

CHALLENGES IN THE CONCEPTUALIZATION AND IDENTIFICATION OF FAKE NEWS IN THE MEDIA

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Abstract

This study examined the challenges in the conceptualization and identification of fake news in the media. The research sought to explore how fake news is conceptualized and defined within scholarly contexts, identify the key challenges encountered in forming clear and consistent definitions, and investigate the difficulties faced by media practitioners in identifying and verifying fake news. The theoretical framework was grounded in Gatekeeping Theory. A qualitative research design was adopted, involving documentary analysis of forty scholarly definitions and semi-structured interviews with sixteen participants comprising eight communication scholars and eight media practitioners purposively selected for their expertise. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurrent patterns and underlying meanings. Findings revealed that fake news is conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon involving fabrication, intentional deception, varying degrees of falsity, calculated incentives, and overlapping relationships with related information disorders. Key challenges in conceptualization included conceptual ambiguity, evolving digital contexts, disciplinary fragmentation, and normative tensions. Media practitioners faced difficulties stemming from time pressures, sophisticated digital manipulation, audience polarization, and inadequate institutional support. The study concluded that both conceptual clarity and operational capacity for fake news identification remain constrained by systemic factors operating at multiple gatekeeping levels. Recommendations included developing interdisciplinary definitional frameworks, establishing institutional verification protocols, and investing in technological and training resources to enhance media practitioners' detection capabilities.

Keywords: Fake news, conceptualization, media practitioners, verification, gatekeeping theory, misinformation, disinformation

Introduction

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The spread of fake news is fast becoming a trending and rapidly growing phenomenon. Its amplification is strongly aided by the increasing adoption of digital media platforms for information generation and sharing as against the traditional news media outlets that the world has been known with over the years. The advancement and popularity of the Internet have enabled people to obtain and distribute news messages quickly and ubiquitously. People now use mobile phones and social media to obtain news messages, (Chiang, Wu, & Yang, 2019).

Scholars of various disciplines and media and communication experts firmly agree that unlike in the past when news were only generated and shared via conventional news media platforms such as newspapers, radio and televisions, the coming and rising popularity of the internet has revolutionized the way and manner in which news is generated and disseminated to the audience. According to Wang, (2020), since it is easy to create and spread news reports on the internet, the news reports spread online are not necessarily from reputable news media. On his part, Westlund, (2013) remarks that the rapid distribution of news and messages on the Internet has changed the industry practice of the news industry.

Some of the news reports may contain fake or false facts purposely or unintentionally. For the purpose of attracting public attention, some news media and news reporters may exaggerate the news report statements, while some may even fabricate or distort the contents. Due to the fact that it is easy to register multiple accounts using fake demographic information on social media, some of these social media are full of fake accounts, which are used to deliver fake news to the public. Adding that spammers and fake news spreaders use social media to distribute fake news, it turns out that the cyberspace is filled with fake or false messages Wang, (2020).

Humanity has therefore witnessed in this era more than any other time in its history, a rapidly growing and concerning surge in the proliferation of fake news. A scholar, Nicolas B. (2022), *et al* echoes this view when he opined that, “*Although Fake News is not a new phenomenon, questions such as why it has emerged as a global topic of interest and why it is attracting increasingly more public attention are particularly relevant at this time.*” According to Nicholas, B. (2022), the leading cause of the rise in fake news is that it can be created and published online faster and cheaper when compared to traditional

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news media such as newspapers and television.

The term "false news" traces back to the 1890s (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2018). It has been used to indicate news reports that are bogus for more than a century, Kumar, A. (2023). The scholar argued that since the previous 10 years or so, communication trends have changed, creating questions about the authenticity, quality, and impact of contents, noting that this has already put the media under fire. *"In recent times, the deliberate spread of untruths like disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information of content through social media platforms in addition to traditional media vehicles has caused a significant number of damage in different areas of life"*, Ireton, C., &Posetti, J. (2018).

