



Fake News and Public Opinion Manipulation: A Comparative Analytical Study of Fabricated and Authentic Content

Afifa HAMZA

Laboratory of Media and Communication Studies

University of mostaganem, Algeria

Email: afifa.hamza.etu@univ-mosta.dz

Abstract:

This study investigates the structural and semantic differences between fake and authentic news in digital environments, aiming to understand their respective impacts on public opinion formation. Utilizing a descriptive-analytical approach and structured observation, the research analyzes selected news samples to identify stylistic, visual, and source-related characteristics. Findings reveal that fake news relies on emotionally charged language, sensational headlines, and manipulative semiotic cues to maximize audience engagement, often leveraging cognitive biases and fast-thinking heuristics. In contrast, authentic news is marked by objective tone and verifiable sources. These differences underscore divergent mechanisms of influence: while fake news exploits psychological shortcuts for rapid dissemination, real news emphasizes informational integrity. The study concludes with a call for integrated counter-disinformation frameworks that combine media literacy, digital regulation, and preventive models to enhance critical awareness and public cognitive resilience.

Keywords : Fake News; Digital Media; Public Opinion; Information Disorder; Media Literacy.

Fausses nouvelles et manipulation de l'opinion publique : étude analytique comparative des contenus fabriqués et authentiques

Résumé:

Cette étude examine les différences structurelles et sémantiques entre les fausses nouvelles et les informations authentiques dans les environnements numériques, dans le but de comprendre leurs impacts respectifs sur la formation de l'opinion publique. En adoptant une approche descriptive-analytique et en recourant à l'observation structurée, la recherche analyse un corpus d'articles sélectionnés afin d'identifier leurs caractéristiques stylistiques, visuelles et liées aux sources. Les résultats révèlent que les fausses nouvelles reposent sur un langage chargé d'émotions, des titres sensationnalistes et des indices sémiotiques manipulatoires pour maximiser l'engagement du public, exploitant souvent les biais cognitifs et les heuristiques de pensée rapide. À l'inverse, les informations authentiques se distinguent par un ton objectif et des sources vérifiables. Ces divergences soulignent des mécanismes d'influence distincts : tandis que les fausses nouvelles exploitent des raccourcis psychologiques pour une diffusion rapide, les véritables informations mettent l'accent sur l'intégrité de l'information. L'étude se conclut par un appel à la mise en place de cadres intégrés de lutte contre la désinformation, combinant éducation aux médias, régulation numérique et modèles préventifs, afin de renforcer la conscience critique et la résilience cognitive du public.

Mots-clés: *Fausses nouvelles ; Médias numériques ; Opinion publique ; Désordre informationnel ; Éducation aux médias.*



Introduction :

Amid rapid digital transformation, the last decade has seen a notable surge in the production and circulation of fake news. This rise is largely fueled by increasing dependence on digital platforms and social media as primary sources of information. These platforms have become fertile ground for the spread of unreliable content – disseminated at a speed that often outpaces users' ability to verify its credibility. As a result, the manipulation of public opinion through fabricated stories that resemble legitimate news has become a growing concern (Lazer et al., 2018).

This phenomenon poses a serious threat to media systems and democratic societies alike. It undermines trust in institutions, deepens social divides, and distorts collective understanding. A study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) found that false news spreads on Twitter up to 70% faster than true stories and garners significantly more engagement (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Further research shows that repeated exposure to misinformation can shape individuals' beliefs and perceptions, influencing their political and social behavior (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

In the Arab world, a study of 1,200 users reported that 58% had encountered news that was later proven false, with nearly half admitting to sharing it without verification (Arab Social Media Report, 2022). These findings highlight a pressing need to promote digital literacy and foster a culture of verification. They also underscore the importance of understanding the structural and semantic differences between fake and authentic news content.

This study therefore seeks to conduct a comparative analysis of fake versus real news, examining their respective narratives, visual forms, and influence on public perception. By combining theoretical analysis with practical insight, the research aims to support media policymakers, educators, and digital literacy advocates in developing strategies to counter disinformation and nurture a more critical, informed public.

The digital revolution has brought about profound transformations in the ways information is produced and disseminated. Digital platforms and social media have become central sources of news for a broad segment of the public. However, alongside the advantages of accessibility and rapid dissemination, these platforms have also become fertile ground for the spread of fake news and misinformation. Often presented in a professionally crafted media format, such content can be highly persuasive to audiences, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between false and factual information.

The rapid spread of such content poses a serious challenge to media institutions, given its far-reaching implications for public awareness and opinion formation—especially when individuals engage with such news uncritically, without verification or analysis. Research has shown that false news tends to outperform factual reporting in terms of reach and engagement. This is primarily due to its reliance on emotional appeal, sensationalism, and visually compelling techniques (Vosoughi et al., 2018), which significantly influence users' perceptions and behaviors (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

Despite growing academic interest in this topic, the literature remains limited in terms of comparative studies



that systematically explore the structural and semantic differences between fake and real news. Moreover, most of these studies are rooted in Western contexts, while the digital landscape in the Arab world still lacks in-depth empirical research that accounts for its cultural and social specificities.

