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Fake News, Epistemic Coverage and Trust

SHANE RYAN

Abstract

This article makes the case that a deficit or absence of trust in media sources to report on newsworthy items facilitates acceptance of fake news. The article begins by identifying the sort of fake news that is of interest for the purposes of this article. Epistemic coverage is then explained—in particular, how an individual's expectations about their epistemic environment can lead them to accepting or rejecting claims. The article explains that when an individual believes that mainstream media report on what is deemed newsworthy, it follows that an individual will have grounds to dismiss a newsworthy claim that has not been reported upon—such as a claim made by fake news. Trust—which has both a believed competence requirement and a believed goodwill requirement—is then discussed as part of this explanation. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the argument for regulating mainstream media.

Keywords: fake news, coverage, trust, epistemology, media, public discourse

Fake news

FAKE NEWS has been the subject of recent public and academic debate. The increase in attention paid to fake news has coincided with a decline in traditional media, a proliferation of media on the internet, and widespread viewing and circulation of media stories via social media. Within the analytic philosophical discussion of fake news, a number of scholars have offered rival definitions of fake news. Michel Croce and Tommaso Piazza hold that fake news involves its creators thinking that they do not have 'sufficient evidence in favor of what they divulge and they fail to display the appropriate attitude towards the truth of the information they share'.¹ For Axel Gelfert, fake news is 'the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design'.² Whereas Rini defines a fake news report as 'one that purports to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage, yet is known

by its creators to be significantly false, and is transmitted with the two goals of being widely re-transmitted and of deceiving at least some of its audience'.³ This is the strongest of the three in a number of respects, including the requirement that fake news is transmitted with the goal of being widely re-transmitted. Other theorists have charged that the academic focus on fake news is inappropriate. Habgood-Coote makes the case that the term 'fake news' lacks a stable public meaning.⁴ In support of that position is the fact that the term has only very recently become popularised and is being used in a variety of ways, including as a slur.

While we do need some means of fixing the scope of discussion, my purpose here is neither to attempt a competing analysis nor make the case for giving up on an analysis. Instead, I offer a necessary condition for fake news. Offering this necessary condition is more modest than attempting to provide a full analysis of fake news. Given the lack of consensus on the topic, however, a more modest approach with which many theorists working on the topic can agree as a starting point seems beneficial.

¹M. Croce and T. Piazza, 'Misinformation and intentional deception: a novel account of fake news', in N. Snow and M. S. Vaccarezza, eds., *Virtues, Democracy, and Online Media: Ethical and Epistemic Issues*, Abingdon, Routledge, forthcoming.

²A. Gelfert, 'Fake news: a definition', *Informal Logic*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2018, pp. 84–117.

³R. Rini, 'Fake news and partisan epistemology', *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2017.

⁴J. Habgood-Coote, 'Stop talking about fake news!', *Inquiry*, vol. 62, nos. 9–10, 2019, pp. 1033–1065.

The proposed necessary condition is: information presented as news that falls short of the (procedural) standards for news. Such a requirement captures at least one thing that seems to go wrong in cases of fake news. Information is presented in the trappings of news and gains the associated perception of authority that such trappings tend to generate. Nevertheless, in cases of fake news, such a perception of authority is undeserved. A simple explanation for this is that the procedural standards required for news haven't been followed, so what is being presented as news is undeserving of that title.

The necessary condition proposed leaves us with a wide scope as to what might be considered as fake news. For my purposes here, however, I'm interested in extreme cases of fake news. By extreme cases I mean news stories that claim, without good journalistic foundation, that the world is radically different from how it is presented by mainstream media sources. These are the kinds of news stories that claim that Australia doesn't exist, 9/11 was an inside job, Pizzagate happened, Covid-19 is either a hoax or a political conspiracy to reduce the world population. From an epistemological point of view, these stories are particularly interesting as they are the sort of stories that suggest radical divergence in worldviews.

