



Communicative Actions We Live By: The Problem with Fact-Checking, Tagging or Flagging Fake News - the case of Facebook

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ejc**Jack Andersen  and Sille Obelitz Sørensen**

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Abstract

In this article, we question the efforts undertaken by Facebook in regard to fact-checking, tagging, and flagging instances or appearances of fake news. We argue that in a global world of communication, fake news is a form of communicative action, which we must learn to deal with rather than try to remove. The very existence of fake news is a political question inscribing itself in the history of political communication and thus in the long run a question about the democratic conversation. This conversation must and will always be a conversation where arguments (emotional or not) are discussed in a common place. In other words, there is no technical fix, such as automated flagging or tagging, to the ‘solution’ for democratic conversation. We must insist on the democratic value of listening to the other. The outcome can never be one of getting it right by algorithmic means.

Keywords

Communicative action, Facebook, fake news, political communication, social media

Introduction

The phenomenon of fake news has in recent years attracted a great deal of attention in popular media as well as in the scholarly literature. Obviously, fake news is not a new phenomenon. We have always been surrounded by rumours, propaganda, fictions, small-talk and gossip (Pettegree, 2014: 4–5). In some cases, these forms of communication

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have a strong social character in which they make up particular social structures and help sustain social relations. Yet, many attempts have recently been concerned with content moderation in terms of flagging, fact-checking or tagging fake news. Examples include PolitiFact, FactCheck.org and *Washington Post's* Fact Checker. We know that social media moderate content on their platforms although they do not officially articulate and acknowledge their decisions (Gillespie, 2018). In the scholarly literature, the usefulness of fact-checking initiatives as well as content moderation has been questioned (Lim, 2018; Marietta et al., 2016). Nonetheless, on 31 January 2017, Facebook published a Newsroom announcement explaining some of the ways they are tweaking their News Feed algorithm in order to counter fake news. That is, all of a sudden Facebook entered the battle against fake news and acted like a media company, something that they on other occasions deny to be.

In this article, we question the efforts undertaken by Facebook in regard to fact-checking, tagging, and flagging instances or appearances of fake news. This type of fake news detection does not delete the problem. Instead, it raises serious social, cultural and political questions about the values, motives and ideologies inscribed in the algorithms designed to flag or tag fake news. That is, the problem will not be solved by algorithmic means. It continues to be with us. This calls for another understanding of the fake news phenomenon. Therefore, in this article we argue that in a global world of communication, fake news is a form of communicative action, which we must learn to deal with rather than try to remove. The actions undertaken by platforms to combat fake news – tagging, flagging and fact-checking – are also communicative actions. Of course, not any statement about social reality is true. However, it is a delicate practice for a company like Facebook to claim to be in the business of fact-checking given their status as a commercial enterprise with investors to take care of. The very existence of fake news is a political question inscribing itself in the history of political communication and thus in the long run a question about the democratic conversation. This conversation must and will always be a conversation where arguments (emotional or not) are discussed in a common place (Habermas, 1989; Lynch, 2016). In other words, there is no technical fix, such as automated flagging or tagging, to the ‘solution’ for democratic conversation (i.e. deliberation). We must insist on the democratic value of listening to the other. The outcome can never be one of getting it right by algorithmic means.

The structure of this article is as follows. In the section ‘Fake news in the world’, we sketch a few characteristics of modern western societies that can be used as a frame for situating and understanding the fake news phenomenon. In the section ‘Fake news and flagging as communicative actions’, we develop our argument about fact-checking, tagging and flagging practices as communicative actions. In the section ‘The fake news concept’, we argue that the term ‘fake news’ is a very broad, poorly understood and vague term. In order to ground our claims regarding the inefficiency of flagging and tagging, we analyse Facebook’s newsroom announcements of updates to their algorithms in the section ‘The Case of Facebook: between combat and misleadingness’. These analyses bring insights about the inner workings of the News Feed algorithms with regard to ‘the battle’ against fake news. Furthermore, they challenge the underlying assumptions about fake news as a phenomenon built into the algorithms. These analyses are followed by brief conclusions in the section ‘Conclusion’.

