

News on Fake News: Logics of Media Discourses on Disinformation

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Abstract

This article presents a qualitative study of media discourses around fake news, examining 288 news articles from two national elections in Denmark in 2019. It explores how news media construct fake news as a national security threat and how journalists articulate their own role in relation to this threat. The study draws on discourse theory and the concept of logics to critically map how particular meaning ascriptions and subject positions come to dominate over others, finding five logics undergirding media discourses: (1) a logic of anticipation; (2) a logic of exteriorisation; (3) a logic of technologisation; (4) a logic of securitisation; and (5) a logic of pre-legitimation. The article concludes that fake news is constructed as an ‘ultimate other’ in Danish media discourses, potentially contributing to blind spots in both public perception and political solutions. This resonates with previous studies from other geo-political contexts, calling for further cross-national research.

Keywords: Fake news, disinformation, journalism, discourse theory, election reporting, Denmark, European Parliament.

Introduction

In early 2019, analysts and officials warned that the European Parliament (EP) elections – held across Europe in late May 2019 – could be the “next epicenter for malign election interference” (Brattberg 2019). According to European Union (EU) diplomats, Russia was “already attempting to make mischief” (Foy, Murgia, and Peel 2019), giving rise to a new “digital arms race” (Boffey 2018). These dire predictions came in the wake of existing fears of fake news and the so-called post-truth era, capturing public imaginations since 2016 (Farkas and Schou 2019).

One EU country preparing for both the EP elections and potential disinformation was Denmark. Danish politicians were additionally on the ballot for a national parliament (NP)

election on 5 June 2019, only two weeks after the EP elections (held on 23 May 2019). Prior to these event, Danish intelligence agencies warned of a significant risk of Russian disinformation attacks (Svendsen, 2018). 47% of surveyed Danes stated they were ‘worried’ or ‘very worried’ about fake news influencing the electoral process (KMD 2019). In response, Danish news media – including public service broadcasters, broadsheet newspapers and tabloid newspapers – declared that they would designate fake news as a top priority in their election coverage (Dyrby 2019; Hertz 2019; Jensen 2019b).

This article presents a qualitative study of media discourses around fake news, disinformation, and misinformation (mostly used interchangeably in news media) across 10 Danish news outlets. The study examines 288 news articles spanning a seven-month period around the 2019 elections, a period of democratic significance for both Denmark and the EU, representing the first Danish NP election and the first EP elections since fake news became a major topic of concern. It captures a moment of discursive centrality of both fake news as a political issue and news media as a societal institution. As noted by D’Angelo et al. (2014, 156), the political importance of the press is “nowhere more evident than in contemporary elections campaigns.” Drawing on key concepts and theoretical perspectives of the Essex School of Discourse Theory – most notably the concept of logics (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Laclau and Mouffe 2014) – the article maps how news media construct fake news as both a topic of public significance and a threat to democracy.

Addressing a Gap in Scholarship on Fake News

False information and manipulation have attracted significant attention in recent years across journalism, politics, and academia. Discussed under a range of headings, most notably fake news and disinformation, a new form of societal threat has captured public imaginations, which has become “*the* defining political communication topic of our time” (Freelon and Wells 2020, 145, original emphasis). Despite widespread research, however, scholars have tended to approach fake news from a similar perspective, focusing on cases of deception rather than the role of fake news as a signifier in political discourses (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Wright 2021). The discursive role of fake news remains “severely understudied” (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019, 98), especially outside the US (Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft 2019).

This article addresses the gap in scholarship on fake news by providing a discourse theoretical analysis of how Danish news media construct fake news as both a journalistic topic and societal threat. In doing so, the study contributes to a small but growing line of research examining journalistic reporting on fake news in countries such as the US (Bratich 2020; Carlson 2020; Rossini, Stromer-Galley, and Korsunskaja 2021), Germany (Monsees, 2020), South Africa (Wasserman 2020), and Austria (Egelhofer et al. 2020). This scholarship shows that journalists often deploy fake news as an “empty buzzword” (Egelhofer et al. 2020, 1036) and synonymises the term with a general “fear that digital media channels only pollute the media environment” (Carlson 2020, 387). In doing so, imaginaries around fake news as a threat to democracy becomes part of broader discursive struggles among journalists seeking reaffirm “their authoritative status as gatekeepers of truth-telling” in times of “waning gatekeeping authority” (Bratich 2020, 316).

