

# Facts, values, and the epistemic authority of journalism

*How journalists use and define the terms fake news, junk news, misinformation, and disinformation*

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine how journalists try to uphold ideals of objectivity, clarity, and epistemic authority when using four overlapping terms: fake news, junk news, misinformation, and disinformation. Drawing on 16 qualitative interviews with journalists in Denmark, our study finds that journalists struggle to convert the ideals of clarity and objectivity into a coherent conceptual practice. Across interviews, journalists disagree on which concepts to use and how to define them, accusing academics of producing too technical definitions, politicians of diluting meaning, and journalistic peers of being insufficiently objective. Drawing on insights from journalism scholarship and rhetorical argumentation theory, we highlight how such disagreements reveal a fundamental tension in journalistic claims to epistemic authority, causing a continuous search for unambiguous terms, which in turn produces the very ambiguity that journalists seek to avoid.

**KEYWORDS:** fake news, junk news, misinformation, disinformation, journalistic objectivity, journalistic ideals

## Introduction

Political manipulation and deception have in recent years become major topics of political, journalistic, and scholarly concern (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Tandoc, 2019). This development has been accompanied by a proliferation of both new and existing concepts, with overlapping terms such as post-truth, fake news, misinformation, and gaslighting all being designated as “word of the year” by prominent English dictionaries (Collins Dictionary, 2017; Dictionary.com, 2018; Merriam Webster, 2022; Oxford Dictionaries, 2016).

The growing attention and concern about fake news and related topics have prompted heated discussions over the meanings and definitions of these concepts (Altay et al., 2023; Freelon & Wells, 2020; Simon & Camargo, 2023). Political actors have concurrently appropriated the label of fake news as a means of discrediting media institutions and political opponents (Lischka, 2019; Rossini et al., 2021). This has led scholars to urge colleagues and journalists to carefully (re)consider their linguistic practices (Egelhofer et al., 2020; Habgood-Coote, 2018; Wardle, 2023).

In journalism, research shows that the term fake news is often used as an “empty buzzword” (Egelhofer et al., 2020: 1327), with journalists using the term to describe a range of overarching fears and threats with little conceptual clarity (Bratich, 2020; Creech, 2020; Farkas, 2023b). At the same time, major news institutions use the term fake news when promoting their own societal importance as epistemic authorities in times of economic instability within the news industry (Kalsnes et al., 2021; Waisbord, 2018).

In this study, we set out to examine how Danish journalists reflect on their own professional uses and definitions of the concepts of fake news, junk news, misinformation, and disinformation. Such a perspective currently remains underexplored in the academic literature, as few studies have analysed journalists’ conceptual practices around these terms, and even less in a Scandinavian context (Farkas, 2023a; Kalsnes et al., 2021).

Our analysis builds on 16 qualitative interviews with journalists from ten Danish national news outlets. Theoretically, we combine scholarship on journalism’s epistemic authority (Carlson, 2017; Schudson, 2011; Tuchman, 1978) with rhetorical argumentation theory (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969), thus investigating not only *what* journalists do, but also *why* they do so in relation to professional values, argumentative practices, and tensions within journalism. The contribution of this article thus lies in unpacking both connections and contradictions between contemporary journalistic practices and underlying ideals. We address the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Danish journalists define and use the terms fake news, junk news, misinformation, and disinformation?

RQ2. How do Danish journalists relate their conceptual practices to ideals of journalistic clarity, neutrality, and objectivity?

RQ3. How do Danish journalists view their own conceptual practices in relation to those of academics, politicians, and news audiences and, in turn, how do such perceptions relate to journalistic claims to epistemic authority?

Before addressing these questions, in the following sections, we present a brief introduction to academic debates on the meaning and usefulness of “fake news” and related terms, our theoretical framework, and a description of our methodological approach.

## **Emergent research literature on fake news and what to call it**

Across social scientific disciplines, fake news and related phenomena have received significant academic attention in recent years (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Righetti, 2021). Scholars from a wide array of fields have sought to study, conceptualise, and delineate both new and existing phenomena (Farkas, 2023c). This has given rise to a range of competing, and at times conflicting, typologies, revolving around terms such as fake news (Tandoc, 2019), junk news (Howard et al., 2017), information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), computational propaganda (Woolley, 2020), cyber influence operations (Sander, 2019), coordinated inauthentic behaviour (Weber & Neumann, 2021), disinformation (Freelon & Wells, 2020), malinformation (Yesmin, 2023), and misinformation (McBrayer, 2020).

Multiple scholars have argued that this research has a conceptual deficit (Habgood-Coote, 2018; S e, 2018). As Yesmin (2023: 2) has noted, “Mis-disinformation, fake news, rumor, etc., are used interchangeably in the scientific works due to their conceptual closeness”. Krause and colleagues (2022: 113) similarly noted that “misinformation” is frequently invoked by researchers as a “a near-meaningless catch-all term”, while Freelon and Wells (2020) argued that “fake news” is used ambiguously.

Terminology is thus contested and marked by ambivalence, as scholars diverge in their application of existing terms, while continually developing new concepts to capture more nuances. The result is a terminological cacophony that – as we unfold in our analysis – can also be found in journalism.

