journalism and when they are just offering opinion. Also, advertising in newspapers is sometimes made to look like content, and some readers may not notice the fine print identifying it as advertising (see Launder 2013). If such muddying of the waters is done intentionally and has the propensity to deceive, it might count as fake news on our definition.

do disagree vehemently about whether particular cases, such as stories on CNN, count as fake news. But this does not mean that they disagree about the definition of fake news. A better explanation is that they disagree about whether the conditions of that definition are satisfied in this particular case. For instance, is CNN a legitimate news outlet that implements the standard modern journalistic process, or is it just pretending to be such an outlet? In a similar vein, even if we were to agree on the definition of *lying*, we might disagree on whether those conditions are satisfied in any actual case. For instance, it might be unclear whether a speaker intends to deceive or actually believes what she says.

5. Dangers of counterfeit news

In addition to capturing speaker intuitions about the use of the term, defining fake news as counterfeit news allows us to explain why fake news is so dangerous. In this regard, it is helpful to first consider why counterfeit currency is dangerous.

Counterfeit currency poses two main dangers. First, it can harm those people who are directly exposed to it. For instance, a convincing counterfeit $20 bill is likely to mislead many people into believing that it is the genuine item. And that false belief can easily lead these people into accepting that worthless piece of paper for goods and services.

Counterfeit news poses an analogous danger. It can harm those people who are directly exposed to it. For instance, a convincing counterfeit news website is likely to mislead many people into believing that it is the genuine item. And since legitimate news outlets that implement the standard modern journalistic process tend to be fairly reliable sources of information, that false belief can easily lead these people into believing the stories on the website.[9]

It must be acknowledged that the mere fact that a story is counterfeit news does not *guarantee* that the story itself is false or misleading. For instance, suppose that someone discovers ironclad evidence for a story of great public importance (e.g. evidence that a high-ranking government official is corrupt), but that he cannot get any traction with the story because he is not a professional journalist and does not work for a legitimate news outlet. In that case, he might decide to create a website for a

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[9]In addition to making stories more convincing by mimicking the traditional news media, purveyors of fake news also use other forms of deception. For instance, they use *bots* to make it seem like the stories have been viewed or endorsed by more *people* than really have viewed or endorsed them (see Lazer et al. 2018, 1095).

fictitious newspaper and use it to publish the story. Thus, even if people are misled into believing that the story has gone through the standard modern journalistic process, they might not be misled about anything else.

Indeed, the same sort of thing could happen with counterfeit currency. For instance, a counterfeiter might make a counterfeit quarter out of silver. In that case, it would be worth as much as, and probably more than, a genuine quarter. It is just that this sort of behavior on the part of a counterfeiter is rather unlikely. Counterfeit currency is typically worthless.

Similarly, counterfeit news stories are highly likely to be false and misleading. As a matter of empirical fact, most purveyors of counterfeit news seem to be **(a)** motivated to mislead, like Drobota, or **(b)** motivated to make money by generating clicks, like the Macedonian teenagers. And in both cases, they are likely to publish stories that are false and misleading. Drobota does so intentionally. And there are incentives that lead the Macedonian teenagers to do so even if they do not do so intentionally.[10] For one thing, it is cheaper to come up with stories for a counterfeit news website by making them up (rather than by gathering evidence) and stories that are made up are likely to be false. In addition, the stories that generate the most clicks and shares (and, thus, generate the most revenue) are likely to be false. In a recent empirical study, Soroush Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that, on the internet, false information spreads farther and faster than accurate information.[11] So, unlike most other philosophers who have offered definitions of fake news, we do not think that the falsity or misleadingness of the content needs to be built into the definition.[12]

The second main danger of counterfeit currency is that it can harm everyone who uses the currency. As the amount of counterfeit currency in circulation increases, the value of genuine currency tends to decrease. Since it is difficult to distinguish counterfeits from genuine currency,

[10]Thus, much like a king snake mimicking the appearance of a coral snake, even though their stories are not intentional disinformation, they are arguably *adaptive disinformation* (see Fallis 2016, 340).

[11]This may be because people like reading and sharing extreme claims, and extreme claims are more likely to be false. Indeed, David Hume (1977 [1748], 78) thought that this feature of human psychology explained the spread of reports of miracles:

> The passion of *surprise* and *wonder*, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events. And this goes so far, that even those who cannot enjoy this pleasure immediately, nor can believe those miraculous events, of which they are informed, yet love to partake of the satisfaction at second-hand or by rebound, and place a pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others.

