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Maniou, Theodora A.; Papa, Venetia; Bantimaroudis, Philemon

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# The Salience of Fakeness: Experimental Evidence on Readers' Distinction between Mainstream Media Content and Altered News Stories

Theodora A. Maniou, Venetia Papa, and Philemon Bantimaroudis  
University of Cyprus, Cyprus

## Abstract

This experiment was designed to explore people's critical, differentiating capacity between actual news and content that looks like news. Four groups of post-millennials read four versions of a news story. While the first condition included a real news story derived from a mainstream medium, the other three conditions tested three attributes of fakeness, namely an exaggerated, satirical, and popularised frame of disinformation. Although readers differentiated between satire and the actual news story, no significant differences were observed between exaggerated and simplified versions of news and the actual news story. Additional intervening variables were scrutinized, showing a connection between the salience of a story and its perceptions of fakeness.

Keywords: Salience, fake news, agenda-setting, disinformation, post-millennials

## Introduction

The term 'fake news' has emerged as a global construct among leaders, media professionals and consumers of media content, capturing a new trend of doubt and disbelief towards mainstream media organizations which, in the past, maintained a capacity to establish the salience of news stories while advancing dominant agendas (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018). Some of this capacity is currently claimed by alternative, hybrid mediated entities while influencing users' perceptions and behaviors (Chadwick, 2017; Maniou & Bantimaroudis, 2018). Indeed, the media's ability to establish a mass consensus about the significance of news topics has been blurred by the advent of hybrid media entities that advance various types of content while contributing toward a public fragmentation. Even before the arrival of social media platforms, Takeshita (2006) observed: "the new media landscape affects the agenda-setting process because mainstream media have a weakened capacity for consensus-building while losing their ability to establish a 'common public agenda' (p. 286).

As media's consensus-building function weakens, multiple agendas compete against one another for people's attention. This fragmentation of agendas is evident as numerous groups and segments give attention to topics and issues about their specialized interests. Most importantly, consumers of content seem unable to differentiate between documented information — including scientific research — versus undocumented content, pseudoscience, and gossip. Often consumers of digital content cannot distinguish among various types of 'news,' the origin, and how content was processed and disseminated.

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Correspondence to: Theodora A. Maniou, Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Cyprus, 1, University Avenue, 2109, Nicosia, Cyprus.

The rapid proliferation and easy dissemination of content, though heralded as a triumph of the information society, nonetheless pose challenges for citizens and media users. As consumers fail to differentiate between information and undocumented content, fake news seems to set new agendas of mass communication, and dubious content becomes salient in public minds.

This study draws from agenda-setting theory, discussing fake news in parallel with agendas of mainstream media news. As audiences attribute more salience to specific stories, they are more likely to treat them as news. Drawing from the literature on fake news, we test three main attributes to assess the salience of fakeness in the story: satire, exaggeration, and popularity. We argue that these attributes can contribute to identifying or assessing fakeness in media content.

## **Constructed Meanings and Perceptions on Fakeness in the News**

The debate on the integrity of news often evokes diverging understandings as audiences engage in a broader discussion of how various segments perceive information. Ling et al. (2018) argue that while the news is constructed and distributed by professional journalists, fake news is co-constructed by audiences, and its degree of fakeness depends on audience perceptions. This is significant in the context of social media, where meanings are negotiated and shared (Ling et al., p.148) among users. While the term ‘fake news’ has gained significant global attention in recent years, there are still critical gaps to fill within the literature regarding the roles of audiences in perceptions of ‘fakeness.’

In recent years, there has been extensive discussion about the nature of fake news, its effects on democratic political processes, as well as its impact on journalism. The Internet and multimedia applications have made it easy to produce and spread media; they have also made it possible to distribute fake news to the masses (Farooq, 2017). Several studies have attempted to provide definitions of fake news, underlining the motivations behind its production and dissemination. Scholars recognize the creation of stories “that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213; Vargo, Guo & Amazeen, 2018), while the literature discusses “completely false information that was created for financial gain” (Silverman, 2017).