This study adds to existing scholarship by providing an empirical perspective from Scandinavia on news reporting on fake news, doing so from a discourse theoretical perspective that remains underexplored (Farkas and Schou 2020; 2018). The article contributes to a clearer understanding of how news media mobilise fake news as a signifier and to a critical discussion about how journalists risk creating blind spots that affect both public perception and political solutions.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study builds on an initial sample of 857 news articles (including editorials, op-eds and reviews) collected through InfoMedia, a database of all major news publications in the Nordic countries. Articles were collected from a seven-month period (1 December 2018 to 30 June 2019) using four overlapping search terms: ‘fake news,’ *falske nyheder* [fake news in Danish], ‘misinformation,’ and ‘desinformation’ [disinformation in Danish]. The selected timeframe encompasses roughly six months before and one month after the Danish EP and NP elections. All articles were collected from the 10 national news outlets that wrote most extensively on the topic(s). This includes the three biggest broadsheet newspapers, *Politiken*, *Jyllands-Posten* and *Berlingske*, the two biggest tabloid newspapers, *B.T*

and *Ekstra Bladet*, and the two biggest public service broadcasters, DR and TV2 (see Table 1).

Following the data collection, articles were sampled for further analysis based on four overlapping criteria, of which at least one had to be fulfilled: (1) articles had to be about the Danish elections; (2) articles had to be about the threat of fake news towards Denmark and/or the EU; (3) articles had to be about specific cases of fake news (incl. mis- and disinformation) related to Danish politics; and (4) articles had to be about someone in Denmark accusing someone else in Denmark of spreading/being fake news. Of the excluded news pieces, a majority revolved around foreign politics (especially the US).

Media outlet	Type of outlet	Collected articles	Final sample
<i>Politiken</i>	Broadsheet newspaper	197	72
<i>Berlingske</i>	Broadsheet newspaper	155	65
<i>Jyllands-Posten</i>	Broadsheet newspaper	109	27
<i>Information</i>	Broadsheet newspaper	86	17
<i>DR.dk</i>	Public service broadcaster	76	26
<i>Kristeligt Dagblad</i>	Broadsheet newspaper	61	21
<i>TV2.dk</i>	Public service broadcaster	58	23
<i>Weekendavisen</i>	Weekly newspaper	50	10
<i>Ekstra Bladet</i>	Tabloid newspaper	41	16
<i>B.T.</i>	Tabloid newspaper	24	11
TOTAL		<u>857</u>	<u>288</u>

Table 1 – Archive and sample of Danish news articles

The final sample of 288 articles was analysed through three overlapping phases of qualitative analysis informed by the Essex School of Discourse Theory (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Laclau and Mouffe 2014). The initial phase involved identifying central themes and nodal points across the material, grouping articles and quotes around dominant topics and key signifiers. The second phase involved identifying discursive logics, pinpointing underlying processes and relations through which some subject positions, meaning ascriptions, and antagonisms become dominant, while others are excluded. Finally, the third phase involved refining and validating the findings, revisiting the studied material to challenge, affirm and nuance the results.

Theoretical Framework: Discourse Theory and Logics

The analysis builds on the Essex School of Discourse Theory, drawing on the concepts of *discourse*, *subject position*, *antagonism*, *imaginary*, *articulation*, *nodal point*, *hegemony* and – most notably – *logics* (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Laclau and Mouffe 2014; Laclau 2005). In this vocabulary, discourses encompass “articulatory practices,” while logics represent “processes that inform and structure such practices” (Glynos et al. 2021, 67). Logics capture “the rule or grammar” of a discursive practice and “the conditions which make the practice both possible and vulnerable” (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 136, emphasis removed). They represent relational processes through which certain worldviews and modes of understanding become hegemonic (Glynos and Howarth 2007).

