

A family of falsehoods

Deception, media hoaxes and fake news

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Abstract

“Fake news” became a concern for journalists in 2017 as news organizations sought to differentiate themselves from false information spread via social media, websites and public officials. This essay examines the history of media hoaxing and fake news to help provide context for the current U.S. media environment. In addition, definitions of the concepts are proposed to provide clarity for researchers and journalists trying to explain these phenomena.

Keywords

journalism studies, conceptual, newspaper, United States, credibility, newspaper and online news, fake news, media hoaxing

Following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, “fake news” became the subject of much concern within journalism as news outlets sought to differentiate factual information from false material circulating via social media and the internet in general.¹ Columns and editorials bemoaning this trend emphasized the importance of traditional journalism. *USA Today* readers were told “unless we invest in journalism—at the national or local level, in print or online—fake news is all we’ll have.”² *The Longview News-Journal* in Texas called fake news “a danger to our republic” and urged readers to trust established media since “professional journalists strive to report the news fairly—and take responsibility for the accuracy of their work.”³ News

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organizations tracked down producers of fake news to find out why they do it in an attempt to make sense of this phenomenon, and the Pew Research Center conducted a fake news survey asking Americans for their views on “made-up” or “fabricated” stories.⁴

However, concern about the dissemination of false information is a recycling of history rather than a new sensation. *Columbia Journalism Review*, for example, referred to hoaxing as a “sister” to the recent fake news phenomenon.⁵ There is a rich history of hoaxes perpetrated by media actors upon an unsuspecting public. Indeed, journalism is said to have “invented the art” of hoaxing,⁶ and hoaxes have been perpetrated by journalists for as long as there has been the platform to do so.⁷ Although contemporary news articles have provided background about hoaxing while explaining the fake news phenomenon, scholarship on media hoaxes has long been absent, a state of affairs that is “both remarkable and problematic.”⁸ Recent attention to fake news and its consequences offers an opportunity to examine the relationship between news media hoaxes and fake news, particularly at a time when fake news has taken on multiple interpretations.

Given that meaningful similarities and differences between the two phenomena could be glossed over, it is important to provide conceptual scaffolding to guide future research and to help newspaper journalists explain these concepts to readers to defend themselves and their craft and, in so doing, improve media literacy. Clarity over concepts is central to research as it ensures the closest possible relationship between an abstract concept and its “real world” referent.⁹ Likewise, it is important for newspaper journalists to understand these problematic concepts, given the repercussions their usage has for their field, such as in declining trust in news media organizations and competition for reader attention, particularly on social media. This essay begins by situating news media hoaxing and fake news as “sisters” belonging to the “parent” category of mediated deception. It examines how others have defined these concepts, explores the histories of both concepts and proposes a definition of each concept. The essay concludes with suggested directions for future research.

Mediated Deception

Although news media hoaxes and fake news are dissimilar in particular ways, as will be discussed further in this essay, what they have in common is they are forms of deception through mass communication channels. Mediated deception is part of the broader category of deception. Truth-telling is considered a “default behavior”¹⁰ as it is foundational to trust, which is foundational to human communication. To trust one another, individuals must assume others are acting honestly so decision making is based on facts rather than deceit or conjecture. Deception, then, is a violation of this norm and of the “rules” governing human interaction, and is thus considered harmful interpersonal behavior.¹¹ For this reason, Bok argues truth-telling requires no moral justification whereas deception does.¹² However, research shows deception to be common in everyday life.¹³

At its most basic level, a deceptive message is one “knowingly transmitted by a sender to foster a false belief or conclusion by the receiver.”¹⁴ Of course, not all forms of deception are alike. Research focusing on the “deceiver” emphasizes how deception occurs due to a range of complex motivations, such as the achievement or preservation of power, avoidance of conflict or need to save face.¹⁵ On the contrary, research

focusing on the “deceived” has underlined the subjective nature of deception and the potential mismatch between the intent behind a deceptive communication and how it is received, making the drawing of definitional lines difficult and subjective.¹⁶ Bryant suggests five factors to differentiate types of deception: Intention (the deceiver’s motivation), Consequences (the extent and severity of a given deception), Beneficiary (who a deception is intended to benefit), Truthfulness (the degree of truth present) and Acceptability (the extent to which a given deception could be tolerated).¹⁷