In this work, fake news is conceptualized as disinformation, namely “misleading information used with the intent to mislead” (Fallis, 2015); rather than misinformation, namely “information that is initially assumed to be valid but is later corrected or retracted” (Ecker, Lewandowsky, Fenton, & Martin, 2014, p.252). Misinformation has been differentiated from disinformation in connection with the motives behind those categories of content. Misinformation is merely erroneous, while disinformation, in contrast, is used with the intent to mislead. But both terms are used interchangeably in the literature as both indicate distorted information (Barman & Sen, 2011). Baum (2005) states that “fake news necessitates assumptions about some kind of authentic or legitimate sets of news practices” (p.261). Therefore, researchers highlight financial and ideological motivations that underlie the production of fake news (Tandoc et al., 2017). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) provide a financial rationale for the proliferation of fake news. Fake news is cheaper to produce and circulate than mainstream news, while some people tend to enjoy its partisan nature. Consumers are very likely to endorse fake news as they “cannot costlessly infer accuracy” (p. 212). Financial, as well as ideological motivations, can encourage the production of fake news since ‘outrageous’ content attracts people’s attention and thereby attracts advertising (Tandoc et al., 2018). Fake news has evolved from a long line of satire—parodies,

fabrications, photo manipulations, and advertising material. Recent research suggests that it is now more popular than ever (Dewey, 2016), not only due to its connection to the rapid rise of social media platforms in recent decades but also because of its different forms or attributes that seem to promote fakeness.

Social media allow journalists to reach wider audiences, while at the same time individuals produce, consume, and share different types of information, including false stories (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). This is strongly associated with the ability of Facebook and other social media platforms to hide sources of information while spreading fake news via anonymous, automated accounts that target users already engaged and interested in specific topics (Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2017).

Sharing fake content becomes problematic within polarised political environments, where online partisan media can easily allow the propagation of fake news. Rojecki and Meraz's (2016) analysis of actors responsible for transmitting false news articles during the 2004 U.S. presidential election found that conservative websites and blogs became central gatekeepers in the release of misinformation. In the same context, Bakir and McStay (2018) link the fake news phenomenon with the ascension of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States. They argue that political actors participating in social media discourses have advanced populist agendas. In contrast, the use of social media algorithms for political purposes has been linked with affective reactions among online audiences.

Furthermore, alienation and cynicism are directly linked to exposure to fake news. Similarly, scholars argue that social media render the "bandwagon heuristic more salient," as posts, comments, and news articles are accompanied by popularity ratings (Sundar, 2008). Such reactions and shares displayed on social media are more likely to receive attention from users, either positive or negative (Papa, 2017).

## Assessing the Salience of Fakeness in the News

News agendas are comprised of attributes that signify salience. According to Barman and Sen (2011), the qualities that render information valuable are Accurateness, Timeliness, Completeness, Preciseness, and Relevance. As audiences attribute more salience to a particular news article, they are more likely to treat it as real. Several attributes could be linked to fake news, and all of them are connected with a wide range of human emotions (Watson, 2018). Due to their salacious and often unbelievable headlines and content features, they are consumed and shared by millions of people (Robinson, 2019). For this study, we adopt three main attributes to assess a salience of fakeness: *satire*, *exaggeration*, and *popularity*. These attributes contribute toward assessing fakeness in the news, as they are directly related to the tricky, emotional aspect of disinformation. Recent global crises offer many examples of how audiences tend to be surprisingly 'open' to fake, emotional news stories related to real information (Watson, 2018). From the Syrian conflict to the financial crisis of 2007 and –more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic— a series of fake stories were disseminated mainly through social media platforms and soon became viral. Specific stories promoted fake pictures (e.g., soldiers pointing their guns towards children), while others touted exaggerated information (e.g., conspiracy theories linked to the global spread of COVID-19). This study investigates three main attributes related to fake news stories, namely satire, exaggeration, and popularity, as the most evident characteristics of disinformation:

*Satire* represents a popular type of content that has been purposefully altered with the intent of raising people's awareness of highly contested issues often promoted by journalists. Satire is a type of deception that intentionally incorporates cues revealing its deceptiveness (Rubin, Conroy, Chen, & Cornwell, 2016). As such, fake news is expected to

incorporate satire in connection with the news or current events. Satire can be conceptualized as a rhetorical strategy that seeks wittily to provoke an emotional and intellectual reaction from an audience on a matter of public significance (Phiddian, 2013). Fake news stories can arouse the audience's attention, amuse them, and awaken their capacity to judge contemporary society (Chovanec & Ermida, 2012), provided this audience has prior knowledge of the news stories presented. In other words, the level of the audience's prior knowledge or awareness of news or current events directly affects their capacity to identify fakeness in these news stories.

