Fake news. Origins, connotations (and decline?) of a successful expression[*]

Claudio Melchior[**]
Università degli Studi di Udine

Nicola Strizzolo[***]
Università degli Studi di Teramo

The objective of this research is to analyse the evolution and connotations of the expression "fake news" from its inception to its current use. The investigation focuses on the origin, the quantitative trajectory of its use, and the macro-categories of meaning associated with this term.

To achieve these objectives, a content analysis was conducted on prominent media outlets between 2016 and 2022. The dataset, comprising 30,035 articles, enabled the tracing of the term's usage trends. Furthermore, sub-corpus sampling and computer-assisted qualitative techniques were employed to assess the evolving connotations and macro-categories of meaning related to the expression.

The results indicate that the mature usage of the term "fake news" emerged in November 2016. The term's usage increased significantly, reaching its peak in 2018, and then spread into broader realms. Initially, the expression was primarily associated with the "world of the Net" and the specific political events of 2016, but it gradually expanded to encompass journalism and socio-political conflict in general.

Even during the decline and stabilisation that took place between 2019 and 2022, the term "fake news" continued to be used pervasively, with references to journalism overtaking those to the online world. This was combined with a continuous "background noise" of oppositional and emotional connotations.

The term "fake news" was originally designed to criticise online information. However, it has since evolved into a stigmatising and generic label that is utilised in political and social discourse to discredit opponents. This negative connotation erodes trust in media and institutions, intensifies divisive rhetoric, and hinders open and democratic debate in increasingly complex social systems.

Keywords: fake news; content analysis; media; newspaper; connotations

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Fake news: the ambiguous term that heightens uncertainty

There is extensive literature highlighting the fragility of the term "fake news", which will be the core of our analysis. Its definitional weakness, both external (what it is and what it is not) and internal (its many variations and nuances), makes it on the one hand a semantically confused "buzzword" (Corner, 2018; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018; Waisbord, 2018), and on the other, easily applicable in journalistic and political contexts (Waisbord, 2018), as well as in broader discussions (Jaster & Lanius, 2018).

The definitions of "fake news" can include "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213), and which appropriate "the look and feel of real news; from how websites look; to how articles are written; to how photos include attributions" (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018, p. 11), hiding "under a veneer of legitimacy" as they take on "some form of credibility by trying to appear like real news" (ibidem), and extend to the entire cascading process that generates distribution and dissemination through a hybrid information system (Giglietto, Iannelli, Valeriani, & Rossi, 2019).

Regarding both the origins and the treatment of the term, as well as the scope of our investigation, we will limit our focus to Western countries due to linguistic constraints in our research and historical and current events significant for its dissemination, such as Brexit in the United Kingdom (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018) and the election of Donald Trump in the United States (Ireton, 2018; Jaster & Lanius, 2018; Waisbord, 2018; Jack, 2017). These events have tested the information flow system, a hybrid system of complex and multi-actor processes (Giglietto, Iannelli, Valeriani, & Rossi, 2019), and highlighted its influence on public opinion and political choices (Ireton, 2018; Jaster& Lanius, 2018; Waisbord, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018; Jack, 2017).

The term "fake" associated with the concept of "news" has much older origins within the English linguistic sphere: as early as the late nineteenth century, during the era of "yellow journalism", it referred to sensationalist and misleading stories (Love, 2007). Since then, the meaning of the term has changed numerous times, including genres that mimic the format of traditional news but with an ironic tone, such as satirical programmes or parodies (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). The spread of the term "fake news" as we understand it today (even outside the English linguistic sphere) occurred with reference to (a) specific historical and political circumstances and (b) the growing social importance of digital communication. The technological expansion of the Web, the ability to create and share content, has created new types of misinformation, where truth and fiction overlap, collide and blur. The information ecosystem, particularly the digital one, is characterized by several vulnerabilities that facilitate the spread of "fake news" (Binotto, 2017), and these "fake news" mimic the characteristics of the news provided through accredited news production procedures (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). These news items are designed not only to capture people's selective attention and search engine indexing but also to simulate a journalistic code and format. Many online news platforms compete in an environment saturated with content designed primarily to attract attention. This situation is accompanied by a strong polarization

of public discourse and an overall information landscape characterized by a growing distrust of the media and institutions (see, for example, "Edelmann Trust Barometer", 2023). These factors compose a scenario of "news bombing", authentic or mimetically adhering to accredited sources, in a context of information overload, defined as "infostorms" or "infoglut" (Hendricks & Hansen, 2014; Andrejevic, 2013); "information overload" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011) or even "infodemic" (Lovari & Righetti, 2020).

Delving into the concept of "fake news" or misinformation, it is observed how the term has become prevalent in media discourses, although the definitions and applications of the concept vary significantly. The existing literature, including seminal works such as the study by Jack (2017), which explores the roots and manifestations of misinformation, and Waisbord (2018), which examines the sociopolitical implications of misinformation, provides a foundation for our investigation. Additionally, the approaches of Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) offer crucial insights for identifying and classifying the different types of misleading content that emerge in media networks.

