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## An Exploration Into How Print and Online News Journalists Manage Political Fake News in Ireland

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## **An exploration into how print and online news journalists manage political fake news in Ireland**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how a number of Irish political journalists, working for both traditional newspapers and an online news website, deal with the problem of fake news. The aim is to gain an understanding of what the journalists' perception of political fake news is and the methods they employ to manage it - a sorely under researched topic. Our findings show that the journalists we spoke with feel there are a range of forms that fake news assumes, many of them insidious and challenging to overcome with facts. The paper highlights the important role journalists play in confronting political fake news. It is also clear from the journalists' perceptions that fake news is a chronic problem, as social media platforms, that serve as a major medium for its spread, become ubiquitous in our daily lives.

**Keywords:** Fake news; journalists; politics; social media; factchecking.

### **Introduction**

During the 2016 United States (US) presidential election campaign Donald Trump and his supporters disingenuously used the term fake news to describe actual news organisations, and genuine news articles, that criticised him. Trump called the media “bad people – the worst people in the world” (Baldwin, 2018: 228). Thus, fake news became a problem not only of individuals being exposed to the wrong information, but also of legitimate journalists being maligned (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2019: 4). By taking ownership of the concept of fake news, and recasting it to suit his anti-establishment campaign ends, Trump worked to undermine the notion of truth. “Post-truth” was selected as term of the year in 2016 by the Oxford English Dictionary (Curiel and Aldea 2022).

False news has always been spread throughout history. Fake news is not a new term, having first appeared in the 1890s in the US. Fake News can be defined as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organisational process or intent” (Lazar et al., 2018: 1094). According to Tandoc Jr. et al. (2019) fake news has been used to

refer to various forms of content, from political satires, and parodies, to state propaganda and false advertising. The 2016 US presidential election put the phenomenon on the international agenda (Wang et al., 2020), as fabricated news stories went viral on social media and Trump used the term as a weapon against critics (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2019).

“The widespread and growing distrust among Western publics in institutions of the press is an inescapable reality” (Freelon and Wells, 2020: 146). While there is relevant academic literature on fake news from the US, various parts of Europe and Asia, and the role it plays in media and society (Bakir and McStay, 2018; Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Freelon and Wells, 2020; Khaldarova and Pantti, 2016; Tandoc Jr. et al., 2019), there has been little academic research on how Irish political journalists deal with it. Here we seek to investigate political journalists’ perceptions of fake news and the methods they employ to manage it. This is in the broader context of a profession wherein a dwindling workforce, and economic pressures, create conditions that can impact the quality of journalism (Harro-Loit and Josephi, 2020; Himma-Kadakas, & Ojamets, 2022).

This is particularly relevant now that social media, a transmission belt for many things, including fake news, has become ubiquitous in our daily lives (Curiel and Aldea, 2022; Gardiner, 2015). As of 2023 there are 4.28 million social media users in Ireland out of a population of just 5.1 million.<sup>1</sup> “As an ideal platform to accelerate fake news dissemination, social media breaks the physical distance barrier among individuals; provides rich platforms to share, forward, vote, and review; and encourages users to participate and discuss online news” (Zhou and Zafarani, 2020, 109: 2). Never before does the aphorism of Mark Twain “a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes” have so much resonance.

The paper begins with an examination of the literature on fake news and journalism. From there we discuss the context of the study –print and online newspapers in Ireland. We then set out the methodology employed. Thereafter we present our findings and analysis. We finish with a discussion of the findings.

## **Fake News and Journalism**

### Fake News

Fake news, unlike its cousins misinformation and disinformation, while misleading or totally fabricated, is more insidious in that it is purposefully crafted to mimic mainstream news (Zimdars and McLeod, 2020). Fake news exists across a variety of media including print, television (TV), radio, and online media (Auxier and Arbanas, 2021). While the term fake news appeared almost 130 years ago, it has come to prominence since the 2016 US Presidential election campaign (Bakir and McStay, 2018; Jankowski, 2018). This iteration of fake news “is associated with the efforts of movements and parties on the radical right to mobilize supporters against centre parties and the mainstream press that carries their messages” (Bennett and Livingston, 2018: 122). “Fake news is now viewed as one of the greatest threats to democracy, journalism, and freedom of expression” (Zhou and Zafarani, 2020: 109:1).