In light of these gaps, this study is guided by the following central research question: *What are the similarities and differences between fake and real news in terms of structure and content, and what do these differences reveal about how public opinion is shaped?*

To address this question, the study further explores the following sub-questions:

- 1) What stylistic and thematic features distinguish fake news from real news in the selected sample?
- 2) What types of sources are typically used in fake versus real news?
- 3) How are elements such as headlines, images, and quotations utilized in each type?
- 4) What persuasive or emotional strategies are employed in fake news compared to authentic reporting?
- 5) What are the implications of these structural and content differences for understanding media influence on public opinion?

Significance of the Study:

This research is significant due to the urgent nature of the phenomenon it investigates – namely, the role of fake news in shaping public consciousness in the digital era. The ability of fabricated content to mimic real news increases the risk of

deception and public confusion. By deconstructing the communicative structure of false news and comparing it to authentic reporting, the study provides deeper insights into the mechanisms that affect media reception and influence. Moreover, it contributes to filling a critical knowledge gap in Arab scholarly literature by offering a structured comparative analysis of this phenomenon, thereby supporting the development of awareness strategies for media institutions and educators alike.

Research Objectives: The primary goal of this study is to analyze structural and content-based differences between selected examples of fake and real news. This includes identifying stylistic and narrative distinctions, exploring the nature of sources used, and examining how editorial and visual elements – such as headlines, images, and quotes – are employed. The study also investigates the rhetorical and emotional strategies embedded in both types of content, aiming to provide a nuanced understanding of how these differences influence public perception and opinion formation in the digital environment.

Methodology of the Study:

This study falls within the scope of analytical research. It adopts the descriptive-analytical method as the most suitable framework for observing stylistic and thematic patterns and drawing comparisons between fake and authentic news. The ultimate aim is to generate qualitative insights into the dynamics of media discourse and its role in shaping public opinion.

Research Instrument: The primary instrument used in this study is structured observation, which facilitates in-depth qualitative analysis of the selected news texts. An analytical



observation form was developed, covering several key dimensions to guide the researcher's evaluation of both fake and real news samples. These include:

- Language Style (e.g., sensationalism, objectivity, exaggeration)
- Headline and Image (e.g., appeal, credibility, emotional resonance)
- Source Type (e.g., anonymous, credible, unverifiable)
- Persuasive Techniques (e.g., emotional appeal, logical reasoning, rumor propagation)

1. Conceptual Framework

- 1) Fake News: refers to a type of news content that is deliberately published with false or misleading information, with the intent to deceive or influence the audience. It is often presented in a journalistic format that appears credible, despite lacking factual accuracy (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). According to Tandoc et al. (2018), fake news is a hybrid form that blends elements of satire, misinformation, and fabricated content, crafted to imitate professional journalism while lacking truthfulness and precision.
- 2) In the context of this study, fake news refers to media samples containing intentionally false or fabricated information, selected from digital platforms for the purpose of analyzing their structural and thematic characteristics. These samples are compared with real news in terms of language, style, sourcing, and potential influence.
- 3) Public Opinion :is generally understood as the aggregate of prevailing attitudes and perceptions

held by a group of individuals toward a particular issue or event. It is shaped through interaction between individuals, media, and social institutions (Glynn et al., 2018). According to Price (1992), public opinion is “the collective expression of attitudes and positions regarding issues of public discourse,” and is influenced by psychological, cultural, and media-related factors.

- 4) In this study, public opinion refers to the perceptions and attitudes formed by individuals toward certain issues or events, as reflected in their responses to and interpretations of both fake and real news content under analysis.
- 5) Fabricated Content :is considered one of the most dangerous forms of misinformation. It involves the creation of entirely false media material that is not based on any real events and is disseminated with the intention of misleading or manipulating public opinion (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Lazer et al. (2018) point out that fabricated content is often presented using realistic and persuasive language, making it difficult for the average recipient to distinguish it from authentic news.

For the purposes of this study, fabricated content refers to news texts or media materials produced in a realistic style but devoid of credibility or based on fictitious events. These samples have been selected to represent fake news content within the analytical framework of the study.



2. Section Two: The Impact of Fake News on Public Opinion

Fake news has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges in the contemporary media landscape, particularly with the growing reliance on digital platforms and alternative media sources. Its danger lies in its ability to infiltrate collective consciousness, subtly influencing individuals' attitudes and perceptions without undergoing critical verification processes. This often results in widespread cognitive and behavioral distortions. The urgency of examining this phenomenon is amplified by the increasing political and social complexities facing societies, where fake news is frequently employed as a psychological and propaganda tool in managing crises and shaping public narratives.