The term "fake news" falls within the broader concept of "misinformation", defined as "information whose inaccuracy is unintentional" (Jack, 2017, p. 2). However, as Wardle and Derakhshan (2018) emphasize, this term is "inadequate to explain the scope of information pollution" and "problematic, thus we should avoid using it" (ibid., p. 43). They propose a differentiation among various forms of incorrect information: misinformation, which, when intersecting with malinformation, becomes disinformation, creating a scenario of production and reproduction of informational disorder (ibid., p. 44).

The definition of "fake news" as a problematic phenomenon that needs to be named, despite its vague and worn nature, is also supported by Jaster and Lanius (2018). They observe that, although the term is generally of little use and ambiguous, it cannot be completely eliminated from public discourse. At the Oxford Internet Institute, terms like "junk news" are now preferred over "fake news" to describe poor-quality news that does not meet journalistic standards of truthfulness (Jaster & Lanius, 2018, p. 207).

Moreover, the reproduction of false news can occur either knowingly or due to errors made in good faith, influenced by emotions, the pressures of time in journalistic work, or by a misinterpretation of satirical or parodic news. In some cases, the dissemination of false news is driven by a clear intention to harm and pollute the information ecosystem, with precise manipulative purposes (Wardle& Derakhshan, 2018).

In summary, the triggers for the spread of false information can originate from various sources: satirical parody; false associations; misleading content; fabricated contexts; impostor content (information that involves deliberate imitations or forgeries of reliable sources), and manipulated or manufactured content (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018, p. 48).

The content can be completely false or may use elements of truth mixed with lies. It can also be the result of artificially produced illusions intended to entertain, which in themselves do not constitute lies.

In the current context, characterized by a complex digital information system and a multitude of actors producing and disseminating information across various formats and platforms, it is crucial to adopt an approach that considers not only the nature of the news

but also the dynamic processes of dissemination through multiple chains of propagation, as suggested by Giglietto, Iannelli, Valeriani, and Rossi (2019). With this perspective, today it is insufficient to merely observe and reproduce reality to produce reliable information; it is also necessary to qualify and pay attention to which sources and information provide valid building blocks for other information and a plausible framework of reality. This leads to a second-order cybernetic perspective, namely the observation of observers (who observe a fact or information and constitute news), their intentions and professionalism (ibid., p. 636).

However, there is a risk of a scenario that leads to a decline in the role of news and journalism. According to Shannon (1948), if the value of information is determined by its ability to reduce uncertainty, the uncontrolled proliferation of information and counter-information can amplify such uncertainty. Similarly, Luhmann observed that since the primary role of the information system is to simplify complexity, its malfunction achieves the opposite effect; information overload, by hindering communication within social systems, impairs their effective performance (Luhmann, 1995). Additionally, the large amount of resources consumed to manage information overload can negatively affect other aspects, such as privacy (Solove, 2006) or public safety (Zurko, 2005). The traditional role of the press as the "watchdog of democracy" is being questioned. Disinformation can erode the credibility of the media and decrease its effectiveness in checking other authorities. Therefore, in the era of post-truth, disinformation undermines the essential level of trust that supports social capital. According to many authors, the year 2016, marked by two political events (the referendum on the so-called "Brexit" and the election of Donald Trump), signalled a turning point in these dynamics (see, for example, Anderau, 2021; Wang, 2020; Fallis & Mathiesen, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018). Trump, who has been accused of being an "instigator" of "fake news", in turn used the term as a "weapon" against the media, increasing the frequency of its use as well as the ambiguities about its meaning (Holan, 2017). Since then, the pervasiveness and impact of the term seem to have grown, and its use in public debate has become increasingly polarized among political antagonisms, with implications also for the concept of democracy (Stocking, Grieco, & Gottfried, 2019).

A critical discourse analysis and the definitions of the concept

A first critical reflection concerns the private nature of digital media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017): platforms profit from the traffic they generate, which creates an incentive to produce content that attracts as much attention as possible, regardless of truthfulness (in addition to the fact that producing fake news is cheaper than rigorous fact gathering). It should be noted, however, that this dynamic is not all that different from that of earlier eras when "sensationalism" was widely used by the media to attract readers and listeners.

Moreover, there is a differently critical literature that emphasizes that the main risk to current democracy would not be in false information, which has existed since before the expression "fake news" and whose real effects may be less significant than feared, but in the adoption of regulatory measures by platforms and governments (Seneviratne, 2020).

Some of these policies, while presented as solutions to the problem of disinformation, could pose serious threats to freedom and privacy. Examples ranging from China to Europe (Freedom House, 2019) show how delicate the balance is between protecting the truth and restricting freedom of expression.