Within mass communication, the deceiver’s role matters greatly. For example, truth-telling is considered sacrosanct to journalism, and journalists are said to possess “a greater responsibility to tell the truth than most professions.”¹⁸ Despite this, journalistic deception occurs, and Lasorsa and Dai identify seven types: full fabrication (total fabrication of a news event), fact fabrication (fabrication of particular elements of a story), dateline fabrication (where the reporter was not present at the scene they were identified as being), source fabrication (invention of a source), quote fabrication (falsifying a quote), plagiarism (duplication of another’s work) and the use of undisclosed bylines (where work by others is not accurately attributed).¹⁹ Lee suggests evaluations of journalistic deception depend on three factors: who is deceived (newsmakers or the audience), the perceived nature of the person deceived (whether they are deemed to be “good” or “bad”) and the nature of the act (deception through omission or commission).²⁰

It is beyond the reach of this essay to comprehensively map out the nuances of mediated deception, given the vastness of this field. However, the task at hand is to address the relationship between media hoaxes and fake news as members of the “family” of mediated deception. These phenomena are explored next, by way of explanation of these concepts.

Examining Media Hoaxing

Walsh writes the word “hoax” originated in 1808 but traces back a few hundred years earlier to the phrase “hocus pocus.” This phrase was “considered a parody of *hoc est corpus*, which a Catholic priest would intone during the Eucharist as the host underwent transubstantiation.”²¹ However, Harwood believes the English version of the word came about in 1796 and said there is little evidence of its connection to *hocus*.²²

Beyond disagreements over its origin, scholars also vary in their explications of “hoax,” with some more specific than others:

*Often a hoax is defined as a deception by which an amusing or mischievous untruth comes to be believed. Sometimes a hoax is taken to be anything believed by fraud or deception. Yet other times a hoax is defined as something meant to trick or fool. You might see a hoax in an intent of the hoaxer, or in an effect upon the hoaxee, or both.*²³

MacDougall defines a hoax as “a deliberately concocted untruth made to masquerade as truth” as he discusses the value of studying how hoaxes influence public opinion.²⁴ This definition is still vague, yet establishes the parameters that a hoax involves more than a single target and is aimed at swaying how people think. Powell adds to this

definition by arguing inequitable power relations are central to hoaxes, as the deceiver is exercising power over the deceived.²⁵ Fedler's book, *Media Hoaxes*, offers one of the most complete examinations of hoaxing. Dictionaries often state "a hoax involves deception: that it deludes, fools, hoodwinks or misleads its victims."²⁶ However, Fedler differentiates hoaxing from these other acts of deception by arguing hoaxes "are usually created to entertain—not cheat—the public. Thus, the hoaxes are a form of practical joking, but on a grand scale."²⁷ Journalists who create hoaxes think of themselves as entertainers, not as "liars or cheats nor even as fakers."²⁸ Therefore, thus far, central characteristics of hoaxing are untruths framed as truths, someone in a position of power over a public and influence via entertainment.

Defining a news media hoax involves addressing what hoaxing is not as much as what hoaxing is, since the concept is often aligned with other terms, such as pranks and practical jokes. Pranks, such as whoopee cushions or short-sheeted beds, tend to involve just a few individuals:

However, if a prank attracts the attention of a wide public audience it can rise to the level of a hoax. For instance, making a prank phone call to a friend might generate a few laughs but it will never be reported on the front page of the paper. It will always remain just a prank. But making a prank phone call to the queen of England, and broadcasting that call over the radio to millions of people, certainly would raise that prank to the level of a hoax.²⁹

Building upon prior definitions, Boese also points out hoaxes are not about making money. Rather, "hoaxes touch on something deeper" and are a "strong incentive to shape public opinion and to attract the public's attention."³⁰ He writes that not any act of deception qualifies as a hoax:

[T]o become a hoax a lie must have something extra. It must be somehow outrageous, ingenious, dramatic or sensational. Most of all, it must command the attention of the public. A hoax, then, is a deliberately deceptive act that has succeeded in capturing the attention (and, ideally, the imagination) of the public. The key word in this definition is "public." In my opinion, there is no such thing as a private hoax.³¹

Therefore, magnitude and sensation become factors to consider in creating a definition for hoaxing.

Walsh provides a more recent definition by arguing hoaxing applies "to any situation in which the public initially mistakes an object or communication. It also connotes a sense that someone has intended this misapprehension."³² Walsh also differentiates hoaxes from fraud by noting hoaxes are eventually publicized, whereas the aim of fraud is not to be discovered. Therefore, scholars have arrived at some consensus on the concept, yet a simplified definition remains elusive.

