a) Summary of ‘This Just In: Fake News Packs a Lot in Title, Uses Simpler, Repetitive Content in Text Body, More Similar to Satire than Real News’

*by Benjamin D. Horne, Sibel Adali*

‘News informs and influences almost all of our everyday decisions. Today, the news is networked, abundant, and fast-flowing through social networks’ (Horne; Adali 2017: 759). Since the US presidential election in 2016, the term "fake news" has gained a lot of attention as it is claimed to have had a significant impact on the election results (cf. e.g. Allcott; Gentzkow 2017; Horne; Adali 2017; Nelson and Taneja 2018). False information is especially dangerous in political news as an informed public is crucial to any operating democracy (cf. Horne; Adali 2017: 759). The concept of fake news is not a new issue and its distribution on social media platforms is well-researched but there is relatively little work on understanding how real news content differs from fake news content (cf. ibid.). In the discussion about fake news, it is generally assumed that those messages are written in a way that makes them look like real news to the recipient. This misleads the reader who does not check for reliability of the arguments or sources (cf. ibid.). Today, several studies relating to the study of fake news in different fields are already known. E.g. Burfoot and Baldwin (2009) have developed a method to automatically classify news and satirical news based on semantic and lexical features. Rubin et al. (2016) further elaborated on this method, so that an algorithm they developed was able to classify 90% of the news accurately (cf. Horne; Adali 2017: 760). In their study, Bessi et al. (2014) dealt with the spreading, or more specifically, the attention of users of misinformation on Facebook. In 2016, Shao et al. built a platform called Hoaxy that automatically distinguishes truthful online content from misinformation (cf. ibid.). The aim of the paper by Horne and Adali (2017) was to find, whether fake news differs systematically from real news in style and language use.

To start analysing the content of fake news, strict definitions of what is real, fake and satirical news have been developed. Real news are stories that are considered true and coming from reliable sources. In contrast, fake news are stories that are known to be false and are derived from fake news outlets that purposely publish false information (cf. Horne; Adali 2017: 759f.). Stories coming from news sources that explicitly state that they are satirical without the intentional dissemination of misinformation are called satirical news. They are produced specifically for the purpose of entertainment. Based on these definitions, three data sets and features that capture the style and the language of articles are being used to conduct the study of fake news (cf. ibid.). Whereas fake news has the intention to fool the reader by making them appear to be real. In order to understand different persuasion heuristics used, similarities between satire and fake news are studied. The included satire as the third category of news is a unique contribution from the authors (cf. ibid.).

The results show that real and fake news are clearly distinguishable, especially in the title of the articles. In addition, fake news articles use significantly more proper names and verbs, while significantly fewer stop words and nouns are used (cf. ibid.: 764f.). The authors also conclude that the style and complexity of the content in fake news articles is more similar to the content of satirical news, leading to the
conclusion that the persuasive power of fake news articles is not achieved by the strength of the arguments, but by heuristics (cf. ibid.). Furthermore, the authors found that the general assumption that fake news is written to look like real news to fool the recipient is not true. This leads them to the conclusion that fake news is intended for an audience that is unlikely to read beyond the titles and that aims to make mental associations between claims and entities (cf. ibid.: 759).

Reference

b) Summary of the factsheet ‘Measuring the reach of “fake news” and online disinformation in Europe’

by Richard Fletcher, Alessio Cornia, Lucas Graves, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

‘The production, consumption and dissemination of online disinformation has become a serious concern in many countries in recent years’ (Fletcher et al. 2018: 1).

Hence, policymakers, governments and stakeholders have begun taking formal steps to assess and tackle the issue of false news. Especially against the backdrop of the increased use of online news. Social Media in particular, is increasingly used to find news and information (cf. ibid.). The authors of the factsheet dealt with here point out that for almost no country, with the partial exception of the US, we have no substantial information about the scale of the problem (cf. e.g. Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2018; Nelson and Taneja 2018 cited from Fletcher et al. 2018:1). The aim of the factsheet was to produce statistics on the use of the most popular websites in two European countries, France and Italy, which were identified by observers and independent fact-checkers as publishers of false news and online disinformation. The focus was on those sites that are verifiably publishing false news and information, either for political and ideological motives or for-profit reasons. As both these countries facing those kinds of serious issues, France and Italy are particularly important cases (cf. ibid.).

Based on an initial sample of 300 websites in each country which were identified as false news sites, the reach, attention and number of interactions of these sites were measured on Facebook. A context is provided by comparing ‘these figures with equivalent data for a small selection of the most widely used French and Italian news brands’ (cf. ibid.: 1).
Fletcher et al. found that in 2017 none of the considered false news websites had an average reach of more than 3.5% per month. In both countries, most of them reached less than 1% of the online population. For clarification, the most popular news websites had an average reach of 22.3% (France: *La Figaro*) and 50.9% (Italy: *La Repubblica*) each month (cf. ibid.). It was also found that many of the most noted identified false news sites are far less popular in these countries than the much more established news sites. For example, the French people spent an average of 178 million minutes per month on *Le Monde* and the Italian people 443 million minutes per month on *La Repubblica*. Whereas the most popular false news websites in France were visited for about 10 million minutes per month, while in Italy they spent about 7.5 million minutes (cf. ibid.).

Significant differences in terms of website access were discovered, but the level of the Facebook interaction, generated by a small number of false news outlets, matched or surpassed the value of the more established news website. Generally, false news doesn't generate as many interactions as established news brands, in both these countries (cf. ibid.: 2f.).

This factsheet provides a preliminary measurement of the reach of the most popular identified false news sites in Italy and France. Further research is necessary to understand the scale and impact of online disinformation and false news in these and other countries (cf. ibid.: 2). Which is important, because online disinformation and false news are important issues that e.g. the public, policymakers, platform companies and publishers should pay serious attention to (cf. ibid.: 7).

**Reference**