Fake news in the world

The contemporary concern with fake news needs to be understood in a larger perspective. Bennett and Livingston (2018) argue for the importance of

[. . .] looking less at isolated examples of ‘fake news’ and paying more attention to how they and other disruptive processes fit into larger ‘disinformation orders’. Part of this broadening of perspective is to resist easy efforts to make the problem go away by fact-checking initiatives and educating citizens about the perils of fake news. (p. 135)

Here, we develop such a perspective. First, a critical aspect in discussions of modernity and the transformations of modern societies is globalization. Globalization is one of the consequences, or an inherent feature, of modernity (Giddens, 1990: 63). Globalization is by Giddens (1994) characterized as ‘action at a distance’ – fake news is a good example (p. 96). When, for instance, various nation states produce media stories in a national context about (presumably false) affairs in other nations, the stories are intended for local national audiences but with the double intention of affecting affairs in other national contexts and affecting the local views on these affairs. Action at a distance implies that nation states have a hard time controlling the circulation of information. Circulation has a performative power of its own, as it is a constitutive component in the production of what Mackenzie calls culture objects (Mackenzie, 2005). Therefore, the power of circulation in a digitized and globalized world contributes to raising the discursive and performative effects of fake news. Second, social media platforms such as Facebook are undeniably a crucial part of the information and communicative infrastructures in everyday life in many western societies. The mere presence of social media platforms, given their urge to connect, share and circulate content, suggests what van Dijck calls a culture of connectivity (van Dijck, 2013). According to van Dijck (2013),

Talking to friends, exchanging gossip, showing holiday pictures, scribbling notes, checking on a friend’s well-being, or watching a neighbor’s home video used to be casual, evanescent (speech) acts, commonly shared only with selected individuals. A major change is that through social media, these casual speech acts have turned into formalized inscriptions, which, once embedded in the larger economy of wider publics, take on a different value. (p. 7)

This turn from casual speech acts into formalized inscriptions suggests how our view on communication on social media platforms tends to be removed from what it is: gossip, small-talk and rumours – all forms of communication that are a natural and indispensable part of constructing everyday reality. They sustain social relationships and our idea of intersubjective being in the world. Social media platforms exploit this as they make sociality technical:

Sociality coded by technology renders people’s activities formal, manageable, and manipulable, enabling platforms to engineer the sociality in people’s everyday routines. (van Dijck, 2013: 12)

Rendering people’s activities as formal, manageable and manipulable not only enable social media platforms to engineer the sociality in people’s everyday routines. It transforms

people's activities into 'objective' measures that can be counted, aggregated and calculated. Furthermore, it produces an 'objective' impression of the circulated content and viewpoints. For this reason, when we learn that the content and viewpoints are actually gossip, small-talk or rumours, we feel misled because 'numbers and metrics do not lie'. This further fuel the idea (on the sides of both social media platforms and users) that posts must be fact-checked, tagged or flagged. Finally, many discussions about fake news seem to rest on an implicit assumption of a world consisting of nothing but the truth. In the heat of these discussions, we forget that our social worlds also consist of fictions. Research into fictionality emphasizes exactly this and argues, broadly, that fiction is not limited to a medium (e.g. book or television) but can be found all over in our everyday life across media and genres (Kjerkegaard et al., 2013; Marinescu and Branea, 2012; Ryan, 2013; Walsh, 2007). Fictions are a means to understand ourselves, our others and our worlds as they are narratives in which we can mirror or see things differently. In that sense, fictions form a necessary and indispensable part of our being in the world. Fictions will always be with us. Thus, the obsession with fact-checking, tagging or flagging fake news stand in danger of overestimating the value of critically evaluating sources at the expense of acknowledging the existence of fictions too. This is basically a rehearsal of the old positivistic concern with verifying facts and nothing but the facts. Our worlds, our cultures and our life-worlds consist of fictions, and the value of them does not lie in how much they correspond with 'reality' and that they must be fact-checked accordingly. Their value is that they show us imaginary worlds providing us with tools and ideas to think about our own life-worlds, our place in it and our relations to others. This cannot (and should not) be fact-checked away. In a world dominated by securing 'truth' through technical fixes, we seem to have forgotten the role of fictions and the culturally valuable representations, values, and norms they generate. Therefore, while our worlds of course also consist of harmful fictions, pointing to the presence of fictions is a helpful reminder that there is more in the world than facts.