## **Theoretical framework: Journalistic objectivity and the argumentative character of definitions**

Professional journalism – as it has come to develop in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – is marked by a series of tensions and contradictions related to its epistemic authority. As journalism scholars such as Tuchman (1978), Schudson (2011), and Carlson (2017) have noted, journalism’s claim to epistemic authority rests on ideals of being able to independently capture and convey significant news about the world “as it is”. This is typically expressed through notions of objectivity, accuracy, clarity, and neutrality. Paradoxically, however, the

journalistic field does not follow any established scientific method nor claim to possess any esoteric knowledge. As a result, journalists often describe their claim to epistemic authority as being simply a matter of fact (i.e., something journalists just *know* how to perform), rather than the result of a specialised process.

In her landmark study of American journalism from 1978, Tuchman captured a series of tensions that arise from journalism's claim to epistemic authority. For example, her work showcases how journalists, on the one hand, strongly emphasise their ability to be objective and distinguish *facts* from *value judgements*, while on the other, they struggle to describe how they maintain such an ideal in practice. In this regard, Tuchman (1978: 99) noted the following:

It is not surprising that newswriters found the “intuitively obvious” distinction between fact and value judgment difficult to explain. First, facing the problem means considering how much all identification of facts is embedded in specific understandings of the everyday world. [...] It is also to acknowledge that news frames strips of everyday occurrences and is not a mere mirror of events.

While journalists tend to describe their epistemic authority as being self-evident and similar to a mirror, journalism is always embedded in social structures and invested in upholding them. This, however, is rarely admitted by journalists, Tuchman found, causing continuous tensions whenever journalists try to describe exactly how they convert their ideals into day-to-day practices.

In line with Tuchman, Carlson (2017) has noted that journalists tend to mobilise what he called “mirror theories” of epistemic authority. This encompasses ideals about journalism functioning like a mirror of the social world, conveying facts without imbricating journalists' own value judgements. Such mirror theories, however, are difficult to maintain in practice, Carlson (2017: 54) argued, since journalists not only present a string of facts, but also curate and make sense of the world:

Normatively, journalists speak of their work in such value-neutral tones as providing facts or information for their readers to interpret as they will. Despite such pronouncements, if mirror theories assuming journalistic accounts to be exact reproductions of the events being covered are to be rejected, then what journalists really produce are *meanings* about the world.

As Carlson and Tuchman remind us, journalism's claim to epistemic authority often fails to account for how journalism revolves around the production of narratives, meaning, and sense-making. Rather than “just” churning out an endless stream of facts, journalists produce and curate *stories* that shape how people come to understand the news (as well as what counts as “news” in the first place). In doing so, journalists do not only let us “know more about ‘the world’ but to make sense of it”, as Stuart Hall (1977: 341) put it.

While the aspiration for clarity, exactness, and a univocal passage between language and the world it represents have existed for centuries (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969), scholars within rhetorical argumentation theory have

long noted how choices involved in uses of concepts and their definitions always implicate argumentation: “Even uncontroversial definitions function as claims about how part of the world should be conceptualized; how part of the world *is* [emphasis original]” (Schiappa, 1993: 404).

According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), the ideal of a “perfectly clear” and “univocal” notion is only possible within a formal system, in which its field of application is completely determined. Conversely, they invited the examination of what they have called confused notions: terms possessing multiple and ambiguous meanings. As examples, they highlighted how concepts such as justice, freedom, truth, and goodness are characterised by being simultaneously central to political discourse and deeply ambiguous. Importantly, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca did not consider such ambiguity as imperfection to be eliminated or resolved, but rather as a productive place for both generating and evaluating arguments (see also Haller, 2017). As such, they argued that concepts and definitions should not be viewed as a mere presentation of an external world, but as “an interpretation of reality” which calls for critical examination (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 132).

Through such analysis, one can gain an understanding of how people argue about and from definitions, that is, which notions and accompanying definitions are accepted and which are contested; whether this adherence or lack thereof is presented as self-evident or supported by various substantive or authoritative arguments; and how various and sometimes competing notions are clarified and obscured in the process.

From these theoretical and empirical insights, we can begin to see how concepts such as fake news, junk news, misinformation, and disinformation might cause frictions within journalism, since using such terms requires active judgements to be made, ruling in or out what counts as, for example, “fake” versus “junk” versus “real” news. For journalists adhering to mirror theories, such decisions might feel counterproductive to ideals of avoiding value judgements and reflecting the world “as it is”. In this regard, however, rhetorical argumentation theory reminds us that no definition can ever be divorced from interpretative and argumentative choices. Accordingly, from this theoretical backdrop, we can begin to analyse not only how journalists engage in definitional practices, but also how such practices stand in relation to, and sometimes in tension with, journalistic ideals and claims to epistemic authority.

## Methods

The analysis builds on 16 qualitative interviews with Danish journalists working at ten national media outlets, conducted as part of a larger study of news media coverage of fake news, misinformation, and related phenomena in Denmark (Farkas, 2023a, 2023b). The interviews were carried out in April, May, and June 2019, a period marked by two important national elections: one for the European Parliament (26 May 2019) and one for the Danish national parliament (5 June 2019). These elections were accompanied by widespread concern from

both Danish and international analysts about the potential threat of fake news, misinformation, and foreign interference in the electoral process (Ahrens, 2018; Brattberg, 2019; European Parliament, 2019).