In general, the issues about fake news go beyond individual effects or the falsehoods they might spread: instead, they should be interpreted from a broader cultural perspective, both epistemological and ideological (Boccia Artieri, 2019). In this regard, some authors suggested that the assessment of which news is fake (and who is most likely to be a victim of it) follows psychosocial dynamics related not so much to the true–false dichotomy but to processes of identity and social belonging (Mo & Kim, 2018; van der Linden, Panagopulos, & Roozenbeek, 2020). According to the so-called "third person effect", indeed, the "outgroups" would always be the biggest producers, and also the most defenceless, regarding false information (Davison, 1983).

Some research, in fact, observed how the very definition of "fake news" is highly polarized along ideological lines. As the use of the term became more widespread, this polarization intensified, reproducing cultural dynamics typical of any hegemonic process. Specifically, the label "fake news" allegedly became a way to discredit information that would disrupt the cultural symbolic landscape that somebody wants to construct and reproduce, with a devaluing effect on the people, groups and sites that spread it (Li & Su, 2020).

Beyond these critical considerations, to give an accurate reference to our empirical work, the analysis of the literature prompts us to observe that the numerous definitions of the expression "fake news" seem to focus, in most cases, on the following points: a) the content of the news item must be "misleading"; b) this condition must be deliberate and intentional (sometimes recharacterized with the concept of "malevolent intentionality"); c) fake news must "mimic" the form of "genuine" news and (d) be "published" (for a literary review see, e.g., Baptista, Gradim & Correia, 2022; Anderau, 2021; Gelfert, 2018). Fallis and Mathiesen (2019, p. 8) also write about fake news as "counterfeit news", opposing it to "genuine news" (i.e. stories "that have gone through the standard modern journalistic process"). However, such considerations, in our opinion, do not take into account a basic fact: the concepts of "genuineness" or "truth" are abstract concepts that cannot be traced in the complexity of social reality. As Rochlin writes, "the misunderstanding is that fake news can be contested on an intellectual spectrum of true-untrue, prescribed by an independent and objective source. In an era of post-truth and mass social divide, this is no longer viable" (2017, p. 386).

The objective of this study is to identify the point in time at which the term "fake news" first emerged in the context of journalism in the Western world, to quantify its subsequent usage, and to identify the key topics with which it has been associated over time. In order to achieve these goals, we have formulated the following research questions:

(RQ1) What was the precise moment in time when the expression "fake news", with its contemporary meaning, was first employed in the press, and what has been its quantitative evolution in use over time?

(RQ2) What are the main keywords associated with the term "fake news" in newspapers, and to which macro-categories of meaning do they belong?

(RQ3) What is the evolution over time of a) the keywords most frequently associated with the expression "fake news" and b) the macro-categories of meaning to which they belong?

Data and methods

To address the aforementioned research questions, we conducted a content analysis within the Nexis Uni database, examining media in major European languages (in terms of number of speakers) and selecting for each of the languages two media that met the following criteria: (1) presence in the Nexis Uni database from at least 2016 to 2022; and (2) the two media with the largest diffusion for each language. 2016 was chosen as the starting year of the analysis, based on existing literature that postulates, on an observational basis, that the term "fake news" would have assumed the status of a "buzzword" in the context of the 2016 presidential election in the United States (see e.g. Bovet, Makse, 2019; Tandoc, 2019; Kalsnes, 2018; Tandoc, Lim, Ling, 2018; Waisbord, 2018).

These criteria led us to select: for the French Le Figaro and Les Échos; for the Spanish El Mundo and El País; for the German Die Welt and Süddeutsche Zeitung; for the Italian Corriere della Sera and Notiziario Generale dell'Ansa[1]; and finally The Sun and Daily Mail. The peculiar nature of these British newspapers, which are widely distributed but described as "scandalous", prompted us to include two other media, scrolling down the diffusion ranking: Daily Mirror and The Guardian. Finally, as the expression originated in the United States, we also included USA Today and The New York Times, selected using the same criteria as described above.

The total corpus of 30,035 articles emerging from the research of the term "fake news" in these media between 2016 and 2022 allowed us to analyse the spread of the use of the expression in quantitative terms.

The concepts and category of meaning most closely associated with the expression were then analysed. To conduct this analysis, a sub-corpus sampling procedure was implemented by selecting: 1) three reference years (2016, 2019 and 2022, i.e. initial, intermediate and final period in regular 3-year jumps); 2) the first 100 articles for each reference year (according to the relevance score calculated by the Nexis Uni database, which is based on keyword frequency and metadata); 3) this process was repeated for each of the languages/nations under consideration. In other words, for each year and language, we selected the articles most focused on the topic we are analysing. This sub-corpus of 1,800 articles was then subjected to: 1) a segment coding, carried out with MAXQDA software, with isolation of all sentences that contained the expression in the title or in the body; 2) a machine translation procedure (with a proprietary Deepl account) so as to normalize all phrases and lemmas to English in a standardized form; 3) a lexical analysis