According to the Agenda-Setting Theory, media does not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about – by prioritizing certain issues over others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In this context, fake news serves as a mechanism for manipulating public priorities by exaggerating minor topics or inventing entirely new ones. Lahmar (2020) found that when fake news spreads widely on social media, it redirects public attention away from strategically important issues and constructs a distorted view of political and social realities. A notable example cited by Al Jazeera Center for Studies (2018) is Colin Powell's 2003 speech at the UN Security Council, which was built on falsified intelligence and helped shape global public opinion in favor of the Iraq invasion—illustrating how fake information can influence mass agendas.

Spiral of Silence Theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) further explains how fake news can reinforce false impressions of majority opinion, leading dissenting voices to withdraw out of fear of isolation. This dynamic can result in a perceived consensus grounded in misinformation. This view is supported by Tareeh's study (n.d.), which illustrates how rumors—often a form of fake news—generate anxiety and uncertainty, prompting individuals to conform to dominant behaviors or beliefs without genuine internal agreement. A 2023 article in *Youm7* confirms this, showing how widespread social media rumors can generate immediate social pressure that silences critical or opposing views.

The Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) suggests that during times of crisis, people become more reliant on media for explanations and decision-making support. However, in the absence of journalistic standards or adequate media literacy, this reliance can become a gateway for disinformation. A *Arab 48* (2023) report showed that 68% of American adults use Facebook for news, yet only 24% can reliably distinguish between factual and fake stories. Such dependence on unverified sources reinforces cognitive biases and contributes to the emergence of “echo chambers” (Barber, 2021), where individuals are trapped within ideologically consistent but factually distorted environments.

From a psychological perspective, fake news often triggers intense emotional reactions such as fear and anxiety, amplifying collective responses and weakening critical reasoning. Instead of engaging in reflective thinking, audiences may react impulsively based on emotional stimuli. Confirmation bias plays a central role here, as individuals are more likely to accept information that aligns



with their preexisting beliefs—even if it lacks factual accuracy (Nickerson, 1998). *Youm7* (2023) reported that during health or security crises, rumors can provoke irrational mass behavior and escalate societal fear.

On a social level, fake news contributes to institutional distrust, particularly toward governments and media outlets. It also deepens societal polarization by promoting conflicting narratives that fracture public discourse. The *Arab 48* report (2023) highlighted how fake news intensified political polarization during key events such as the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where coordinated misinformation campaigns on digital platforms helped sway public sentiment. This is further reinforced by the concept of information bubbles (Pariser, 2011), where users become isolated in personalized information ecosystems, detached from corrective or opposing perspectives.

Multiple studies and statistics illustrate the severity of the issue. A joint survey by Al Jazeera Center for Studies and YouGov (2018) found that nearly 76% of users struggle to accurately distinguish between real and fake news. A study by the University of California, Davis—cited in *Arab 48* (2023)—revealed that exposure to fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly lowered adherence to public health guidelines, showing how misinformation can directly impact individual behavior and public safety.

Given these findings, addressing fake news requires a multi-level approach. This begins with fostering media literacy and critical thinking in educational systems, developing independent fact-checking mechanisms, and implementing regulations that ensure transparency and accountability on digital platforms. Strengthening

investigative journalism and rebuilding trust in traditional media are also crucial steps toward restoring credible public discourse. Ultimately, constructing a healthy informational environment demands a collaborative effort among individuals, institutions, and technology providers—integrating education, governance, oversight, and innovation to safeguard public opinion from manipulation and preserve collective awareness.

3. Section Three: A Comparative Analytical Study of Fake and Authentic News

The study of fake news has gained increasing importance in the fields of media and social research due to its profound effects on shaping public opinion, guiding individual and collective behavior, and at times, destabilizing societies. In this context, the third section of this research presents a comparative analysis of selected fake and authentic news samples. The primary aim is not only to identify the fundamental differences between the two types of news, but also to understand the mechanisms used to construct and disseminate fake news, and how audiences can develop critical media literacy skills to distinguish between fabricated and factual content.

This analytical comparison is based on the hypothesis that although fake news attempts to mimic the appearance and content of real journalism, it contains distinctive features and structural elements that can be detected and analyzed. By deconstructing the discursive structure of both types of news, examining the language used, evaluating sources, and assessing the supporting evidence, the study aims to develop a methodological framework for more



effectively distinguishing between true and false information.

The relevance of this section stems from the urgent need to equip the public with intellectual and methodological tools to navigate the overwhelming flow of information in the digital age. In a media environment marked by complexity and fragmentation, where sources of news are diverse and often conflicting, the ability to differentiate between accurate and misleading content becomes a daily challenge. Thus, providing a comparative analytical model based on scientific principles and clear evaluative criteria is a vital contribution to enhancing media awareness and fostering a more resilient information society. Developing the ability to distinguish between real and fake news does not only protect individuals from deception—it also enables societies to make informed decisions based on credible information, which is fundamental to democracy and civic participation.

3.1. Comparative Methodology:

To conduct a rigorous and effective comparative analysis between fake and authentic news models, a clear analytical framework is needed—one that incorporates well-defined criteria and a systematic process. This methodology seeks to identify key indicators that distinguish both news types, in an objective and precise manner.