Interviewees were identified through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Blakie & Priest, 2019). Prior to and during the data collection period, the lead author (Johan Farkas) closely followed journalistic coverage of fake news, misinformation, and related topics across Danish national media. In doing so, journalists who reported on these issues were then contacted and invited to participate in the study. Participants were asked during the interviews if they could also recommend other potential interviewees.

As Table 1 shows, the 16 participants worked at national news outlets, spanning broadsheet newspapers, public service broadcasters, news magazines, and digitally native news outlets. These institutions – while varying in size and scope – share a national Danish target audience and all published articles on the phenomena of fake news, junk news, misinformation, and/or disinformation leading up to the 2019 Danish elections (Farkas, 2023b).

At the ten media institutions, five participants worked in editorial positions, while the remaining eleven worked as journalists. The interviews lasted 68 minutes on average and were all conducted by the lead author (Johan Farkas). Informed consent was secured from all participants, and personal identities have subsequently been anonymised in this article, each being assigned a random number (e.g., Respondent #1).

**TABLE 1** Overview of interviewees’ professional affiliation and news institutions

	Broadsheet newspaper	Public service broadcaster	News magazine	Digitally native news outlet	Total
Interviewees’ affiliation	7	3	3	3	16
Journalistic institutions	3	3	2	2	10

All interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide, containing open-ended questions. This research design builds on an emic approach, aimed at exploring “the particulars of a culture, social context, or group” (Beals et al., 2020: 594) – in this case, how journalists adopt, use, define, and reflect upon different terms in their coverage. Accordingly, no definitions were provided to the interviewees and no set list of terms were presented as the object of discussion.

The interview questions centred on several key themes, including 1) when and how the journalist and their institution had become interested in reporting on fake news, misinformation, and related topics, 2) how they reported on them, and 3) how they viewed the role of journalism in potentially mitigating or contributing to democratic threats related to them. During the conversations, the interviewer carefully sought to let participants bring up cases, terms,

and definitions. As an example, when asking about uses of and preferences for concepts, the interviewer would openly ask: “Which terms have you used in your news reporting? And which considerations have you had in this regard?” Such open phrasings follow Brinkmann and Kvale’s (2018: 17) call for letting interviewees “bring forth the dimensions they find important by the theme of inquiry. The interviewer leads the subject towards certain themes, but not to specific opinions about these themes”.

A challenge in the research design was, on the one hand, to delineate the topic under investigation – both to us as researchers and to the interviewees – while not imposing specific ideas about how to define concepts such as fake news, on the other. While this tension is not, at its core, completely resolvable – since interviewers always affect interviewees through their language when posing questions – our solution has been to continuously reflect upon the interview situation. As such, we have tried to maintain a conceptual openness, allowing interviewees to present their own uses and definitions.

After conducting the interviews, responses were analysed using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, inductively identifying key themes and arguments across the material and clustering quotes accordingly. This resonates with Meuser and Magel’s (2009: 35) argument that “in the analysis of expert interviews attention is focused on thematic units, that is passages with similar topics which are scattered about the interviews”.

Through this analysis, we identified four key concepts as being central across the interviewed journalists’ reflections and described practices: fake news, junk news, misinformation, and disinformation.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, we focus primarily on these four terms in this article, analysing similarities and tensions across interviewee responses. It should be noted that other terms, including influence operations and propaganda, were also sporadically mentioned in interviews. Since these were not similarly reoccurring, they have not been included.