Studying (discursive) logics does not involve searching for causal laws, but rather searching for underlying rules and connections. This means examining relationships between subject positions, objects, and meaning ascriptions to identify underlying processes or ‘grammars’ that shape said relations. According to Glynos and Howarth (2007), logics can be divided into three overall types: social, political, and fantasmatic. Social logics encompass norms that structure sedimented social relations, while political logics refer to processes of political mobilisation, contestation, and redrawing of discursive boundaries (Glynos and Howarth 2007). Finally, fantasmatic logics capture processes through which certain subject positions and objects are constructed as enemies to be defeated to achieve harmony and discursive closure. This logic “promises a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome... or which foretells of disaster if the obstacle proves insurmountable”

(Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147). This connects to the notion of imaginaries, which capture a “metaphorical representation of fullness” (Laclau cited in Howarth 2015, 49) within specific discourses.

In this article, I use the concepts of logics to critically unpack the discursive relations that shape media discourses around fake news. This involves “the linking together of different logics, along with the empirical circumstances in which they occur, in order to construct an account that is descriptive, explanatory, and critical” (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 152). While logics should not be seen as monoliths – since all discourses are multi-faceted and contain counter-tendencies – they nonetheless highlight underlying processes through which some meaning ascriptions come to dominate over others.

The study draws on the theoretical vocabulary of discourse theory to examine how certain understandings and imaginaries around fake news become hegemonic, while others are excluded. It furthermore uses the distinction between social, political, and fantasmatic logics to critically discuss the implications of how fake news is constructed in media discourses. Doing so, the article addresses the following research questions: How is fake news constructed as a topic and societal threat in Danish media discourses? Which logics undergird media discourses? And how do logics shape how some meaning ascriptions become dominant, while others are excluded?

The Danish Media Landscape and the Threat of Fake News

Before diving into news on fake news, I will briefly contextualise the Danish media landscape and outline how fake news – and associated terms and concerns - came to notoriety prior to the 2019 Danish EP and NP elections.

As in the rest of Scandinavia, Denmark’s media landscape is characterized by a high degree of trust in media institutions as compared to the global average (Newman et al. 2020) as well as a strong tradition for state funding for news and public service broadcasting. Scholars have described Denmark as fitting the so-called Democratic Corporatist model of media and politics characterised by “a high reach of the press market, relatively high degrees of political parallelism, strong professionalization, and strong state intervention”

(Brüggemann et al. 2014, 1042–43). This system – associated with Northern Europe – stands in contrast to, for example, that of the US, which fits the Liberal model with little to no state funding for media institutions and lower degrees of trust in news (Newman et al. 2020).

Despite having markedly different media systems, concerns about fake news in Denmark came quite directly from the US (Kalsnes, Falasca, and Kammer 2021). As Google Trends show, the term was rarely used in Danish search queries before the 2016 US Presidential election (Google Trends 2022). As Donald Trump took office, scholars, journalists, and politicians raised concerns about the potential role of social media in influencing elections through manipulation and false information (Kalsnes, Falasca, and Kammer 2021). A central question in Denmark, as in the rest of the EU, became: Could this happen here?

In late 2018, The Danish Defence Intelligence Service warned that disinformation from Russia represented a substantial threat: “Denmark could be targeted with little to no warning ... for example during an election campaign” (Danish Defence Intelligence Service 2018, 19–20). This bleak assessment came only six months before the Danish EP and NP elections, echoing concerns across Europe (Monsees 2020; 2021).

In tandem with worries about foreign interference, fake news also became associated with rhetorical attacks on established news, most (in-)famously through Donald Trump’s persistent use of the term to delegitimise news media (Lischka 2021). In Denmark, fake news was similarly used to discredit established journalists in specific cases (Kalsnes, Falasca, and Kammer 2021). No elected politician, however, adopted the word in a similar manner as seen in the US. To the contrary, Danish members of parliament reached a bipartisan agreement in early 2019, signing a so-called “gentlemen’s agreement” to abstain from “fanning the flames when fake news that hurts political opponents starts circulation on the Web” (Bostrup 2019).

Despite widespread concern about election interference, no large-scale disinformation attack took place against Denmark or any other EU country in 2019. The outgoing Danish Minister of Defence declared that intelligence agencies had not found any examples of

attempted foreign interference (Nielsen and Andersen 2019). The European Commission similarly concluded that “available evidence has not allowed to identify a distinct cross-border disinformation campaign” (European Commission 2019).