*Exaggeration* represents another category that is related to the fake news phenomenon. Fake news contains exaggerated versions of reality, which can incentivize the use of clickbait to increase the audience's interest (Chen, Conroy, & Rubin, 2014). Together with sensationalism, exaggeration has been traditionally associated with tabloid journalism and, as such, it can directly guide consumers towards misleading news content. Although it may seem evident that audiences would detect exaggeration, their perception of this attribute may vary since it is often used by journalists to criticize social, political, and even economic issues in addition to attracting users' interest (Klein & Wueller, 2017). In other cases, exaggeration can be used to intentionally add comedic intent to a news story (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016) and, as such, it can affect the audience's perception in assessing the fakeness of the story.

*Popularity* represents a significant attribute of news that might be related to fake news (Watson, 2018). Producers of fake news focus on the most popular issues that prevail in digital public spheres. As such, the popularity of content refers to details of an event, news story, or fact that can be intentionally emphasized to attract readers' attention. In recent years, as people's interest in news has been steadily declining, journalistic content has tended to display an increasing emphasis on popularised stories to attract attention. This attribute seems to attract the attention of younger audiences (Meijer, 2007) and especially post-millennials, since their interest in news content is related to entertainment, along with its popularity. As such, popular news stories constitute a basis for conversation, which, in turn, can offer to post-millennial audiences a sense of belonging (e.g., in a group), especially when these conversations take place on social media platforms.

## **The Current Project**

This experiment was designed to explore people's critical, differentiating capacity between news and content that looks like news. It explores the influences of news derived from mainstream media in contrast to content that presents specific facts along with fictional or false information. The study assesses readers' critical capacity to recognize news in contrast to content that looks like news but is not. To achieve this goal, we designed an experiment with four primary conditions.

The primary objective of this experiment is to provide empirical evidence about the processing of media content in a controlled environment. The second objective is to identify the attributes of fake news that are more likely to be read and perceived by consumers as news. Studying attributes of fake news that are more likely to be perceived as the news might shed light on how people process the news within hybrid media environments. It is identifying those attributes of fake news that have a higher probability of being read as journalism might enhance the work of educators who strive to empower students in the realm of media literacy, to equip young people with critical skills and the capacity to question the origin and validity of online content.

## Methodology

Four versions of a news story were presented to four groups of post-millennials, who were recruited for this experiment since this generation receives information almost entirely through social media. To confirm this point, Figure 1 shows patterns of news consumption by our 108 participants. The term ‘post-millennials’ refers to the generation born in the middle of the last decade of the 20th century, who have never experienced a world without the internet and digital technology (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Shatto & Erwin, 2016; Turner, 2015; Twenge, 2017).

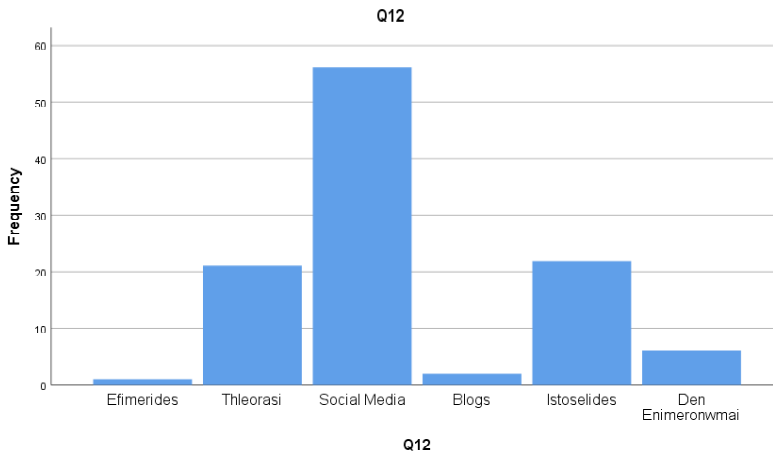


Figure 1. Participants responding to the question: From which media do you usually find news about Donald Trump?

Prensky (2001) described this generation as digital natives, who rely on digital media, as opposed to previous generations who are digital immigrants. Prensky’s theory was expanded by Buda (2013), who used qualitative indicators to describe various roles—from ‘digital refugees’ and ‘digital explorers’ to ‘digital addicts’ (see also, Podara et al., 2019).

The control condition in this experiment included the actual news story, drawn from a news agency and published by mainstream media. This story was presented unaltered, in the same format as it was initially published online. The story was first published on February 21, 2019, by the Athenian Press Agency in Greece. It pertained to President Donald Trump’s decision to declare a national emergency on the border with Mexico. This move, which prompted a constitutional crisis in the United States, was initiated by President Trump to secure funds for building a wall on the border of the United States with Mexico. This story was highly publicized by the international media. It was widely read in Europe for the same reasons, and it became salient in the United States – because of a heated political discourse on the topic of illegal immigration.