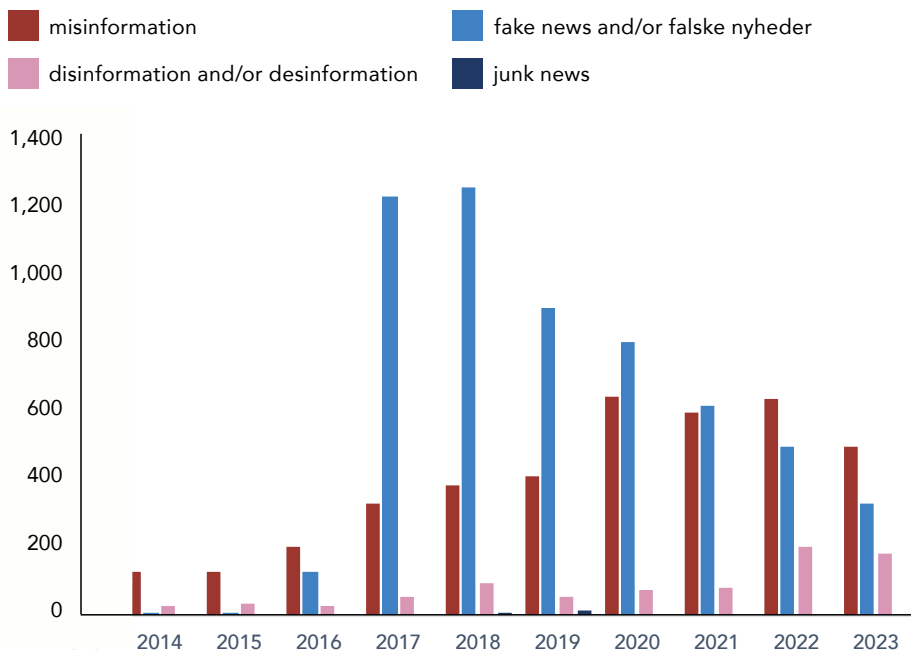
### **The Danish media context**

The Danish media landscape is characterised by a high degree of public trust in journalistic institutions, as compared to other European countries (Newman et al., 2021). Like the rest of the Nordics, Denmark fits within the so-called democratic corporatist model of media and politics, as described by Hallin and Mancini (2004). This encompasses a diverse, independent, and professionalised news industry, supported economically by the state but based on an arm’s length principle without direct political involvement in editorial processes. Danish journalists have been found to have strong adherence to the ideal of journalistic objectivity (Skovsgaard, 2014).

Due to the country’s high levels of public trust in journalism as well as state support for legacy news, Denmark is often described as exhibiting a high degree of resilience towards mis- and disinformation (Humprecht et al., 2020). In a cross-European survey from 2018, Danish citizens expressed the lowest degree of concern within the European Union about the impact of fake news in their country (European Commission, 2018).

Despite being an outlier in terms of the perceived threat of fake news and related phenomena, Danish news media have since 2016 devoted significant attention to notions such as fake news, disinformation, and misinformation (Farkas, 2023b; Kalsnes et al., 2021). As findings from searching the Nordic news database Infomedia reveal, the prevalence of the above-mentioned terms grew significantly in national daily newspapers between 2013 and 2023 (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> This echoes developments in other European countries, where interest grew markedly after the election of Donald Trump in the US in 2016 (Egelhofer et al., 2020; Monsees, 2020).

**FIGURE 1** Number of Danish national newspaper articles containing the terms misinformation, fake news, disinformation, and junk news, 2013–2023



Regarding the notion of fake news,<sup>3</sup> Infomedia queries show that this term grew explosively in prominence in 2017, before gradually declining in popularity after 2018 (though still being more prevalent in 2023 than before 2017). The concept of junk news, in contrast, never caught on in national Danish news reporting. The only year the term junk news saw a bit of use in national Danish newspapers was in 2018–2019, around the time of the qualitative interviews in this study. In connection to the concepts of misinformation and disinformation, news prevalence of both terms grew steadily between 2013 and 2023, with misinformation surpassing fake news in 2022 as the most widely used of the four concepts (as had also been the case before 2017). In this regard, it should be noted that our interviews, being from 2019, do not account for most recent developments, including major events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.



Having outlined this brief contextualisation, the following sections present our findings. First, we present journalists' overall reflections, highlighting an epistemic hierarchy in which journalists position themselves in relation to academics, politicians, and news audiences. Second, we dive into their uses and definitions of the terms fake news, junk news, misinformation, and disinformation. Third and finally, we unpack a desire to abandon overarching concepts altogether and thus reinforce mirror theories of journalism's epistemic authority.

## **Findings: The search for journalistic objectivity through an epistemic hierarchy**

Overall, the journalists in our study expressed frustration with the conceptual landscape around fake news, junk news, misinformation, and disinformation, describing it as messy and difficult to navigate and convey to news audiences. According to interviewees, news reporting on these topics faces two recurring challenges: First, journalists need to figure out which concepts to use among many overlapping and competing ones, and second, they must try to convey the meaning of these concepts to news audiences in an accurate and understandable way.

In relation to the first challenge – deciding which terms to use in news reporting – interviewees described this as a task they mainly figure out on their own: “I have taken my own editorial decision”, as Respondent #3, a journalist at a broadsheet newspaper, summarised. Respondent #11, a journalist at a public service broadcaster, similarly noted: “It is not like we have taken an editorial decision on this. So that is on my own account”.

A few respondents described institutional steps taken by editors at their news organisations towards creating alignment on key terms such as fake news. According to interviewees, however, such efforts have largely been unsuccessful:

What we did before the election was to make a definition – which I can show you – of what *we* thought was fake news. And that was simply something about the intentional spreading of lies – something like that. But then, in our reporting, we have tried to stick to words like “misinformation” and such, since “fake news” has become a battle cry for someone like Paludan [far-right candidate] and those on the far right. (Respondent #5, journalist at a public service broadcaster)

As this quote exemplifies, even in cases where journalistic institutions try to create common terminological ground about ambiguous terms, a key challenge remains that meanings keep changing in public discourse, which the journalists expressed a need to accommodate for. Politicians were primarily blamed for such shifts in meaning.

With the aim of achieving some form of consistency in their vocabulary, interviewees described several routines they developed as part of their journalistic practice, including consulting academic definitions (#3, #12, #13, #14), adopting terminologies from government and law enforcement agencies as well as social media companies (#2, #8, #9, #16), or seeking assistance from colleagues at their institutions (#1, #4, #5, #11, #13). As described by Respondent #4, a journalist at a

news magazine: “I simply have it hanging on my bulletin board – on my wall – the difference between disinformation and misinformation. Our copyeditor has written it down for me, so I have it hanging there”. In this way, journalists continuously try to anchor their own conceptual practices in some form of external epistemic authority – whether it be that of academia, social media corporations, or government agencies – rather than attempting to develop their own terms or definitions.