Key Analytical Dimensions : The following elements have been identified as critical for evaluating and contrasting fake versus authentic news content:

a. **Source of Information:**

-**Authentic news:** Cites credible, verifiable sources such as established news agencies, reputable media organizations, subject-matter experts, or official government spokespeople. These sources are typically named clearly and can be independently verified.

-**Fake news:** Often relies on anonymous, vague, or misleading sources, including newly created websites with poor design or deceptive names that mimic reputable outlets. Tracing the original source is often difficult or impossible.

b. **Language, Tone, and Style:**

- **Authentic news:** Uses balanced, objective, and accurate language. It avoids excessive emotional language and sweeping generalizations, and follows professional journalistic style.

- **Fake news:** Tends to use sensational, emotionally charged, or biased language. It may include excessive punctuation (e.g., multiple exclamation marks), uppercase words, and exaggerated or misleading headlines (clickbait). Grammatical and spelling errors are also common.

c. **Accuracy, Reliability, and Verifiability:**

- **Authentic news:** Presents information that is precise and verifiable through multiple, independent sources. Names, dates, statistics, and quotes are properly cited and contextualized.

- **Fake news:** Features inaccurate, exaggerated, or completely fabricated content. It may blend facts and opinions without distinction, and often includes manipulated or decontextualized images and videos.

-



d. Structure, Formatting, and Layout:

- **Authentic news:** Follows standard journalistic structure, often using the inverted pyramid format. It features clear headlines, logical progression, and well-organized content. Layouts are professionally designed and reflect the identity of the media organization.
- **Fake news:** Lacks logical structure and may feature chaotic formatting. Headlines are often misleading or exaggerated. Page layouts are unprofessional, cluttered with deceptive advertisements, and visually resemble legitimate sites only superficially.

e. Evidence, Documentation, and Attribution:

- **Authentic news:** Supports claims with strong evidence, including direct quotes from identified sources, statistics from credible institutions, and original or contextually accurate multimedia.
- **Fake news:** Lacks credible documentation, may use fake or misattributed quotes, and often relies on manipulated or unrelated images or videos to fabricate legitimacy.

f. Bias, Intent, and Purpose:

- **Authentic news:** Aims to provide balanced, objective coverage and clearly separates news reporting from editorial opinions. Its primary goal is to inform.
- **Fake news:** Often serves a hidden agenda—political, ideological, financial, or personal. It may aim to mislead, manipulate public opinion, defame individuals or institutions, or simply attract attention for advertising revenue.

g. **Verification Mechanisms, Transparency, and Accountability:**

- **Authentic news:** Reputable outlets typically have internal fact-checking systems, editorial standards, and transparent correction policies. Information about ownership and editorial staff is readily available.
- **Fake news:** Offers little to no transparency about its creators or editorial process. Errors are rarely corrected, and the site's identity or domain may frequently change.

h. **Context and Comprehensive Coverage:**

- **Authentic news:** Situates the event within a broader context, providing background information and multiple perspectives to ensure informed understanding.
- **Fake news:** Often removes content from its context or omits critical elements of the story to push a specific agenda. It offers simplistic, one-sided narratives.

i. **Engagement and Virality Patterns:**

- **Authentic news:** Gains traction through relevance, credibility, and quality.
- **Fake news:** Designed for rapid virality, often through sensationalism, emotional provocation, and polarizing narratives. It exploits reactive sharing before critical evaluation occurs.

-

3.2. Applied Case Study 1: The Riyadh Season Video Case

Fake news and rumors have become one of the most pressing challenges in the digital era, particularly in light of the unprecedented speed with which information spreads and the increasing ease of manipulating digital content. Against this backdrop, the current study offers an academic comparative analysis between a fabricated media item (rumor) and an authentic one (fact), focusing on the case of a



viral video circulated on social media claiming that a musical performance during Riyadh Season featured Quranic verses in its lyrics. This comparison is grounded in rigorous scientific standards and draws upon theoretical frameworks from media studies, social psychology, and communication sciences, with the goal of deepening our understanding of how fake news spreads and affects collective awareness.

The case in question centers on a video widely circulated across social platforms, purporting to show a musical group performing a song interspersed with Quranic verses—allegedly during Saudi Arabia’s National Day celebrations as part of Riyadh Season. The video prompted widespread controversy and public outrage. However, subsequent fact-checking revealed that the clip had been manipulated. A non-credible YouTube channel had added audio containing Quranic verses to footage of the American band Slipknot. Moreover, the video had been released before the official launch of Riyadh Season, revealing a clear case of media fabrication and distortion.