Although widespread disinformation remained absent from the EP and NP elections, Danish media produced hundreds of articles referencing fake news, misinformation, and disinformation during the election period. Studying this material provides critical insights into how and why news media construct fake news as a threat to democracy as well as how media institutions position themselves in relation to this threat. This addresses a notable gap in the literature on fake news and contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of fake news as a signifier in contemporary media discourses.

Five Logics of News on Fake News

Across the studied material, five interrelated logics undergird media discourses on fake news: (1) a logic of anticipation; (2) a logic of exteriorisation; (3) a logic of technologisation; (4) a logic of securitisation; and (5) a logic of pre-legitimation. These logics play a key role in shaping how fake news is constructed in news media, how it is perceived as a threat, and how journalists articulate their own role in relation to the topic.

A logic of anticipation

The first logic is a *logic of anticipation*. Fake news is articulated as not-yet-present, yet soon-to-be-materialised. It lingers in the close horizon as a pertinent threat towards Denmark, the EU, and democracy. If Denmark does not bolster its defences quickly, numerous articles claim, a large-scale attack would be close to inevitable: “the risk is not to be prepared for today or tomorrow’s influence operations – and that could be catastrophic” (Santos Rasmussen, 2019; see also Ahrens, 2018).

The 2019 Danish elections are presented as taking place in a brand new “digital media reality” (Fejerskov 2019) saturated with “fake news, cyber trolls” (Hertz cited in Hansen 2019), and “Russian robots” (Lauritzen cited in Olsen 2019). Democracy faces an imminent danger, not simply from an increase in lies, but also from a fundamental break with an established reality and hegemonic order:

When Danes voted in June 2015 in the national parliament election, no one worried about fake news on Facebook. Back then, only few people could imagine that shady actors would use the world's biggest social media to spread political lies and try to manipulate voters... reality is now the complete opposite.

(Sjöberg and Fejerskov 2019)

News media articulate the EP and NP elections as a period where fake news is likely to strike, perhaps even influencing the results: "All ingredients are there for an election period that explodes in our hands: mistrust, instability, and misinformation" (Madsen, 2019). Intelligence agencies warn that "Russia Will Attempt to Influence the Danish Election" (Ahrens 2018) and that "The Cyber Threat is Growing" (Kongstad 2019). The 2019 elections could become "infected with misinformation and propaganda so voters become isolated in two uncompromising camps. Or worse: Become so confused and paralyzed that they completely turn their backs to the voting booth and debate" (Tolstrup Holm, 2019). Denmark and the rest of Europe will shortly be "swarmed with articles about fake news and voter manipulation" (Eberholst cited in Franck 2018).

Fake news could even – in the not-so-distant future - reach an industrial scale (Breinstrup 2018; Fejerskov 2019). As predicted by an "expert panel of fortune tellers" in *Berlingske*, Danes have to "prepare for attacks by artificial intelligence, freelance robots, and Danish fake news millionaires" (Breinstrup 2018). Shady actors appropriating sophisticated technologies will make fake news near-ubiquitous, with the most immediate threat coming from abroad. According to the Danish Defence Intelligence Service "there could be up to a 75% likelihood of Russia actually trying to interfere in the elections" (Svendsen, 2018). The odds of a large-scale disinformation attack are thus presented as potentially greater than the odds of an attack-free election.

A logic of exteriorisation

This connects to a second logic, a *logic of exteriorisation*. Fake news is predominantly constructed as deriving from nefarious and dangerous foreigners. As formulated by then Minister of Defense, Claus Hjort Frederiksen, Denmark faces a threat of election

interference from “foreign powers” and “foreign states” (Cited in Larsen 2019). Across Danish media, Russia is highlighted in this regard.

According to Danish media professionals and authorities, Russia is preparing a large-scale disinformation attack on Denmark and the EU. The country is planning a “huge effort to derail the EP elections,” as stated by former Danish Prime Minister and General Secretary of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Aagaard 2019). This makes it “highly likely that fake profiles will shape the debate and spread false claims before and during the elections” (Ankerhus & Elkjær, 2019).