In terms of the second challenge – conveying the meaning of different concepts to news audiences – multiple interviewees expressed concern about potentially alienating people when using what they described as convoluted and technical terms. As stated by Respondent #10, a journalist working at a broadsheet newspaper:

There are so many technicalities. And that can be frustrating when making these stories. It is so difficult to get to the point where things actually start to get interesting because the first third of the article must be used explaining these terms and concepts.

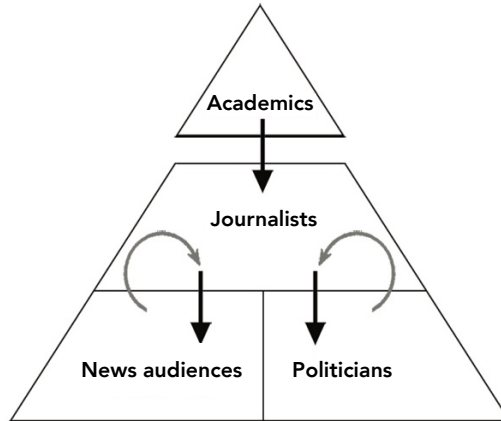
In a similar vein, Respondent #14, an editor at a (different) broadsheet newspaper, described it as a hassle to try to import academic definitions:

It can also definitely get too academic sometimes. I am sure that fake news is something a lot of people have researched within this and that. And you can probably find three–four definitions in different PhD theses and what do I know. But can you transfer that directly to your article? I am not so sure that you always can. So yes, you can use the concept, but you need to know that different things will be read into it.

As these quotes exemplify, journalists often describe a tension between trying to use the various terms accurately (i.e., in accordance with academic definitions) and trying to present news stories in a straightforward way (i.e., as something news audiences can easily follow). In this regard, interviewees often expressed notably low expectations of what news audiences are capable of comprehending, describing them as knowing “very little about the subject matter” (#11) and having difficulties “orienting themselves in all those concepts” (#7).

Across the interviews, we thus find that journalists articulated their epistemic authority as existing within a hierarchy. In this hierarchy, academics as well as government and corporate actors are positioned at the top, being the ones journalists look towards for authoritative support regarding concepts and definitions. Despite their high epistemic status, however, academics were simultaneously described as being (too) isolated from real-world struggles over meaning. Following from this, the journalists viewed themselves as having to translate academic terms and definitions into something news audiences can comprehend. Such a translation was deemed necessary since audiences were generally described as being quite unknowledgeable. At the same time, the journalists also argued that they continuously must consider the different ways in which politicians affect the meaning of certain words over time. Figure 2 presents a visualisation of this perceived epistemic hierarchy, which – as we unpack in the following sections – is reflected when journalists described their specific uses of the terms fake news, junk news, misinformation, and disinformation.

**FIGURE 2** Visualisation of the perceived epistemic hierarchy expressed by journalists in interview responses



Source: created by the authors

### Fake news

Interviewees generally stated that journalists ought to avoid the term fake news in their reporting, since it has become too “imprecise” (#6, #11), “polarising” (#6, #13), and “provocative” (#16). A recurring theme is that, while the term fake news was initially useful, it gradually became “polluted” (#15), “cliché” (#6), and “diluted” (#2, #5, #10, #11, #13, #14). As such, several journalists said that, although they frequently used the term fake news when it first became popular in 2016, they now (in 2019) try to avoid it: “It is something that suddenly cropped up and then everyone used it and then it got worn out and no one knew what it meant... politicians here in Denmark started saying to each other: ‘You are fake news’”, according to Respondent #2, a journalist at a public service broadcaster. In this narrative, politicians are primarily the ones responsible for changing its meaning:

We had a lot of discussions about which terms that are relevant to use. And we can see that there are media outlets that disagree with us. But we try to stay away from “falske nyheder” [fake news in Danish] and “fake news” because it means so many different things. It has also become a term that people use – also politicians – to just throw at each other... It has become diluted, you could say. (Respondent #11, Journalist at a public service broadcaster)

As these quotes highlight, the journalists viewed the term fake news as having gradually shifted from being useful for making factual descriptions of the world to becoming too loaded and value-laden following its adoption by politicians. This shift, several noted, creates a challenge for journalists, since they want to use neutral and objective language in their reporting, but at the same time want to use well-known and popular terms. Here, interviewees argued that, while

academics might be able to neatly define a concept such as fake news, this luxury is not afforded to journalists, who must account for the real-world messiness and limited capabilities of news audiences:

I think “fake news” can be quite well defined as a piece of falsified news... In research, that is doable. The problem is that, in public debate, it means all kinds of other things. For a lot of people, it just means bad journalism and for politicians it just means journalism they do not like... And that is why it is a concept that in many ways confuses people today. (Respondent #12, Editor at a broadsheet newspaper)