There has been a breakdown of trust in the democratic institutions of the press and politics due to the hollowing of parties and diminished electoral representation (Bennett and Livingston, 2018). This process has been ongoing for decades (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). It appears that the erosion of the importance of truthfulness is the aim of malicious agents propagating fake news (Nyilasy, 2019). If “people can no longer confidently repair ‘to the best fountains for their information’, then anyone’s guess and anyone’s rumour, each man’s hope

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/568962/predicted-number-of-social-network-users-in-ireland/#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20the%20number%20of,over%200.7%20million%20since%202018.>

and each man's whim becomes the basis of government" (Lippmann, 1920: 3). As Yale historian Timothy Snyder said "if we don't have access to facts, we can't trust each other. Without trust, there's no law. Without law, there's no democracy" (Klaas, 2017: 41).

Fake news is like advertising – sponsored messaging, spread through mass media with a persuasive intent (Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016). Fake news spreads primarily on advertising-supported social media platforms. Some argue it is the business model of relying almost exclusively on advertising revenue that has prevented social media platforms from curtailing fake news (The Economist, 2017). Fake news stories are the ideal form of "clickbait" to drive web traffic because of the emotional response inspired from the headlines (Gardiner, 2015), consequently increasing advertising volume and, by extension, revenues (Visentin et al., 2019). Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow news stories to be shared "without fact-checking and editorial mechanisms in place" (Lee, 2019: 17). Consequently fake news supports, and is supported by, advertising dollars (Mills et al., 2019).

Fake news may be effectively quelled by credible institutions responding quickly. However, the problem can be intractable when levels of institutional trust are low (Lee, 2020). "Conventional notions of news and truth that ground standard journalistic practice are harder to achieve and maintain amid the destabilization of the past hierarchical order" (Waisbord, 2018: 1866). Across democracies, "fake news" has flourished, serving to question the credibility of mainstream news networks, dividing the general public both ideologically and on the mere acceptance of facts, providing credence to ideological claims of "fake news" (Lee, 2019, p. 16). According to the director of the American Press Institute and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, Tom Rosenstiel, "misinformation is not like a plumbing problem you fix. It is a social condition, like crime, that you must constantly monitor and adjust to" (Anderson and Rainie, 2017).

### Journalism

Fake news is created often with an intention to deceive, which is directly in conflict with journalism (Balod and Hameleers, 2021: 2370). Scholars and media critics have argued that fake news, and the accusatory discourse against the news media can alter public beliefs, affect election results, and de-legitimise traditional journalism as society's fourth estate (Vu and Saldana, 2021). Evidence suggests that the mere presence of the term fake news is sufficient to lower trust in the media (Egelhofer et al., 2020).

The functioning of democracies and economies relies on well-informed publics (Wilczek, 2020). Thus, news organisations fulfil important functions for democratic societies (Lischka, 2019). The work of political journalists constitutes a public good of information – generating debate and also scrutiny (Schudson, 2008: 11–12). The basis for an efficient relationship between news media and democratic societies are attributions of legitimacy by the public toward the news media (Lischka, 2019). However, legacy news organisations have lost their unchallenged status in the digital social-networked age (Lischka, 2019: 287).

The use of fake news in political discourse constitutes a critical incident for journalism – an event that leads journalists to reconsider the how's and whys of journalistic practice (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2019). These events function as discursive opportunities for journalists to ensure the well-being of their interpretive community by reasserting the normative boundaries of their profession and locating practices and actors that fall short of journalistic ideals as outside the boundaries of legitimate journalism (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2019). To combat fake news, journalists are expected to do more than just debunk falsehoods (Vu and Saldana, 2021). Journalists, concerned over declining public trust, urge colleagues to adopt more rigorous factchecking measures (Graves and Amazeen, 2019; Schapals, 2018). Journalists try to signal to audiences the differences between their news stories and fake news to defend the narrative

of their profession being crucial to democracy (Jahng et al., 2021). Journalists have proposed tweaking the algorithms on social media platforms to break people out of their filter bubbles (Bakir and McStay, 2017). Bhaskaran et al (2017) argue that journalism educators should formulate a dynamic curriculum framework focused on collaborative verification practices to combat fake news. In this environment of huge flows of information, the journalists' role is to be a filter – to select and process information to make sense of it for the public (Himma-Kadakas, 2017). As a result, it is crucial for journalists to become digitally literate (Usher, 2019).

In journalism, increased pressures for profitability, changes in media consumer behaviour and changing technology have transformed practices and values of working life (O'Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008). This shift has resulted in a loss of local journalism and under-resourced newsrooms (Walker, 2021). Newspapers have had to reduce staff, cut pay, tighten editorial budgets, decide how to implement paywalls, and set up social media presence to stay relevant in the attention economy (Haughey et al., 2020).

