

The Politics of Fake News – On Fake News as a Collective Symbol

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1. Introduction

Fake News as an apparent novel phenomenon has been on the political agenda since the 2016 US-election. It sparked academic interest by scholars in various disciplines. Most attention has been paid to the US and the UK and their election and referendum, respectively (Pew Research Center, 2016; Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2017). But fake news made the news around the world, and the threat by Russian manipulation of internal affairs is a concern not only for the US (Baldacci & Pelagalli, 2017; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). Fake News are seen as a threat for democracy since they distort the formation of public opinion and increase level of populism and xenophobia.

This discomfort with fake news is also very present in Germany. In the wake of the 2017 election the possible impact of fake news and bots was widely debated. In the end, observers agreed that fake news probably did not play a major role in the outcome of the election (see below). But the constant preoccupation with fake news and the idea of a post-truth era point, so I argue, to a broader point. Fake news is not (only) relevant since it impacts people voting behaviour and other actions, it is also used as an expression for a much broader concern with the future of democracy. As I show below in more detail, fake news became a symbol for the challenges democracy and society faced that are (mostly) produced by digital technology.

I arrive at this argument by analysing the public debate on fake news. This perspective is based on the insight that I understand the debate on fake news as a crucial site in which ideas about the future of democracy are negotiated. The article follows a discourse analytic perspective that does not look at fake news as such but at the debates that unfold in discourse. I can thereby show how fake news is discussed in an often quite reflexive and sophisticated way but that media literacy is considered as the main solution for the problem of fake news. I conclude this article by a discussion on how a focus on media literacy runs danger in covering up the political contestations that fake news brings to the fore.

2 Fake News as a Discursive Articulation

Research on fake news and ‘post-truth’ is mushrooming since 2016. Most studies so far have applied quantitative methods in order to understand the impact and spread of fake news. One of the earliest study has cast doubt on the actual impact of fake news on election results (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Additional research has focused on the patterns in which fake news spread and its agenda-setting power (Chadwick, Vaccari, & O’Loughlin, 2018). Arguably, fake news are well received in an already polarized environment and confirmation bias makes it difficult to rectify wrong information (Del Vicario et al., 2016; Zollo et al., 2015). A rather different strand of research emerged that looks at the phenomenon of post-truth from a more philosophical perspective. Authors here highlight the epistemological challenges of connotating certain stories as ‘false’ (Vogelmann, 2017) or the idea that fake-news as such is a novel phenomenon (Darnton, 2017). Especially Steve Fuller has been quite vocal in highlighting the problems the emergence of fake news poses for science and technology studies - a discipline that is built on the idea of showing the social production of (scientific) knowledge (Fuller, 2016; see also: Jasanoff & Simmet, 2017). Coming from a more practical oriented perspective, media and journalism studies has been more occupied with the question of how to mitigate the influence of fake news. Bakir and McStay (2018) argue in this context that the problem of fake news can only be properly understood and fought if we account for the influential role of advertising networks that make the fake news economy possible. This research is important since it embeds the phenomenon of fake news in a broader economic and societal setting.

In this article I would also like to look at how fake news is embedded in society but I chose a different perspective. Rather than looking at how fake news is spread or received by people believing in fake news, I aim at understanding in which way fake news represent larger discomforts with the current state of democracy. It is important to keep in mind that fake news currently occupies two starkly diverging meanings: For some fake news refers to the mainstream media and its biased reporting as for instance Donald Trump’s usage of fake news illustrates. In Germany, the more commonly used term is *Lügenpresse* which literally means ‘lying press’ to discredit mass media and its false and biased reporting. Fake news –or the German term *Falschnachrichten* – however is used by mass media and the official political discourse to refer to false stories often spread in new digital outlets and spread via social media. Here, I am only interested in the second meaning. How is fake news presented in mass media and the official governmental discourse (i.e. the non-fake news believer)? I am thus not interested in the sentiments of the far-right and their perception of mass media. I rather try to understand the debate on fake news in mass media. By now the term fake news is associated by people in the (German) public with a set of associations. My results from the empirical analysis below spell out these associations and linkages. Fake news thus becomes a collective symbol within society. Fake news is widely discussed in society, and ideas about new media, the future of elections changed due to the emergence of the discussions around fake news. Even new policies were created under the impression of the apparent novel phenomenon of fake news. Thus, fake news become a symbol that resonates with society.