Here, we see an expression of the perceived epistemic hierarchy described earlier. At the top, the interviewees described a “pure” field of academia – in which scholars can define fake news clearly by more or less ignoring real-world ambiguities. Below the academics, journalists see themselves as trying to adopt such academic terminologies, while at the same time having to accommodate news audiences and account for political struggles over meaning. Following from this hierarchy – in which journalists act as intermediaries between academics and real-world messiness – the journalists argued that their decision to avoid the term fake news proves their integrity as epistemic authorities, since it highlights their insistence on accuracy over popularity:

We could easily use terms like “fake news” and would probably get some more clicks on our articles if we did so. But we try to be careful about it because it makes it less clear what we are describing. People read things into it. (Respondent #11, Journalist at a broadsheet newspaper)

Even if the term fake news might garner a lot of attention when used in news reporting, this argument goes, journalists still ought to abandon it, since it has become politically “hijacked” (#15) and thus “completely diluted” (#2).

What is notable within this narrative is that journalists assign a mostly passive role to themselves and their profession in explaining the shift in meaning of the term fake news from being neutral to value-laden. While politicians are recurrently blamed, journalists are rarely mentioned. At the same time, interviewees did not explain exactly how or when they concluded that the time was ripe for abandoning the term.

Connecting this finding to the work of Tuchman (1978), we can see how journalists, on the one hand, place emphasis on being able to distinguish between factual claims and value judgements (arguing that objective journalists should avoid the latter). On the other hand, journalists have difficulties in explaining how they maintain such a distinction in practice. In the case of fake news, this term is described as having shifted from being useful in factual reporting to being useful only for value judgements (and thus something journalists ought to avoid). Yet, how and when this exactly happened remains unclear.

## Junk news

In contrast to the notion of fake news – which interviewees agreed that they seek to avoid – views on the notion of junk news were divided. While some interviewees stated that they prefer this term as a nuanced alternative to fake news, others described it as too negatively loaded and biased for journalists to use while staying objective.

Among those who expressed favourable views on junk news, several highlighted how the term derives from researchers at Oxford University (see Howard et al., 2017, 2018), ascribing it academic weight and credibility. Once again, this reflects a sense of epistemic hierarchy, in which journalists perceive concepts to be more authoritative if they derive from within academic institutions. Using academic literature as support, some of the journalists thus argued that junk news is a more flexible concept than fake news, since it not only captures a conception of outright lies, but also various cases of bad journalism and misleading content:

It [my use of “junk news”] was inspired by Oxford, of course. I preferred that concept because “fake news” is more polarising in some ways. It is black and white. Something is either a lie or the truth. And reality is rarely like that. And politics is never like that. There are degrees of truth and more or less deliberate misinformation. And this is where “junk” is a better term because you are dealing with something where the quality is bad. (Respondent #13, journalist at a broadsheet newspaper)

As this quote exemplifies, journalists who argued for the usefulness of the term junk news highlighted the concept’s ability to capture more nuances and a broader spectrum of violations of journalistic standards than what can be described as fake news.

In contrast to this position, other interviewees stated that they would never use the term junk news in news reporting, calling it too “condemning” (#7), “value-laden” (#4), and going against the journalistic ideal of being a “neutral news medium” (#4). Like in the case of fake news, these reflections highlight a core tension in journalistic distinctions between what counts as facts and value judgements (and thus in how to maintain ideals of objectivity). While, in the case of fake news, journalists agree that the term has gradually become value-laden, we find that in the case of junk news, this term is simultaneously described as neutral and value-laden. Depending on the individual journalist, the term is either seen as a suitable alternative to the “polluted” concept of fake news or as being exactly as useless for objective reporting as the former. In line with Tuchman (1978), this showcases the difficulties for journalists in maintaining a clear separation between facts and value judgements.

Reflecting the epistemic hierarchy described earlier, some journalists also argued that the term junk news ought to be avoided by journalists since it might alienate certain news audiences. From this position, journalists must take audience perspectives into account, fostering mutual understanding, even with people who consume content that might be labelled as junk:

Well, the problem with the term “junk news” is that there is a sense of condemnation to it, which... well, it is a very negative term. So, if you want to have a dialogue with those who consume it [junk news], then I think you should try to call it something else. Because otherwise you are just pushing these people further away from you. (Respondent #7, Journalist at a broadsheet newspaper)

Not only is the term junk news too value-laden, this argument goes, but it conflicts with the notion that journalists ought to account for and accommodate the ways in which news audiences make sense of the world.

### **Misinformation and disinformation**

The final two terms brought up across the interviews – most often in conjunction with each other – are misinformation and disinformation. Respondents generally stated that they favour these terms in news reporting, seeing them as more precise and less divisive than fake news (and, for some, also junk news). In support of such arguments, several highlighted how the terms misinformation and disinformation are frequently used by authoritative epistemic actors, such as academics, social media companies, and government agencies. As summarised by Respondent #10, a journalist at a broadsheet newspaper: “I think ‘misinformation’, which is also what Facebook uses, is actually a much better term”. Or as stated by Respondent #16, an editor at a news magazine: “‘Disinformation’ and ‘misinformation’ are in my view the most neutral, and I think they are also the most used terms by authorities”.