### **Context: Print and online newspapers in Ireland**

The norm in Ireland is an impartial media that falls within the liberal model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The political parties are not connected with the media. Journalist, in general, refrain from expressing their personal opinions on political matters, reporting facts. Brandenburg (2005: 297) found that “instead of a polarised partisan press, as for example in the [United Kingdom] UK, in Ireland we seem to be faced with a rather homogenous anti-politics bias”. A decade and a half later Breen et al., (2019: 10) argue that “Irish political journalism has maintained a code of critical impartiality in the face of the unpopularity of their profession, profound economic, political, and social change, as well as an ongoing revolution in the technology and business model underlying the industry.”

We focus exclusively on print and online newspapers. This is to make the research manageable in the space available, but also because these media environments are highly competitive, whereas linear, digital and radio broadcasting in Ireland exists in the presence of a significant public service broadcaster, funded by a licence fee and advertising. Newspapers are very popular in Ireland, with over 90 percent of adults regularly reading them with market penetration of daily and Sunday titles at 190 and 350 percent respectively.

There are daily national newspapers, national Sunday editions and weekly regional newspapers, in addition to online only publications. In all, as of 2023, there are 8 daily national newspapers, 4 of which are Irish versions of UK papers, and 6 of which are owned by overseas concerns. There are 8 Sunday national newspapers, 4 of which are Irish versions of UK papers, and 7 of which are owned by overseas concerns. This is in addition to the numerous, smaller, regional newspapers. There is also the presence of overseas newspapers, as distinct from Irish versions of foreign papers. These are mostly from the US and the UK.

This highlights the high level of cultural penetration by the British media, in particular, of the Irish market (Robbins, 2018). Some of the most popular newspapers in Ireland include The Irish Times, Irish Examiner, Irish Independent, and regionally The Kerryman. In addition to the traditional newspapers having a strong online presence, there are a number of online only publications, such as [TheJournal.ie](https://www.thejournal.ie), and [Joe.ie](https://www.joe.ie).

The newspaper industry is in decline, with total weekly sales for the top 10 selling Sunday papers falling from 1,048,000 to 206,600 between 2008 and 2019; while sales for the top 8 daily newspapers fell from 666,088 to 220,653 in the same period.<sup>2</sup> This amounts to an

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.medialive.ie/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&id=44](https://www.medialive.ie/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=44)

81 percent slump for Sunday sales and a 66 percent drop for daily newspaper sales in just 11 years. As a result a number of newspapers have closed down, while aggressive cost cutting has helped to maintain a level of profitability for the survivors (Breen et al., 2019). The digital disruption has reduced sales and consequently advertising revenues of print newspapers. There is no doubt that social media platforms have taken audience attention away from traditional news sites (Rashidian et al., 2018).

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report found that Irish media remains relatively well trusted by international standards, with overall trust in news at 53 percent, far higher than in the US or UK (Reuters Institute, 2021). The Irish Times is the most trusted newspaper at 71 percent, while Irish editions of British tabloid newspapers are the least trusted (Reuters Institute, 2021).

## **Methodology**

We wish to explore how political journalists, working in Ireland, understand and deal with fake news. A review of the literature reveals that the past decade has seen the emergence of a significant body of research on the issue of fake news (see Abu Arqoub et al., 2022; Bakir and McStay, 2018; Bhaskara et al., 2017; Curiel and Aldea, 2022; Himma-Kadakas, 2017; Himma-Kadakas and Ojamets, 2022; Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018). Ireland shares characteristics with the countries focused upon in this previous research – the US, Estonia, Spain, India and Sweden – democracy, the rule of law and a free press.

Our approach involved in-depth interviews, in the spring of 2024, with 8 politics journalists working for four newspapers (two broadsheets, two tabloids) and one online news website. These journalists, of both genders, have all been involved in covering Irish politics for at least half a decade and in most cases significantly longer. Although the numbers were small, our interviewees possess a wealth of experience and as such can provide in-depth and valuable insights. Of course, being a small-n study, we cannot generalise from our findings. The interviewees wished to remain anonymous.

The in-depth interview is a technique that gives researchers an opportunity to gain an understanding of how others interpret the world. It is indispensable for probing behind public-oriented statements (Yow, 2005). This approach seeks to provide an understanding of how an interviewee attributes meanings to experience (Yow, 2005). As Lummis (1987: 75) points out, the "advantage of oral evidence is that it is interactive and one is not left alone, as with documentary evidence, to divine its significance; the 'source' can reflect upon the content and offer interpretation as well as the facts."

