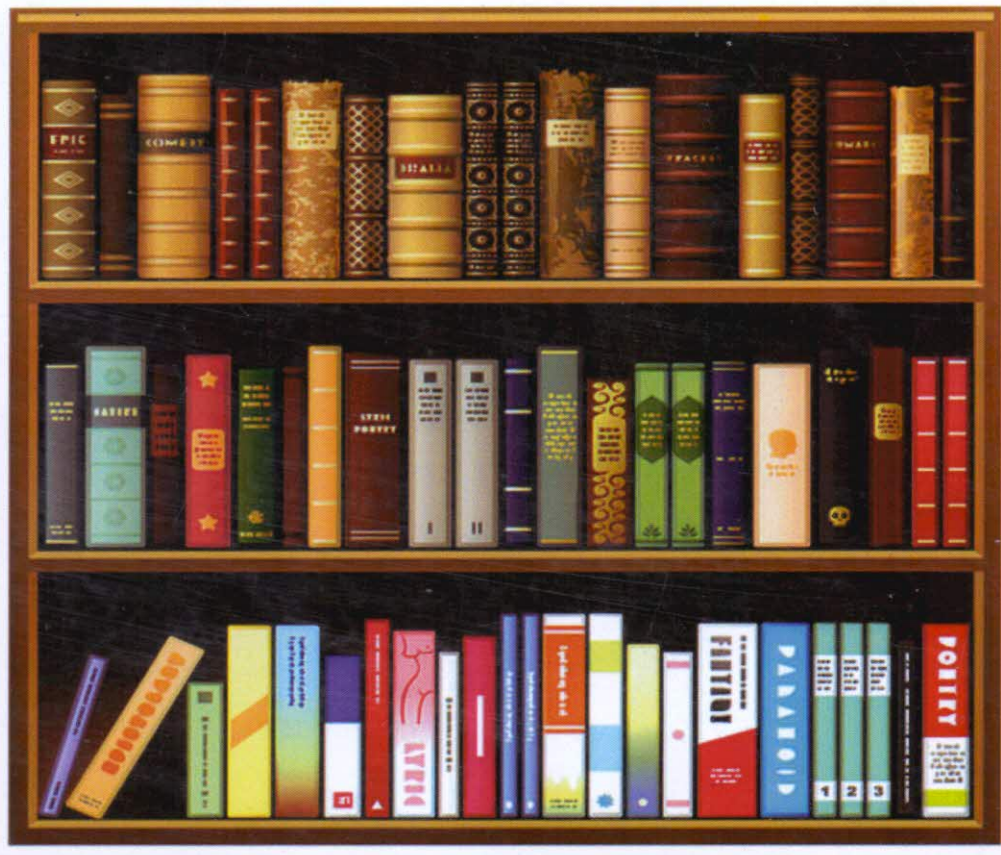


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Internet Fake News and Issues of Misrepresentation and Misinterpretation

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Abstract

This study analysed data randomly sourced from the internet to prove that misrepresentation of information by netizens ultimately leads to misinterpretation. The objectives of the study are: to examine the nature of fake news on social media; and to examine if netizens acknowledge the existence of fake news on social media. The data for the study were sourced from several websites and social media. The study is anchored on Halliday's (1985) Systemic Functional Linguistic theory, which considers language as a social semiotic, that presents language users with a network of choices to create both spoken and written texts. Findings reveal that the samples of fake news presented and analysed all look real; it is also revealed that some media organisations are not exonerated in the issue of fake news reporting. It is recommended that all social media sites should have fake news detection devices that detect fake news even before they are aired; the sites should also have an inbuilt face detection device which will reveal the faces of users of social media platforms. The study concludes that fake news generates varied complex issues of misinterpretation as a result of the misrepresentation.