While interviewees generally stated that they use the terms misinformation and disinformation in their work, however, several described how they deliberately ignore conceptual differences between them. Journalists expressed awareness of how academics might distinguish between the terms, using them to respectively label *unintentional* and *deliberate* forms of manipulation (see Jack, 2017). Such distinctions, however, were described as being simply too technical for news audiences to comprehend:

We talked a bit about using both “misinformation” and “disinformation”. And I also think we produced some articles where we describe: “What does this mean and what does that mean”. But I think those are pretty much the only articles where we used “disinformation”. Simply because it is not comprehensible for our readers. At least, then you need to explain it every time you use it. (Respondent #15, Journalist at a news magazine)

In line with the perceived epistemic hierarchy, journalists described the distinction between misinformation and disinformation as being too difficult to maintain outside the realm of “pure” epistemic authorities, whether that be academics or government officials. According to this narrative, journalists must disregard certain aspects of academic definitions in order to accommodate the capabilities of news audiences:

I am quite aware that there is a distinction in research between “misinformation” and “disinformation”. But I have decided to ignore that distinction for communicative reasons. (Respondent #3, Journalist at a broadsheet newspaper)

A different argument raised by interviewees for not using the term disinformation is that its embedded element of intentionality is often difficult – if not impossible – to prove, requiring more time and energy than what journalists can typically afford:

It is so hard to prove that something is intentional. So, we try to be very careful about using the term “disinformation”. And it is kind of a shame because some of it is definitely disinformation. But to prove that requires a bigger process. So, we try to say “misinformation”, “deceptive”, or “misleading”. Or just “factually incorrect”. (Respondent #10, Journalist at a broadsheet newspaper)

In sum, journalists generally viewed misinformation and disinformation as useful terms for making factual descriptions of the world. Yet, the distinction between these concepts is deemed, by some, as too technical for news audiences to understand or too cumbersome to convincingly apply. Once again, this points to a journalistic conception of an epistemic hierarchy, in which academics are positioned as simultaneously being epistemic authorities and disconnected from reality. As a result, journalists see their own role as being that of a translator of academic concepts, turning them into understandable language for their audience.

### **A desire to abandon the concepts**

This brings us to a final theme from our interviews, revolving around the idea that journalists would, perhaps, be better off simply avoiding ambiguous terms altogether. Multiple interviewees expressed a desire for abandoning labels – whether it be fake news or misinformation – and reverting to describing the world “as it is”:

I think we should just try to call things what they are: “That is a false story. That is untrue. Those media outlets have often published things that do not hold up to scrutiny”. It is the search for a common term for everything that sometimes leads us astray. (Respondent #12, Editor at a broadsheet newspaper)

Following from this position, journalists see their profession as having ventured beyond their primary purpose of describing the world as closely to the subject matter as possible. By trying to reach an overarching vantage point through concepts such as fake news, journalists have strayed from what they ought to do, namely “communicating precisely” (#5) and “describing what is happening as concretely as possible, not jumping on some kind of conceptual trend” (#11). From this view, journalists should stop “putting people into boxes, but rather pursue the concrete stories” (#12) and “allow the examples to speak for themselves and describing reality as it is to people” (#14).

Across these journalistic aspirations, we can see a call for reinforcing an ideal of journalism as being what Tuchman (1978: 99) described as “a mere mirror

of events”. Interviewees, in other words, articulated an ideal of journalistic objectivity, in which journalists simply describe the world “as it is”, avoiding all confused notions and sticking to words that have clear and “proper” meaning. This, the journalists argued, would enable them to deliver on their promises of communicative clarity, exactness, and objectivity, which they otherwise struggle to find.

From the perspective of rhetorical argumentation theory, we can see how this journalistic ideal is not only infeasible, but also impossible. The act of describing and defining the world “as it is” will always function as a *claim* about how to make sense of the world (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Schiappa, 1993). Furthermore, colloquial notions such as true and false – which interviewees expressed a desire to adopt instead of the term fake news – are no less confused or free from ambiguity than more academic concepts adjudicating questions of truth. A similar scepticism about calls for neutral language free from value judgements have long been noted by journalism scholars, criticising this ideal of journalists escaping their role as producers of meaning (Carlson, 2017; Tuchman, 1978).

Paradoxically, journalists did seem to recognise that their conceptual choices and definitions necessarily imply argumentation and that they produce meaning about the world, despite simultaneously expressing a desire to escape the ambiguity of meaning altogether. First, as support for their conceptual practices, journalists continually look towards external forms of epistemic authority, most notably academics. In doing so, journalists implicitly acknowledge a need for justifying their choice of specific concepts and definitions. Interviewees simultaneously distance themselves from making conceptual choices, while also claiming responsibility for them by arguing that they must accommodate the “dilution” of meaning created by politicians. Second, as interviewees worried about the effects of their conceptual practices – for example, pushing certain readers away – they did seem to acknowledge that they, as journalists, do not merely hold up a mirror to the world, but rather shape how people come to understand it.

