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# Seeking Clarity in a World Infected by COVID-19 and Fake News\*

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## **Abstract**

The world has been changed irrevocably by the infectious severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that causes the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) that was first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. COVID-19 affects everyone everywhere. A separate and significant, though not necessarily as infectious, malady affecting many, though not all, individuals worldwide, is “Fake News”, known alternatively as yellow journalism, junk news, pseudo news, false news, alternative facts, hoaxes, misinformation, disinformation, fabricated news, corrupt news, unfathomable nonsense, or outright lies, which are typically based on provably false statements, and are distributed widely through mainstream news media and social media. The opinion piece presents a brief history of COVID-19 and fake news, and existing international efforts to deal with each of these infections, and to encourage critical comments, concepts and ideas.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, fake news, infectious, news media, social media, international efforts.

**JEL:** L82.

## **1. Introduction**

The world has been changed irrevocably by the infectious severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that causes the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which was first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019.

COVID-19 affects everyone everywhere.

As of 11 November 2020, according to Worldometers (2020), there were more than 50 million reported infections and 1.26 million deaths worldwide, both of which are almost certain to be substantially lower than the true figures, with around 20% of each in the USA alone.

A separate and significant, though not necessarily as infectious, malady affecting many, though not all, individuals worldwide, is “Fake News”, known alternatively as yellow journalism, junk news, pseudo news, alternative facts, hoaxes, misinformation, and disinformation (Wikipedia, 2020a). Fake news, false news, fabricated news, corrupt news, unfathomable nonsense, or outright lies, are typically based on provably false statements, and which are distributed widely through mainstream news media and social media.

As fake news also affects everyone everywhere, this opinion piece is intended to elicit critical comments, concepts and ideas about how best to react to COVID-19, fake news, and fake news about COVID-19.

The following section presents a brief history of COVID-19 and fake news, and international scientific, medical, and health care efforts to deal with each of these infections. The final section provides some concluding remarks.

## **2. A Brief History of COVID-19 and Fake News**

*Fake News You Can Trust*  
**The Ferguson Report (2020)**

Fake news seems to have originated in the small town of Veles, Macedonia (BBC Trending, 2020), and was popularized in 2014 by BuzzFeed News media editor, Craig Silverman (Washingtonian, 2020). However, Merriam-Webster (2020) argues that “The term seems to have emerged around the end of the 19’th century.”

President Donald Trump has claimed ownership of Fake News as his invention, which is a genuine case of true fake news. In Trump’s parallel universe, fake news is anything that does not paint a cloying and obsequiously glossy picture of himself. This version of fake news, as distinct from its literal meaning, might be called Trumpian fake news, or Trumpian news.

This is all the more important when Donald Trump is suffering serious bouts of paranoia, manic mentality, feelings of grandeur, and extreme mood swings, especially when they are heavily influenced by strong steroids and an untested anti-body cocktail of drugs, including dexamethasone (The Washington Post (2020)), which has alarmed health experts.

Examples of Trump’s confused tweets containing fake news on Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un and nuclear weapons are examined by means of a data mining technique, sentiment analysis, in Allen and McAleer (2018a). A set of 115 tweets on global warming, climate change, and weather by President Trump, from 2011 to 2015, are analysed by means of sentiment analysis in Allen and McAleer (2018b). Trump’s version of Democratic America and similarities with Hitler’s National Socialist (Nazi) Germany are examined in Allen and McAleer (2019) by means of various data mining techniques, including sentiment analysis. A comparison of President Trump’s State of the Union Addresses (SOUAs) with those of President Obama, and a series of recent of tweets by Trump, are evaluated in Allen, McAleer and Reid (2018). In terms of spreading rumours, which might not be understood to be fake news due to “discrimination and media literacy”, Sun, Cheng and Zhang (2020) argue that factors affecting the spreading of rumours can have “a negative impact on pandemic prevention and social psychology”.

The COVID-19 pandemic might recede in intensity in the coming years, though it will not necessarily disappear alongside the SARS epidemic, or the ongoing but relatively inconspicuous

MERS epidemic. However, fake news is embedded in the vernacular language, and is clearly here to stay.

How are individuals expected to seek clarity in a world infected by COVID-19 and fake news? Even the science that is presented by undisputed experts is deliberately ignored or dismissed, including by Dr Anthony Fauci, the leading infectious diseases expert and respected Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) (Changing America, 2020), who has stated repeatedly the need to adhere to health care recommendations in order to restrict the spread of COVID-19.

World experts at the renowned US Centers for Disease Control and Infection (CDC), under the direction of Dr Robert Ray Redfield Jr. (Wikipedia, 2020b), focuses attention on a wide range of infectious diseases (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020)).

Like the US CDC, the European Union has a related agency, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) (2020), which is much less highly politicized as compared with the current status of the CDC in the 2020 Presidential cycle.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has established a list of more than 750,000 published research papers in the “WHO COVID-19 Global literature on coronavirus disease” database to “bring the world’s scientists and global health professionals together to accelerate the research and development process, and develop new norms and standards to contain the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and help care for those affected.” (World Health Organization, 2020).

The database has numerous informative website connections to leading university and commercial publishing houses, scientific journals such as Nature and Science, and leading medical research journals, such as The Lancet, New England Journal of Medicine, and the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) Network, each of which has associated COVID-19 Resource Centers on the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting clinical laboratory trials and reports, physical and mental illness healthcare issues, and risk management strategies, among others.

### **3. Concluding Remarks**

There does not yet seem to be any international organization, such as the “Weird Humour Onology Scholars” on first base (WHOS on FIRST) to deal with the mindlessness of fake news, but that might currently be in the planning stages.

It is disconcerting that there are many individuals and organizations that, to this day, have questionable doubts about the moon landing, or are registered members of the Flat Earth Society, or both, among many oxymorons that include love hate relationships and deafening silence. Raising issues such as climate change, global warming, and the widely-held benefits of vaccinations against the seasonal flu, and masking to increase protection against the spread of COVID-19, will cause a firestorm of derision from anti-vaxxers and anti-maskers.

COVID-19 and fake news affect everyone everywhere.

It is a statement of fact that fake news will outlive the COVID-19 pandemic, with only one of these infections being directly life threatening.

One cannot ignore science in the fight against COVID-19 and fake news, including fake news about COVID-19.

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