History of Media Hoaxes

In the 1700s and early 1800s, hoaxes tended to be means for critiquing society and proving a point. One of the first known American hoaxes occurred in 1708 when noted

author Jonathan Swift, using the pseudonym Isaac Bickerstaff, used an almanac to publicly predict the death of astrologer John Partridge.³³ Swift later wrote the prediction came true and continued to insist Partridge was dead, infuriating Partridge, who was still alive. Swift disliked Partridge,³⁴ but one theory holds that Swift also intended to embarrass “the gullible readers who believed in astrology,”³⁵ using the hoax to critique belief in pseudoscience.

Other famous Americans also created early media hoaxes in efforts to provoke public enlightenment. Benjamin Franklin created a speech published in 1747 said to be from the court hearing of “Polly Baker.” Franklin wanted to point out the double standard of women, but not men, being punished for having children outside of marriage.³⁶ Franklin also concocted hoaxes to criticize British policies for the American colonies and to attack religious intolerance, slavery and witchcraft.³⁷ Therefore, Franklin used hoaxing as an attempt to make people think more about societal injustices: “It became a means of educating and enlightening people and of improving the human condition itself.”³⁸ This same reasoning applied to media hoaxes generated by Mark Twain and Edgar Allan Poe in the 19th century. In 1862, Twain wrote a newspaper story about “a fully intact fossilized man.”³⁹ Similar to the Swift case, Twain’s hoax came at a time when science—not all of it legitimate—was on the rise:

Hoaxers such as Poe and Twain exploited reader assumptions about science and science news to fool their readers . . . then, by revealing the hoaxes . . . the authors exposed the unconscious expectations the public had about science as a vehicle to the Truth and implied that those expectations were unwarranted.⁴⁰

This justification for hoaxing began to wane in the mid-1800s when publishing hoaxes instead became a means for entertainment and increasing newspaper sales.⁴¹ Since these years coincided with the eras of the “penny press” and “yellow journalism,” it is not surprising media hoaxes became more common. One of Poe’s most notable hoaxes was an 1844 story in the *New York Sun* claiming a British man crossed the Atlantic Ocean in a balloon in three days.⁴² The paper’s circulation for the day hit a record.⁴³ In the mid-1800s, advances in printing technology and more advertising revenue meant newspapers could be produced faster and cheaper at a price affordable to the general public.⁴⁴ Due to pressure to come up with good stories, “reporters began to stretch the truth, to stress their stories’ most sensational angles, to invent more interesting details and to exaggerate until some stories became works of fiction.”⁴⁵

How could the press get away with this? For one, readers’ isolation and lack of education made fooling them easier.⁴⁶ Journalists also used tactics making it difficult to verify hoaxes, such as writing about famous people or incidents in other countries. They also wrote about topics of contemporary interest, thereby making the hoaxes appear feasible.⁴⁷ One of the most noteworthy hoaxes of the mid-1800s involved all of these tactics. In 1835, Richard Adams Locke wrote a series for the *New York Sun* claiming a noted astronomer saw “moon bison, man bats, moon poppies and moon beavers” through his telescope.⁴⁸ The fact that news organizations continued to produce hoaxes suggests there was no significant public backlash against them. Furthermore, “the public loved sensation,”⁴⁹ a statement supported by readership numbers in the penny press and yellow journalism eras.

As journalism shifted to the professionalization era in the early 1900s, the press began to self-regulate and the acceptability of producing hoaxes declined. The rise of

objectivity as a journalistic standard and industry backlash for deceiving audiences shifted hoaxing culture as “the media’s new owners and managers fear that a hoax would anger the public . . . (who) might cancel their subscriptions . . . or might file thousands of lawsuits.”⁵⁰ Yet a journalistic practice with 200 years of history would not diminish quickly. Newspapers still use April Fool’s Day as an excuse for hoaxing readers. For example, in 1957, a newspaper in Illinois told readers that drillers found oil on the local courthouse grounds.⁵¹ In 1984, another Illinois newspaper ran a “contest” promising prizes to “whoever saves the most daylight”⁵² after Daylight Saving Time began. Journalists who take advantage of April Fool’s Day for hoaxes tend to say the practice is “fun” and that readers approve,⁵³ adding another journalistic justification for publishing false information.

It is ironic that journalism—a “discipline of verification”⁵⁴ that cherishes truth as its “god term”⁵⁵—has been key to the development of hoaxing, from journalism’s formative years onward.