Across the studied material, Danish journalists rarely question these assessments nor their empirical basis, which remain opaque. The underlying premise is generally accepted: Denmark faces a major foreign threat, powerful enough to undermine elections. Editors at news outlets support these assessments, highlighting their own professional importance in times “where manipulation, fake news, and troll armies could become part of political reality” (Østergaard and Jensen 2019).

The only tangible evidence presented to support the claims of imminent danger comes in the form of comparisons with other countries, most notably the US. A recurring narrative in Danish media is that, if disinformation attacks could strike the US, it could also happen in Denmark. Russia’s next target after the 2016 US elections “could very well be the EP elections in May and the Danish national election” (Kretz 2019). The empirical support for such assessments remains opaque and news articles rarely engage with differences between Denmark and the US, for example in terms of electoral systems, media systems, languages, geographical sizes, and population sizes.

Through a logic of exteriorisation, fake news is associated with a foreign and malevolent ‘them,’ standing in contrast to a domestic and benign ‘us.’ Danish politics implicitly becomes associated with ‘real’ or ‘good’ news, while foreign actors become connected to ‘fake’ and ‘bad’ news. This is exemplified by the aforementioned “gentlemen’s agreement” (Bostrup 2019) by which Danish members of parliament promised to abstain from sharing fake news. The subject position of Danish politicians is coupled with rationality and real

news, dichotomously positioned in relation to those who spread fake news. Media professionals similarly claim to represent a “bulwark against fake news” (Mollerup, 2019), coupling their own subject position to real news in a struggle against a foreign ‘other.’ In this way, fake news becomes part of a nationalistic discourse, in which Danes – particularly Danish authorities and traditional knowledge gatekeepers – are articulated as predominantly rational and well-meaning, while foreign actors are linked to malevolence. If Danish citizens are deceived or radicalised by lies, in other words, the culprit is largely assumed to be alien.

A detailed example of the logic of exteriorisation can be found in an article from the national newspaper, *Politiken*, entitled “The Ultimate Guide to Fake News: The Villains, Scandals, and Everything Else you Need to Know to Avoid being Deceived in the Election Year 2019” (Fejerskov 2019). This article tells readers to “know your enemy” as to “not become a victim” of fake news (ibid.). It then outlines three enemies, the first of which is the “professional web warrior” who is described as “extremely systematic” and “cynical” (ibid.). This villain can be found in “troll armies” in countries like Russia, the Philippines, Turkey, and Brazil, the article claims (ibid.). No EU country is mentioned as a potential base for the professional web warrior. The second enemy is the “businessman” who spreads fake news for monetary gains, being “completely indifferent to whether his fictitious stories affect political elections... And then he is Macedonian. Or at least he can be” (ibid.). No country except for Macedonia is specified as the businessman’s potential residence. The third and final enemy is “the partisan,” described as an “ordinary citizen fighting a persistent ideological battle on the Web and on social media. A battle where all tricks are allowed” (ibid.).

Two out of three enemy archetypes are constructed as purely foreign and non-EU based. These foreigners are presented as highly skilled and cynical, standing in contrast to the third archetype, constructed as an “ordinary citizen” driven by politics and emotions (ibid.). Through a logic of exteriorisation, fake news become inseparable from foreign actors. This extends to Danish media broadly, especially in assessments of the 2019 elections, where fake news is predominantly presented as deriving from a manipulative and alien ‘them.’ These findings resonate with existing research from Kalsnes et al. (2021), concluding that

Scandinavian media have generally tended to portray “fake news in terms of Russian propaganda or for-profit fabrications by Macedonian teenagers” (285). It also aligns with findings from Germany (Monsees 2020), the Czech Republic (Eberle and Daniel 2019) and the US (Bratich 2020), pointing towards a cross-national discourse on fake news, undergirded by a logic of exteriorisation that antagonises foreign ‘others’ and constructs domestic actors – especially politicians and journalists - as benevolent.