In order to tease out the symbolic character and what kind of associations prevail I conducted a discourse analysis. I conceptualise fake news as a distinct articulation in public discourse. Relevant is for me here not the content of fake news or patterns of how it spreads. Contributing to previous research on fake news, I add a new perspective by analysing the discourse on fake news. By discourse I refer to the sum of all articulations. An articulation refers to process of relating two elements establishing thereby a certain identity of these elements (Laclau & Mouffe, 2006, p. 141). For this project, I focus solely on linguistic articulation since I am interested of the position of fake news in discourse. In principle however one could also conceptualise non-linguistic articulations as being part of discourse. The core assumption underlying this particular discourse is that the media (or public) discourse functions of what Jürgen Link calls an interdiscourse (Link, 2006, p. 437). While specific discourses such as the scientific, the religious, the economic discourse are getting ever more specialized, an interdiscourse can ‘translate’ between these specialized discourses and are therefore crucial for social integration. Analysing mass media is thus relevant for understanding of what kind of arguments are prevailing in the popular discourse. Since I am interested in the presentation of fake news and what kind of associations were drawn, I opted for a method of analysis focusing mostly on content thus staying at the ‘surface’ of the text.

Following from this, the focus on mass media is justified - a few more sources stemming from politicians and anti-fake news initiatives were added in order to enrich the analysis. The core of the texts that I analysed consists of newspaper but the corpus was expanded by statements by politicians (esp. Heiko Maas), civil-societal actors (e.g. the activist group netzpiloten.de) and other core actors such as the statements by Mark Zuckerberg or the journalist group *Correctiv*. This allowed for a more complete picture of discourse. To be more precise: The analysis included texts from July 2016 until December 2017 and from the main German newspapers *die Zeit* (weekly, liberal), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (daily, conservative leaning) *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (daily, left-leaning) and the *BILD*. The *BILD* is the most sold daily newspaper but it is also the main tabloid paper. From this corpus 55 texts were chosen for a fine-grained analysis, after this saturation was achieved since no new themes emerged.¹ This choice allows a representation of the most prevailing themes in the German media landscape. I searched for articles not only using the operators [fake news AND fakenews] but also the German translation ‘*Falschnachrichten*’ that is often used. The word ‘*Falschnachrichten*’ has a more technical or official connotation, while ‘fake news’ appears especially when reporting about Trump and US-politics. Although I expected articles dealing with fake news from summer 2016, the debate really took off in November and December 2016. Below I will cite the material in an exemplary way to illustrate my arguments.

3. The Discourse on Fake News: Fearing the Destruction of Democracy

In Germany the term fake news and the translation ‘*Falschnachrichten*’ are both used. *Falschnachrichten* is a term that occurs in newspaper in the context of false news items that

¹ A list of all analysed texts can be required from the author.

were spread and is used (very sparingly) since (at least) the 1970s. The term fake news occurs before summer 2016 only in a few articles dealing with satirical news. In academic debates fake news is traditionally used to denote satire (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2017) and before summer 2016 the term ‘fake news’ is used in this technical sense in Germany. After the US-election we can observe a steady discussion on fake news. The *BILD* differs from the other three newspaper in the sense that it reports less on fake news and also starts using ‘fake news’ synonymous for ‘rumour’ (Editorial, 2017 in *BILD*). Here we can thus see how the meaning of the word slightly changes and is used in an even wider sense. Future will tell if this usage will transfer also to other media and general language-use. This section will highlight three themes prevailing in discourse: 1) How is fake news presented as a concern for elections and thus democracy in the wake of the German election but also as a global development? 2) Closely linked to this point, I show how fake news becomes to represent the danger of a polarized and disintegrated society. 3) Fake news becomes linked to the broader debate on cyber threats. Thus, again fake news represents the contemporary threats for society. This section will thus provide the base for the succeeding debate on how medial literacy appears as a panacea in discourse and what this implies for the politics of fake news.