Defining Media Hoaxing

Taking into consideration the above, this essay identifies three key components to defining media hoaxing: awareness of falsehood, intent and scale.

Awareness of Falsehood

Deception involves two parties: the message sender and the receiver. To qualify as a media hoax, the message sender must be aware of the message’s falsehood and the message receiver must be unaware. Therefore, a hoax does not include an innocent mistake of falsehood from the message sender, such as error of fact in reporting or the dissemination of false information from a third party. In such cases, media may play a role in magnifying a falsehood but they are not, at the point of dissemination, aware of the false nature of the communication.

With regard to the message receiver, the distinction lies in whether or not the audience is “in on the joke” since this would be classified as satire rather than hoaxing. For example, viewers of “The Colbert Report,” where comedian Stephen Colbert assumed the role of a right-wing cable news host, are aware Colbert is playing a role and are sharing in the joke. In other cases, audiences may not be aware of the false nature of the communication. The website *Literally Unbelievable*, for example, provides numerous examples of individuals who have taken the content of the satirical news site *The Onion* at face value. Audiences occasionally have mistakenly taken fictional narratives as factual, as in the case of Orson Welles’s radio reading of “The War of the Worlds.” However, the message senders in these cases believed the message receivers were aware this material was not true and did not intend for them to believe false information.

Intent

To qualify as a media hoax, the message sender must intend for an audience to believe false information. As noted in the historical examination, hoaxers had specific

reasons for publishing false information, such as to enlighten the public, to increase circulation or to have fun. As previously noted, the general goal of media hoaxes is “to entertain—not cheat—the public.”⁵⁶ Journalists who hoax aim to amuse and tend to later admit when they have hoaxed an audience.⁵⁷ Through this revelation, the success of a hoax lies in its ability to fool its audience into “admitting the inconsistency or poor foundation of its assumptions about what holds true in the world.”⁵⁸ The “good intentions,” so to speak, of the message sender distinguishes media hoaxers from journalistic fabricators such as Stephen Glass and Janet Cooke who engaged in deception that fools not only the audience but also the other parties involved in sending the message. The history of hoaxing indicates the intent behind the practice has generally been to entertain or, less frequently, to inform (albeit in an entertaining manner). Put another way, deception is the means rather than the ends.

Scale

The third critical component to defining media hoaxing is scale, which refers to the level of public spectacle of a falsehood. A media hoax requires the channels of mass communication to achieve its ends. Indeed, to talk of a nonmediated hoax is a misnomer since, as noted above, “there is no such thing as a private hoax.”⁵⁹ Hoaxes are further differentiated from fraud in that hoaxes are publicized, whereas the aim of fraud is not to be discovered.⁶⁰ A hoax exists to be read or viewed, publicized and believed by as large of an audience as possible. This contrasts with a prank or practical joke, which is limited in public scale in that it affects very few people, often just an individual. A media hoax, by contrast, affects a larger number of people and is more ambitious.⁶¹ It is through sheer scale that a hoax is elevated above a prank. This underlines the importance of *media* to *hoaxing*, for media provide the channels for a hoax to be disseminated to a large audience and also provide the context for deception to occur, as the originator of the hoax must possess some level of credibility to be believed in the first place.

Therefore, a media hoax is a form of deceptive communication characterized by (1) awareness on the part of the hoaxer and lack of awareness on the part of the hoaxee, (2) intent to entertain (or inform through entertainment) and (3) scale. Drawing on the above characteristics, a media hoax is the intentional deception of a mass audience by professional media actors via a sensational communication that appears credible but is designed to entertain (or, less commonly, educate through entertainment) and is eventually revealed to be false. How this compares and contrasts with “fake news” is explored next.

Examining Fake News

Although “fake news” may not have as long of a history as hoaxing, the more recent phenomenon also is already encumbered with competing definitions. Although the term has previously been used by scholars to describe political satire like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*,⁶² beginning in the mid-2010s, and especially since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, it has been used to describe the purposeful dissemination of false information by partisan websites. For example, Allcott and Gentzkow define fake news as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably

false and could mislead readers”⁶³ while Johnson and Kelling define fake news as “content that is deliberately false and published on websites that mimic traditional news websites.”⁶⁴ Similarly, Brennen defines fake news as “made-up news, manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are designed to deceive us.”⁶⁵ Bakir and McStay define the concept as “either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or context,”⁶⁶ arguing that fake news can have toxic consequences for democracy by misinforming citizens, keeping them shuttered in informational echo chambers and amplifying their sense of outrage. Notably, the term has also been used in public discourse as a means of attacking legitimate news organizations when their reporting is deemed overly critical of a given figure or party.⁶⁷