A logic of technologisation

This brings us to the third logic, a *logic of technologisation*. Fake news is constructed as inseparable from high levels of technological sophistication, deriving from “artificially intelligent robots, psychographic manipulation, and armies of Russian trolls” (Bostrup, 2019). Through imageries of ‘robots,’ ‘algorithms,’ and ‘AI’, fake news is not simply presented as equal to false information. Rather, it is articulated as a new type of technological danger so sophisticated that any citizen could potentially fall victim to it. It derives from false “profiles on social media that look and sound like Danish citizens” (Kretz 2019) and a “digital toolbox” that can increasingly “target more precisely, with greater effect, and lower risk of detection by the sender” (Splidsboel Hansen 2019).

Artificial intelligence will “increase societies’ vulnerability to cyber-attacks” (Nordvang Jensen & Nielsen, 2019), potentially resulting in “assaults from malicious artificial intelligence, driven by rogue states” (Breinstrup, 2018). The election year – 2019 - will bring “a great breakthrough in so-called deepfakes - computer manipulated videos, for example with heads of state, that put words in their mouths with such authenticity that you cannot tell truth from falsehood” (Jarlner 2019). Deepfakes will provide “fake news on steroids” (Rasmussen 2019) that could result in “the collapse of election campaigns and perhaps even declarations of war” (Santos Rasmussen 2019). Danes must prepare for a future where “deepfakes combined with fake news heralds ‘post-truth geopolitics’ in international relations” (Rasmussen 2019).

Through a logic of technologisation, fake news marks a new era in which technology disturbs political reality and hegemonic relations in unforeseen and dangerous ways. It represents something broader than false information, capturing a dangerous technological development that threatens established norms and political stability. This finding also echoes

previous studies (Carlson 2020; Waisbord 2018), again indicating a cross-national discourse.

A logic of securitisation

The fourth logic is a *logic of securitisation*. Fake news is constructed as a national security threat calling for national security solutions. Across Danish media, threat assessments predominantly derive from sources connected to the military and/or law enforcement, most notably intelligence agencies. According to these actors, fake news and disinformation from Russia represents “a real risk” (Karkov 2019) during the 2019 elections and a “growing threat towards Denmark” (Ritzau 2019). The presented solutions to this soon-to-be crisis revolve around increased military presence and surveillance. As summarised in *Jyllands-Posten*: “When the upcoming national election is announced, months of preparations will be behind it... the government has planned a cross-ministry task force together with the Danish Defence Intelligence Service and the Danish Security and Intelligence Service who will be surveilling social media” (Dengsøe and Festersen 2019). Prior to the elections, the Danish government allocated 172 million Danish kroner (approximately 23.1 million euro) to the Danish Security and Intelligence Service to combat fake news (Boier 2018). Among other initiatives, the agency announced it considered establishing “a hotline to which leading newspapers could call if they have suspicions of Russian misinformation” (Karkov 2019). They would also brief Danish members of parliament “about how to handle the threat of being a politician in Denmark during a national election” (Ahrens, 2018).

The discursive connections between fake news, foreign actors, and national security resonate with findings from other European countries and beyond (Monsees 2021; 2020; Eberle and Daniel 2019; Tenove 2020; Lim 2020). European governments have generally “turned to their national security sectors to address online disinformation” (Tenove 2020, 523), relying on “tropes such as ‘hybrid warfare’” (Monsees 2020, 10). In the US, “professional journalism has drawn from the language of war... liberally employing terms like *weaponization* and *infowar* to understand fake news” (Bratich 2020, 314, original emphasis). Once again, this points towards a cross-national discourse, as I will return to in the discussion.

A logic of pre-legitimation

The fifth and final logic is a logic of *pre-legitimation*. Drawing on Krzyżanowski (2014), this encompasses discursive practices where subjects legitimise their authority through “visions rather than accounts of practice yet construct those visions from experience-like aspects of discursive representation of social action” (346-47). Pre-legitimation is a form of discursive positioning where actors claim legitimacy based on *imaginaries* about “what we would potentially do” (Krzyżanowski 2014, 357), typically in response to “various real and imagined ‘crises’” (Krzyżanowski 2019, 469). This discursive strategy often revolves around visions of how ‘we’ (as a collective identity) embody solutions to societal problems through idealised narratives of our existing practice.