Fake news, an issue coming along with the Internet, has existed for years, but relatively few people are aware of the presence of fake news. In the 2016 presidential election of the United States, there was enormous fake news (Persily, 2017). After 2016, fake news has gradually become a blooming topic of research. The impact of the spread of fake political news is one of the themes. A number of scholars focus their efforts on other aspects of fake news, such as the

source of fake news, spreading behavior of fake news, the social impact of fake news, the persuasion effect of fake news, individuals' factors for fake news persuasion, and fake news detection among other areas of research and scholarship interest.

According to N. Belloir *et al* (2022), *"Fake News is a news article that is intentionally and verifiably false"*. Molina, Sundar, Le, and Lee (2019) revealed that fake news is not simply false information. How to characterize fake news has been a major concern for many researchers. News reports that contain incorrect news may not always be considered as fake news because people believe that the reporters do not purposely deliver the incorrect news. In contrast, people consider news reports with some facts as fake because reporters put too many exaggerated statements in the news reports. *Fake News target a precise category of people and use a cognitive process based on emotions Although a Fake News can influence different people in different ways, it is designed to reach a specific group of people to manipulate them in a particular way. It aims to influence the opinion of its target by generating an emotional charge. The target's reaction leads them to draw*

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certain conclusions and change their mind about a topic.

Statement of the Problem

Fake news has become a pervasive challenge in media studies, yet its conceptualization remains ambiguous. Scholars observe that the term “fake news” overlaps significantly with related ideas like misinformation, disinformation, satire, propaganda, and parody, making it difficult to draw clear distinctions in both academic and media-practice contexts (Wang, 2020). The absence of a uniform definition complicates efforts to create consistent criteria for identifying what counts as fake news, how intent is evaluated, and how audiences perceive such content. This definitional fluidity undermines scholarly debate and policy formulation, as well as public understanding of media information integrity.

Apart from conceptual confusion, media practitioners face serious operational challenges in detecting and verifying fake news. In Kenya, for example, television journalists report difficulties such as sources with questionable authority, fake news camouflaging itself among real reports, rapid spread of false content, and lack of skills or training among less experienced

reporters (Mutugi, Nyamboga&Matu, 2020). Similarly, Kamruzzaman (2025) note that in Bangladesh, media organizations struggle due to lack of advanced verification technologies, human resource constraints, and limited awareness of automated fact-checking tools. These challenges result in false or misleading content slipping through editorial filters, damaging not only media credibility but also public trust in news sources.

Considering these gaps in conceptual clarity and the practical capacity of media practitioners to reliably identify fake news, this study intends to examine how fake news is conceptualized and defined in scholarly contexts, identify the main obstacles in forming clear and consistent definitions and investigate the difficulties faced by media professionals in verifying fake news. By doing so, this research aims to contribute to better theoretical framing of fake news and to suggest practical recommendations for improving identification and verification practices in media.

Research Questions

The following research questions formed the basis for this study:

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1. How is fake news conceptualized and defined within scholarly contexts?
2. What are the key challenges encountered in conceptualizing and defining fake news?
3. What difficulties do media practitioners face in identifying and verifying fake news?

Literature Review

The Concept of Fake News

The concept of fake news has generated extensive scholarly debate, with disagreement centering on what makes a news item “fake.” Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) argue that fake news should be viewed through a typology of six categories, namely; satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda, each varying by degree of factuality and intent to deceive. They maintain that fake news cannot be simply equated with falsehood, because its defining feature lies in its imitation of legitimate news forms while concealing a deceptive purpose. Similarly, Gelfert (2021) asserts that fake news involves a deliberate attempt to mislead, setting it apart from misinformation or rumor, which may arise unintentionally.

Lazer et al. (2018) further conceptualize fake news as fabricated information that imitates news media content in form but not in organizational process or editorial standards. Their view emphasizes that fake news undermines journalism’s truth-seeking ethos by exploiting the credibility attached to the news format. Collectively, these scholarly perspectives highlight that fake news involves a complex interplay of intention, deception, and imitation, making it not merely a matter of falsity but a distortion of communicative trust.