A series of open-ended questions were asked to gain an understanding of what the journalists' perceptions of political fake news is and the methods they employ to manage it. In this environment the interpretivist approach is ideal, as it is intended to explore the feelings of the journalists through their own understandings of fake news. This allows for meanings, views, opinions and attitudes to be interpreted through the construction of their responses (Creswell, 2003).

## **Findings and Analysis**

Here we present the results of the findings from our interviews with political journalists working for traditional newspapers and an online news website. From these we can see how the journalists perceive fake news, challenge falsehoods, and work to ensure trust in the media.

### The Journalists Perceptions of Political Fake News in Ireland

A number of the journalists we spoke with did not like the term fake news. One said that what is labelled fake news should more properly be regarded as manipulated news - “content or stories which are purposely manipulated.” Another interviewee defined fake news as stories designed to be factually inaccurate to mislead readers. This is similar to what Bakir and McStay (2018) found. The aim, they felt, was to try and make readers feel a certain way about a topic. One interviewee regarded fake news as all about preying on people’s vulnerabilities to make them feel either better, or worse, about a situation. “Fake news is very often driven by emotion, it is not driven by fact. People are so ingrained in their own emotions and how they feel about things that it is very difficult to persuade them that they are incorrect” said one. This is consistent with the findings of Gardiner (2015) who said fake news stories drive traffic due to the emotional responses generated. These include surprise, anger, fear and anxiety (Vosoughi et al., 2018). An interviewee remarked chillingly “fake news will be a threat if we don’t get a handle on it. It’s incredibly worrying.” It was also suggested that the profession needs to “actively work” towards managing the impact misinformation could have in future.

One journalist said that they regard political fake news as any information deliberately put out by political parties to “mislead the public” about an issue. Another interviewee, from a traditional broadsheet, said that political fake news can include information “not deliberately set out to completely mislead, but do not take rigid enough precautions about being accurate to inform the people. I think that would qualify as fake news as well.” It is clear that our interviewees regarded fake news as bound up with manipulation, feelings and emotions – not necessarily outright lies – but certainly not facts.

An interviewee explained that fake news in Irish politics manifests itself in two ways – as framing statements, or information, to align with a particular party’s agenda; and in the form of rumours. There might be a “grain of truth” in what is being said, another journalist told us, and this is used to ensure that the message is framed in a certain way. Another term that came up was “twisting” information, so voters do not get the full story. One journalist felt that Ireland did not have as many issues with fake news as other countries and that active misinformation was absent from politics. However, other interviewees advised that Irish journalists need to learn lessons from other countries’ experiences with fake news, least we experience the same problems.

However, other participants believed that social media was being used to spread defamatory rumours about certain politicians, particularly female politicians in Northern Ireland. Former First Minister of Northern Ireland Arlene Foster said that misogynistic abuse on social media was the biggest obstacle facing women in public life (BBC, 2021); while the current First Minister, Michelle O’Neill, described how she is critiqued daily on her appearance and accent, as well as being the target of threats of physical and sexual violence (Holland, 2021). These attacks have also been aimed at some of the journalists we spoke with, where some were accused of being members of political parties, or of supporting particular political parties’ agendas. “Poisonous misinformation” was a description.

Technological changes have supported the emergence of social media, which has placed the means of publication in many more hands (Simons, et al., 2017). It was clear that the participants blamed the internet and social media platforms for allowing fake news in Irish politics to spread more quickly than previously. This is similar to what Zhou and Zafarani (2020) found in the UK and US. Social media has also allowed politicians to get their messages across to voters without first being factchecked by journalists, as was the case in the past when politicians were much more reliant on traditional media to get their messages to the public. The role of the journalist as a form of gatekeeper between the politicians and the public has been obviated. This creates a situation that is tempting for politicians, who might want to



misrepresent something, to have their message sent unmediated to voters. However, while the interviewees acknowledged that it is the responsibility of the press to factcheck the politicians' messages, irrespective of the media they appear in, they also felt that there is a responsibility on the part of social media companies to engage in factchecking.

An interviewee regarded the absence of factchecking on social media as a threat to social discourse, to people's belief in politics and to their engagement with the political system. They went on to say that "if politicians are actively lying all the time and they're not being challenged on this, then absolutely that is a threat to democracy and our way of life." The spread of fake news allows for increasing partisan politics and pressure for individual responsibility in navigating emerging news platforms via social media (Lee, 2019).