3.1 Fake News: Destabilizing Elections and Democratic Institutions

Before the 2017 German parliamentary elections, fake news was a huge concern for German politicians and experts. The impact of fake news was much feared but ultimately did not seem to have a major impact on the election. However, the issue of fake news was quite extensively discussed and still receives much attention. Fake news were said to increase populism, xenophobia and racism. This particular concern about the impact on fake news needs to be put into the context of the ongoing debate about refugees in Germany and the rise of right-wing populism and the success of the *AfD* (Alternative for Germany, a right-wing populist party). Fake news are seen as a problem since it is said to increase racist tendencies in societies by spreading false information about refugees. This in turn is considered to be a problem for democracy since it causes disruption in society. False stories about refugees, especially Muslims, are spread via social networks and this is the main concern in the public debate about fake news. Fake news is thus described in January 2017 as “right-wing populist agitation” (Hertle, 2017) and people spreading it are for instance called “digital democracy threats” (Graff, 2017).² The whole discussion about fake news is intertwined with concerns about rising racism and xenophobia.

This concern with elections and the proper function of democratic institutions is reflected in the discussion of fake news as a global phenomenon, and a global problem. The US election is naturally widely reported about, but also other events such as Brexit are discussed. A common theme here is that Russia is behind all attacks trying to influence politics in ‘the West’. Not only

² Lit: digitale Demokratiegefährder, which refers to a (digital) person posing a threat to democracy. The term ‘Gefährder’ is currently used in German public discourse to refer to people who might pose a threat and are thus under state-surveillance. At the moment mostly refugees that are said to be potential terrorists are connotated with that term.

is the threat described, but also national responses and how the countries try to react to the spread of fake news and protect their democracy. In an article from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that describes the British reactions we can read:

“Since weeks, people in London talk and write about how Moscow influences the process of formation of opinion through ‘fake news’ as it does in almost all of the Western world. But it might also have influenced –with money and structural support - the Brexit-referendum.” (Brössler & et al., 2017)

Fake news is thus presented as a global concern which is triggered by the Russian power. A sign for the preoccupation with fake news in Germany can be seen in the law that was established in fall 2017. The *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz (NetzDG)*; law for the enforcement of/in the net) promises to prevent the spread of fake news by making the provider of social networks responsible for deleting content that transgresses German law (Federal Minister for Justice and Consumer Protection, 2017). This initiative by Germany is quite unique in its attempt to make companies such as facebook responsible for the content that is uploaded and distributed on their platforms. The *NetzDG*, which was developed by the then minister of Justice and Consumer Protection Heiko Maas, was met with fierce critique. It was criticized by lawyers, ICT companies, political opponents and civil society activists. Ultimately, the law was altered but is effective since January 2018. This critique was very intense and speaks to a general tendency within Germany to be sceptical about state intervention that aims at controlling internet content and access. Despite this critique, fake news was, as I showed, presented as a core problem for democracy. The result of elections was seen in danger because of fake news. But not only that –fake news poses a problem for society as a whole. This is the topic I will focus on in the next section.

3.2 Fake News: Disintegrating Society

Together with increasing populism and racism, fake news is seen as a concern for another reason. Fake news also hampers the free circulation of opinions and the process in which public opinion can form (*freie Meinungsbildung*). This distortion of the formation of public opinion is seen as a real threat and is of deep concern for most commentators. A news article from March 2017 published by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* can serve here as an example of how fake news is seen as a problem for a rational, democratic deliberation:

[How to answer the problem of fake news] concerns the freedoms (sic) of speech, media and their information, the rights of the people affected, as well as the process of free, democratic formation of opinion in general.[...] Lies do not contribute anything to the process of free formation of opinion. [...] Truth and information³ are necessary conditions for a rational process of the free formation of opinion - one

3 The original talks about ‚*Informiertheit*‘, which is not information but the state of being informed.

cannot relinquish them, only for the price of reason and freedom. (Rößner & Hein, 2017).

To be clear: the article is also quite critical of claims about the novelty of fake news (see below). However, this quote brings to the fore how fake news is presented as a threat to rational, democratic politics. The spread of fake news is a critical challenge for democracy. As one article from 2017 summarizes it: fake news “aims at influencing elections, destabilizing countries and organisations – and thus ultimately democracy” (Dausend & et al., 2017). The theme of fake news being propaganda and causing distortion and disorientation is dominant – and again this claim is linked to the threat of democracy. Not only do hacking attacks threaten free elections, fake news are considered to be threatening the process in which rational debate can ensue and public opinion can form. Democracy is thus also threatened on a deeper level since its fundamental processes are distorted by fake news. The already quoted article by Hertle sees the problem of fake news in the fact that “trust in society is disturbed” (Hertle, 2017).