Fake news and flagging as communicative actions

When political leaders or states communicate something that is obviously not true, the intention is clearly to have a communicative effect on some matter for some audience. For instance, in 2017, the European Union (EU) task force, East StratCom,¹ reported that a Russian newspaper² had published a story claiming that a brothel for zoophiles had opened in Copenhagen.³ Obviously, this was an absurd and false statement. However, as Coleman (2018) explains, 'Verifying the status of basic facts is one thing but questions about what facts mean and how they relate to reliable accounts of political reality cannot be reduced to the mechanics of automatic affirmation' (p. 2). The brothel story and its potential communicative effects cannot be erased by some automatic procedure tagging it as false. Communication is a political problem and not an engineering one (Peters, 1999). Moreover, politics and democracy have to do with priorities, values and perspectives and these are not objective phenomena. They are intersubjective phenomena (Coleman, 2018). They are phenomena in need of communication in order to be visible and intelligible to publics, audiences and other interpreters. Hence, political truth does not exist as an objective phenomenon to be measured, counted or calculated (Coleman, 2018).

Instead of understanding fake news as something that must be combated and deleted, we propose to understand the existence and appearance of fake news as a form of communicative action. In both phenomenological accounts of communication and in pragmatic philosophy of language, communication is a form of doing, an action and a practice (cf. Austin, 1962; Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Searle, 1969; Wittgenstein, 1953) as opposed to communication as a mere statement of fact or description of a state of affairs. Doing something with language and in communication means being involved with others by either questioning, informing, shaping, influencing or achieving something with others. In short, communicative action is social, '[. . .] a practice of interaction' (Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 30). Accordingly, suggesting fake news to be communicative actions means an orientation towards these as doings with the intent of achieving something with communication. It follows that fact-checking, tagging or flagging cannot be mere descriptions of a given news item (text or picture) in terms of its truth or falsity.

In arguing that fake news as well as fact-checking and the like are communicative actions, we have stated a rather simple point about the phenomenon. However, the point is more complex than it seems: efforts at combating and deleting fake news by technical fixes are still with us and as such rehearse outdated understandings of communication, where the challenge is to erase noise in the transfer of information (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). Likewise, when some actors claim to be able to automatically detect false information or tag it as false, the problem of communication is reduced to one of solving an engineering problem. Still, as Peters (1999) argues, the problems of communication are intractable because they are political and ethical and not a matter of better wiring (pp. 29–30). Likewise, with communicative actions, we do not understand much of them, if anything, when trying to look for their truth or falsity. Understanding communicative actions, by contrast, means knowing how to recognize their perlocutionary effect (cf. Austin, 1962). Therefore, arguing that fake news and the corresponding acts of fact-checking and flagging are communicative actions is an attempt to direct attention to what is intended to be accomplished with the action rather than seeing fake news as a phenomenon that must be falsified or checked for its amount of truth. With this orientation, we align our argument with Coleman (2018) when he argues that 'Given that political truth is not discovered and then told *but generated through acts and modes of telling*, it follows that ways of speaking truth change, often quite dramatically, in response to emergent technologies, genres and vocabularies of mediation' (p. 8; our italics). We can apply this argument and map it onto everyday communication in general. How we perceive and experience our social world is to a large degree a product of our communicative actions, generated through 'the acts and modes of telling' in concert with the available means and modes of communication. Moreover, actions can be assessed as suitable or pertinent based on politically valued criteria. However, such criteria do not always have an explicit form, and if they do, they are context sensitive. Therefore, understanding fake news and fact-checking as communicative actions implies that, first, we accept that communicative actions are inscribed and embedded in our everyday life. Some of them are more important or relevant to us than others. Second, living with communicative actions also means looking at what the actions want to achieve when trying to understand what they are about. Who is called upon? What discursive tools and repertoires are available to us for responding to and acting with communicative actions produced by others? These are

questions about how to handle communicative situations in everyday life and not about falsifying matters of communication. Fundamentally, they are questions about how to deal with the communicative actions we live by.

The fake news concept

Most people are familiar with the term ‘fake news’. However, the rapid and wide spread of fake news seems to suggest that many people are not able to recognize the concept ‘fake news’ – or, if they recognize it, they share it anyways. The rhetoric around fake news is that of combat and war: fake news must be combatted and deleted such that ‘the real news’, the truth, can reign. However, the fight is muddled by the fact that ‘fake news’ is a very broad, poorly understood and vague term – covering everything from fabrications, fakeness, falsity, lies, deception, misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, conspiracy theory, satire or just anything with which one disagrees. All these concepts surely do have family resemblances; however, they are still so diverse that trying to fight all of them simultaneously under the same heading is bound to fail. Trying to fight ‘fake news’ as one coherent phenomenon is like trying to fight all disease at once and by the same means. You cannot fight and cure diseases without specifying which disease you are dealing with – we need different types of medications. Or, to use Wittgenstein’s example – games – as a concept held together by family resemblance: all games are played differently and by different means; thus, to write just one set of rules for all games is impossible.