In Danish media discourses, fake news is constructed as an almost-already crisis that pre-legitimises established knowledge gatekeepers, such as intelligence agencies and journalistic institutions, by being their antithesis in an *a priori* sense. Fake news (re-)affirms the societal importance of journalism, not based on journalists’ existing track record of countering fake news, but rather based on journalism’s *ontological status* as a conveyor of truth. Since fake news is yet-to-be-materialised, it legitimises journalistic institutions irrespective of the current prevalence of falsehoods, since journalists simply “know the best cure against misinformation: trustworthy and transparent journalism delivered by established media” (Jensen, 2019b).

Danish citizens need journalists more than ever, news editors insist, since without traditional media, fake news from foreign robots and troll armies would likely win and overthrow established hegemonic order. According to Michael Dyrby (2019), Editor in Chief at the tabloid *B.T.*, the Danish NP election is the “most important in 46 years,” in part due to a “stream of information and misinformation that will pour from all media platforms.” This, he argues, provides a “solid reason to follow the campaign here at *B.T.* and at other established media outlets” (Dyrby 2019). In a similar vein, Mikkel Hertz, the News Director at TV2, states that “systematic misinformation has become part of the Danish reality”, making “trustworthy, transparent news reporting... more important than ever before” (cited in Kamph 2019). Luckily, Denmark has a “good press... far better than its reputation and a much better place to let yourself be enlightened than social media’s opaque web of

algorithmically controlled information streams”, as formulated by Editor in Chief at *Kristeligt Dagblad*, Erik Bjerager (2019).

After the elections, several news editors declared victory, arguing that the lack of disinformation could largely be attributed to Danish journalists, since the “best defense against misinformation and junk media is skillful journalism” (Jensen, 2019a). In an editorial entitled “The Media Won the Election”, Editor in Chief at the tabloid, *Ekstra Bladet*, Karen Bro (2019), proclaimed:

The truth is that the established media throughout this election campaign has shown what journalism is worth and why we cannot just rely on neither emotions nor algorithms... The news landscape was not marred by fake news and attacks from Russian troll factories, as many feared... This campaign has shown that we are ready for any challenge that may arise.

(Bro 2019)

The lack of fake news, robots, deepfakes, and foreign ‘others’ – predicted to be close to inevitable before the elections – is presented after the fact as evidence of the importance of journalism. Through a logic of pre-legitimation, journalism’s role as the antithesis to fake news is paradoxically reinforced through a *lack* of journalistic findings around fake news.

The logic of pre-legitimation helps explain why Danish media – despite uncovering very few cases of disinformation – produced hundreds of articles mentioning fake news (and related concepts) during the 2019 EP and NP elections. In addition to perceiving fake news as an ‘almost-already crisis,’ fake news is seen as a dichotomous ‘other’ that (re-)affirms the societal importance of legacy media *a priori*. Fake news becomes part of a wider *imaginary* of how and why journalism will survive in times of challenges and dislocation. In the face of rapid technological change and financial hardship, fake news affirms the need to preserve the authority of established journalism as a societal knowledge gatekeeper.

In sum, fake news is constructed in media discourses as a soon-to-be-materialised, foreign, technologically sophisticated, national security threat. Editors at established news outlets

articulate their institutions as bulwarks against this ‘almost-already crisis,’ pre-legitimising their professional authority through notions of deepfakes, robots, and malicious ‘others.’ These dominant meaning ascriptions arise through logics that produce specific imaginaries and hegemonic relations, shaping not only how fake news is understood as a threat, but also how it is addressed.

Discussion

The five logics presented in this article shape how certain worldviews and imaginaries around fake news become dominant, while others are excluded. For example, media discourses contain little discussion on how fake news might derive from within national politics or traditional media, since the threat of fake news is both implicitly and explicitly assumed to be *de facto* foreign and digital. Journalists rarely question or challenge threat assessments from intelligence agencies since fake news is constructed as a soon-to-be materialised danger that is best understood through a national security lens.