The other three conditions included altered versions of the original story that were designed because of specific framing devices that were tested under the premise of fake news: exaggeration, satire, and popularity. The second condition included the title “Collaboration between the United States and Mexico for Funding the Wall.” The story capitalizes on Trump’s pre-election promise that Mexico would fund the wall, a promise that proved completely unrealistic (exaggeration frame). Apart from its title, the story included several factual errors such as secret meetings between Trump and the Mexican President during which the Mexican government agreed to co-fund the wall with the

United States and an agreement for a low-interest loan that the U.S. Government would supply to the Mexican authorities to help them do their share in building the wall. This article stressed the notion that Trump was successful in persuading Mexico to build the wall, and thereby he kept his pre-election promise in a very effective way.

In the third condition, the title of the manipulated article was: "Canada joins the United States to Complete the Wall on the border with Mexico." The fakeness envelope was pushed further as the story presented the Canadian Prime Minister as a supporter of Donald Trump. Various elements of the story were manipulated, as the Canadian Prime Minister agreed to fund the wall on the southern border of the United States to curtail illegal immigration toward Canada. The article included 'information' showing the 'success' of Trump in persuading the Canadian Prime Minister to follow Trump's lead toward securing the borders of the United States (satire).

In the fourth condition, the title of the article read as follows: "The Wall is Nearly Finished." Additional fake information was provided about the budget needed for the completion of the project. Most importantly, it was argued that the entire project was completed in just one year. Trump was thus successful and efficient in delivering to his voters exactly what he promised (popularity).

The goal of the experiment was to assess readers' capacity to draw from what they already know about this particular story from its international media coverage. Additionally, to put their prior knowledge to the test, ultimately, to use their critical ability in differentiating between what news is derived from mainstream media sources versus what contradicts that coverage and thereby was disseminated through alternative channels. The three versions included information that ranged from false to preposterous. A story presenting a collaboration between Mexico and the United States for building the wall is simply false. Mexico has repeatedly denied funding the wall, despite what Trump promised in his campaign. Those who keep up with the news would be aware of that fact. The article has been manipulated using a tone of exaggeration about what Trump could achieve as a leader despite what has already been achieved. A collaboration between Canada and the United States in connection with the wall is entirely improbable because of the very different personalities and ideologies that govern the two countries. Basic knowledge of the two leaders and what they represent is adequate to preclude a collaboration at this level. Prior experience rules out the possibility of this article being read as legitimate news. The same principles apply to the fourth condition. Trump's massive project could not have been completed in such a short period, though this 'popular effectiveness' frame of Trump could be appealing to his supporters.

The sample consisted of 108 university students who were randomly assigned to four groups. Each group of participants read one of the four versions of the story. Only one group (Condition 1) read the actual news story. All readers were asked to fill out a questionnaire providing measures of 'reality' of the story on a Likert scale from 1 to 7. In contrast, additional control variables provided quantitative assessments of the perceived significance of the story. A measure of the perceived 'reality' of the story was the primary dependent variable of this study. Several demographic variables were included: gender, education level of the father, education level of the mother, and place of residence. Further questions dealt with students' prior knowledge, news consumption habits, and perceptions of reality derived from the version they read.

## Variables

The main variables of this project were conceptualized as a set of questions, assessing people's understanding of news or content that looks like news. Thereby, they were measured as predictors of perceived 'reality.' The entire questionnaire is presented in Appendix A. Question 9 was designed as the primary dependent variable of the study, measuring readers' perceptions of reality. We posed the following exploratory question: "To what extent do you consider the story you read like a real story?"

All other questions represent independent or intervening variables that supposedly influence readers' perceptions of reality. Previous knowledge of news, prior agreement with Trump's policies, the perceived salience/significance of the story, and attributes that help readers recognize the story, such as photographs, types of media, narrative structures, and contextual information, constitute the primary control variables of the study. Furthermore, we tested the reliability of the instrument. The Alpha Cronbach is .74.

## Hypotheses and Measures

Mean differences among the four conditions were assessed through ANOVA and ANCOVA measures while controlling for factors that supposedly interfere with perceptions of reality. Standard inferential measures, such as hierarchical regression utilized in experimental designs, were also used. To ensure that the findings are reliable and robust, several precautions were undertaken to avoid problems related to data distribution, collinearity, and the independence of observations. Hierarchical regression was selected to assess influences on readers' perceptions of reality beyond a basic model, including the four conditions of this experimental design.