The thesis

The main claim of this article is that a deficit or absence of trust in media sources to report on newsworthy items facilitates acceptance of fake news. Here, I say acceptance rather than belief. The thought is that consumers of fake news will sometimes wholeheartedly believe what they read. In some cases though, they may attest to fake news claims and share them with others without it being completely clear whether they really believe the claims. For some of the more outlandish fake news claims, one wonders whether they would hold firm to the belief, say that the earth is flat, if they thought for some reason their life depended on it. Here, my suggestion is not that there is some intent to deceive others; rather, I'm merely recognising that sometimes people espouse claims and identify with in-group beliefs without much consideration or challenge. In such cases it is not always clear

whether the relevant beliefs have actually formed. Ultimately, however, not much will depend on the distinction between belief and acceptance in this article.

I take my explanation that acceptance of fake news is a result of an absence or deficit of trust to be only part of the story. There may be cases where the epistemic environment supports belief in the fake news claim. An epistemic environment is constituted by facts, whether social or physical, that bear on epistemic attainment (gaining knowledge, understanding, and so on) in that environment.⁵ Of course, such a case wouldn't count as the radical sort of fake news case that is of interest here. The claim is that in the radical fake news case, the individual who accepts fake news is somehow going against what their epistemic environment supports in a significant respect. To understand what an epistemic environment supports in a significant respect, we need to understand the idea of coverage. To understand how such an individual who accepts fake news goes against what their epistemic environment supports in a significant respect, we need to understand trust.

The approach taken here is to present an understanding of the key concepts of fake news, coverage, and trust. I make the case that by understanding these concepts, we can better understand how one can accept radical fake news. The approach assumes a certain level of background rationality of those who accept fake news in a way that will soon become apparent. I make the case that in the normal course of events, epistemic coverage would lead an individual to reject radical fake news claims, but that this wouldn't be expected in cases in which the individual does not believe in the competence or goodwill of those who typically provide her epistemic coverage. While my discussion focusses on the relationship between fake news, coverage and trust, other work has discussed the relationship between coverage and rumour.⁶

⁵S. Ryan, 'Epistemic environmentalism', *Journal of Philosophical Research*, vol. 43, 2018, pp. 97–112.

⁶A. Gelfert, 'Coverage-reliability, epistemic dependence, and the problem of rumor-based belief', *Philosophia*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2013, pp. 763–786.

What is epistemic coverage?

First, it is standard in epistemology to hold that knowledge that ‘P’ requires a true belief that ‘P’ but a true belief that ‘P’ alone is not sufficient for knowledge. Epistemic coverage is the idea that one can be justified in belief ‘P’, given that if ‘P’ were not true one would have heard about it.⁷ I can know, for example, that President Biden did not die yesterday, as I read the news today and had he died yesterday, I would have heard about it. In other words, if it were true, then I would have heard about it by now; therefore it’s not true. In fact, this reasoning supports my continued belief in many claims about the world. Similarly, a positive rendition of coverage is also possible. I have learnt something at one point and my continued belief enjoys epistemic justification on the basis that if it were no longer true, then I would have heard about it. Epistemic coverage need not only relate to items that can be expected to be covered by the media; it can also relate to personal matters. Dana believes that her partner Aslan went to the office as usual yesterday. She saw Aslan yesterday evening and if he hadn’t gone to the office, then she would have heard about it.

Such epistemic coverage depends on one’s epistemic environment. More generally, what one can know on the basis of not having heard otherwise can be expected to vary from one epistemic environment to another. Similarly, one’s perception as to what one is justified in believing depends on one’s perception of one’s epistemic environment. One may believe that Biden didn’t die yesterday because one thinks that one’s epistemic environment is such that one has exposure to news sources that inform audiences of such newsworthy items like the death of a president or, for example, a very large earthquake in Portugal. Essentially, one has a view about the epistemic workings of the environment (or environments) one inhabits.

Of course, on some matters it is reasonable to hold the view that sometimes one can’t rely on one’s epistemic environment in this sort of way. I don’t, for example, expect that if my friend missed his flight back to Dublin, then it would have been reported on the news. This

point can be rendered as: even if it were true, then I wouldn’t have heard about it (from mainstream media sources), and therefore it might or might not be true. This is entirely reasonable. After all, whether my friend caught his flight or not is not a newsworthy item.

Nevertheless, one might hold a view, say if one lives in a dictatorship with strict media control and censorship, that even newsworthy items might not make the news. For example, one may reasonably hold that if a government official has stolen billions of euros from the country, then one wouldn’t have heard about it. Yet, one doesn’t have to live under a dictatorship with strict media controls to think that, on certain matters, one’s epistemic environment is such that it won’t provide coverage for certain propositions from mainstream media sources, be those propositions newsworthy or not.