with MAXQDA, looking for the most frequent words, which was the basis for the analysis of the concept (Figure 1).
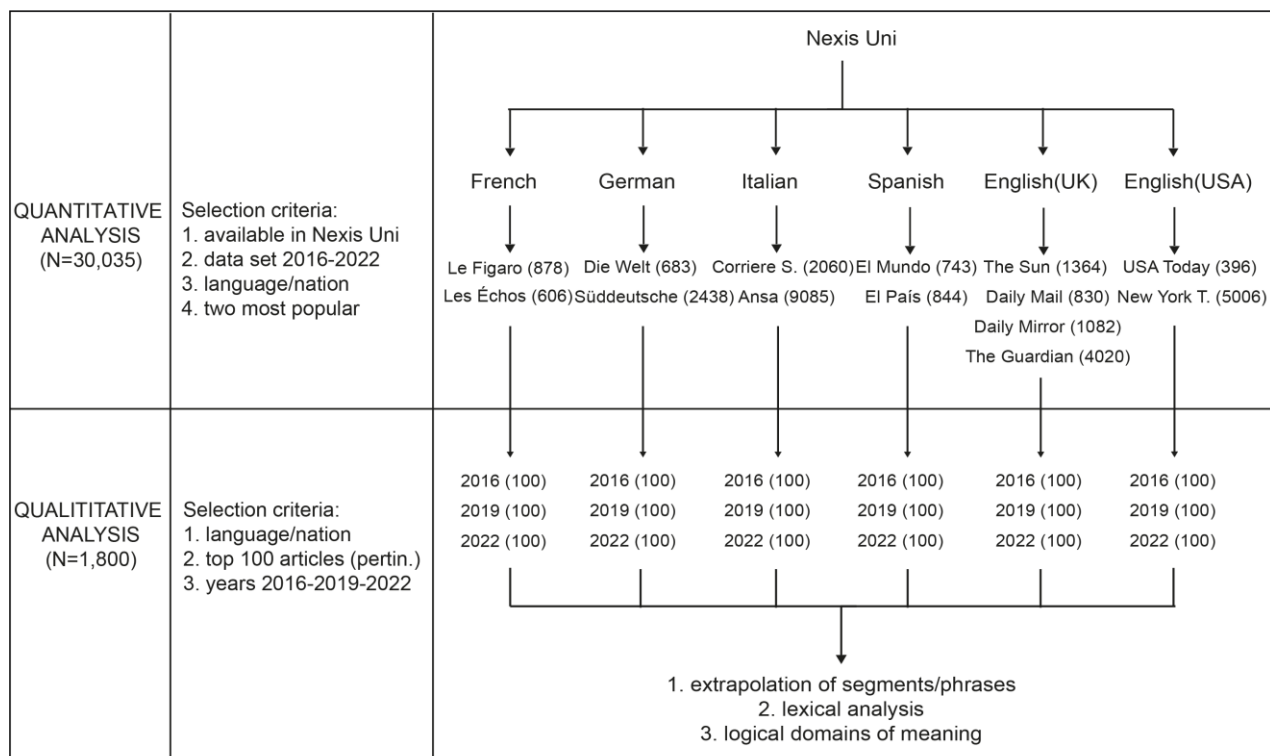

Figure 1 Selection steps of the two analysis corpus.

Origins and usage trends over time

Before focusing on the period 2016–2022, let us point out that the beginning of the use of the concept of "fake news" with the connotations we know today actually occurs in 2016. Although we do not have data from all our media, in 2015 we find a total of only 45 articles containing the sequence of these two words, compared to a total of 661 in 2016. In 2015 Ansa, Corriere della Sera, Daily Mirror, Die Welt and Daily Mail published no articles containing the expression. Almost all of the 45 articles we track in 2015 are from The New York Times (18) and The Guardian (18). Extensive reading of these articles (made possible by the small number of pieces) tells us, however, that more than two-thirds of the 45 articles speak of "fake news" with a completely different meaning to the one we know now, simply referring to a specific mode of satire. Only the remaining 9 articles, all published in English-language media, anticipate the use of the expression. In 2015, the expression was rarely employed and, in any case, was not typically used in the manner we currently understand it.

Focusing now on our corpus, between 2016 and the end of 2022, the media we analysed published a total of 30,035 articles containing the expression. The distribution over time is not uniform. It starts from 661 articles in 2016, a beginning that might seem "shy" compared