Keywords: Internet Fake news, Social-Media, Misrepresentation, Misinterpretation, Misinformation

Introduction

The internet is one of the most used means of communication in contemporary times (Zanatta et al., 2021). It is used for giving and receiving information, including news. This form of new media has become an interactive platform for various users with different views of life. On some social media platforms, individuals and groups, create, use and manage their content for different purposes (Sankar & Bouchard, 2009). Scholars like McPeak (2014) Barnhart (2019), McLachlan and Newberry (2021), and Prajapati (2021) highlight some benefits of social media for communication and agree that social media has made life easier. McPeak (2014: 581) points out that “social media data is changing the face of civil discovery in many cases, and informal discovery of social media content on sites such as Facebook can prove extremely valuable for litigants”. Social media are websites for social networking, communication, interaction, meeting, re-union dating, and advertisement. The implication of McPeak (2014: 581) comment is that social media is a site where all kinds of news can be found. Roomi (2021) notes that apart from the benefits of social media, its down side should not be overlooked. One of the downsides of social media is its use by netizens for the spread of fake news, this is the preoccupation of the current study. Activities on social media are possible with a connection to the internet (Ugoala, 2020).

Despite the attested benefits of the internet, its down sides have roused scholarly attention in recent times, with the view that fake news is the intentional spread of untrue information, which is disseminated on the internet with so many users (Shu et al., 2017; Zuiderveen, Möller & Kruike-meier, 2018; Sharma et al., 2019; Pulido et al., 2020; Ugoala, 2020). Pieces of the information displayed by netizens on the internet could be shared by readers (Koohikamali and Sidorova, 2017: 216; McPeak, 2014: 583; Myerson, 2013). In the course of sharing, both real and fake pieces of information (news) are shared. A piece of information shared can influence the reader (The Information Society Project, 2017: 5).

Defining fake news from the angle of the internet or new media, Mavridis (2018: 19) describes it as viral posts, which are based on fake accounts made to seem like “real” news reports. For example, in May 2019, a video clip of Nancy Pelosi, went viral on social media, showing her stammering and slurring her speech. That made some people question Nancy’s mental aptitude. Nancy Pelosi is the first woman to serve as a speaker representing San Francisco elected in 2007, and who in January 2019, regained her position second-in-line to the presidency. The New York Times reported that it was a doctored video clip. Also, in early 2020, different myths and tales were spread by both social and traditional media about the supposed treatment of the Covid-19 pandemic (Rocha et al., 2021). The implication of Mavridis’ (2018: 19) definition is that real or true news does not go viral as much as fake news does.

Fake news, as Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) note, refers to stories, which are intentionally and verifiably false, misleading and misinforming readers. This definition points out that fake news is intentionally created and spread by those who do so. It also foregrounds the view that fake news could be verified to be an untrue representation of communication content. Essentially, untrue representations in any form which are made to seem real, are misrepresentations of the realities made. Similarly, defining fake news from the angle of perceived propaganda, Leonhardt and Thompson (2017) describes fake news as a kind of “propaganda or yellow and misleading journalism that consists of deliberate misinformation, spread via traditional media outlets (their print or online editions) or online social media.” This definition tallies with that of Allcott & Gentzkow (2017), which see fake news as misleading news.

Fake news is noted to “devalue and delegitimise voices of expertise, authoritative institutions, and the concept of objective data” and all these undermine a society’s ability to rationally engage in facts-shared discourses (The Information Society Project, 2017: 3). Fake news aggravates the extant deep-rooted structural problems in the media industry (The Information Society Project, 2017: 4-5). Factors behind fake news include curiosity, perception, worldview, power and politics, propaganda, the lapses of the traditional (mass) media, social factors like tribalism, bias and discrimination, the drive to make money from news formation and dissemination, the rise of the profitable information economy, and so on (The Information Society Project, 2017: 4-5). Recently, a video clip showing a snake inside a toilet closet on Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter went viral, spreading misinformation that snakes can survive the heat in the pipes of toilet closets. Thereafter, a counter audio post was made by an expert, who clarifies that no snake can live and survive in toilet pipes. Such pieces of information usually misinform and mislead the audience.

Tandoc et al. (2018: 147) categorise fake news into six: news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising and propaganda. The categorization by Tandoc et. al (2018) indicates that fake news occurs in varied dimensions. For this study, fake news refers to falsified information about what is supposed to be communicated or disseminated. It involves giving the opposite of the