The concern with the current state of society and democracy is a dominant theme in discourse. The problem is not only seen in the spread of racist propaganda but also in the way in which fake news threaten society by increasing disorientation and confusion. In one article by the *Zeit* in December 2017 the author writes about a broader problem; an “information war” and a “war against truth” (Probst & Pelletier, 2017). False stories that are spread via social networks are said to harm freedom of speech and thus the foundations of democracy. This idea of fake news as a threat to democracy is widespread and the predominant theme in the debates about fake news. This theme even occurs in the reports of the *BILD* who appointed an “ombudsman” responsible for detecting (Editorial 2017). Thus, fake news is considered to be a problem even by the *BILD* who in general does not report widely on fake news.

Debating fake news means debating the erosion of democracy and the threat of increasing disintegration. Fake news comes to stand as a symbol for the challenges established democratic practices face. In the last section I will problematize how this challenge of fake news for democracy is actually covered up by focusing on media literacy as a solution.

3.3 Fake News: A Security Concern

As the quotes above show, commentators speak often about ‘war’ or ‘fight’. This linguistic feature points out to a broader theme that is quite striking and only becomes apparent upon closer analysis. The German debate on fake news is embedded in broader discussions on (cyber-)security. This becomes most obvious when the role of Russia is discussed. Russia is seen as the source of fake news. Closer analysis reveals that debating Russia in the context of fake news is discursively linked to debating Russia as a *military* threat. Even more so, the threat by Russian bots and fake news is translated into a broader threat concerning free elections. The referent object of national security (military threat) seems to merge with the threat to free elections (threat to democracy). A longer quote from an article fittingly titled ‘War without blood’ published by the *Zeit* in February 2017 offers a good example for this:

For that matter, faked and imaginary news (fake-news) [i.O.] are only one possibility to cause confusion in the year of the election. Through cyberattacks on the electricity or water supply could the daily life be attacked – even if only for hours. Large quantities of data were already captured through hacker attacks on computers of the parliament or the government, in case they would be spread deliberately they could harm the reputation of distinct politicians. Special programmed opinion roboter (social bots) could create a certain atmosphere in social networks. The federal returning officer fears that on the day of the election fake news could be spread that state that polling stations are closed and citizens would not go to the polls. The results of the elections would then be questioned (Beuth & et al., 2017).

In this quote several threats are discussed: cyberattacks to infrastructure, the threat of leaking documents, bots and fake news. One would expect that debating fake news is something rather different from attacks such as the destruction of infrastructure. Some articles that I analysed describe how cyberattacks - including fake news! – might disturb elections (as in Kuhn, 2017; and in a rare example from the BILD Solms-Laubach, 2017). In several instances the topic of fake news is linked with debates about other kinds of cyberattacks that are more closely related to military threats. Another example can be found in an article published by the *Zeit* in December 2016 creating a threat-scenario in which fake-news destabilizes election (Brost & et al., 2016). Here, fake news are just “one possibility to cause confusion in the year of election” (ibid.). The authors discuss fake news in line with other possibilities of hacking attacks conducting espionage or destroying infrastructure. The authors link the “digital threat” of fake news closely to other kind of attacks when they describe a previous attack occurred when „a million Telekom-customers were without internet access”. This attack does not seem to be linked to fake news at first sight. However, in discourse cybersecurity, fake news and the problematic future of democracy are discursively linked. Even more so, fake news are also discussed in the context of a new Nato-military strategy in fall 2017; fake news occur just as one part of a broader changing military strategy (Seliger, 2017).

Fake news is thus not only seen as an extraordinary challenge to the conduct of free elections but also as part of a larger (newly emerging) threat landscape. Fake news are a rather different problem than traditional cyber-attacks. However, in the German public discourse fake news is linked with other cyber-attacks such as DDoS-attacks or other kinds of military attacks on infrastructure or espionage. The fake news discourse is thus broadened and includes now the issue of military security, too. More importantly for the overall argument is that we can see how the theme of fake news as a challenge for democracy gets a certain twist: fake news are part of an ever changing landscape of new digital security threats. To conclude, the prevailing theme of fake news as a source for increasing disorientation is reinforced by using images of an ever more complex landscape of cyber threats.