There was a general feeling that fake news was linked to hot topics, or "topics of the day in politics" as one interviewee put it. A journalist told us that this was evident during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, when anytime restrictions were increased they saw "ecosystems" develop in social media around the idea that not only were the restrictions wrong, but the entire basis for their existence was false. This is what Bolsen and Druckman (2015: 745) refer to as the politicization of science – an actor emphasising the inherent uncertainty of science "to cast doubt on the existence of scientific consensus." Another interviewee remarked that Ireland never experienced the levels of misinformation as it did during the Covid-19 pandemic. This observation related specifically to the blizzard of misinformation surrounding vaccines. They said "I think that the pandemic really blew the doors off fake news in Ireland." This is similar to what Montesi (2020) found in Spain. There was a feeling that, when it comes to social media, the people who "shout the loudest", as one journalist remarked, get the most attention and sometimes those shouting the loudest are also the ones making the "most outlandish claims".

### Methods Employed to Challenge Fake News

Fake news, and the discourse against journalists popularised by politicians, together with large amounts of false information, has induced distrust in the news media, damaging the credibility of the independent press (Curiel and Aldea 2022; Vu and Saldana, 2021). When it comes to fake news, it is important to remind ourselves that while the term has recently been revived (Jankowski, 2018), it is not new. Fake news is not a new phenomenon within Irish society or politics. Many of the journalist felt Irish people have always known there is a willingness on the part of politicians to twist the truth, but social media has exacerbated this. During our analysis of the interviews it became clear that the journalists were forced to employ several methods to challenge falsehoods. These methods will be analysed to shed light on the work modern political journalist have to perform.

### *Factchecking and being cynical*

The journalists told us that they must factcheck all the information they receive and corroborate it with other sources. They all seemed to be cynical, as well as wary, of what politicians' say – prompting further rounds of factchecking. Some also expressed a deep fear of amplifying falsehoods and as a result doing all they can to avoid this. The basis for an efficient relationship between news media and democratic societies are attributions of legitimacy by the public toward the news media (Lischka, 2019). The interviewees all agreed that they have to ensure that the information they publish is accurate and factual, in order to maintain the public's trust. According to Nelson (2017), journalists are now charged with a new mission, to gain back the audience's trust by objective and accurate reporting as a way to counterbalance the fake news in social media feeds.



A journalist mentioned his determination to actively challenge falsehoods in the media. There was consensus on the need to investigate and report on what is actually happening, as opposed to what they are told is happening, providing facts and context. This is not surprising given that journalism is a profession built on factchecking, truth-telling and verification procedures (Balod and Hameleers, 2021). As one interviewee put it “when a politician says something nearly always one of my eyebrows goes up and you have to go and factcheck.” When people can discern that a news story has been factchecked they tend to display a more favourable attitude toward the news media (Amazeen, 2020). This finding is in line with what Rafter and Dunn (2016) discovered – 52 percent of Irish journalists have some trust in politicians, but 40 percent have no trust at all.

Journalists are among many vocational groups that have had to meet the challenge of adapting to changing premises in recent years (O’Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008). Information coming from social media is examined “a lot more thoroughly” than at the beginning of the 2010s. An interviewee admitted that earlier in their career misinformation was not as dangerous because “it was not reaching a wide range of people.” The journalist confessed to being confronted by huge amounts of information coming through social media and so much of it is convincing fake news. This requires them to point out when something is false and to openly label it as such.

#### *Being held to high standards*

As all our interviewees are political journalists working for well know and established publications all of the information they publish must be of a high standard. They must all abide by journalistic ethics. One of the interviewees pointed out that the public seemed to be unaware that journalists are also held to the code of practice of the Press Council of Ireland. A print journalist felt that they were more likely to be held to a “really high standard,” but the online journalist we spoke with also works for a “publication” signed up to the Press Council’s code. As result of its powerful position within society, journalism has developed consensual rules and standards to ensure the news media’s power is not misused, while providing journalists with social support (Lischka, 2019).

One interviewee remarked that “people have serious issues with the mainstream media, which I totally understand. The press does not always cover itself in glory.” Another said that although a free press is essential for a democracy it can also be dangerous if it does not always act with responsibility. For all there was a feeling that journalists need to hold themselves to incredible high standards to maintain the public’s confidence. Journalists need to actively flag fake news when they find it and strive to educate the public in digital literacy. Digital literacy will strengthen the public’s resilience to fake news (McDougal et al, 2019). This will enable the public to differentiate legitimate news sources that have a “track record” from the others – and prevent the public from writing off established newspapers.