[12]Furthermore, even if a counterfeit news story is true, there is still an epistemic downside to believing it. Basically, your justified true belief is *gettierized*. Your justification for believing the story is not appropriately connected to the truth of the story. So, you do not *know* that it is true.

people have less faith in the currency. Indeed, while most counterfeiters are just interested in making money (e.g. by converting their counterfeit currency into goods, services, and/or genuine currency), some counterfeiters intend to undermine the monetary system. For instance, during World War Two, Nazi Germany used counterfeit currency in an attempt to destabilize the American and British economies (see Ruffner 2014).

Counterfeit news poses an analogous danger. It can harm everyone who consumes the news. As the amount of counterfeit news in circulation increases, the value of genuine news tends to decrease. Since it is difficult to distinguish counterfeits from genuine news, people come to have less faith in the traditional news media (see Faulkner 2018). They think that they can no longer trust the information that they receive from most news sources. Indeed, undermining trust in the traditional news media might be the primary goal of a purveyor of counterfeit news, such as the Internet Research Agency.

By mimicking the appearance of the traditional news media, fake news leverages the existing epistemic authority of that social institution. Thus, fake news has the potential to mislead people and to undermine the epistemic authority of that institution (see also Lazer et al. 2018, 1094).[13] It is worth noting that the same sort of thing can also happen with other social institutions. For instance, much like journalism, science has a well-established set of procedures that allow it to discover valuable new knowledge for society. However, unscrupulous actors sometimes mimic the appearance of legitimate science. For instance, the tobacco industry paid scientists to carry out research that would counter the growing scientific evidence for the dangers of smoking (see Bero 2005). Also, using a strategy very similar to that of the aforementioned deceitful reporters, individual scientists have falsified data in order to further their own careers (see Judson 2004). Such counterfeits have the potential to mislead people, and to undermine the epistemic authority of legitimate science.

6. Possible objections

Admittedly, defining fake news as counterfeit news does rule out some cases that a few philosophers have wanted to include. For instance, some philosophers (e.g. Rini 2017; Jaster and Lanius 2018) have counted

[13]Some philosophers (e.g., Véliz 2019, §5) have argued that, in order to promote free speech online, people should be allowed to use false names. But these false names should be known to be false names. So, this proposal is not a defense of counterfeit news.

President Trump's tweets as fake news. These tweets arguably have many of the common properties of fake news. Trump makes claims about current events, these claims are often false, and they spread widely over the internet. And indeed, just like fake news, Trump's tweets probably are a serious threat to knowledge and democracy. However, we think that they exemplify a different (albeit related) epistemic problem.

Trump does not falsely purport that his claims have gone through the standard modern journalistic process. Instead, they are accurately presented as the claims of one individual.[14] Thus, while Trump may be leveraging (and thereby undermining) the epistemic authority of the Presidency, he is not leveraging (and thereby undermining) the epistemic authority of the traditional news media.

Now, Trump arguably is undermining the epistemic authority of the traditional news media. But he does so by overtly trying to convince people that the traditional news media is 'fake news' (see Faulkner 2018, Habgood-Coote 2019). He does not do so by pretending to be a legitimate news outlet in the way that purveyors of fake news do.[15]

Other philosophers (e.g. Aikin and Talisse 2018; Talisse 2018) have wanted to count *biased reporting* as fake news. If a news outlet uses the standard modern journalistic process, most of its stories are likely to be fairly accurate. Even so, such a news outlet can mislead people if it focuses on certain types of stories (e.g. stories that appeal to one end of the political spectrum) and ignores other types of stories.

Biased reporting arguably has even more of the common properties of fake news than Trump's tweets. Most notably, it leverages (and thereby potentially undermines) the epistemic authority of the traditional news media. And indeed, just like fake news, biased reporting probably is a serious threat to knowledge and democracy. However, we think that it is a different (albeit related) epistemic problem.

Unlike fake news, biased reporting need not involve any intentional deception. And even when the bias is intentionally deceptive (i.e. even when there is intentional deception with respect to its content), biased reporting need not involve any intentional deception with respect to its

[14]Admittedly, Trump's claims are often presented as what 'many people are saying' rather than as what *he* is saying (see Johnson 2016). But either way, they are not presented as having gone through the standard modern journalistic process.

[15]There is one possible way in which Trump might count as a purveyor of fake news. Suppose that he recounts a story and falsely claims that he read it on a news website. In that case, he would be falsely purporting that the story went through the standard modern journalistic process. If he actually did read the story on a website, it might still be fake news. But in that case, he would just be passing on fake news (wittingly or unwittingly). His actions did not make it fake news.

source. In other words, it need not be counterfeit news. The existence (and recent prevalence) of biased reporting simply highlights the fact that implementing the standard modern journalistic process does not guarantee good epistemic outcomes. Like any other human activity, it can be done well, or it can be done badly in various respects. In particular, a legitimate news outlet might fail to sufficiently 'manage bias' (American Press Institute 2018).