From a semiotic perspective, the fake news item illustrates what semioticians describe as sign manipulation—the strategic reconstruction of visual and auditory symbols to generate meanings that deviate substantially from their original context. In this case, deliberately combining religious Quranic audio with Western musical imagery creates a value-laden conflict aimed at triggering moral tension in the viewer. This form of semantic hybridization induces a form of cognitive dissonance that, as Festinger (1957) posits, causes psychological discomfort and prompts the audience to seek

coherence, often by sharing the content or reacting impulsively. In contrast, the authentic video maintains semiotic coherence, aligning sound with imagery and preserving the cultural and contextual integrity of the content. This observation aligns with Vosoughi et al. (2018), whose research found that fake news is more likely to evoke shock, fear, and disgust—emotions strongly correlated with rapid online dissemination. Furthermore, the persuasive techniques used in the rumor reflect what Peterson and Gist (1951) identified as emotional amplification, a key characteristic of emotionally charged disinformation.

Psychologically and cognitively, the rumor exploits several mental shortcuts and biases that affect perception and judgment. These include confirmation bias, which reinforces belief in information that aligns with existing attitudes; emotional reasoning, in which emotional responses override factual analysis; dichotomous thinking, which frames issues in black-and-white terms (e.g., sacred vs. profane); and cognitive haste, which encourages snap judgments without verification. In contrast, the factual content fosters cognitive strategies such as critical thinking, systematic processing, deliberative reasoning, and bias awareness—all of which support thoughtful engagement and informed evaluation. This distinction reflects the Elaboration Likelihood Model by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), which differentiates between central routes of persuasion (based on logical argumentation) and peripheral routes (based on emotional triggers). The rumor activates the peripheral path to bypass analytical scrutiny, whereas the factual report engages the central path to encourage deeper understanding.



Culturally and socially, the rumor capitalizes on local sensitivities, particularly the strong religious sentiments prevalent in Saudi society. It taps into existing societal debates surrounding cultural reforms and the expansion of entertainment initiatives, presenting them as threats to national and religious identity. On the other hand, the factual content respects these cultural contexts by clearly distinguishing between local and foreign narratives and providing a balanced representation of the content's origin. This dimension mirrors Hofstede's (2001) National Culture Dimensions, specifically uncertainty avoidance, which refers to a society's discomfort with ambiguity and change. The rumor amplifies this discomfort by framing cultural shifts as existential threats, thereby fostering anxiety and making the content more prone to uncritical acceptance.

From a technical and media standpoint, the rumor utilizes sophisticated methods of manipulation, including audio-visual editing and the exploitation of social media algorithms to maximize reach. It leverages filter bubbles to target content toward ideologically aligned users and employs network diffusion through coordinated accounts to create the illusion of widespread consensus. In contrast, the authentic content relies on tools such as digital verification techniques, fact-checking platforms, manipulation detection tools, and authenticated publication methods. This dimension is representative of what Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) termed information disorder, where the rumor is a clear case of disinformation—deliberately false content produced with the intent to deceive. It also illustrates the ongoing information arms race described by Tambini et al.

(2017), in which fact-checkers and disinformation producers are locked in a continuous struggle for narrative dominance.

Ultimately, the comparison reveals that the differences between rumor and reality are not merely superficial but extend to deep structural, semantic, and contextual levels. Structurally, the rumor relies on hybrid construction, merging unrelated audio and visual elements from different contexts. In contrast, the authentic content demonstrates structural integrity, ensuring consistency and coherence. Semantically, the rumor creates a semantic gap between surface appearance and actual meaning, while the fact-based item maintains semantic coherence. Contextually, the rumor engages in context displacement, detaching content from its original environment, whereas the factual piece ensures context authenticity, presenting information within its proper temporal, spatial, and cultural framework.

3.3. Media Theories Interpreting the First Case Study

Applying media theories to the analysis of the fabricated Riyadh Season video provides a crucial lens for understanding how fake news is produced, received, and disseminated. Among the most relevant theoretical frameworks that help explain this case are the Uses and Gratifications Theory, Framing Theory, and the Diffusion of Innovations Theory—each offering a unique perspective on the complex interplay between media messages and societal response.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory, as developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), positions the audience not as passive consumers of media, but as active participants who seek content that fulfills specific cognitive, emotional, or social needs. Within this framework, the dissemination of



fake news—such as the Riyadh Season video—can be interpreted through the dual lens of producer and audience motivations. On one hand, those who fabricate and publish such content may be driven by epistemic satisfaction derived from manipulating narratives and stirring public controversy, political or ideological goals aimed at shaping public discourse, or economic incentives related to maximizing views and engagement. On the other hand, consumers of such content may find emotional gratification in having their existing beliefs affirmed, social gratification through alignment with a like-minded community, or cognitive gratification by accessing simplified explanations of complex realities. In this context, the fabricated video serves both groups: it fuels the agenda of its creators while offering emotional validation to viewers predisposed to distrust cultural change.

Framing Theory, developed by Robert Entman (1993), provides a complementary perspective, focusing on how the presentation of information influences public interpretation. Rather than neutrally presenting facts, fake news often employs specific frames that guide audiences toward predetermined conclusions. In the case of the Riyadh Season video, the content was strategically framed as a religious transgression, thereby provoking intense emotional reactions. Additionally, it was cast within a conflict frame—depicting entertainment and religious values as oppositional forces—and a responsibility frame, which held the organizers of Riyadh Season accountable for the alleged offense. These frames were instrumental in shaping public outrage and embedding the false narrative in the audience's consciousness, even before any verification occurred. The

case thus underscores that how information is framed can be just as influential as the information itself in constructing public meaning.