Furthermore, one question seems to remain unasked – and thereby unanswered – in the discussions about fake news: Do we actually want to fight, combat and remove all of this? Unless you are a Kantian deontologist and therefore cannot permit any forms of lying for any purpose, none of the concepts above are in themselves bad – it all depends on content, context, purpose, meaning and intentions. For instance, a fabrication is not bad in itself. Fictions are fabricated but that does not mean that they cannot tell us something important, and true, about the world, the human condition, morality and so on. It depends on whether we recognize it as fiction or believe it to be a non-fictitious account of actual events; what the purpose of the fiction and the intentions behind it are (e.g. to mislead us, enlighten us, question our morality, provoke us, etc.); as well as the context in which we encounter the fiction. The same considerations apply to satire and most of the other concepts as well. Even deception is not necessarily bad; it depends on the purpose and content of the deception. Deceiving others in order to protect yourself or your family might be necessary and not morally wrong.

That said the purpose of this article is not to make claims about the moral standing of fake news. Instead, the purpose is to contribute to the debates around fake news by clarifying how the term can be understood – that is to single out some of the most common and dominant concepts squeezed together under the ‘fake news’-heading. Misinformation, disinformation, lies, deception and propaganda are the concepts most often used to describe fake news with falsity as their characteristic in common. However, these concepts are not synonymous and they are not necessarily characterized by falsity (Søe, 2018). Some of the concepts are mutually exclusive while others co-exist as varieties of one another. What further complicates the matter is the fact that the concepts of misinformation, disinformation

and lying occur in different interpretations – that is there are multiple definitions of each of these concepts and most of them are in use in writings about fake news. Often one will meet misinformation and disinformation depicted as types of deception – that is something that is deliberately misleading and false. Sometimes one will encounter depictions of misinformation and disinformation where they are distinguished in terms of intentions – that is misinformation as unintended misleading and disinformation as intended misleading. Often fake news is just equated with lying – or sometimes even bullshit.

Lying is a very specific speech act with a quite narrow scope. Lying only occurs when what is said (or written) p is believed-false, and p is shared with the intention of having others believe p to be true – that is to obtain the false belief that p (Mahon, 2008). Thus, lying does not cover all instances of fake news. Moreover, lying is very different from bullshitting, as bullshitting has nothing to do with the truth-values of what is said (or written) but has everything to do with appearance (Frankfurt, 1986). The bullshitter does not care whether what is said is true or false, all that matters are the overall appearance of his persona – that is to be perceived in the right light and to make the right figure. Thus, the bullshitter does not even have to know the truth-value of what is said, it is simply unimportant. In contrast, the liar must be very aware of the truth-value of what is said – the liar has to believe that it is false in order to be able to lie.

The concept of propaganda is often associated with falsity and insincerity – just as lying – but with the addition of ideology. However, according to philosopher Jason Stanley (2015), propaganda need neither be false nor communicated with insincerity, instead it has everything to do with ideology and in the classical sense it ‘is manipulation of the rational will to close off debate’. (p. 48). Stanley (2015) argues that there are

examples of propaganda in which someone is being *misleading*, rather than stating something false, or even implicating something false. One expresses a truth, and relies on the audience’s false beliefs to communicate goals that are worthwhile. Falsity is implicated in such cases, but not by means of the expression or communication of a falsehood. (pp. 42–43)

Thus, some instances of fake news might be propaganda, whereas others are not. It depends on whether the intention is an ideologically driven manipulation and bypassing of rational will in order to shut down debate.

That falsity is not the defining feature also holds for the concepts of misinformation and disinformation. As argued previously (Sørensen, 2016, 2018), both misinformation and disinformation can occur in true varieties much in the sense described by Stanley above. Misinformation and disinformation can either be true through the use of false implications (cf. Grice, 1957) or through acts of omission. Thus, misinformation and disinformation are defined by misleadingness rather than falsity, and the difference between the two is whether the misleadingness is intentional (disinformation) or unintended (misinformation) – that is the result of ignorance, an honest mistake, and the like (Sørensen, 2016, 2018) This, however, does not mean that all propaganda, misinformation and disinformation are true yet misleading. The point is that it is not the truth-value which determines whether something is propaganda, misinformation or disinformation. Furthermore, these concepts occur in different varieties adding to the complexity of the matter. For instance, lying is a specific kind of disinformation – the verbal kind where what is said is believed

to be false. Then there is visual disinformation – that is intentionally misleading pictures, maps, drawings and so on. And gestural disinformation – that is intentionally misleading gestures and actions (cf. Fallis, 2014; Mahon, 2008). Except for lying, misinformation can occur in all the same varieties as disinformation, the difference being that with misinformation the misleadingness is unintended.