4. The Epistemic Problems with Fake News

So far the focus has been on how fake news is seen as a problem and how the debate on fake news signifies much deeper problems. This section will look at how the debate around fake news itself is reflexively problematized. This section will discuss how the phenomenon of fake news, the assumptions and distinctions on which it is built are critically discussed within mass media. This will allow us to get a deeper understanding of how fake news is discussed as a problem. The previous section highlighted the way in which fake news is presented as a problem, but this is not the only way in which fake news is discussed. There are quite a few sceptic voices that are hesitant to frame fake-news as a novel phenomenon that is caused but can also be solved by the right technology.

Firstly, many arguments originating in academic discourse are translated into mass media discourse. The critical attitude concerns the supposed impact of fake news, the idea that one can easily identify fake news and the assumption that one can always clearly distinguish between facts and opinion. For instance, the results from the scientific study by Allcot & Gentzkow (2017) were taken up in mass media. The results of this academic study question the impact of fake news on the US election outcome. Secondly, the ability to differentiate between fake and non-fake is discussed in very critical ways, too. The capability to easily identify fake-news with better algorithms or other technology is met with a lot of scepticism. This, for instance, can be seen in an article that discusses an app that is supposed to help with identifying fake news published in 2016 by the *Zeit* in which the general reservations against technology as a solution come to the fore, too (Bittner, 2016).

An article also already published in November 2016 by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* starts by asking rhetorically “Who decides what ‘fake news’ are in the internet?” (Hanfeld, 2016). The article then continues with a critical discussion of the ability of facebook to identify fake news. This point of critique also speaks to the prevailing critique on the *NetzDG* or on arguments that facebook should identify and delete fake news. The analysis of the German public discourse shows how critically this idea is discussed. The group *netzpiloten.de* states: „[...] even in its current version the law still poses a danger to the freedom of speech“ (2017). In sum, we can thus say that despite the infrequently uttered remarks about fake news as a novel and extraordinary phenomenon, many articles discuss fake news or at least part of the phenomenon rather critically.

On an even deeper level, the whole concept of ‘fake news’ is challenged. Surprisingly, some texts in the corpus discuss critically the whole idea that one could easily distinguish between fake and non-fake, facts and opinion. Thus, not only the technical possibilities of identifying fake news are discussed but the idea that one could even in principle distinguish between facts and opinion. The concept of fake news is based on the idea that real journalism reports on facts, while fake news spread stories that are not true. This idea is challenged in the academic discourse where the notion of a post-truth era are often dismissed. Academics challenge the epistemological tenets on which the concepts rests (Jasanoff & Simmet, 2017; Vogelmann, 2017). Interestingly, this idea is also challenged in the public discourse. For instance, in an

article by the *Zeit* from October 2017 the whole idea of journalists being able to report only facts without opinions is considered to be ‘naïve’. It states there that:

But one needs to criticize the illusionary presumption that one could achieve something like a view of nowhere, non-party presentation of reality. (Jessen, 2017).

This is one of the strongest example of articles in which the idea of truth and the role of journalism on which the critique of fake news often relies is criticized.⁴ Another article problematizes the role of expert – more precisely that their special knowledge is not acknowledged anymore (Grundmann, 2017). These, I think, are all examples for a quite sophisticated critique that even takes insights from the academic discourse seriously and transfers them into arguments accessible to the public.

There is thus a tension within the German public discourse. Fake news is presented as a core challenge for democracy – even as being part of a broader cyber threat. But then we can also see, as discussed in this section, that fake news is discussed quite critically. Critique is not only uttered against the *NetzDG* and the assumption that one can easily detect fake news with the help of algorithms. Critique is also made against the ‘naïve’ idea that journalism would always only report on facts and that only fake news transport opinions.

As a result we can see that fake news is described is discussed in a differentiated way. This critical stance towards the phenomenon is a distinct feature of the German discourse. It has repercussions for what kind of solutions are considered to be appropriate. Since actors are aware that the identification of fake news is not straightforward, easy technological solutions are met with resistance. In the next section I will show that media literacy is the predominant solution. Then it will also become clear why the critical stance towards fake news is not translated into a further politicisation of problems that come to the fore in the debates on fake news, but that media literacy serves as a means for depoliticisation.