The central assumption is related to people's capacity to differentiate between mainstream media news and alternative content that circulates widely online. Students participated in this experiment in the context of a class assignment. Instructors provided detailed information about the reading project and the questionnaire that students would have to fill out. There was a debriefing and discussion at the end of the procedure about the nature of fake news and those attributes of the story that were associated with fakeness. The following exploratory research questions and hypotheses were examined:

### Research Questions

- RQ1: Are there significant differences between the four groups of readers in terms of their perceptions of reality?
- RQ2: Which particular frames or attributes of news content are highly associated with readers' perceptions of reality?

### Hypotheses

- H1: The news story derived from mainstream media will be perceived by readers as more real than the altered versions of that story.
- H2: There will be significant variations in readers' perceptions of reality among the three altered versions of the news story.

## Findings

Both descriptive and inferential measures were utilized to assess differences among the four conditions, while additional measures of salience as covariates generated evidence about combined influences on the perceived 'reality' of each version of the news story.



Each condition is comprised of 27 students, with 108 participants in total—the main dependent variable measures people’s perception of how ‘real’ the story is? Although the ANOVA measure ( $F= 2.261$ ) is not statistically significant ( $p < 0.08$ ), it registers very close to 0.05, a standard threshold for significance. Mean comparisons across the four conditions display significant variations from the control group (Condition 1). On a scale from 1 to 7, where 7 signifies a maximum perception of reality, the mean for the control group is 4.81 (SD= 1.56). The respective means for Conditions 2, 3 and 4 are: 4.40 (SD= 1.57), 3.70 (SD= 1.61) and 4.18 (SD=1.64). The greatest difference in means is recorded between Condition 1 (Control group) and Condition 3, a difference of 1.11. Furthermore, the ANOVA measure dealing with mean differences between Condition 1 and Condition 3 is statistically significant at the 0.05 level; in fact, the only difference in means that displays statistical significance at the 0.05 level. Mean differences between Condition 1 (control group) and Conditions 2 and 4 are not statistically significant.

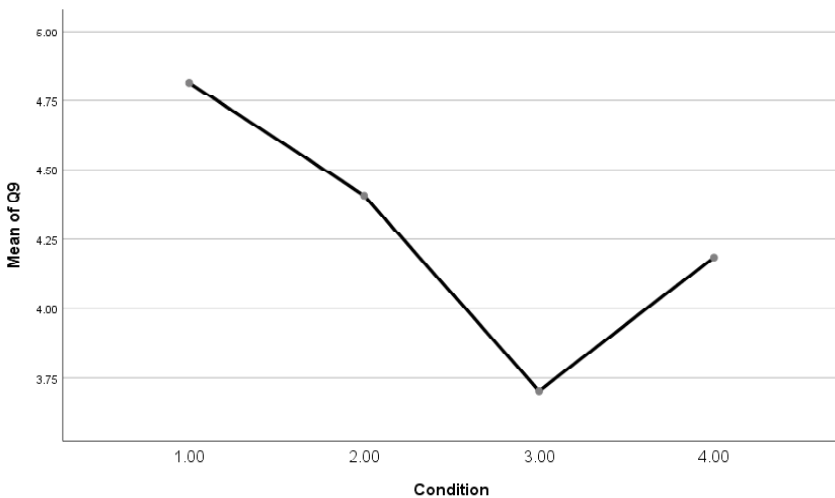


Figure 2. Mean plots for the four conditions

Furthermore, these initial findings show that participants differentiate to some extent between the four versions of ‘reality,’ but specific news frames are associated with fakeness more than other attributes. Fakeness should be examined at different levels as certain attributes, or narrative choices might enhance people’s reading of a story as fake. Therefore, additional ANCOVA measures were utilized to assess the role of other variables in conjunction with Condition 3. As Table 1 demonstrates, there are several variables that register as significant covariants. Specifically, Questions 3, 5, 8, 10, and 11 are significant co-predictors of readers’ misreading of reality. Those five variables represent the level of salience (Questions 3 and 5), the type of news source (Question 8), contextual information in the text (Question 10), and the type of media outlet (Question 11). Those factors seem to influence how students read the story and to what extent supplementary evidence within the story aids them in accepting it as real.