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory, proposed by Everett Rogers (1962), offers a third analytical dimension by explaining how new ideas—or in this case, false narratives—spread within a social system. According to the model, diffusion unfolds across five stages: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. These stages are clearly observable in the spread of the fabricated video. Initially, audiences were exposed to the content; this was followed by the formation of either positive or negative attitudes based on pre-existing values. Subsequently, viewers decided to either accept or reject the narrative, often leading to active dissemination through sharing. Finally, individuals sought reinforcement of their chosen stance. What made the rumor particularly "diffusive" was its *relative advantage*—namely, its emotional resonance with religious sentiment—and its *compatibility* with societal anxieties regarding cultural shifts. These factors accelerated the adoption and viral spread of the misinformation, mirroring the pathways of technological or cultural innovation diffusion.

Collectively, these three theories offer a comprehensive framework for analyzing the fabricated Riyadh Season video. The Uses and Gratifications Theory clarifies the motivational dynamics behind both the production and consumption of the fake news; the Framing Theory highlights how meaning is constructed and manipulated; and the Diffusion of Innovations Theory explains the social mechanics behind its rapid spread. Together, they emphasize that combating fake news requires more than



fact-checking—it necessitates addressing the psychological, cultural, and communicative contexts that enable misinformation to thrive and influence public consciousness.

3.4. Applied Case Study 2: The “Underwater Mosque”

This case revolves around a widely circulated video on social media that claimed the inauguration of the first underwater mosque in Saudi Arabia. The video quickly gained traction due to its religious symbolism, national significance, and novelty—elements that naturally attract attention and promote virality. However, Saudi Arabia’s official Anti-Rumor Authority later refuted the claim, clarifying that the footage in question actually depicted the Cologne Central Mosque in Germany. The mosque, contrary to the claims, is a conventional place of worship and has no connection to Saudi Arabia or any underwater construction. This case is significant because it demonstrates how authentic visual content can be deliberately repurposed within a misleading narrative, capitalizing on the audience’s sensitivity to national and religious symbols.

From a semiotic perspective, this example illustrates what scholars refer to as *re-semiotization*—the process of reassigning new meanings to existing visual symbols. In this case, a real video of a German mosque was reframed as evidence of a groundbreaking Saudi project, thus creating a rupture between the signifier and its original referent. In contrast, the factual correction restored *semiotic coherence* by situating the visual content within its actual geographic and cultural context. Roland Barthes would describe this manipulation as the creation of a “myth”—where familiar symbols are stripped of their original meaning and reloaded

with ideological significance. Umberto Eco would frame this as *semiotic violence*, a form of representational distortion that produces *cognitive shock*, thereby capturing public attention and prompting immediate, often uncritical, engagement.

In terms of persuasive strategies, the hoax leaned heavily on *emotional appeals*, targeting the affective rather than rational dimensions of the audience's cognition. It evoked national pride by portraying the content as a unique Saudi achievement, exploited the novelty of "the world's first underwater mosque" to draw attention, and subtly implied institutional legitimacy by presenting the video as if it were documenting an official event. Conversely, the factual narrative relied on *logical appeals*, offering verifiable facts, referencing an official source (the Anti-Rumor Authority), and directly debunking the falsehood. This contrast aligns with the *Elaboration Likelihood Model* (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which posits two pathways to persuasion: a peripheral route that relies on emotional cues and low cognitive effort, and a central route that requires analytical engagement with evidence. The hoax's success in spreading can partly be explained by its use of the peripheral route, which elicits quick, intuitive responses.

Psychologically, the hoax activated several cognitive biases and heuristics that influence how audiences process information. *Confirmation bias* played a central role by appealing to users already predisposed to view Saudi Arabia as a leader in innovation and modernization. Emotional reasoning and intuitive thinking further facilitated acceptance of the claim without critical scrutiny. The phenomenon known as *Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)* likely motivated users to share the content rapidly, fearing they might miss a significant national milestone. In contrast,



the factual correction engaged different cognitive processes, such as reflective thinking and systematic information processing. It encouraged audiences to slow down and evaluate the claim using reason and evidence. These distinctions are supported by findings from Pennycook et al. (2021), which show that individuals who engage in reflective thinking are less susceptible to fake news than those who rely on intuitive thinking. Kahneman's dual-process theory (System 1 and System 2) also helps explain the dynamics: the rumor exploited fast, automatic thinking (System 1), while the correction required activation of slower, more analytical thinking (System 2).