7. Possible tweaks

It should be noted that there are a few respects in which our definition of fake news as counterfeit news could be tweaked. First, we might want to require that fake news be intended to deceive for a significant period of time. Unlike stories that appear in *The Onion*, stories that appear on April Fool's Day, for instance, often are intended to deceive for a short time (see Fallis 2016, 343). But such stories are not a serious threat to knowledge and democracy and, thus, one may prefer to put them in a different category than fake news.

Second, we might want to require that fake news at least be intended to deceive a 'reasonable person' (see Fallis 2016, 337). If the publishers of a satirical newspaper *were* to design their stories so as to mislead the most gullible of their readers, then these stories would be fake news on our definition.[16] But as with April Fool's Day stories, such stories might not be a serious threat to knowledge and democracy.

Third, we might want to broaden our characterization of the standard modern journalistic process beyond professional organizations. Perhaps, fake news can be created when someone merely pretends to be a *citizen journalist* who is attempting to provide fair and accurate accounts of current events.

Finally, and most importantly, we might not want to require that a counterfeit be intended to deceive, but only that it be *no accident* that it has the propensity to deceive (see Fallis 2016, 340). After all, if the non-venomous king snake has simply evolved to mimic the appearance of the deadly coral snake, doesn't it still count as a counterfeit coral snake? Similarly, if a website that looks like a legitimate news outlet only because a machine learning algorithm has determined that this appearance generates the most clicks, it still seems like fake news and a serious threat to knowledge and democracy (see Pepp et al. forthcoming, section 2).

[16]An anonymous reviewer plausibly suggests that a story would not be effective satire if it did not fool anyone at all. It is not clear to us though that satirists must have such a goal.

Even as it stands, however, our definition captures the prototypical instances of fake news from the 2016 Presidential election. Furthermore, these complications do not alter the central insight that fake news is counterfeit news. So, for purposes of this paper, we set these complications aside in the interest of simplicity.[17]

8. Conclusion

Fake news poses a serious threat to knowledge and democracy. In order to address this threat, it is important to understand exactly what fake news is. After surveying the various definitions that have been proposed in the philosophical literature, we have argued that it is best to simply define fake news as *counterfeit news*. That is, a story is fake news if and only if it has not gone through the standard modern journalistic process, but is presented as if it has, with the intention and propensity to deceive. This definition is superior to previous definitions because it is able to explain the unique epistemic threat that fake news poses. In particular, the spread of fake news does not just lead people to form false beliefs, it undermines an important epistemic institution.

Our definition of fake news can be understood as a contribution to what Alvin Goldman (2011, 18) calls 'systems-oriented social epistemology.' This project asks us to consider the positive and negative epistemic consequences of various social systems and arrangements. Several social institutions, such as science and journalism, provide important epistemic benefits to society. But unscrupulous individuals and organizations are often motivated to leverage the epistemic authority of these institutions by counterfeiting them. As a result, people can be misled and/or lose

[17]Jessica Pepp, Eliot Michaelson, and Rachel K. Sterken (forthcoming, section 2) have recently and independently offered a definition of fake news that also contrasts it with genuine news produced by a standard journalistic process. They claim that fake news is 'the broad spread of stories treated by those who spread them as having been produced by standard journalistic practices, but that have not in fact been produced by such practices.' It is worth noting a couple of points of (apparent) disagreement between their definition and ours.

First, Pepp et al. emphasize that whether a story counts as fake news can change over time. We think that this is correct, but that it is consistent with our definition. A story might start out as neither fake news nor genuine news. For instance, it could have been created by someone with no intention to deceive, such as a conspiracy theorist posting on Twitter under own his name or a satirist working for *The Onion*. Later the story may become fake news. For instance, it could get the attention of a Macedonian teenager on the lookout for good headlines who republishes the story on a fraudulent website. And then the story might even become genuine news. For instance, it could get the attention of a professional journalist working for the *New York Times* who then investigates it, verifies it, and republishes it.

Second, Pepp et al. seem to allow for cases where it is a complete accident that a story is treated as genuine news (as when someone is fooled by a story in *The Onion*). We think that this is incorrect and our definition is designed to rule out such cases. If a story is not *intended* to look like genuine news, there must at least be a mechanism that reinforces this appearance.

faith in these institutions.[18] In other words, society may suffer significant epistemic costs when such counterfeits proliferate.[19]

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[18]By offering a new definition of fake news that (a) captures intuitions about cases and (b) explains why this particular phenomenon is so dangerous, we take ourselves to have responded to Habgood-Coote's criticisms of the utility of the term.

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