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to the following years, but in fact it is not, as almost all of these 661 articles (616 articles, to be precise, representing 93.1% of the total number of articles published that year) are concentrated in November and December (Figure 2). Then, we rise to 6,678 articles in 2017; this growth continued impetuously throughout 2018, peaking with 7,303 articles (Table 3).
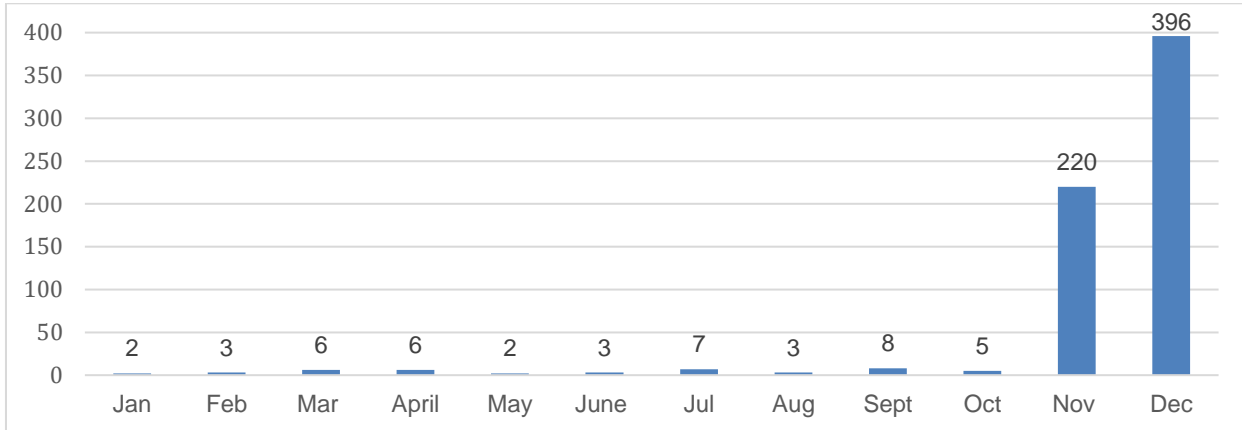

Figure 2 Distribution of articles in 2016 sorted by month (N=661).

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Ansa	30	1956	2179	1606	1695	769	850
Corriere della Sera	9	378	476	359	330	254	254
Daily Mail	8	227	173	105	96	65	156
Daily Mirror	7	187	282	213	190	111	92
Die Welt	17	168	138	92	138	74	56
El Mundo	3	75	190	144	139	88	104
El País	0	74	207	204	145	111	103
Le Figaro	4	92	262	194	138	89	99
Les Échos	4	84	157	136	101	63	61
Süddeutsche Zeitung	52	570	508	345	368	316	279
The Guardian	147	788	958	804	708	291	324
The New York Times	336	1613	1272	680	630	248	227
The Sun	18	299	427	248	165	113	94
USA Today	26	167	74	37	37	18	37
Total	661	6678	7303	5167	4880	2610	2736

Table 3 Number of articles containing the expression "fake news" in 2016–2022, sorted by media (N=30,035)

In previous tests, conducted on a more restricted corpus, we had already observed this preliminary tendency. With a larger corpus, in terms of the newspapers analysed and the time period considered, a clear decline in the quantitative use of the expression can be observed from 2019 onwards. This decline continues until 2021, exhibiting a slight downward trend between 2019 and 2020 and almost a halving between 2020 and 2021. In contrast, the data for 2022 indicate a slight increase (2,736 vs 2,610 total articles), which leads us to conclude that a quantitative stabilization of the use of the expression began in 2021.

Focusing in more detail on the trend, it is obvious that, in the sums by year in Table 3, the editorial choices of media that published a very large number of articles, e.g. Ansa, The New York Times, and The Guardian[2] assume great prominence. Subsequently, the number of

articles published annually by a specific media outlet was parameterized in relation to the total number of articles published over the entire time series by the same media outlet. In other words, the total number of articles published in the period 2016–2022 for each individual media outlet was set at 100, and then the percentage of articles published per year by the same media outlet was calculated. This process yielded a series of normalized percentages, which afforded a more accurate representation of actual usage trends over time. The normalized trend is significantly similar for all media (Figure 4).

If we apply the same normalization to the entire corpus of articles (i.e. parameterizing the number of registered articles per year to the sum of the 30,035 articles under consideration), we find that: (1) almost half of the total number of articles was published in the 2017–2018 biennium (46.5%); (2) the sharp decline in usage over time after 2018 only suffers a relative attenuation when comparing the data of 2019 and 2020 (it is possible that the emergence of the "Covid" infodemic during the course of the 2020 agenda setting contributed to this outcome.); (3) between 2021 and 2022, there is a slight counter-trend growth (+0.9%), which leads us to reflect on the stabilization of the usage of the expression already mentioned.
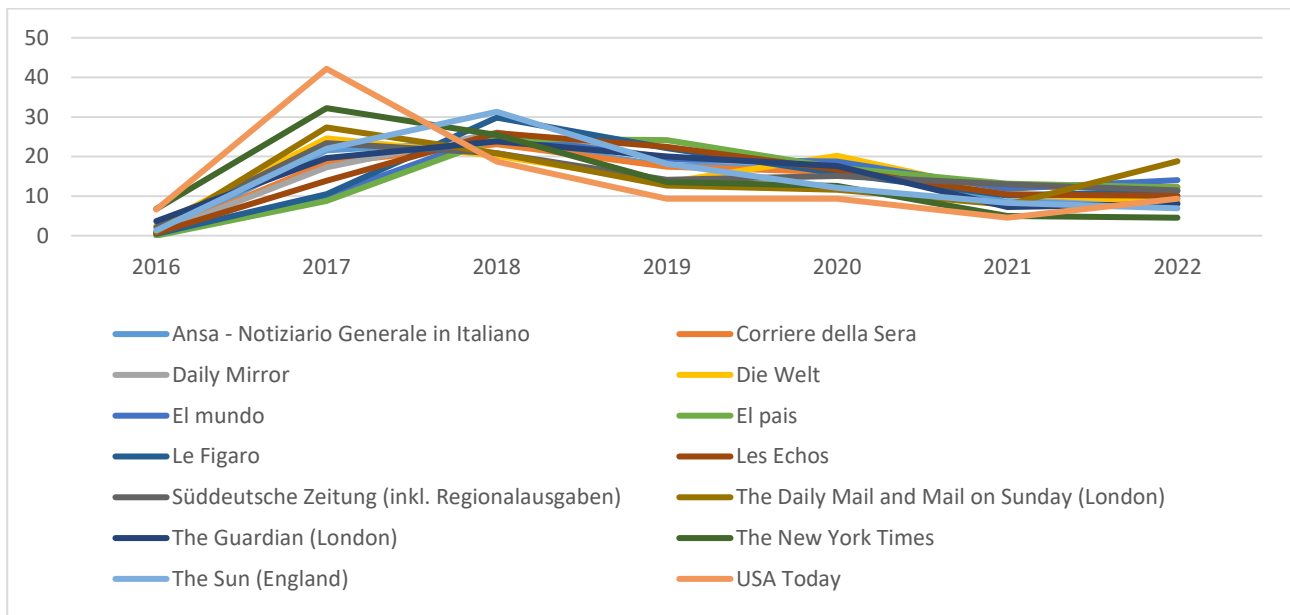