5 Education as a Panacea against Fake News?

When looking at how solutions of fake-news are discussed we find many themes already discussed above. Fake news as something that threatens society and causes disintegration. What I will also show below is how, despite the above discussed critical attitude against fake news, education and media literacy are presented as the best solution.

The most unique solution against fake news one is certainly the *NetzDG*. The German *NetzDG* is somehow a ‘leading’ example since Germany is one of the first countries to implement a law like this. The law was mostly pushed by Heiko Maas and is enforced since January 2018. It is an example of a top-down solution in which the state tried to take action but at the same time

⁴ Scepticism towards the concept of fake news could be identified in all newspapers but the *BILD* who uses the term fake news only affirmatively.

is empowering global companies who now have the responsibility (and power) to decide what kind of data is deleted. The *NetzDG* raised a lot of critique and as a result it was altered (Committee for Law and Consumer Protection, 2017). The predominant critical stance becomes apparent in the statement by for instance the activist groups *netzpiloten.de*. But it was also discussed quite critically in the mass media (as for instance in these articles: Grundmann, 2017; Rossman, 2017; Wieduwilt, 2017).⁵

Indeed, one article published in June 2017 by the *Zeit* discusses the danger of paternalism if politicians or social networks decide what kind of news are distributed and advocates for the need of being critical about the kind of news one reads. And again we can find the theme of fake news as a sign for the increasing distortion of the process of rational deliberation. The real problem is that “too many people believe too much of what they hear. Too many people do not realize if something is made up” (Kittlitz von, 2017). The article published by the *Zeit* continues with a discussion of the problem that citizens need to trust media - but not too much and that one needs to be aware of the possibility of manipulation. In addition, solutions that aim for better technologies or rely on the (simple) identification of fake news are discussed with a lot of scepticism. The result is an ideal of a citizen who knows what kind of sources to trust and can fight against top-down mechanisms of control.

Another set of strategies suggests ‘bottom-up’ solutions such as self-binding declaration by politicians to not use bots or exploit fake news aimed at the political adversary. This strategy materializes for instance in the “fairness agreement” suggested by the social democratic party during the 2017 campaign (Schulz, 2017).⁶ Another prevailing sets of argument concerns the state of journalism and the need to improve it. Initiatives such as *Hoaxmap* and *Correctiv* are signs of this idea. *Hoaxmap* tries to collect false stories about refugees and correct them. This initiative was widely reported on in its attempt to deal with the negative consequences of fake news. *Hoaxmap* solely focuses on refugees and false stories that are spread about them (Hoaxmap, 2018). *Correctiv* is a collective for investigative journalism. They do have a wider thematic focus, although racism is a major topic for them. Their self-declared aim is that „we want to give every citizen information in order to understand the world” (Correctiv.org, 2018). A closer look at their self-description reveals that they perceive their role as being an actor providing better journalism and thus strengthening democracy. In order to rescue democracy not control from above, but better journalistic procedures are needed.

Both sets of solutions are discussed quite critically. The last solution is presented in the most positive terms. It is also the politically most telling one. The main solutions, shared by most if

⁵ Facebook itself suggested a different solution, by attempting to prevent pages spreading fake news from receiving money of commercials being put up on facebook. This solution stays in contrast to the *NetzDG* but similarly suggests an improved mechanism to ‘control’ the spread of fake news. Both set of solutions were discussed quite critically in the German newspaper (although affirmative arguments about the need for facebook to take control can be found as well) and especially by activists that fear constraints on the freedom of speech and an empowerment by global companies.

⁶ The German political scientists Stefan Marschall suggests for instance a better ‘culture of honesty’ as a way to cope with fake news (Marschall, 2017). This is an example of how ‘weaker’ solutions are also put forth by academics.

not all commentators is education. More precisely the idea is that readers need to improve on their skills of critically assess news and their sources (*kritische Nachrichtenkompetenz*). This focus on media literacy is the predominant one in the German discourse on fake news. People with racist or populists ideas are seen in need of better education. The solution lies in better skills to assess news, and here the emphasis lies on a critical stance towards sources: “That is why fundamental scientific questions are important today: ‘Do you have reasons for your claim? Do you have sources for your claim?’” (taken from the already quoted article published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* Hertle, 2017). Thus, even commentators quite critical of the impact of fake news and even more so on ‘control’ solutions end up putting their hope in education. This focus on education seems justified, since more knowledge on journalistic practices and identifying reliable sources would certainly help mitigate the impact of fake news. Educational measures are thus also dominant in texts that discuss fake news sceptically. Ultimately, education seems to be the last resort.