There are a couple points to take from the previous discussion. One can have a justified belief about a proposition on the basis of epistemic coverage. However, one may think that one lacks coverage for belief in particular propositions. In fact, one may think that one’s epistemic environment is such that mainstream media will not report or even hide certain events. If one encounters claims that such events have taken place, then the absence or, in some cases, even the denial of these claims from mainstream sources may not deter belief.

Similarly the following may hold: Even if ‘P’ isn’t true, I would hear that ‘P’ is true, therefore ‘P’ may or may not be true. Thinking the above may be entirely reasonable in some circumstances. Think again about the financial misbehaviour by authorities in the dictatorship case. One shouldn’t expect to get such news, and, in the absence of such news, one shouldn’t therefore think that financial misbehaviour isn’t happening. Similarly one may expect to hear that the leader is doing a great job, even if it isn’t true. Whether these ways of thinking could apply in a democratic society with an open press depends on the specific epistemic environment and the specific proposition (as indeed it does in the non-democratic cases). Even in a democracy, it’s conceivable that some newsworthy stories won’t be covered because of the perceived interests or commitments of relevant parties.

These aspects of coverage outlined above influence uptake in news, some of it fake, from

⁷S. Goldberg, ‘The division of epistemic labor’, *Episteme*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2011, pp. 112–125.

non-traditional news media sources. To understand why—even in relatively open, democratic societies—there is such a perception, it is helpful to understand trust. By understanding trust or the lack thereof, we can better understand why an individual might hold that even if ‘P’ is true (and newsworthy), ‘P’ would not be reported. More specifically, by understanding the nature of trust, we can understand the basis for thinking that a particular newsworthy item won’t be covered, even if it’s true.

Trust

It is my claim that generally, a deficit or absence of trust (or even active distrust) accounts for the difference between the cases in which one believes one has coverage and the cases in which one believes that one lacks coverage. To understand how this works, we need to understand the nature of trust. The focus in what follows is not on trusting as a character trait, but rather on what it is for one individual to trust another individual or organisation with respect to a particular matter, or S trusts T to X. Ultimately, we’re interested in whether S trusts mainstream media to cover newsworthy items.

Whether an individual trusts another individual or organisation to do something depends on that individual’s psychology and not necessarily on whether they should in fact trust that other person. As such, trusting depends on the perceptions of the trusting individual rather than some standard independent of that. This point is important for our discussion of epistemic coverage, where an epistemic environment may be such as to provide justificatory support for belief in a particular proposition, although an individual’s psychology may be such that they hold that the epistemic environment provides no such support, and as a result they fail to believe the relevant proposition.

As is standardly accepted in the literature on trust, trust requires a belief that an individual or organisation is competent in the relevant respect, say, to do X.⁸ If one doesn’t believe another person to be competent to do something, then one can’t trust them to do that

⁸C. McLeod, ‘Trust’, in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2015.

thing. So, for example, I can’t trust you to drive me to the meeting if I believe you don’t know how to drive. Of course, one can believe that one is competent to do X without trusting one to do X. So, S may believe that T, his worst enemy, is competent to look after his plants. Belief in that competence, however, isn’t sufficient for S to trust T to do this. Something more is needed. Exactly what is needed is the tricky part for analyses of trust and is the subject of much discussion.

Annette Baier proposes a goodwill requirement that, while influential, faces a number of criticisms. She argues that ‘[t]rust ... is reliance on others’ competence and willingness to look after, rather than harm things one cares about which are entrusted to their care’.⁹ The relationship between the trusting and the trusted can be characterised, then, as one of reliance on the part of the trusting on the trusted, according to Baier. Goodwill is couched in terms of a willingness of another to look after something about which the trusting individual cares. Indeed, an implication of Baier’s view is that trust can only arise when something one cares about is at stake. This makes sense of the sort of the feelings of being let down or betrayed that often arise when trust goes wrong. Those responses wouldn’t be present in cases in which one doesn’t care what the other person does.