Socioculturally, the hoax was particularly effective because it leveraged several deeply rooted societal values. It drew upon the religious significance of mosques in Saudi culture, the national aspiration for groundbreaking achievements, and the growing regional and global interest in Saudi Arabia's modernization efforts. These cultural touchpoints made the claim not only believable but also desirable. By contrast, the factual correction respected cultural sensitivities, provided accurate information without dismissing national accomplishments, and emphasized the importance of responsible information sharing. This interplay echoes Hofstede's cultural dimension of *long-term orientation*, where societies with a future-oriented mindset are more inclined to accept narratives of progress—even if they are false—unless a credible and compelling alternative is offered.

Structurally and contextually, the differences between the hoax and the truth are significant. On the informational level, the hoax represents a form of *information hybridization*,

combining a real video with a fabricated context. The factual narrative, by contrast, maintains *informational purity*, presenting accurate content in its correct setting. Contextually, the hoax engaged in *contextual displacement*, relocating the video from its original environment in Germany to Saudi Arabia, thereby altering its meaning. Semantically, it created a *semantic gap* between the visual content and its claimed interpretation, while the authentic report preserved *semantic coherence*.

Several empirical studies support these observations. A landmark study by Vosoughi et al. (2018), published in *Science*, revealed that false news spreads 70% faster than true news on Twitter, reaches a broader audience, and propagates deeper through retweet chains. False stories also tend to elicit more surprise and admiration than accurate ones, which helps explain the virality of the “underwater mosque” hoax. Additionally, Pennycook et al. (2021) found that reflective thinkers are less likely to believe misinformation—a finding that helps explain why many users accepted the claim at face value without critical thought. Finally, Wardle and Derakhshan’s (2017) *Information Disorder* framework is particularly relevant here. They distinguish between *misinformation* (false but unintentional), *disinformation* (false and deliberately misleading), and *malinformation* (genuine information used out of context to cause harm). The “underwater mosque” hoax combines elements of both disinformation and malinformation, making it especially difficult for the average user to detect. The video is real, but the context is fabricated—an ideal recipe for persuasive deception in the digital age.



3.5. Social Psychological Theories Explaining Belief in Fake News: A Theoretical Framework Based on the “Underwater Mosque” Case

Understanding why individuals are susceptible to fake news requires more than just media or technological explanations—it demands insights from social psychology that illuminate the mental and behavioral patterns shaping how people interact with information, particularly in digital environments. The case of the “underwater mosque” hoax offers a valuable example through which several psychological theories can be applied to explain why misinformation spreads rapidly and is often readily accepted by a wide audience.

Confirmation Bias, as conceptualized by Nickerson (1998), is one of the most relevant frameworks for understanding audience receptivity to misleading content. This theory describes the human tendency to favor information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs while ignoring or discounting contradictory evidence. In the context of the underwater mosque rumor, many recipients may have been more inclined to believe the claim because it resonated with their optimistic view of rapid development and innovation in Saudi Arabia. This tendency is amplified when the information connects to one’s social or national identity—a phenomenon supported by Chan et al. (2017), who found that confirmation bias intensifies when content affirms collective identity. This explains why rumors tied to national pride or religious significance often spread faster and more widely than other forms of misinformation.

Closely related to this is the Echo Chamber effect and the concept of the Filter Bubble, introduced by Pariser (2011).

These theories describe how algorithm-driven digital platforms create information silos, exposing users primarily to content that reinforces their existing beliefs. Within such self-reinforcing environments, rumors are not merely encountered—they are validated and amplified by like-minded communities. In the case of the mosque rumor, these mechanisms likely facilitated the viral spread of misinformation among ideologically similar users, making it difficult for corrective content to penetrate such tightly sealed networks. In these digital echo chambers, the rumor is often treated not as a contested narrative, but as a collective truth, thus reinforcing its credibility through repetition and social consensus.

Social Contagion Theory, developed by Christakis and Fowler (2009), further explains how ideas, behaviors, and emotions can spread through social networks in ways akin to infectious diseases. Applied to fake news, this theory suggests that the spread of misinformation depends not only on the content itself but also on the dynamics of social transmission. In the case of the underwater mosque, different "contagion thresholds" were likely at play—some users required only one trusted source to believe the claim, while others needed to see it multiple times before accepting it as plausible. As more people shared the rumor, the likelihood of others believing it increased, especially when accompanied by emotional resonance or narratives that aligned with dominant cultural discourses.

Together, these social psychological theories reveal that belief in fake news is not simply a failure of logic or information literacy. Instead, it is shaped by a complex interplay of cognitive biases, social identity, emotional engagement, and algorithmic reinforcement. Therefore, any



Soumission : 01/01/2025 Acceptation : 01/07/2025 Publication : 10/10/2025

strategy aimed at combating misinformation must go beyond fact-checking to address the deeper psychological and social mechanisms at work. Critical thinking education, awareness of cognitive biases, and deliberate efforts to break information silos are essential steps toward fostering a more resilient and discerning media audience.