News Verification in the Digital Age

In today’s digital media environment, the verification of news has become increasingly complicated due to the rapid spread of user-generated content and algorithmic amplification. Zhou and Zafarani (2018) contend that traditional verification, which relied on source checking and editorial oversight, has been disrupted by digital technologies that allow anyone to publish and share information instantly. They propose that effective verification in the digital age requires analyzing metadata, propagation patterns, and social network interactions, elements that reveal how and by whom information circulates. Shu, Wang, and Liu (2017)

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similarly observe that other factors such as publisher credibility and audience engagement patterns are central to verifying authenticity in online spaces.

Apart from technical mechanisms, scholars emphasize the human and cognitive dimensions of verification. Pehlivanoglu et al. (2021) demonstrate that individuals' analytical reasoning and evaluation of source credibility strongly influence how they judge information accuracy. Likewise, media literacy education has been identified as crucial in empowering both journalists and audiences to assess information reliability (Zhou & Zafarani, 2018). Hence, news verification in the digital age entails not only algorithmic sophistication but also critical thinking skills and institutional transparency.

Fake News and Media Credibility

It is widely accepted in scholarly circles that fake news erodes the credibility of mainstream media by reducing public trust. Martin and Hassan (2020) found that audiences' exposure to fake political news is closely linked to diminished perceptions of media credibility across several national contexts. They argue that this erosion of trust extends beyond the specific fake stories to encompass broader skepticism toward

journalism as an institution. Lazer et al. (2018) also note that the prevalence of fake news challenges journalistic authority by blurring the boundary between credible reporting and manipulated content.

Moreover, researchers see media credibility as part of a reciprocal process in which trust both sustains and is sustained by verification practices. When media organizations fail to detect or correct falsehoods promptly, their credibility weakens, which in turn reduces the effectiveness of their corrective efforts (Pehlivanoglu et al., 2021). Therefore, scholars conceptualize media credibility not as a fixed attribute but as a dynamic outcome influenced by ethical standards, verification culture, and audience perceptions of transparency.

Review of Empirical Studies

A study by Wang (2021) examined how the term fake news is conceptualized and differentiated from related concepts such as misinformation and disinformation. The study aimed to clarify definitional boundaries and identify emerging research trends surrounding the phenomenon. Using a bibliometric analysis of 387 journal articles indexed in SSCI and SCI-Expanded databases, the study traced how fake news and associated terms are used across

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disciplines. Findings revealed that the concept remains conceptually ambiguous, with overlapping meanings and inconsistent criteria for distinguishing fake news from similar constructs. Wang concluded that this lack of definitional precision hinders theoretical progress, recommending that scholars adopt clearer, more consistent conceptual frameworks to improve cross-study comparability and communication within the field.

In another study, Haiden and Althuis (2018) explored the definitional challenges surrounding fake news, misinformation, and disinformation in academic and policy discourses. The research sought to uncover how definitional inconsistencies shape both scholarly investigation and policy responses. Employing a systematic review of widely cited literature, the authors analyzed the operationalization of these terms and how intent, truth-value, and format were addressed. Findings showed that many studies conflated misinformation and disinformation, often neglecting the crucial element of intent. The paper concluded that definitional vagueness undermines policy formulation and detection strategies, and recommended the adoption of clearer operational definitions that distinguish

intent, harm, and dissemination mechanisms to ensure more targeted interventions.

A related study by Mutugi et al. (2020) investigated the challenges faced by Kenyan television journalists in identifying and verifying fake news. The study aimed to understand the professional, institutional, and technological constraints that impede journalists' ability to detect false information. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research drew on interviews with 16 television journalists, complemented by observation and document review. Findings indicated that journalists grapple with inadequate verification tools, time pressures, unreliable sources, and limited training in recognizing the evolving forms of fake news. The study concluded that fake news detection is hindered by both resource and knowledge gaps, recommending improved training programs, institutional support, and stronger professional networks to enhance journalists' verification capacity.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the assumptions of the Gatekeeping Theory. Gatekeeping Theory originated from the work of Kurt Lewin (1947), who first used the “gate” metaphor to describe how certain items (such as food) are selected or rejected before