Table 1. Dependent Variable = Q9

| Covariates | Sum of Squares | Mean Square | F      | Sig  | R Squared |
|------------|----------------|-------------|--------|------|-----------|
| Q1         | .007           | .007        | .003   | .959 | .061      |
| Q2         | 4.012          | 4.012       | 1.576  | .212 | .075      |
| Q3         | 19.618         | 19.618      | 8.191  | .005 | .130      |
| Q4         | 5.272          | 5.272       | 2.080  | .152 | .080      |
| Q5         | 30.593         | 30.593      | 13.369 | .000 | .169      |
| Q7         | 3.611          | 3.611       | 1.416  | .237 | .074      |
| Q8         | 16.455         | 16.455      | 6.784  | .011 | .119      |
| Q10        | 96.234         | 96.234      | 58.285 | .000 | .400      |
| Q11        | 33.055         | 33.055      | 14.597 | .000 | .178      |

Furthermore, a hierarchical linear regression provides additional evidence about how different variables, along with demographic evidence, predict readers' perceptions of reality. The first model includes dummy variables of the three manipulated conditions without the control condition. The second model includes all the necessary control variables, such as previous knowledge of this news story, prior agreement with Trump's policies, the perceived salience/significance of the story along with the primary attributes under scrutiny – the role of photographs, types of media, narrative structures and contextual information. The third model includes demographic variables – gender and the parents' level of education. In each model, we attempt to assess influences beyond the previous analysis.

Table 2. Hierarchical Linear Regression Models predicting readers' perceived reality of news content

| Variables        | Model 1   | Model 2    | Model 3   |
|------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| Constant         | 4.815 *** | .644       | 1,463     |
| Condition #2     | -.407     | -.349      | -.289     |
| Condition #3     | -1.111 ** | -1.100 *** | -1.071 ** |
| Condition #4     | -.630     | -.777 **   | -.714 †   |
| Q1               | —         | -.007      | -.017     |
| Q2               | —         | -.033      | -.012     |
| Q3               | —         | .183       | .205      |
| Q4               | —         | .128       | .131      |
| Q5               | —         | .055       | .067      |
| Q7               | —         | -.025      | -.042     |
| Q8               | —         | -.007      | .011      |
| Q10              | —         | .576 ***   | .539 ***  |
| Q11              | —         | -.034      | -.019     |
| Gender           | —         | —          | -.264     |
| Education/Father | —         | —          | -.195     |
| Education Mother | —         | —          | -.003     |
| R Square         | 0.061     | .363       | .455      |

Note. N = 108 student participants. Answers to question "To what extent you consider the story you read as a real story?" 7-point scale. Levels of statistical †p < .10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

As Table 2 shows, the basic model confirms the significance of Condition 3 as an influencer of readers' perceptions of news. Model 2 provides a holistic picture of influences, showing Conditions 3 and 4 along with Question 10 jointly registering as significant predictors of readers' perceptions. The third model, in addition to the variables mentioned above, includes certain demographic variables, none of which registers as statistically significant.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This experiment was designed to assess public influences of media content that looks like news or includes elements of news, without, however, qualifying as news. In modern terminology, content like this is described as fake news. Undocumented content originating from dubious online sources is widely available online. In some cases, it is purposefully altered or manipulated to satisfy unknown interests. At the same time, the content of an extreme or conspiratorial nature becomes possible to attract attention, to shock readers and attract followers. Which attributes of fake news are more likely to be interpreted and/or perceived by consumers as news?

As we examine perceptions of reality, what comparative evidence can we generate between mainstream news and dubious content? Is the impact of both types of content similar in terms of quantifiable effects? These are just some of the broader themes explored in this experiment.

We chose students as participants because of a broader discussion concerning media literacy in hybrid media settings. As the post-millennial generation has grown up entirely immersed in hybrid, mediated ecosystems, younger segments exist in symbiotic relationships with media platforms and digital applications. They acquire information and entertainment from various media platforms and thereby are often exposed to content of questionable news value. Can they differentiate between news and other types of content? Can they recognize elements of undocumented information (fake news) in content that resembles news? As post-millennial generations progressively assume positions of power and authority, will they be able to seek reliable information? How should media literacy programs address the increasing problem of dubious content circulating freely online? Our rationale for designing this experiment dealt with foundational issues of our time that increasingly evolve as significant societal challenges affecting the functionality of western democracies.