Fake news as such a miscellaneous category questions the mere meaning of fact-checking, tagging or flagging. In the end, one reaches the old question about who gets to decide upon the truth – what should be visible and invisible. The answer here is fact-checkers, flaggers and taggers (cf. Crawford and Gillespie, 2016). In the actual practice of content moderation, for example, on Facebook, these decisions are made within seconds and are often based on users' tagging and reporting what they find to be inappropriate or misleading. However, users do not recognize themselves to be part of a conversation when flagging (Crawford and Gillespie, 2016; Gillespie, 2018).

The case of Facebook: Between combat and misleadingness

'The battle' against fake news is partly fought through tweaks of Facebook's News Feed algorithms. Analyses of Facebook's News Feed updates as articulated in their newsroom announcements will give us insights about the guiding principles for the News Feed algorithms regarding this 'battle'. Furthermore, we will challenge the underlying assumptions about fake news as a phenomenon built into the Facebook algorithms. For instance, one assumption is that the authenticity of a story is a marker for credibility. Another assumption is that engagement with a story from many people is a marker for relevance (FB, 2017d). We base our analyses on the observation that the debates around fake news are often cast in terms of falsity, misinformation and disinformation with the goal of fighting them and preserving the truth.

Authentic communication

On 31 January 2017, Facebook explains some of the ways they are tweaking their News Feed algorithms in order to counter fake news by promoting authentic communication. The announcement presents and explains some of the new signals that Facebook has incorporated in their News Feed algorithms in order to 'identify and rank authentic content' as well as 'predict and rank in real-time when posts might be more relevant to you' (FB, 2017d).

In order to explain the reasoning behind the purpose of promoting authentic content Facebook writes,

One of our News Feed values is authentic communication. We've heard from our community that authentic stories are the ones that resonate most – those that people consider genuine and not misleading, sensational or spammy. (FB, 2017d)

Thus, Facebook makes a link or equation between 'authentic stories' and those stories 'people consider to be genuine' which means that in the end it is left for the users to decide what to believe (cf. Crawford and Gillespie, 2016). Therefore, if users fail to

recognize stories as fake news, the tweaks on the News Feed algorithms will have no effect. It is in principle positive that decision-making about what to believe is still in the hands of the users. Nevertheless, when the outset and overall aim is a technical fix of a societal and communicative problem, human decision-making is reduced to a signal for algorithms to process. Furthermore, the whole process of algorithmically promoting authentic stories becomes somewhat circular. The promise from Facebook is to automatically help users make better decisions by promoting authentic stories. Yet, this promotion is based on decisions regarding authenticity made by users in the first place. 'If a post is likely to be authentic based on the new signals we look at, it might show up higher in your feed'. (FB, 2017d). Taken to its extreme, it means that if users collectively believe fake stories to be genuine – and therefore do not report them to be 'misleading, sensational or spammy' – these stories will be promoted as authentic. Thus, the mechanism introduced to combat fake news could potentially and very easily reinforce the problem instead.

Furthermore,

[. . .] if there is a lot of engagement from many people on Facebook about a topic, or if a post from a Page is getting a lot of engagement, we can understand in real-time that the topic or Page post might be temporarily more important to you, so we should show that content higher in your feed. (FB, 2017d)

However, the main challenge with fake news is that they circulate rapid and wide – that is they receive a lot of engagement. The underlying assumption seems to be that engagement equals relevance, importance and authenticity. Otherwise, this feature in the News Feed algorithms would be conflicting with the goal of promoting authentic communication. However, engagement may be fostered by other features than importance – for instance, disagreement, curiosity or simply because the page is funny.

Fake news and false news

In the report *'Information Operations and Facebook'* from 27 April 2017, Facebook argues in favour of abandoning the term 'fake news' and instead use a variety of different and more precise terms for the different aspects of fake news.