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passing through to consumers, depending on decisions at various junctures. This idea was adapted to journalism by David Manning White in 1950, when he observed how a wire-editor of a newspaper selected wire stories, discarding many based on criteria like interest, redundancy, or space. The term "gatekeeper" hence came to denote those who control which news items are published, shaping the flow of information to the public (White, 1950; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Shoemaker & Vos's book, *Gatekeeping Theory* (2009) elaborates and expands this metaphor, identifying levels of gatekeeping (individual, routines, organizational, institutional, societal) as well as introducing digital and algorithmic "gates."

The major assumptions of Gatekeeping Theory include; information selection, which states that not all events or messages become news and that gatekeepers decide which ones pass. Second, filtering mechanisms states that selection is influenced by personal values, newsroom routines, institutional policies, availability of space/resources, professional norms, and editorial or ownership interests. Furthermore, multi-level influence suggests that decisions are made at multiple levels (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), from the

journalist's personal judgment to organizational constraints and societal/ideological pressures. Finally, the theory assumes subjectivity and bias, noting that gatekeepers are influenced by their perceptions, beliefs, and external pressures. In White's study, for example, the wire editor rejected many stories simply because they were "uninteresting" or had appeared elsewhere; much was rejected because of lack of space or repetitiveness (White, 1950; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Gatekeeping Theory is relevant to this study because it provides a structured way to analyze how definitions of fake news are formed and who exercises power in determining what counts as legitimate information. Since fake news sits in the gray zones of truth, intent, format, and source, understanding gatekeeping helps explain why different scholars or media professionals define it differently, why some false or misleading messages slip through, and why verification practices vary. The theory thus offers a theoretical foundation to examine both who gets to decide "what is fake news" and how filtering (human, organizational, algorithmic) affects both the conceptual clarity and operational capacity to identify fake news.

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Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretivist paradigm to explore the conceptual and identification challenges surrounding fake news in the media. The approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret meanings, perspectives, and experiences rather than quantify them. The research was carried out in three stages corresponding to its objectives. The first stage involved a documentary analysis of academic and media literature to examine how fake news has been defined and conceptualized within scholarly contexts. A total of forty (40) definitions were reviewed from books, peer-reviewed journals, and institutional reports to identify recurring ideas, points of divergence, and conceptual ambiguities. This process helped to establish a theoretical foundation for understanding the evolving discourse on fake news and the complexities that surround its interpretation in media and communication scholarship.

Subsequently, primary data were generated through semi-structured interviews. The second stage focused on communication scholars and lecturers with expertise in journalism, media studies, or digital communication, whose perspectives helped

uncover the conceptual and definitional challenges scholars face in engaging with fake news as a research construct. The third stage addressed media practitioners, including journalists, editors, and fact-checkers from mainstream and online media organizations, whose experiences shed light on the operational difficulties encountered in identifying and verifying fake news within professional practice. In total, sixteen participants (eight scholars and eight practitioners) were purposively selected to ensure a balance of academic and practical insights. Purposive sampling is used because it allows the inclusion of individuals who have demonstrated expertise and relevant experience capable of providing useful data.

Data were collected through face-to-face or virtual interviews, depending on participants' availability. Interviews were guided by open-ended questions designed to encourage detailed and reflective responses. Documentary materials collected earlier were analyzed alongside the interview data using thematic analysis to identify recurrent patterns and underlying meanings inherent in the data.

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Data Analysis

Scholarly Conceptualizations of Fake News (RQ1)

Theme 1.1: Fabrication and Mimicry of News Form

A dominant pattern across scholarly definitions is the framing of fake news as fabricated content designed to imitate legitimate journalism. Lazer et al. (2018) describe fake news as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent,” emphasizing that it reproduces the look and tone of real news while lacking its verification standards. Similarly, Baptista (2022) explains that fake news deliberately adopts the “appearance of a news format to attract readers’ attention” and gain credibility. These perspectives show that fake news operates like a parasite on journalism, adopting the conventions of headlines, structure, and citation to conceal its falsity. The definitional emphasis on mimicry highlights the dual nature of fake news, that it is both recognizably news-like and fundamentally deceptive.