In the course of its 50-year history, the agenda-setting paradigm has benefitted from experimental research (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). We draw on this tradition while capitalizing on issues that resonate with young users of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our experimental findings offer compelling evidence concerning how young people perceive the news. We learn that mainstream news is treated as more real than altered versions of the news. The control group of students, who read the actual story, perceived the story as more real than any other group. This difference in perceptions is significant, showing that post-millennials keep up with current events and can some extent to differentiate between a news story and a fake one.

On the other hand, the mean differences between the real and fake versions of news were relatively small. This finding should be subject to additional investigation. Our ANOVA shows that there is just one statistically significant comparison between Conditions 1 and 3, while differences between the control group and Conditions 2 and 4 were not statistically significant. Furthermore, mean differences did not deviate from one another a great deal. Although there are differences among the four groups, these differences should have been more pronounced than they were.

Furthermore, there were differences among altered (fake) versions of the story. There was some exciting differentiation in terms of students' perceptions. Condition 2 described an 'exaggeration' frame, presenting a collaboration between the United States and Mexico to complete the wall, as Trump had promised in his campaign. The article in Condition 3 presented a satirical version, namely a collaboration between Donald Trump and the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, with the latter agreeing to fund the wall on the southern border of the United States. The article in Condition 4 argued that the wall had been completed. This item was labeled as a popularity frame, demonstrating both effectiveness as well as the satisfaction of a popular promise.

While the mean for the actual story was 4.8, the means for Conditions 2 and 4 were 4.4 and 4.1, respectively. These findings tell a mixed story about reality and fakeness. The fact that readers of the actual story have a higher score in terms of their perceptions of its reality is reassuring concerning peoples' critical reading skills. However, the two fake versions show only a minor deviation from the actual story. The only condition that shows a relatively significant departure from Condition 1 presents a collaboration between Canada and America in connection with building the wall, but in a satirical manner. The mean for Condition 3 is 3.7 and is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. The story in Condition 3 is highly improbable, and unsurprisingly, Condition 3 readers pick up on the satirical aspect of the story.

Having examined mean differences among the four groups, ANCOVAs were used to examine the role of covariates that supposedly interfere with participants' perceptions of reality. The most surprising finding was that prior agreement with Trump's proposals did not register as a significant covariate with perceptions of reality. Perhaps the fact that this study was conducted outside the United States and away from polarised political environments should be considered as we analyze our evidence. The results might have been different if the experiment were conducted in the United States, especially in connection with voters' prior agreement with a political belief or a political personality. Although many students registered their agreement with Trump's ideas, their positive disposition toward Trump did not seem to register as a significant covariate.

On the other hand, several other variables seem to influence people's perceptions. For example, the perceived salience of the story – thinking of the story as significant – appears to influence people's perception of its reality. Because students thought of the story as a "significant problem" or "significant international news," their perception of the story's salience seems to be related to their perception of the story's reality. Three additional internal attributes of the story seem to aid people's perceptions of its reality – the source of the story, supplementary information presented in the article, and the type of medium used to disseminate the story. Every article presented evidence about the origin of the story, its journalistic source, and the medium through which it was initially disseminated. It seems that students paid attention to pieces of information about sources (i.e., credible journalists), media platforms (i.e., Facebook), as well as other secondary information (i.e., the date the building of the wall was supposedly completed). The fact that post-millennials look for supplementary information regarding all the above implies a finding of dual nature: It shows that consumers of news pay attention to content uploaded on Facebook, differentiating between social media platforms and websites they do not immediately recognize. What is considered credible news sources for post-millennials seem to be linked to recognizable social media platforms, regardless of the real origin of the story.

In addition to ANOVA and ANCOVA measures, our hierarchical regression analysis confirmed the likelihood of Conditions 3 and 4 to influence perceptions of reality. Condition 4 was marginally significant in two of the regression models, while Condition 3

was consistently statistically significant in every model that was examined. Beyond these two conditions, internal evidence presented within the text registered as the most significant predictor of reality. This finding is consistent with our ANCOVA analysis, demonstrating that readers look for internal evidence within the text as the primary filter of reality. Questions 8, 10, and 11 represent a distinctive cluster of internal evidence, showing that information in the text along with the source and the type of media outlet influence the way individuals read the story. If we combine the findings derived from our analyses, we can argue that satirical frames of a popular nature, dealing with a salient issue, in combination with narrative structures, the journalistic source and the type of medium influence post-millennials' understanding and processing of news as well as fake versions of the news.