Figure 4 Temporal trend in the number of articles containing the expression over time. Annual percentage (%) compared to the total time series for each media outlet (N=30,035).

Keywords, macro-categories of meaning and development over time

In order to enhance the previously reported quantitative analysis and concentrate on the most pertinent articles in relation to our investigation, a sub-corpus of articles was identified according to the parameters of relevance, temporality and linguistic context. Specifically, a sub-corpus was created as follows: 1) the articles with the highest level of relevance related to the topic were selected, with relevance being calculated by the ranking system of the Nexis Uni database; 2) the overall corpus was sampled in three-year increments to cover

the entire time period considered in the analysis: this resulted in the focus being placed on 2016, 2019 and 2022; 3) the top 100 articles per year for each of the six languages/nations were selected. The resulting corpus of 1,800 articles, distributed evenly among the six languages/nations considered in the analysis, was subjected to a lexical search procedure with MAXQDA. This was conducted with the objective of extracting all sentences that contain the expression "fake news".

Notwithstanding the limitations inherent in these operational choices, the analysis of the frequency of words within the sub-corpus comprising all sentences containing the expression "fake news" (net of fungible words, such as conjunctions, pronouns and generic verbs) was the starting point for a synthetic reading of the concept's use, its primary associations of meaning, and their evolution over time. Table 5 presents a summary of the 20 most frequent words in association (i.e. in the same sentence) with the expression "fake news" over time.

2016			2019			2022		
Ranking	*Word*	*N° occ.*	*Ranking*	*Word*	*N° occ.*	*Ranking*	*Word*	*N° occ.*
1	facebook	392	1	media	149	1	media	101
2	election	139	2	facebook	119	2	social	69
3	media	117	3	against	108	3	against	64
4	sites	102	4	trump	108	4	spread	57
5	social	102	5	people	91	5	information	54
6	stories	102	6	president	78	6	people	54
7	spread	90	7	social	76	7	disinformation	47
8	problem	86	8	spread	67	8	law	39
9	real	70	9	campaign	53	9	trump	37
10	zuckerberg	68	10	disinformation	53	10	president	36
11	trump	67	11	information	53	11	spreading	36
12	people	64	12	political	53	12	public	34
13	story	64	13	government	52	13	networks	30
14	network	63	14	law	43	14	political	30
15	google	61	15	online	43	15	twitter	29
16	users	53	16	spreading	43	16	accused	23
17	online	52	17	fight	40	17	russia	23
18	mark	51	18	election	37	18	work	23
19	company	48	19	hate	37	19	journalists	22
20	false	48	20	internet	35	20	russian	22

Table 5 Ranking and number of occurrences of the 20 words most frequently associated with the expression "fake news"

In 2016, the top three words are "Facebook", "elections" and "media". This triplet gives a good idea of the tone of the articles of the nascent use of the expression. At the time, due to its success, Facebook was somewhat synonymous with social media. The high occurrence of words like "social" and "sites" indicates that the "early discourse on fake news" was connected to the logical world of the Web. "Media" is a generic word that can be associated with both online and offline communication. Nevertheless, the high frequency of the term "social" (in conjunction with the high number of occurrences, namely 52, within the

expression "social media", which is not shown in the table as it is a composite expression of two keywords) serves to reinforce the aforementioned assertion.