Theme 1.2: Intentionality and Deceptive Purpose

A second defining characteristic in the literature is intentional deception. Scholars consistently distinguish fake news from misinformation by emphasizing that it is deliberately created to mislead. Baptista (2022) identifies intentional manipulation as the core of fake news, describing it as content “intentionally created to mislead and/or manipulate a public ... in order to obtain more clicks and shares and/or ideological gain.” Lazer et al. (2018) similarly argue that fake news is marked not only by falsehood but by the absence of journalistic norms, implying deliberate distortion rather than accidental error. This agreement implies that the producers of fake news knowingly violate the norms of truth-telling, transforming news from an informational tool into an instrument of persuasion or exploitation.

Theme 1.3: Spectrum of False and Misleading Content

While early definitions presented fake news as wholly fabricated, more recent scholarship recognizes a spectrum of falsity, from outright falsehoods to partially true or misleading narratives. The study by Grech and Mula (2024) notes that fake news “often

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contains a mixture of truth and distortion” that complicates fact-checking and audience evaluation. Similarly, Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) describe fake news as “a genre of disinformation that blends fabricated and factual elements” to achieve credibility. This theme reveals that scholars now approach fake news less as a binary of truth versus falsehood and more as a continuum shaped by degrees of manipulation and context.

Theme 1.4: Motivations and Incentives Behind Fake News

Another recurring element in scholarly definitions concerns the motives behind fake news production, which could be financial, political, or ideological. Baptista (2022) explicitly links fake news to economic incentives such as "greater advertising revenue or ideological gain", while Lazer et al. (2018) highlight its political dimensions, describing how it is weaponized to influence public opinion. Grech and Mula (2024) similarly note that fake news often serves as a tool for ideological control and agenda-setting in polarized societies. These perspectives converge on the understanding that fake news is not merely the outcome of careless reporting but a calculated enterprise driven by tangible rewards.

Theme 1.5: Relationship to Other Information Disorders

Finally, many definitions situate fake news within the broader framework of information disorders, distinguishing it from related terms such as misinformation, disinformation, and satire. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) conceptualize fake news as overlapping primarily with disinformation, given its intentionality, but distinct in its appropriation of journalistic format. Similarly, Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) observe that fake news occupies an ambiguous space between disinformation and satire, often borrowing from both to manipulate audiences. This conceptual framing helps clarify that fake news is not a monolithic phenomenon but part of a larger ecosystem of misleading information, each form differing by intent, form, and context.

Challenges in Conceptualizing and Defining Fake News (RQ2)

Theme 2.1: Conceptual Ambiguity and Overlapping Terminologies

Media scholars highlighted that fake news remains difficult to define because it overlaps with related terms like misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and satire. This ambiguity has led to

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inconsistent usage in both research and public discourse.

“The challenge is that fake news sits in the same family as misinformation and disinformation, but the boundaries are constantly blurred,” noted a participant. Another scholar, Aja Sunday added, “Even within academia, we often use the term differently depending on context or discipline.”

Theme 2.2: Evolving Digital Media Contexts

Respondents emphasized that the rapid evolution of digital media platforms complicates conceptual clarity. The nature of fake news shifts as algorithms, user behaviours, and platforms evolve, making static definitions inadequate.

“You can’t define fake news once and for all,” explained Kenneth Nwafor. “What it looked like in 2016 is not what it looks like now with AI-generated content and influencer manipulation.” Another participant observed that “the digital environment keeps changing faster than theoretical frameworks can capture.”

Theme 2.3: Disciplinary Fragmentation in Scholarship

Many scholars attributed definitional challenges to fragmentation across fields. Different academic traditions such as journalism, psychology, communication, and political science, use varying conceptual frameworks, resulting in theoretical disunity.