The current study offers some significant lessons of a mixed nature regarding perceptions of reality. It demonstrates that different frames or attributes of an issue can be related to fake depictions of a story. Not all versions of a fake story are perceived as equally plausible. Still, some stories might seem more or less believable depending on the narrative traits of the story, including its sources and the outlet of dissemination. In this study, a story framed as satire seems more likely to be perceived as fake.

In contrast, other stories that include distorted frames of exaggeration and popular versions of news are more likely to be perceived as closer to reality. Another factor that readers need to take into consideration is the relative salience of the story. This study implies that the level of the salience of an issue renders it more likely to be distorted by dubious sources. At the same time, critical readers need to look at specific internal evidence to assess the validity of a journalistic account.

The study poses some exciting implications. If a story published originally by *The New York Times* or any other mainstream medium is not disseminated through social media platforms widely used by post-millennial readers, how does lack of social media circulation influence perceptions of the story's reality? This study implies that a story's mere presence on social media platforms is related to young readers' perceptions in terms of its salience and reality. Another implication of the current endeavor deals with framing devices. If satire has a higher probability of being read as satire, how should readers assess the probability of fakeness among popular content that includes exaggerated versions of news? What aspects of framed exaggeration should be treated as more likely to be associated with fake content?

Furthermore, this study indicates that in political contexts, popular versions of perceived political effectiveness should be approached with caution. These frames of effectiveness are utilized by political players as personal promotion devices – the portrayal of a leader who delivers on his promises. To what extent can post-millennial readers detect critical differences among texts while comparing diverging versions of reality and fakeness? The current study shows that young readers are relatively capable of recognizing such differences, without, however, drawing definitive lines between mainstream media news and alternative providers of content. Therefore, future extensions of this study may include an in-depth analysis of users' perceptions of news within datafied environments.

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## Appendix (Variables of the Experiment)

The following questions represent the main variables that were examined as predictors of perceived ‘reality’ in connection with news content:

- Q1: How often do you get news about Donald Trump?
- Q2: To what extent do you agree with the need for building a wall on the southern border of the United States with Mexico so that the United States might be protected from illegal migrants?
- Q3: To what extent do you consider the news presented in this article as significant?
- Q4: To what extent do you agree with the main idea of this article?
- Q5: To what extent can the topic of this article be described as a significant international problem?
- Q6: Have you read about this story in other media recently?
- Q7: To what extent does the photograph in the article help you recognize the story?

- Q8: To what extent does the source of the story help you recognize the story?  
 Q9: To what extent do you consider the story you read like a real story?  
 Q10: To what extent does the information presented in the text help you recognize the story?  
 Q11: To what extent does the medium type help you recognize the story as news?

Question (Q9) is the primary dependent variable of the study, measuring readers' perceptions of reality. All other questions represent intervening variables that supposedly influence readers' perceptions of reality. Previous knowledge of news (measured through Questions 1 and 6), prior agreement with Trump's policies (Questions 2 and 4), the perceived salience/significance of the story (Questions 3 and 5) and attributes those help readers recognize the story, such as photographs, types of media, narrative structures and contextual information (Questions 7, 8, 10 and 11) constitute the primary control variables of the study. Additionally, Q12 ("From which media do you usually find news about Donald Trump") was included in the descriptive analysis so as to empirically support the argument that the generation of users analysed in this study receives information almost entirely through social media. However, it was not deemed appropriate for inclusion in the regression analysis as this variable does not fall within the scope of the study, hypotheses and RQs.

**Theodora A. Maniou** (Ph.D.) is a Lecturer in Journalism, at the Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Cyprus. Her area of specialization focuses on new forms of journalism, broadcast journalism in television and multimedia journalism. Prior to her current appointment, she worked as a journalist for fifteen years and is a member of the International Federation of Journalists, the European Federation of Journalists and the Journalistic Union of Macedonia-Thrace (Greece).

**Venetia Papa** (Ph.D.) is a Lecturer in Journalism and Media Studies, at the Department of Social & Political Sciences, University of Cyprus. Her current research interests lie in the fields of new and alternative media, internet politics, media literacy, online communities, and social movements. She is currently the coordinator of the research lab DAT-ACT at the University of Cyprus working on the emerging big data ecology through innovative and advanced methodological tools. She is the co-author of the book *Mobilisations Numeriques: Politiques du conflit et technologies médiatiques* (Les Presses des Mines, 2017).

**Philemon Bantimaroudis** (Ph.D.) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Cyprus. Prior to his current appointment, he was a Professor in the Department of Cultural Technology and Communication at the University of the Aegean (Greece). His primary research interests are focused on media theory with secondary applications in culture and politics.