In 2019, the picture changes. The most frequent word is "media" and we find it more disassociated from the word "social" (the composite expression "social media" is less frequent, occurring a total of 34 times). "Zuckerberg" disappears from the list, where instead "Trump" (as well as "president") rises strongly. Therefore, while the logical sphere of the network still remains important, the relevance of politics and the media in general increases. In addition, a word with a negative and oppositional connotation, "against", rises sharply to third place.

In 2022, words related to the Net maintain a relative importance: "social" rises to second place and the composite expression "social media" also retains substantially the same number of mentions as in 2019 (33), although the 2022 word list has lower numbers of occurrences than the previous years. Furthermore, the disappearance of references to Facebook from the most frequent associations, and its replacement, in first place among the social media mentioned, by Twitter, a social media more specifically focused on informational dissemination, appears to be a significant development. What we observe with more interest, however, is the growth in importance of words generically related to the world of journalism (without any particular Web-related specifics) such as "information" and "disinformation", in addition to the almost 70 occurrences of the word "media" unrelated to "social". "Against" still remains very important.

Figure 6 compares the word clouds generated from the complete list of all words with at least 10 occurrences in the sub-corpus (195 words in 2016, 178 in 2019 and 86 in 2022). The decrease in the overall number of words with at least 10 occurrences, coupled with the decrease in the number of absolute occurrences of the top-ranking words for each year (both despite the fact that the number of articles analysed is the same) prompts us to observe that, over time, the "fake news discourse" has widened, become increasingly a-specific and dispersed across multiple topics, themes and arguments. The close connection with the world of the Internet and US elections of the initial phase, which led to the concentration of keywords, gives way to an increasingly high dispersion of the discourse.

Figure 6 Comparison of word clouds resulting from the full list of words related to the expression in 2016 (N=195); 2019 (N=178); and 2022 (N=86).

In order to provide a more reasoned synthesis, we tried to break down the most frequent definitions of the concept of fake news found in the literature into four different macro-categories that could represent its cornerstones from the point of view of meaning. Therefore, we searched for the words that appeared to be associated:

to the macro-category of politics (such as "Trump" or the name of other politicians or parties, the words "campaign", "president", "government", "minister", "politician" and so on);

to the macro-category of the Net (such as "Facebook" or other social sites, the same words "social", "Internet" and "Web"; as well as "online", "website", "viral", "algorithm", "digital" and so on);

to the macro-category of journalism and information in a general sense, not specifically related to the Net, such as "information", "disinformation", "journalist/ism", "press", "articles" and the word "media" itself;

to the macro-category of emotional, oppositional or negative words (such as, in addition to the aforementioned "against", "hate", "problem", "fight", "attack", "confusion", "threat", "crisis" and "conspiracy").

The sum of the number of occurrences of these words, categorized by macro-categories of meaning and parameterized to the total number of words considered for each year, allowed us to draw four trends that, even in their imperfection, give us an indication of the relative "weight" of each of these logical domains and their evolution over time (Figure 7).
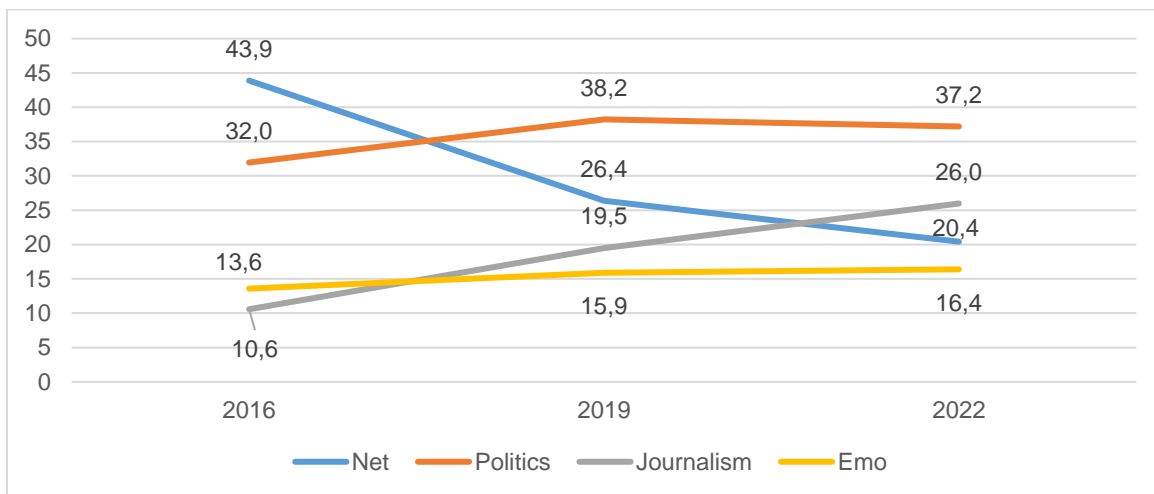

Figure 7 Relative percentage "weight" and evolution over time of different category of meaning.