Between the idealistic aspirations of escaping ambiguity and the professional practice of using terms such as misinformation, the interviewees’ reflections thus highlight a core tension in journalistic claims of objectivity and epistemic authority, revolving around a desire to operate like a mirror, on the one hand, and a practice of having to assign meaning to the world, on the other. As exemplified by Respondent #10, a journalist at a broadsheet newspaper, several interviewees try to resolve this tension by abandoning the practice of “calling all kinds of things misinformation and fake news” and, instead, try “meeting people with arguments and say: ‘Those things you believe are not correct *because*’, rather than just saying ‘that is not correct’”.

## Discussion and conclusion

Overall, our findings show that journalists struggle to navigate the conceptual landscape around the terms fake news, junk news, misinformation, and disinformation



in news reporting. In their reflections, the interviewed journalists positioned their epistemic authority as existing within a hierarchy, in which journalists continually look “up” towards the field of academia for authoritative definitions, while also looking “down” towards politicians (who tend to politicise concepts) and news audiences (who tend to have difficulties comprehending academic definitions). As a result, journalists must continuously adopt definitions from outside their own profession, while simultaneously rejecting such definitions as being overly complicated (e.g., disinformation), diluted (e.g., fake news), or value-laden (e.g., junk news). Following from this, only journalists are ascribed real-world knowledge and thus capabilities in conveying or “translating” academic terms into something news audiences can comprehend. In this regard, journalists often disagree on the validity of specific concepts and definitions, leading some to accuse their colleagues of failing to live up to ideals of objectivity. These disagreements and challenges reveal broader tensions within journalistic claims to epistemic authority through so-called mirror theories of journalism (Carlson, 2017).

In line with Tuchman (1978), our findings show that journalists fundamentally struggle to delineate what counts as a “fact” and what counts as a “value judgement”, despite placing great emphasis on their intuitive ability to do so. Within the conceptual landscape around fake news, junk news, misinformation, and disinformation – occupying an abundance of what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) call confused notions – journalists struggle to figure out how to live up to their own ideals, with some ending up expressing a desire to escape the messiness of language altogether.

These findings from Denmark point to a broader problem within journalistic reporting. As noted in the introduction, emergent research in countries such as Austria (Egelhofer et al., 2020) and the US (Bratich, 2020; Carlson, 2020; Creech, 2020) have shown through analyses of news content that journalists tend to apply terms such as fake news with little definitional clarity. Our study supports and adds to this research by showcasing how such conceptual messiness can derive from journalists’ attempts to convert ideals of objectivity and neutrality into practice. By trying to live up to an ideal of being a societal “mirror”, the journalists in our study described a practice of continuously adjusting their terms and definitions to avoid using what they at any time consider to be “value-laden” concepts. Simultaneously, they adopt new terms from academia, while rejecting key definitional aspects of such terms with the justification that news audiences simply cannot properly comprehend them. The result is, ironically, that their attempts to be both precise and neutral in their language end up contributing to the very ambiguity and conceptual confusion which they tried to escape from in the first place.

These findings highlight how, rather than acknowledging their own role in (re)producing a vague or contradictory conceptual landscape, journalists tend to favour placing blame elsewhere: in academics (for being too technical), in politicians (for diluting meaning), in news audiences (for being too unknowledgeable), and in colleagues (for not being sufficiently neutral). It is worth noting how such externalisation of blame reinforces a status quo in which journalists themselves take little responsibility for the state of public debate.

Rather than trying to avoid ambiguity, we call for journalistic practitioners (as well as academics) to critically consider how concepts are accepted and contested, or clarified and obscured, and from such a perspective *explicitly* argue for conceptual choices, embracing the argumentative character of such decisions.

In terms of limitations, our sampling method – that is, purposive sampling and snowball sampling – means that we do not claim to provide representative conclusions about journalistic definitions of the concepts studied here. In future research, surveys or quantitative content analysis on this issue could provide important insights.

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## Endnotes

**1.** The interviews were conducted in Danish and the respondents used these four English terms as loanwords with two notable variations: First, approximately half of the respondents used the English loanword “fake news” and the Danish equivalent “falske nyheder” interchangeably. We have therefore combined and structured these reflections underneath the fake news term in our findings. Second, the phonetically similar English loanword “disinformation” and the Danish spelling “desinformation” are used interchangeably, and thus, combined and structured together underneath the disinformation term.

**2.** The following 21 publications are categorised as national daily newspapers [landsdækkende dagblade] in the Infomedia database: *Aktuelt*, *Arbejderen*, *Avisen Danmark*, *Avisen Danmark (Fyns Amts Avis)*, *Avisen Danmark (morgen)*, *Avisen Danmark (trekantsområdet)*, *B.T.*, *Berlingske*, *Børsen*, *Børsen Lørdag / Søndag*, *Børsen Tillæg*, *Dato*, *Effektivt Landbrug*, *Ekstra Bladet*, *Information*, *Jyllands-Posten*, *Kids News*, *Kristeligt Dagblad*, *Licitationen – Byggeriets Dagblad*, *Politiken*, *Weekendavisen*.

**3.** Note that our overview of uses of the term fake news also includes the Danish equivalent falske nyheder. In a similar vein, our overview of the uses of the term disinformation includes the terms disinformation and the Danish desinformation, since both spellings – respectively a loanword and a Danish translation – are used in Danish journalism.