“It’s like the blind men and the elephant,” noted a scholar, Chukwu Eugene. “Everyone defines it from their disciplinary vantage point.”

Theme 2.4: Normative and Ethical Tensions

A number of scholars also pointed to the moral undertones that determine fake news definitions. Questions about truth, objectivity, and journalistic ethics make it difficult to form neutral definitions.

“Once you bring in the question of truth, you’re already in philosophical territory,” remarked Uduma Eni. “That’s why fake news is not just a communication concept, it’s an ethical one.” A participant, John Ukaegbu agreed, adding that “definitions reflect our values about what journalism should be, not just what fake news is.”

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Difficulties in Identifying and Verifying Fake News (RQ3)

Theme 3.1: Time Pressure and Resource Constraints

Practitioners frequently noted that newsroom time pressures and lack of verification resources make it hard to fact-check every story. Speed often outweighs accuracy in digital journalism.

“The newsroom culture now is ‘publish first, verify later,’” said a participant, InyaUchenna. “We simply don’t have the time to vet every viral claim.” Another participant, Wisdom Nwedene added, “Verification takes manpower, and many organizations have downsized those teams.”

Theme 3.2: Sophistication of Digital Manipulation

Journalists also expressed concern about the growing sophistication of fake news, especially AI-generated images, videos, and deepfakes that are difficult to verify with traditional methods.

“It’s no longer just text or headlines,” explained OgbuChristian. “We’re dealing with synthetic videos and cloned voices that even experts struggle to detect.” Another participant, ChinweEze noted, “Sometimes

the fakes look more professional than the real thing.”

Theme 3.3: Audience Distrust and Polarization

Another major difficulty stems from audience skepticism and ideological polarization. Even when journalists verify facts, segments of the public reject corrections if they contradict prior beliefs.

“People don’t want the truth; they want confirmation,” said a participant, Emmanuel Nweke. “Once something fits their bias, no correction will change their mind.” Similarly, Patricia Oko observed, “Our credibility is questioned even when we do the work as audiences accuse us of bias no matter what.”

Theme 3.4: Inadequate Institutional and Technological Support

Practitioners lamented that many newsrooms lack institutional policies, technological tools, or specialized training for systematic fake news detection.

“Fact-checking is still treated as a side job,” stated a participant. “We need structural support, not just individual effort.” Another participant, Okpara Douglas added, “Without access to digital forensic tools or

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partnerships with fact-checking platforms, it's impossible to keep up.”

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: How is fake news conceptualized and defined within scholarly contexts?

Themes 1.1 to 1.5 of the thematic analysis revealed that fake news is conceptualized within scholarly contexts through five distinct but interrelated dimensions, namely; fabrication and mimicry of news form, intentionality and deceptive purpose, a spectrum of false and misleading content, motivations and incentives behind its production, and its relationship to other information disorders. These themes demonstrate that scholars approach fake news not as a simple binary of truth versus falsehood, but as a complex phenomenon involving imitation of legitimate journalism, deliberate deception, and varying degrees of manipulation. This implies that the scholarly conceptualization emphasizes fake news as a multidimensional construct that exploits journalistic conventions while fundamentally deceiving audiences, thereby challenging traditional notions of news authenticity and credibility.

This finding is corroborated by Wang (2021), who examined how the term fake

news is conceptualized and differentiated from related concepts through bibliometric analysis of 387 journal articles. Wang concluded that the concept remains conceptually ambiguous, with overlapping meanings and inconsistent criteria for distinguishing fake news from similar constructs. The Gatekeeping Theory helps explain this conceptual diversity by highlighting how different gatekeeping levels, such as individual scholars, disciplinary routines, institutional contexts, and societal pressures, shape how fake news is defined. As Shoemaker and Vos (2009) note, gatekeepers are influenced by their perceptions, beliefs, and external pressures, which means that scholarly definitions reflect not only objective observations but also the disciplinary lenses and normative commitments of the scholars themselves.

Research Question 2: What are the key challenges encountered in conceptualizing and defining fake news?