Baier’s goodwill account, however, has faced a number of objections. We’ll focus on Holton’s trickster objection before turning to an alternative goodwill account that has the resources to respond to his objection. This discussion of goodwill, as we shall see later, is of particular relevance to cases in which individuals don’t trust mainstream media to cover some newsworthy items and may even believe that they will, in certain cases, cover up or provide dishonest testimony. Richard Holton describes a trickster case as a challenge for a goodwill requirement.¹⁰ The trickster tricks his mark by relying on their goodwill and competence to do what he, the trickster, wants the mark to do. The requirement for trust appears to be satisfied, and yet, it seems a

⁹A. Baier, ‘Trust and antitrust’, *Ethics*, vol. 96, no. 2, 1986, 231–260.

¹⁰R. Holton, ‘Deciding to trust, coming to believe’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 72, no. 1, 1994, pp. 63–76.

mistake to say that the trickster trusts his mark in the relevant respect. Zac Cogley sets out a trickster case which helps illustrates the point:

Madoff has found that emphasizing how a deal will help him in some way makes his potential victims more likely to take the bait. He tells a particular potential victim that he has a great investment opportunity and most of the capital already raised to go forward, but not quite enough. Madoff makes it clear to his mark that he needs her money to make the deal happen, or their great opportunity will be missed. He beseeches her, on behalf of himself and his other investors, to invest in the scheme with him.¹¹

Madoff, as described above, genuinely has the relevant belief in the competence of his mark to make him (Madoff) money. Judging by the approach he takes, he may also really believe that his mark has (or perhaps will have after some persuasion) a ‘good will’ towards helping him make money. This appears to be a solid counter-example to Baier’s goodwill requirement.

Whether the Madoff example works as a counter-example depends on how goodwill is understood. An alternative way of understanding it is as approval of will—‘good’ simply expresses approval.¹² Having goodwill as a requirement for trusting an individual or organisation to do something would then be understood as requiring that the trusting individual approves of what she is disposed to believe is the will of the trusted individual or organisation. A feature of this way of thinking about goodwill is that it allows for the possibility of trust among thieves. But if this is right, then the Madoff case and other standard trickster cases are no longer counter-examples to a goodwill account of trust. The trickster won’t believe that the will of the person who is being conned is the will to have. After all, the person is being conned.

Indeed, understanding the goodwill requirement as approval of will predicts the right results in other cases too. Consider the estranged couple case raised by Holton.¹³ Holton’s very plausible

thought is that one member of an estranged couple can trust the other member to look after their child. He uses the example to make the point that the object of goodwill can’t simply be directed at the person trusted. After all, the couple are estranged; they don’t have goodwill towards one another. On my account, however, one member of an estranged couple can trust the other to look after their child because when it comes to that matter, looking after their child, that member is disposed to believe that the other has goodwill, a will of which they approve, for the task. So while the trusting individual is generally negatively disposed to the other, this doesn’t prevent a trust relation in a quite specific matter. An implication relevant for our purposes is that an individual may trust mainstream media to report news, even if she disagrees with their editorial stances. The analysis of trust that we’re left with is as follows: S trusts T to X if, and only if, S dispositionally believes T is competent to do X, and S approves of what she dispositionally believes is the will of T to do X, where X is something about which S cares.¹⁴

Application to fake news

As stated above, a deficit or absence of trust can partly explain acceptance of fake news, such as Pizzagate, and so on. How does this work? In normal cases, encountering claims that suggest that the world is radically different than the mainstream media presents it would be dismissed. In fact, in good cases individuals believe that they have epistemic coverage from mainstream media sources for newsworthy items, such that they believe that if newsworthy item ‘P’ was true, they would have heard about it by now from those sources, and therefore they believe ‘P’ is not true. Therefore, in the good cases, mainstream media are trusted to report newsworthy items. They are believed to have the competence and goodwill to do so. Of course, individuals don’t have to believe that on each issue, each and every mainstream media source has goodwill, but only—in order to believe that they have coverage for newsworthy items—that some mainstream media

¹¹Z. Cogley, ‘Trust and the trickster problem’, *Analytic Philosophy*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2012, pp. 30–47.

¹²S. Ryan, ‘Trust: a recipe’, *Think*, vol. 17, no. 50, 2018, pp. 113–125.

¹³Holton, ‘Deciding to trust’.

¹⁴Ryan, ‘Trust: a recipe’.

sources that they are exposed to will report such items.