Fake news is not, by any reasonable standard, “news” but rather an attempt to deceive through the mimicry of traditional journalism. A review of the scholarly literature by Tandoc, Zim and Ling finds that fake news “appropriates the look and feel of real news; from how websites look; to how articles are written; to how photos include attributions.” Furthermore, they point out, “fake news hides under a veneer of legitimacy as it takes on some form of credibility by trying to appear like real news.”⁶⁸ How fake news became such a popular phenomenon in a short amount of time is due to its historical context.

History of Fake News

The rise of fake news in its current form in the 2010s was made possible due to the rise of the internet as a source of information and the ability for anyone to post content online to reach an audience.⁶⁹ Previously, journalists at news organizations had primary control over gatekeeping, or “the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day.”⁷⁰ Lack of access to wide distribution channels and the costs affiliated with doing so prevented those outside of established media outlets from generating sizable audiences or revenue.⁷¹ However, the launch of Facebook and Twitter to the general public in 2006 and software that allowed anyone to create a website erased the cost and access burdens for mass publication.⁷² As with any technological development, these innovations took time to catch on with the public. Early adapters of these sites were teenagers and young adults, with the number of older adults using social media gradually increasing over the past decade.⁷³ By the time of the divisive 2016 U.S. presidential election, 77 percent of adults using the internet used social network sites compared with 16 percent in 2006.⁷⁴ As a result, millions of people are now able to share content widely without prior fact checking and “an individual user with no track record or reputation can in some cases reach as many readers as Fox News, CNN or *The New York Times*.”⁷⁵ Fake news soared during the U.S. presidential election not only due to ease of distribution access but also due to a decline in trust in the news media, an increasing ability for the public to filter information that aligns with their beliefs and a lack of news literacy.⁷⁶ Ken Paulson, president of the Newseum Institute’s First Amendment Center, also believes a primary factor in the rise of fake news has been “the reluctance of the public to pay for information and the subsequent decline of traditional news media.”⁷⁷ Since consumers are reluctant to pay for news, they opt for what they can find for free online, creating public demand for information regardless of accuracy.

Defining Fake News

Fake news shares the same three critical concepts as media hoaxing: awareness of falsehood, intent and scale. As a result, the two concepts are easily blurred. Both involve awareness on the part of the deceiver and lack of awareness on the part of the audience, an intent to disseminate false information with sensational elements and the channels of mass communication to reach a large audience. Much like the believability of a media hoax derives from the hoaxer's credibility as a trusted source of information, the believability of fake news derives from its imitation of journalism.

Yet there are two critical differences between these "sisters" of falsehood: the actors involved and the specifics of their intent. Whereas professional media actors (i.e., those whose occupation involves the use of mass media, such as journalists, writers, deejays, entertainers etc.) create hoaxes, nonmedia actors create fake news. Media hoaxes aim to entertain or educate, using deception as a means to an end. For fake news, deception is the end in itself, as the aim is to manipulate. Another important, and related, difference lies in the admission of falsity; whereas the actors behind media hoaxes reveal information was false, creators of fake news rarely publicize their identities or "correct" their audiences. Therefore, fake news is *the intentional deception of a mass audience by nonmedia actors via a sensational communication that appears credible but is designed to manipulate and is not revealed to be false.*

Conclusion

This essay began by considering media hoaxes and fake news using the metaphor of a family, where the parent category is mediated deception. Following this motif, it could be said these concepts are similar in key ways but distinct in their intended outcome and motivations, cementing their relationship as "sisters." A deeper analysis of how the news media have defined these concepts to the public would be useful, as well as interviews with members of the public as to how they define fake news and determine what is fake and what is not when reading information online. Such research would be helpful in determining the "threshold" components, so to speak, in how audiences ascribe journalistic standing to particular actors, organizations and content. More generally, developing a model that identifies similarities and differences among types of mediated deception, using the framework of awareness, intent and scale suggested here, would help sharpen conceptual clarity in this area. For newspaper journalists, developing and supporting media literacy efforts is critical to reestablish trust and combat the influence of fake news on public opinion.⁷⁸ By having a better understanding of media hoaxing and fake news, newspaper journalists will hopefully be better equipped to, in turn, educate the public.

Editors' Note

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