The analysis of themes 2.1 to 2.4 identified four major challenges in conceptualizing and defining fake news. These include conceptual ambiguity and overlapping terminologies, evolving digital media contexts, disciplinary fragmentation in scholarship, and normative and ethical tensions. Scholars consistently reported that

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fake news overlaps significantly with related terms like misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and satire, creating blurred boundaries that reduce the likelihood of specificity in definition. Additionally, participants emphasized that the rapid evolution of digital platforms and technologies, particularly AI-generated content and algorithmic manipulation, makes static definitions inadequate. These challenges reflect the difficulty of capturing a moving target within a fragmented scholarly landscape where different disciplines approach the phenomenon from different perspectives.

This finding is in consonance with Haiden and Althuis (2018), who explored the definitional challenges surrounding fake news through systematic review of widely cited literature. They found that many studies conflated misinformation and disinformation, often neglecting the crucial element of intent, and concluded that vagueness in definitions undermines policy formulation and detection strategies. The Gatekeeping Theory provides a useful framework for understanding these challenges by revealing how gatekeeping operates at multiple levels, from individual scholars' judgments to institutional constraints and societal pressures. The

theory thus explains that conceptual ambiguity persists because different gatekeepers apply different filtering mechanisms based on their values, professional norms, and contextual pressures, resulting in a proliferation of competing definitions rather than convergence toward a unified conceptual framework.

Research Question 3: What difficulties do media practitioners face in identifying and verifying fake news?

The research question is answered in themes 3.1 to 3.4 of the thematic analysis which revealed that media practitioners face four significant difficulties in identifying and verifying fake news. These are time pressure and resource constraints, sophistication of digital manipulation, audience distrust and polarization, and inadequate institutional and technological support. Journalists consistently reported that newsroom cultures prioritizing speed over accuracy make thorough verification difficult, with many organizations operating under a "publish first, verify later" mentality. Additionally, practitioners expressed concern about the increasing sophistication of fake news production, particularly AI-generated images, deepfakes, and synthetic videos that challenge traditional verification methods.

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These operational challenges are worsened by audience polarization and institutional issues, where journalists lack access to digital forensic tools, specialized training, or organizational policies that support systematic fake news detection.

Mutugi et al. (2020) found something similar when they investigated the challenges faced by Kenyan television journalists in identifying and verifying fake news. Their findings indicated that journalists grapple with inadequate verification tools, time pressures, unreliable sources, and limited training in recognizing evolving forms of fake news. The Gatekeeping Theory explains these practical difficulties by emphasizing that gatekeeping decisions are shaped by organizational routines, resource availability, and institutional policies (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In the digital age, these filtering mechanisms are disrupted by algorithmic amplification, user-generated content, and the speed of information circulation, meaning that media practitioners now operate within a transformed gatekeeping environment where traditional verification routines are insufficient.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study concluded that the challenges surrounding fake news extend beyond mere definitional disagreements to encompass fundamental issues of scholarly fragmentation, technological disruption, and institutional inadequacy. The conceptualization of fake news remains fluid and contested across disciplines, reflecting not just intellectual diversity but the absence of shared gatekeeping criteria for determining what constitutes legitimate versus deceptive information. Meanwhile, media practitioners operate under constrained conditions where the speed of digital dissemination, sophistication of manipulation techniques, and lack of organizational support undermine their capacity to fulfill traditional gatekeeping roles.

The following recommendations have, therefore, been provided:

1. Since fake news conceptualization varies across disciplines, scholars should promote interdisciplinary dialogue to develop unified definitions that integrate journalism, communication, and political science insights for

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theoretical coherence and cross-study comparability.

2. Given that scholars face challenges in defining fake news due to evolving digital contexts and overlapping terminologies, academic institutions should create collaborative research networks that refine fake news concepts, monitor emerging forms, and adapt definitions to new technologies and media platforms.
3. Because practitioners face time and resource constraints which limit their ability to identify and verify fake news, media organizations should institutionalize fact-checking systems, invest in forensic tools, and train verification teams to detect deepfakes and AI-generated manipulations effectively.

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