In 2016, the discourse on fake news is predominantly focused on the Net, which represents the largest category of meaning associated with the concept. Politics is often included within the sentences containing the expression "fake news", but to a significantly lesser extent. This relationship reverses over time and, in 2019, it is the lemmas concerning politics that lead the scene. The gap grows in 2022, mainly due to the decreasing weight of the macro-category of the network. In a clear and regular trend, however, words referring to the macro-category of journalism, previously a minority, grow to catch up and surpass the relevance of the Net in 2022. Finally, emotional, oppositional-type words represent an

undercurrent, a minority but constant, that accompanies the entire corpus and that appears to be slightly and steadily growing, not decreasing.

Conclusions

We are aware of several limitations of our research work. These limits pertain to at least these aspects: 1) the sources analysed, only printed newspapers and in small numbers; 2) the operational choices regarding the construction of the sub-corpus and the imputation of words to the different macro-category of meaning; as well as 3) the imperfection of the machine translation of non-English sources. However, from our data, we can clearly observe that the use of the expression "fake news" in its mature sense actually has its origin in 2016, more precisely in November 2016 (RQ1). On a scientific level, we are unable to establish a causal relationship between the US election and the emergence of the use of the concept, we can only establish that they are simultaneous. However, the high number of references to this election and its supposed contamination by fake news circulating on the Net in late 2016 articles (as well as by the particular prominence of some politically aligned media on this issue, such as The New York Times) leads us to suppose that this direct relationship exists.

In the following years, the use of the term increased significantly, reaching the peak in 2018. However, its meaning and associations began to expand to encompass a wider range of realms, not only the association with the world of the Web as in the beginning, but also concepts related to the world of politics and offline journalism (RQ2). This dispersion towards fewer and fewer specific macro-categories of meaning increases again in the years of the quantitative "decline" in use, a decline which we had assumed to be definitive and which, instead, in the light of the data, seems to have stabilized after 2021 (RQ3). In 2022, moreover, references to the world of journalism overtake those related to the world of the Net, and this in our view is particularly significant. All this is coupled with a "background noise" related to oppositional, negative or emotionally charged concepts, which appears continuous throughout the corpus (indeed, in a slightly and steadily growing trend).

Born to specifically demonize information circulating on the Net and the results of an "inconvenient" election (objectives that appear to be openly pursued by some of the media analysed), the expression "fake news" expanded to increasingly broad meanings, gradually involving the whole world of political debate and the very status of information circulation in our societies, both online and offline.

The frequency of use of the concept over time (which appears to decline until 2021, before stabilizing) remains high even in the contemporary era, when it seems to have become, rather than a synonym for "hoax on the Net", a stigmatizing label that can be used at will in political and social debate to counter the validity of information, news, and opinions of those who are considered "opponents". Information, news and opinions that are in this way not only discredited in their content but also charged with a negative emotional connotation: the

opponent is inherently false, malevolently self-interested and thus, in fact, morally unworthy of being considered as a legitimate contender in a political and social debate (which should take place as theorized by Habermas, 1983). In our opinion, therefore, the extensive use of the expression "fake news", while having the positive value of focusing attention on the supposed truth or falsity of news, turned into a "rhetorical weapon" that does not benefit the public debate of our societies.

In fact, in addition to the negative effects on trust in the media and institutions, there are also the effects of the acerbicity of oppositional and stigmatizing arguments, which increasingly distance us from the open and democratic debate that would instead be crucial for a plural, effective and fair management of the many dilemmas that arise from the increased complexity of our social systems.

Biographical Note

Claudio Melchior, PhD, is Associate Professor in Sociology of Cultural and Communicative Processes at the University of Udine. His most recent publications include Use of digital resources in the Italian disability community: An exploratory study (with F. Trevisan, Monash University Press, Melbourne, 2023) and Elderly People and the Barriers to Digital Education, Italian Journal of Sociology of Education (2023). In 2022, he collaborated with Nicola Strizzolo to edit the monographic volume of the journal *Salute e Società* entitled Anziani e Industria 4.0 (Franco Angeli, Milano).

Nicola Strizzolo is an Associate Professor of Sociology of Cultural and Communicative Processes at the University of Teramo. His publications include: Relazioni pubbliche: pars comunicans della Sociologia Pubblica? (with D. Bennato), *Cambio. Rivista Sulle Trasformazioni Sociali* (2024); *La comunicazione eclettica* (with A. Pocecco and C. Melchior, Franco Angeli, Milano 2020); Narcisismo 2.0? Tra cultura, comunicazione e web society (Gutenberg, Fisciano 2020). He is the Scientific Coordinator of the Sociology and History Section of the Franco Angeli series Laboratorio Sociologico.

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Notes

[1] The *Notiziario Generale dell'Ansa* is not comparable to the print editions of the other newspapers. However, it is a particularly relevant source for the Italian media context, and its presence within the database since 2004 made its analysis particularly interesting.

[2] *Ansa*'s numbers are very high because its *Notiziario*, produced by press agency launches, contains a much higher number of articles than "mere" newspapers. The numbers of *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* seem to result from a kind of "prominence" of these media with respect to the use of the expression, which they had, as seen, already predicted in some articles in 2015.