In the bad cases, however, the individual doesn't believe themselves to have coverage such that if something newsworthy has occurred, then they would have heard about it from mainstream media. Therefore, an absence of reporting, and in some cases even denials from mainstream media sources, does not mean that they should think it hasn't happened. They don't trust mainstream media sources to report newsworthy items in the first place. This is why a newsworthy story from an unknown source won't be ruled out on the basis that it hasn't appeared, or is denied, in the mainstream media. In fact, the story may be encountered and, especially if we're by default credulous beings, may well be believed.

An obvious question that arises here is whether it is inevitable that, in a politically polarised country, people will believe that they lack coverage from mainstream media sources, and so it is inevitable that there will be a tendency for some parts of the population to be more ready to accept fake news. Based on the analysis of trust, the answer is that it is not inevitable. In the discussion above, we saw that trust even between hostile parties is possible. The estranged divorced couple can trust one another to look after their children. The implication is that it is not a requirement of trust that one believes the other party is friendly to one or generally on one's side. Aside from a belief that the other party has the relevant competence, what is needed is that one believes the other party has a good will, one that you approve of, towards the relevant task. Nevertheless, belief that another party has a good will in a particular matter can be expected to be hindered if that party is viewed as generally not having a good will.

In our case, that task is reporting newsworthy items. Mainstream media facilitates the consumption of fake news when they lose the trust of a portion of the public to report newsworthy items. The problem is not necessarily with mainstream media taking an editorial stance on various issues of the day. Problems arise when, for example, they are seen as so invested in a cause or so politically motivated that they are suspected of not reporting newsworthy items because of such investment or motivation. Of course, a strong editorial stance may be perceived as evidence

of such investment among audiences who disagree with that stance. In short, problems arise when mainstream media are no longer believed to be competent or to have goodwill with regard to reporting newsworthy items. In this type of case, they are no longer trusted to report newsworthy stories.

When other mainstream media sources are thought of in the same way, then an individual can be expected to believe that they lack coverage from the mainstream media. When that happens and an individual encounters fake news, the individual is susceptible to fake news in a way that she wouldn't be were she to believe that she has epistemic coverage that rules out the fake news claim. After all, she believes that the mainstream media can't be trusted to report what's newsworthy—at least with regard to the relevant proposition—so her accepting fake news that is radically at odds with reality as reported by the mainstream media is less surprising. Of course, if she hadn't lost trust in mainstream media sources, she would more likely discount fake news stories upon encountering them.

Informal regulation of public debate

What implications does any of this have for regulating public debate? Here I'll restrict the discussion to a sketch of what can be expected to be beneficial for providing coverage against extreme fake news claims. This might be achieved by informal regulation, which may be self-regulation or encouragement of behavioural change through praise or criticism. The obvious message from the argument here is that mainstream media outlets should avoid losing trust, assuming acceptance of extreme fake news is better avoided. This indeed seems good for a variety of reasons, including facilitating more constructive public discourse, as well as—in the current global context—for public health reasons.

In order to avoid losing trust, mainstream media outlets, or at least some of them, need to be perceived as having a good will with regard to the task of reporting newsworthy items, as well as competence with regard to that task. This is a tricky task, as an individual's judgement about the worth of another individual's (or organisation's) will reflects

the values approved of by the first individual. They will think some goals and means worthwhile or a waste of time; morally required or morally not required; and so on, depending on their values. Of course, in an open, democratic society, we expect there to be approval of a plurality of values. While it would be near impossible for each mainstream media outlet to represent the plurality of values approved within a society, if at least some outlets are perceived as being competent and generally having a good will by the various members of a society, then those members of society can be better expected to have coverage against extreme fake news claims. Alternatively, even if there can't be such media representativeness, if at least some media outlets persuade members of society that, despite differences

in values, they are committed to journalistic ideals—such as objectivity, truthfulness, and generally informing their reader—then despite differences in values, such an outlet may be trusted to report that which is newsworthy and provide coverage against extreme fake news claims. These considerations give us reason to promote media outlets with diverse values, as well as outlets that are committed and seen to be committed to strong journalistic ideals, such that—regardless of their ownership, editorial stances, and so on—they generate trust that they will report newsworthy items.

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