The journalists said they would like to see social media companies held to the same standards as their employers. They felt that Facebook, Twitter and Instagram all need to be treated as publishers and not platforms. One journalist said that, particularly during elections, these companies need to engage in factchecking. Another interviewee suggested that legislation be introduced imposing penalties on social media companies providing platforms for fake news. ‘If information is being deliberately fed to people that is wrong we have to show that there was consequences for putting that information out there and those consequences include being publicly shown to be telling lies. We have to go about identifying sources that are good and sources that are bad to rebuild trust and I think social media companies have a responsibility to do that.’

#### *Education for Fake News*

Several interviewees remarked that they had received little education from their employers on how to deal with fake news. There was a feeling that some Irish newspapers are a “bit more behind the times” when it comes to educating their staff on managing fake news. Those particular journalists admitted that they had to educate themselves on different ways to deal with fake news. Some of the younger interviewees, who would fall within the late Generation Y cohort, felt confident that, as young people, they are “very digitally literate” and that this gave them the ability to readily identify fake news. That said, other journalists told us that they have received regular training from their employers on how to manage fake news. This training came in the form of training days and workshops with organizations that specialise in identifying fake news, such as First Draft News and Kinzen. One interviewee said the result was that colleagues now have regular conversations about things they think might be false. The effect will be to better protect the audience from the impact of fake news.

## **Conclusion**

The term fake news is from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But while that term lay dormant for a long time, in the past decade it has come to prominence, and been given a new, unrestricted, ecosystem in which to propagate itself. As Timothy Snyder points out, fake news is gravely concerning as it denies the existence of facts, undermining trust, and thereby undermining the rule of law and democracy.

While a small-n study, this is the first to examine how Irish political journalists understand fake news and the methods they employ to manage it. This provides insights into practitioners personal experiences, helping us to understand what it has been like for them to confront fake news. We can see that the interviewees all understood that political fake news is a growing problem in Ireland, albeit from a low level. The pandemic exacerbated the problem. This saw the politicizations of medical science, similar to what Bolsen and Druckman (2015) found. The interviewees blamed social media platforms for providing fake news with an environment free of factchecking.

All interviewees recognised the ability of fake news to evoke certain emotions in readers while also preying on their vulnerabilities, causing distress, similar to what Bakir and McStay (2017) found in the US. Fake news is often the ideal form of clickbait, as it inspires anger, fear and anxiety (Gardiner, 2015). False rumours travel faster, and reach more people, than accurate stories because of their novelty (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Political parties in Ireland have taken advantage of this, using social media to bypass the gatekeepers of traditional media. Some politicians, in the US particularly, even use the term ‘fake news’ as a rhetorical device to silence genuine news media, putting pressure on legitimate journalists after they write something critical (Balod and Hameleers, 2021: 2372).

The journalists were all concerned about the dangers posed to society, democracy and journalism by fake news, paralleling the findings of Bennett and Livingston (2018) and Zhou and Zafarani (2020). They worried about the manipulation of the public by factually inaccurate stories designed to make them feel a certain way about a topic. While they felt that although Ireland currently did not have as serious a problem with fake news as other countries, it is a developing issue that will not go away.

The interviewees all work to challenge falsehoods through the traditional method of rigorous factchecking and being cynical about the information they received. Since the onset of fake news our interviewees said that they have intensified their factchecking efforts, recognising that mistruths now reach many more people than in the past. This adoption of more rigorous factchecking measures has been a common theme of journalists across the world in recent years (Amazeen 2020; Balod and Hameleers 2021; Graves and Amazeen 2019; Schapals 2018).

Preventing fake news from impacting democracy, journalism and the economy demands that researchers, practitioners, and industry leaders attach great importance to understanding and detecting fake news (Zhou et al., 2019). However, not all the journalists we spoke with received formal training on how to identify, and deal with, fake news. Some have been left to their own devices by their employers. This is not that surprising given an industry experiencing tightening budgets. Nevertheless, this is clearly a problem, but one that can, at least to some extent in the future, be obviated by Bhaskaran et al's (2017) contention that those now studying journalism should be trained in collaborative verification practices. Nevertheless, the journalists interviewed clearly felt a responsibility to work to maintain the public's trust in their newspapers and to do so they recognise that their reporting needs to be of an exceptionally high standard.

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