The five logics identified in this study help explain why fake news receives significant media attention, even during periods with few documented cases of disinformation. By being a placeholder for general anxieties around foreigners, military threats, technology, and the societal role of traditional media, fake news is largely de-coupled from the abundance of false information. The discursive role of fake news becomes that of an antagonised ‘other,’ changing its meaning from being synonymous with falsehoods to capturing broader fears of potential collapse of established hegemonic relations. News editors contribute to this discourse to (re-)affirm and protect their authority, articulating their institutions as *a priori* solutions to an ‘almost-already crisis.’

As noted in the theory section, Glynos and Howarth (2007) distinguish between three different types of logics: social, political and fantasmatic. Applying this framework, Danish media discourses on fake news primarily rely on fantasmatic logics, processes through which some subject positions and objects are constructed as enemies to be defeated at all costs. Fake news is articulated as a fantasmatic ‘other’ that threatens the stability of both Denmark and democracy. Through the (fantasmatic) logics of anticipation, exteriorisation,

technologisation, and securitisation, fake news condenses general fears about a not-so-distant future in which established hegemonic norms and hierarchies are subverted. This connects to the subject position of the ‘foreigner’ who is similarly presented as an enemy to be overcome. In response, media professionals rely on a logic of pre-legitimation to bolster their own discursive position as authorities of truth.

To legacy media institutions, the discursive construction of fake news as an ‘almost-already crisis’ provides both a dystopian fantasy of how society would disintegrate without them and a utopian imaginary of how and why they ought to maintain legitimacy and authority in times of technological change and declining traditional journalistic business models. In the face of challenges and dislocations for the journalistic profession, fake news ‘proves’ why legacy media institutions deserve to maintain the power to “write the next chapters of the political history of Denmark” (Jensen 2019a). In this way, fake news functions, not just an ambiguous buzzword, as shown in other studies (Egelhofer et al. 2020), but also as a *constitutive outside* for existing knowledge gatekeepers seeking to (re-)sediment a position of authority.

Existing research on journalistic coverage of fake news in countries like the US has shown that established media contribute to fearmongering around the topic with little empirical clarity (Carlson 2020; Bratich 2020). Carlson (2020) concludes that fake news has come to encapsulate “broader concerns surrounding the eroding boundaries of traditional journalistic channels” (376), making it “the ultimate other for traditional news organisations struggling to reassert control over the media environment amid declining public opinion” (386).

In Danish news media, fake news similarly functions as an ‘ultimate other,’ capturing wider concerns about foreigners, technology, the nation state, and – most importantly - journalistic authority. Through the five logics identified in this study, the ‘ultimate other’ takes the form of a “fantasmatic object” that “resists public official disclosure” (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 148). Fake news becomes a threat so immense that its empirical basis becomes incommensurable.

The problem with fake news as an ‘ultimate other’ and ‘almost-already crisis’ undergirded by fantasmatic logics is not only that it becomes a placeholder for broad societal anxieties. It also creates potential blind spots in both public perception and political solutions. By constructing fake news as soon-to-be-materialised, journalists risk neglecting critical questions about the empirical basis of this threat. Similarly, constructing fake news as de facto foreign means journalists risk neglecting how manipulation might derive from within established political institutions. This argument was raised after the elections by Editor of Domestic Affairs at *Information*, Anton Geist (2019), questioning whether journalists had been “good enough at investigating and writing about the problem [of misinformation],” considering their extensive focus on foreign actors and negligible focus on falsehoods from the Danish government. Journalists similarly risk neglecting how false and manipulative information might derive from within their own institutions, something that has been documented in the past (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2018; Farkas and Neumayer 2020). All of this could result in a muddled understanding of both what fake news ‘is’ and how it can be meaningfully addressed.

Going forward, this study points to a need for further critical research on the discursive role of fake news in contemporary media discourses. More scholarship is needed on how journalists construct their own professional role in relation to the topic, including the challenges faced when trying to uncover cases of fake news, assessing it as a threat, and potentially contributing to the construction of an ‘ultimate other.’ Cross-national research is also needed on how media discourses and imaginaries around fake news differ and converge across geo-political contexts. Such critical enquiries remain pertinent as fake news continues to capture both headlines and imaginations of journalists across the world. Hopefully, this could enable a more nuanced understanding of fake news and disinformation in the 21st century and the specific challenges they pose for democracy.

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