The outset of the report is a quote from chief executive officer (CEO) Mark Zuckerberg dated February 2017 stating that 'It is our responsibility to amplify the good effects and mitigate the bad – to continue increasing diversity while strengthening our common understanding so our community can create the greatest positive impact on the world' (FB, 2017a: 3). The authors elaborate: 'Given the increasing role that Facebook is playing in facilitating civic discourse, we wanted to publicly share what we are doing to help ensure Facebook remains a safe and secure forum for authentic dialogue' (FB, 2017a: 3). Thus, with this report, Facebook initiates a shift in terminology from 'Fake News' to 'False News' and 'Disinformation'. 'False News' is defined as 'News articles that purports to be factual, but which contain intentional misstatements of fact with the intention to arouse passions, attract viewership, or deceive'. (FB, 2017a: 5). And 'Disinformation' is defined as

Inaccurate or manipulated information/content that is spread intentionally. This can include false news, or it can involve more subtle methods, such as false flag operations, feeding inaccurate quotes or stories to innocent intermediaries, or knowingly amplifying biased or misleading information. Disinformation is distinct from **misinformation**, which is the inadvertent or unintentional spread of inaccurate information without malicious intent. (FB, 2017a: 5)

With these distinctions, Facebook comes quite close to the definitions of the concepts as presented in the section 'The fake news concept'. Furthermore, Facebook takes the lead as the company dealing with the 'fake-news-problem' with the most nuanced understanding of the concepts of misinformation, disinformation and false news. It is also important to note that by abandoning the notion 'fake news' and solely focusing on 'false news', Facebook narrows the scope of their fight considerably. While most others try to fight disinformation in general (labelled as fake news or misinformation), Facebook only fights false news which is a small part of all the disinformation and misinformation in the online as well as the offline worlds.

On 28 August 2017, the scope is again broadened a bit as Facebook declares that 'Over the past year we have taken several steps to reduce false news and hoaxes on Facebook'. (FB, 2017b). Interestingly, the announcement comes with a realization that merely tagging and flagging false news is not enough to stop the spread of these on the platform. The spread of false news as a way to make money turned out to be an exploitation of Facebook's own business model:

Currently, we do not allow advertisers to run ads that link to stories that have been marked false by third-party fact-checking organizations. Now we are taking an additional step. If Pages repeatedly share stories marked as false, these repeat offenders will no longer be allowed to advertise on Facebook. (FB, 2017b)

This will 'help to reduce the distribution of false news which will keep Pages that spread false news from making money'. (FB, 2017b). What is most interesting here is that Facebook still rely on fact-checking as the main weapon against false news. Thus, it is still a matter of checking away what is false in order to promote 'truth'. However, when the incentive of creating and distributing false or fake news is to make money, the phenomenon resembles bullshit more than it resembles anything else. The content of the story is secondary to appearance – the focus is on creating what people would like to see and hear such that they click on the story. Whether what people would like to see and hear is true or false is unimportant. Thus, by emphasizing fact-checking as a strategy to get rid of 'false news', Facebook risks to overlook the stories which are indifferent to truth – the stories that are created as a way of making money but happen to be somewhat true. In addition, Facebook's strategy will not work for so-called true disinformation – that is stories which are literally true but deliberately framed in a way which makes them misleading, or where vital parts are deliberately omitted also making the stories misleading.

Furthermore, there is no realization that false news or fake news can be anything but detrimental – no realization that they can be instances of fiction and that they are instances of communication. It seems to be assumed that when false news is circulated on the platform, then people necessarily believes them: 'False news is harmful to our community. It makes the world less informed and erodes trust'. (FB, 2017b). The mere presence

of false news somehow causes us to lose information – it causes a semantic loss (Floridi, 2007). However, it is only a loss as such if information is defined as inherently true (as argued by Floridi, 2007), that is, if it is only information if it is true. If one adheres to the argument that information need not be true in order to be information (as we do – cf. Sørensen, 2016, 2018) then there is no loss of information, only a different kind of information of a different quality.

