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Fake News in Metajournalistic Discourse

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, fake news has become central to debates about the state and future of journalism. This article examines imaginaries around fake news as a threat to democracy and the role of journalism in mitigating this threat. The study builds on 34 qualitative interviews with Danish journalists, media experts, government officials, and social media company representatives as well as 42 editorials from nine national Danish news outlets. Drawing on discourse theory and the concept of metajournalistic discourse, the analysis finds that media actors mobilise fake news to support opposing discursive positions on journalism and its relationship with falsehoods. While some voices articulate established journalism and journalistic values, such as objectivity, as the antithesis to fake news, others blame contemporary journalistic practices for potentially contributing to misinformation, calling for change and reform. These contrasts are particularly notable between the public stances of editors-in-chief, expressed through editorials, and reflections based on personal experience from news reporters and media experts. The paper concludes that fake news functions as a floating signifier in Danish metajournalistic discourse, mobilised not only to attack or defend journalism, but also to present conflicting visions for what journalism is and ought to be.

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Introduction

Fake news has become a key signifier in metajournalistic discourse across the globe, i.e., “public talk that seeks to define what journalism is and how it ought to work” (Carlson 2020, 377). Declining journalistic standards have been blamed for a rise in falsehoods (Mikkelsen 2016; Amrita 2017), while political leaders have appropriated the fake news concept in rhetorical and legislative attacks on established media (Lim 2020; Neo 2020; Rossini, Stromer-Galley, and Korsunskaja 2021). At the same time, prominent voices—both inside and outside of journalism—have argued that journalistic values, such as objectivity, represent the solution to fake news and the so-called post-truth era (Waisbord 2018; Wasserman 2020). Discourses around fake news have thus been marked by both tension and ambivalence, as different actors present conflicting definitions and opposing

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views on whether “journalism should be cast as a villain or victim of post-truth” (Farkas and Schou 2019, 60).

While there has been a veritable explosion in scholarship on fake news and related phenomena (Freelon and Wells 2020), “research into fake news discourse remains limited” (Wright 2021, 4). Researchers have tended to focus on new forms of online manipulation—studied under a range of overlapping headings—while neglecting the role of fake news as a signifier in socio-political struggles (Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft 2019). This has led to a lack of “empirical evidence on how the debate around fake news manifests itself in social reality” (Egelhofer et al. 2020, 1324).

Emerging scholarship has begun tackling these issues, highlighting how the relationship between fake news and journalism often revolves around conflicting visions and directions for the journalistic profession (Farkas and Schou 2019; Carlson 2020; Lim 2020; Neo 2020).

Recent work shows that public debate around fake news has “negative downstream effects” on sentiments towards democracy, media, and free speech (Jungherr and Rauchfleisch 2022, 14). Concerns about fake news in the US correlate with both negative views on the overall state of democracy and a willingness to impose free speech restrictions (Jungherr and Rauchfleisch 2022). Other studies indicate that journalistic reporting on fake news unintentionally plays a key role in disseminating falsehoods, as audiences pick up and remember false information from news stories (Tsfati et al. 2020). This calls for a better understanding of both how and why journalists “cover fake news the way they do” (Tsfati et al. 2020, 169).

This article contributes to existing scholarship on fake news by examining metajournalistic discourse around the topic in Denmark. The study provides a qualitative discourse analysis of 42 editorials from nine national news outlets as well as 34 semi-structured interviews with journalists, government officials, social media company representatives, and professionals cited as experts on fake news in Danish media (henceforth designated as “media experts”). The dataset revolves around the 2019 Danish elections for both the European Parliament and Danish national parliament, a period marked by fear of fake news as threat to democracy as well as debate about the role of journalism in countering this threat (Jensen 2019b). By applying a discourse theoretical perspective (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), the study critically examines the relationship between fake news and journalism, thus contributing to existing research on metajournalistic discourse, which I will present in the following.

Metajournalistic Discourse

Metajournalistic discourse represents a rhetorical site where different actors “engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism’s legitimacy” (Carlson 2016, 350). At the heart of metajournalistic discourse lie cultural and rhetorical struggles over journalism’s core and periphery, questions about the ethos of journalists and the societal role of the profession. Through discursive practices, such as public debate, knowledge sharing, and codified norms, boundaries around ethics and values are continuously drawn and redrawn, not only by media professionals, but also by “such diverse actors and sites as government officials, historians, entertainment media, and educators” (Carlson 2016, 356). These processes demarcate the limits of what constitutes “the *right way* of doing journalism” (Hartley 1988, 81, original emphasis).