As plausible as this solution seems to be, it is necessary to look at the effect the emphasis on media literacy has. The underlying conflicts of why fake news is a challenge to democracy are translated into a question of education or critical thinking skills. The increase of populism (with its own complex causes), the changing character of political communication and the challenge of a changing (mass) media landscape are thus translated into a question of better education. Danah boyd discussed this focus on media literacy in the context of the US. She argues that ‘media literacy’ as such is not the solution to the problems we observe at the moment. She states that:

“I don’t want a world full of sheeple. But I also don’t want to naively assume what media literacy could do in responding to a culture war that is already underway” (boyd, 2018).

The problems we observe might be deeper than just people believing in the false kind of media outlet. Boyd shows that it is necessary to pay attention to the underlying conflicts underneath the phenomenon of fake news. Media literacy alone will not solve them. Initiatives such as *Correctiv* make a laudable effort in providing better journalism. But it also tames the issues underlying racist news into one of mere better education and information. What we can rather see is that the idea of media literacy (or *kritische Nachrichtenkompetenz*) symbolizes the distinction between ‘us’ – people knowledgeable about how to assess sources critically – and ‘them’ – people who are in need of better education.

Focusing on education and skills that the citizens need to learn is a strategy of depoliticisation (Burnham, 2001). Depoliticisation is a (political) strategy that covers up conflicts. In the case of fake news we observe a distinct form of depoliticisation in which political conflicts are translated in a question about education. In that way political problems are dealt with in a technocratic way. Right tools such as media literacy classes just need to be applied appropriately and the problem will be solved. Underlying conflicts such as about the relation to Russia, how to deal with xenophobia and how cope with distrust in established democratic institutions are not addressed. People believing in fake news are not seen as political subjects

with an opinion about political conflict, but more as people in need of better education. Jan-Werner Müller problematizes this phenomenon further in his discussion on populism. He warns against the sentiment of treating populists as just in need of better information or empathy from others about their situation to come to terms with their fears. This would translate politics into “group therapy” (Müller, 2016, p. 20). A similar danger lies in the debate on fake news.

I showed above how fake news is presented as a threat to society for a variety of reasons (disorientation, military threat, populism). However, the concept of fake news as such received also a lot of critical attention which ultimately leads to an emphasis on education as a solution to fake news. Transforming the public discourse into one about how to improve education and teach the skills to assess news does not provide an answer to these political questions. It rather risks covering up underlying political problems and portraying populists as merely in need of better education.

6 Conclusion

In this article, I presented the results of a discourse analysis on the German public debate on fake news. Germany is an interesting case since fake news was intensely discussed and even a law trying to prevent fake news (*NetzDG*) was implemented. However, previous research gave reason to be sceptical about the impact of fake news but also about the deeper underlying assumptions of fake news as a novel phenomenon. That is why I argue that the political relevance of fake news lies not in its direct impact on elections, but the political problems it brings to the fore. More precisely one should say: the issues that fake news does *not* bring to the fore.

I showed that fake news is presented as a threat to democracy since it is said to cause disinformation and disorientation. Fake news becomes a symbol that brings together a whole set of concerns: xenophobia, the geopolitical threat posed by Russia, the emergence of new technologies. My analysis shows that fake news is discussed in a surprisingly sophisticated way. Commentators in mass media are aware of the difficulties distinguishing ‘fake’ from ‘non-fake’ news and discuss epistemologically questions on a surprisingly high level. This also explains why solutions that try to control the spread of fake news (by networks or the state) are criticized. In order to cope with fake news, media literacy is considered to be the most promising solution. What is covered up by this focus on education, is the fact that fake news might just be a symptom of more fundamental problems such as distrust in democratic institutions. Although in the debate on fake news these problems are acknowledged, education and media literacy are still seen as the best solution. There is a danger in treating these underlying conflicts as results of fake news – implying that better media literacy and control over the spread of news will help in solving these problems.

What is needed, however, is a debate about the political causes underlying fake news that takes the challenge to mass media but also the reasons for populism seriously. The result might not

be a call for a rather straightforward solution such as: more education! It might however open up way for a better discussion on the current challenges for democracy.

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