Context and decisions

On 5 October 2017, Facebook launches ‘a new test to give people additional context on the articles they see [. . .] designed to provide people some of the tools they need to make an informed decision about which stories to read, share, and trust’. (FB, 2017e). Thus, sometime during September 2017, people have got their agency back, and are now capable of making their own decisions – provided they have the necessary tools:

For links to articles shared in News Feed, we are testing a button that people can tap to easily access additional information without needing to go elsewhere. The additional contextual information is pulled from across Facebook and other sources, such as information from the publisher’s Wikipedia entry, a button to follow their Page, trending articles or related articles about the topic, and information about how the article is being shared by people on Facebook. (FB, 2017e)

It is noteworthy that the additional information is mostly pulled from Facebook itself and Wikipedia. It is also noteworthy that one of the additional pieces of information is trending articles, leading us back to the relevance-assumption – that is the content that gets most engagement is also most relevant. Furthermore, the assumption that relevance implies authenticity also seems to be present in this new strategy. However, that an article is trending says nothing about the quality of the content. Trending articles could just as well be false articles as they could be true articles, or they could be anything in between.

Furthermore, there is the emphasis on trust. Facebook wants to ‘help them [the users] evaluate if articles are from a publisher they trust, and if the story itself is credible’. (FB, 2017e). In order to be able to trust someone without being harmed or duped, those you trust have to be trustworthy. Trustworthiness, however, is not part of the Facebook equation. Thus, what happens if people trust those who fabricate the false news stories?

Flagging as communication

On 20 December 2017, Facebook has realized that flagging is a communicative action with a life of its own and hence not the way to fight false news (FB, 2017c, 2017f). What is communicated through flagging might be something more or something else than originally intended. Thus, Facebook changes their strategy in favour of contextualizing disputed or false news and states: ‘We will no longer use Disputed Flags to identify false news’. (FB, 2017f). The reason is that ‘Academic research on correcting misinformation has shown that putting a strong image, like a red flag, next to an article may actually

entrench deeply held beliefs – the opposite effect to what we intended’. (FB, 2017f). For instance, seeing what you believe to be true flagged as false or disputed might confirm your belief that there is a conspiracy against your view, thus enforcing your belief in the disputed story (Pennycook and Rand, 2017). Another negative effect of the flagging is some users’ (primarily teens) assumption that no flag is a default marker for ‘checked-and-found-credible’ (Pennycook and Rand, 2017). These consequences of flagging are unfortunate as Facebook wants to ‘help people get to the facts’. (FB, 2017f). Therefore, Facebook is ‘starting a new initiative to better understand how people decide whether information is accurate or not based on the news source they depend upon’. (FB, 2017f). This statement is truly puzzling. Taken at face value, it seems to suggest that we can decide for ourselves whether or not some information is accurate. Read more favourably, what Facebook seems to be interested in is how people judge whether something is accurate or inaccurate. However, it is still fact-checkers that are key to the fight against false news: ‘Demoting false news (as identified by fact-checkers) is one of our best weapons because demoted articles typically lose 80 percent of their traffic’. (FB, 2017f). Thus, fact-checkers identify the false news stories and Facebook applies their technical fix and demote these stories. In this fight ‘[. . .] understanding how people decide what’s false and what’s not will be crucial to our success over time’. (FB, 2017f). Again, we believe that this should be read favourably as concerning peoples’ judgements about truth and falsity. This points to a need in Facebook to understand the cues or the markers that people attend to when evaluating a story and judging the accuracy of that story before they decide whether to believe it or not. At least if Facebook really means that it is up to people to decide what is false and what is not, then it implies a view of reality and truth as something which is constructed by humans – a view which does not correspond to the wish of guiding people to the facts and fight falsity.

Conclusion

The contributions of the argument and analyses presented in this article add to the ongoing research discussions about fake news, flagging, and various notions of information. We have stressed that fake news are communicative actions rather than epistemological statements about reality. The concept of fake news covers a variety of other complex concepts such as disinformation, propaganda, and bullshit which all are closely linked to the communicators’ intentions. This is exactly why automatic fact-checking and flagging are odd enterprises. People’s claims about social reality travel through communicative actions. Flagging, tagging, and fact-checking become themselves communicative actions inscribing different claims about social reality but purporting to be epistemological statements. There is no technical fix to deal with intentions, meaning, and social reality – something Facebook itself gradually recognizes. In a world relying on intertwined local and global digital infrastructures for processing and circulating information, fake news is here to stay. Fake news are communicative actions we must learn to live by.

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Notes

1. The European Union (EU) task force for addressing and responding to pro-Kremlin disinformation (<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/about/>).
2. See <http://kolokolrussia.ru/novosti/v-danii-otkrvaetsya-pervy-publichny-dom-dlya-zoofilov>
3. See <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/no-denmark-is-not-legalising-sexual-abuse-of-animals/>

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