Conclusion:

The findings of this comparative analytical study suggest that fake news is no longer a marginal byproduct of the digital environment; rather, it has evolved into a strategic, multi-layered instrument aimed at influencing public opinion through the use of semiotic manipulation, psychological activation, and the exploitation of technological affordances within digital platforms. The study reveals that fabricated content relies on sophisticated mechanisms—such as recontextualization and emotional encoding—which make its detection an epistemological and semiotic challenge that demands heightened critical thinking and contextual awareness.

By examining the cognitive and psychological dimensions underpinning misinformation, it becomes clear that its effectiveness does not stem merely from its departure from truth, but from its ability to resonate with audience biases and exploit intuitive, fast-thinking processes. This explains its extraordinary virality and persuasive power, especially through emotionally charged dissemination pathways, social contagion dynamics, and the amplification effect of echo chambers—all of which provide fake news with a

competitive edge over factual content in an environment where media literacy remains limited.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the consequences of fake news extend beyond individual misperception. They infiltrate the social fabric by undermining trust, intensifying polarization, distorting public discourse, and generating an atmosphere of informational ambiguity that hampers decision-making and weakens the ability to build societal consensus. Such outcomes illustrate the depth of the challenge that fake news poses to the normative structures of communication and value systems in contemporary societies.

In response, this study proposes a comprehensive framework for addressing the phenomenon of fake news, structured across four interrelated levels: prevention, detection, correction, and evaluation. This framework transcends the purely technical or journalistic domains by integrating public awareness, media education, institutional collaboration, and legislative governance. It envisions a socially resilient information environment that is more immune to manipulation and more capable of recognizing and resisting digital deception.

Through the analysis of real-world case studies, the research affirms that understanding the production and reception of fake news requires a multidimensional approach grounded in communication theory, psychological insight, semiotic analysis, and a nuanced understanding of the digital media landscape. Accordingly, fostering a culture of verification and promoting responsible digital citizenship are not optional initiatives—they are essential imperatives for safeguarding the integrity of public discourse and preserving social cohesion.



Soumission : 01/01/2025 Acceptation : 01/07/2025 Publication : 10/10/2025

Ultimately, the battle against fake news is an ongoing and adaptive struggle. It cannot be won through isolated efforts or technical solutions alone, but through continuous civic vigilance, coordinated strategic responses, and a deep comprehension of the evolving mechanisms that shape engagement with digital content in the age of new media.

Applied Case Study 1: The Riyadh Season Video Case



Source: Saudi Authority for Combating Rumors

Applied Case Study 2: The “Underwater Mosque”



Source: Saudi Authority for Combating Rumors

References:

1. Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211–236. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>
2. Arab Social Media Report. (2022). *The impact of fake news on Arab social media users*. Dubai School of Government.



Soumission : 01/01/2025 Acceptation : 01/07/2025 Publication : 10/10/2025

3. Barber, M. (2021). Media, beliefs, and echo chambers: The political consequences of misinformation. *Political Communication*, 38(2), 124–139.
4. Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.
5. Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford University Press.
6. Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1991). *Social cognition*. McGraw-Hill.
7. Glynn, C. J., Herbst, S., O’Keefe, G. J., Shapiro, R. Y., & Lindeman, M. (2018). *Public opinion* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
8. Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. Sage.
9. Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1974). Utilization of mass communication by the individual. In J. G. Blumler & E. Katz (Eds.), *The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research* (pp. 19–32). Sage.
10. Lazer, D. M. J., Baum, M. A., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A. J., Greenhill, K. M., Menczer, F., ... & Zittrain, J. L. (2018). The science of fake news. *Science*, 359(6380), 1094–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aao2998>
11. Lewandowsky, S., & Reefs, S. (2012). Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 13(3), 106–131.
12. Livingston, S. (2021). *The social psychology of media influence: Developing information immunity*. Cambridge University Press.

13. Nickerson, R. S. (1998). Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(2), 175–220.
14. Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. Penguin.
15. Parisi, L. (2022). Filter bubbles and democratic dialogue. *Journal of Media Literacy*, 14(1), 55–70.
16. Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2019). The implied truth effect: Attaching warnings to a subset of fake news stories increases perceived accuracy of stories without warnings. *Management Science*, 66(11), 4944–4957. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2019.3478>
17. Peterson, W. A., & Gist, N. P. (1951). Rumor and public opinion. *American Journal of Sociology*, 57(2), 159–167.
18. Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 19, 123–205.
19. Potter, W. J. (2004). *Theory of media literacy: A cognitive approach*. Sage.
20. Price, V. (1992). *Public opinion*. Sage.
21. Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
22. Rogers, E. M. (1962). *Diffusion of innovations*. Free Press.
23. Tambini, D., Labo, S., & Goodman, E. (2017). *The new political campaigning*. LSE Media Policy Project Series.
24. Tandoc Jr, E. C., Lim, Z. W., & Ling, R. (2018). Defining “fake news”: A typology of scholarly definitions. *Digital Journalism*, 6(2), 137–153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143>
25. Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146–1151. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>



26. Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking*. Council of Europe.
27. Zucker, L. G. (1986). Production of trust: Institutional sources of economic structure, 1840–1920. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 8, 53–111.