Metajournalistic discourse is central to journalism as a gatekeeping institution, since the profession lacks firm boundary markers, such as esoteric knowledge or regulated access, not least in the US and European countries like Denmark where journalism is not a protected professional title (Schudson and Anderson 2008; Vos and Thomas 2019). Discourse represents “the principal vehicle through which journalists construct their professional norms and ideals” (Vos and Thomas 2019, 397).

Scholars have found a consolidation of values over time, with specific practices, roles, and norms being considered “good journalism” across the world (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Mellado 2014; Wiik 2014). These constitute a “belief system” (Nerone 2012, 447), “ideological code” (Hartley 1988, 80), or “occupational ideology” (Deuze 2005, 443) built around shared understandings of how journalists ought to behave and contribute to society. Through metajournalistic discourse, beliefs gradually come to “crystallize as, or sediment in, institutional norms and practice” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 129), which in turn exercise an “institutionalized force” (Hartley 1988, 81) on practitioners. While values diverge across geo-political contexts (Mellado 2014), many are found throughout world, including adherence to a shared sense of objectivity (Hanitzsch et al. 2011). Of interest to this study, Skovsgaard et al. (2013, 2018) have found that journalists in Denmark adhere strongly to an ideal of objectivity.

In studies of metajournalistic discourse, scholars have primarily focused on journalists as research subjects, downplaying the role of other actors in shaping journalistic values and norms (Carlson 2016; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Carlson (2016) views this approach as limited, encouraging researchers to include governmental, academic, and corporate actors and take “seriously divisions among journalists and the blurring of boundaries between journalists and nonjournalists” (356). Hanitzsch and Vos (2017, 129) similarly urge scholars to view “the public and other institutions” as “active interlocutors” in discursive practices around journalistic values.

This study takes up the call from Carlson (2016) and Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) to study metajournalistic discourse as a rhetorical interplay between diverse actors and contexts through which journalistic boundaries are drawn and redrawn. In the context of fake news, numerous actors either blame or praise journalism for its role in mitigating falsehoods (McNair 2017; Carlson 2020). While some are highly vocal about their discursive position—as in the case of prominent politicians accusing journalists of spreading fake news—others might be less noticeable, yet equally important. This includes journalism educators, government officials, and investigative reporters specialised in disinformation.

The rise of fake news in metajournalistic discourse paradoxically captures both a fear of demise of legacy media institutions and a desire to dislocate said institutions (Carlson 2018). While neither fear of journalistic decline nor antagonism towards journalism are novel phenomena (McNair 2017), fake news has increasingly become the go-to signifier for both those wishing to defend journalism in times of growing pressure on journalistic authority and those seeking to attack news outlets (Carlson 2020).

Fake News in Metajournalistic Discourse: An Ultimate Other and Floating Signifier

Emergent research has begun exploring fake news in metajournalistic discourse in countries, such as Austria (Egelhofer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2021), Germany (Monsees

2021), Russia (Dehghan and Glazunova 2021), Australia (Farhall et al. 2019), South Africa (Wasserman 2020), Malaysia (Lim 2020), Cambodia (Neo 2020), and, not least, the US (Waisbord 2018; Lischka 2019, 2021; Koliska, Chadha, and Burns 2020; Bratich 2020; Creech 2020). This scholarship shows that fake news often functions as an “empty buzzword” (Egelhofer et al. 2020, 1036) in journalism and that political actors use the signifier with opposing meanings (Li and Min-Hsin 2020; Dehghan and Glazunova 2021). This has led to a situation where, although citizens often “share the same concern over ‘fake news,’ they may not be thinking and talking about the same problem” (Li and Min-Hsin 2020, 11).

Whereas legacy media institutions mobilise fake news to promote themselves as reliable and trustworthy (Carlson 2020), some politicians use the term “to facilitate unsubstantiated ‘lying press’ accusations against media outlets” (Neo 2020, 1). In the name of protecting against fake news, policymakers in countries, such as Russia, Venezuela, Kenya, Singapore, Malaysia, and Cambodia, have implemented tighter restrictions on journalism and free speech (Farkas and Schou 2020; Lim 2020; Neo 2020, 2021). Elsewhere, for example within the European Union, politicians have used fake news to legitimise increased public spending on factchecking initiatives (Rankin 2017; AFP 2022). This shows how responses to fake news often varies significantly across geo-political boundaries, calling for context-specific research.

Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft (2019) argue that public debate around fake news constitutes a *critical incident* for journalism, i.e., a development that forces journalists to “reflect on their values and norms by reasserting the normative boundaries of their profession” (Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft 2019, 677; see also Zelizer 1992). In response to debates and imaginaries around fake news as a threat to democracy, journalists have had to try to reassert their authority and societal role through metajournalistic discourse. Carlson (2020, 386) argues that this has led to fake news becoming an “ultimate other” for traditional media; “a signifier that condenses broader concerns surrounding the eroding boundaries of traditional journalistic channels, the extension of mediated voices, and the growing role of social media in news distribution” (2020, 376). Instead of being synonymous simply with falsehoods, fake news has become intertwined with wider concerns about what journalism “is” and how it ought to develop in times of rapid technological change and challenges for journalistic business models. It has become a placeholder for external threats to legacy media against which journalists try to defend their profession (Carlson 2020).

For legacy media institutions, fake news calls for the reaffirmation of journalism as a knowledge gatekeeper (Waisbord 2018). For critics of established media, it condenses the “Dishonesty & Bad Reporting” (Trump 2018) that supposedly haunts the profession. Fake news has thus come to function as a *floating signifier* in metajournalistic discourse, receiving “the structural pressure of rival hegemonic projects” (Laclau 2005, 131; see also Farkas and Schou 2018). Opposing actors in different geo-political contexts define fake news dichotomously as part of broader discursive struggles around media, technology, and politics (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). Its meaning has become contingent on the political projects it is mobilised within, whether this be calls for strengthening factchecking journalism or dismantling established news outlets (Farkas and Schou 2019). Researchers have described this as a “politicization” (Brummette et al. 2018, 497) or “weaponization” (Egelhofer et al. 2020, 1325) of fake news, a discursive phenomenon found across the world (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Lim 2020).

Scholars have argued that the politicisation of fake news has stripped the term “of any analytical value it may have once held” (Freelon and Wells 2020, 146), urging colleagues to use “more precise language” (Freelon and Wells 2020). Others, in contrast, have proposed to sort out “what is ‘essential’ to this phenomenon” (Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken 2022, 472). So far, however, no clear scholarly consensus has emerged, as researchers use fake news to describe a range of phenomena, including “satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, propaganda, and advertising” (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018, 141). While some define fake news broadly as “information that is inconsistent with factual reality” (Brody and Meier 2018, 2), others define it narrowly as “a knowingly false headline and story ... published on a website that is designed to look like a real news site and is spread via social media” (Rochlin 2017, 388). This ambiguity has likely contributed the term’s adoption by political actors seeking to impose their own definition.

This article addresses a gap in research, not by abandoning fake news or authoritatively defining it, but by empirically examining how different actors in and around journalism discursively mobilise the signifier in a Scandinavian context that remains underexplored (Kalsnes, Falasca, and Kammer 2021; Farkas 2022). By analysing metajournalistic discourse through both the public stances of media institutions (via editorials) and individual reflections from journalists, media experts, government officials, and social media company representatives, the study addresses the following research questions: How do actors inside and around journalism articulate and mobilise fake news as a signifier to demarcate boundaries of the journalistic profession? What tensions and contradictions arise in meta-journalistic discourse around fake news?

The Case of the 2019 Danish Elections

This study focuses on two overlapping Danish elections that took place in 2019 for the European Parliament (on 26 May) and the Danish national parliament (on 5 June). These events represent, on the one hand, a significant moment for Danish democracy, marking a change of national government and the election of the second female prime minister in Danish history. On the other hand, the elections capture a broader climate of fear around fake news as a threat to democracy in times of rapid digitisation, growing far-right populism, and declining traditional knowledge gatekeepers. Leading up to 2019, political leaders and analysts across the globe warned of imminent dangers posed by disinformation (Brattberg 2019; Foy, Murgia, and Peel 2019). The European Parliament elections—held concurrently in all European Union (EU) member states in May 2019—were designated as “Europe’s most hackable election” (Cerulus 2019) and a potential “next epicenter for malign election interference” (Brattberg 2019). Throughout the EU, surveys showed widespread concern of foreign meddling (European Commission 2018). In Denmark, intelligence agencies warned of up to a 75% risk that Russia would launch a disinformation attack (Svendsen 2018). According to a national survey, 47% of Danes were “worried” or “very worried” about fake news (KMD 2019).

As a liminal period for Danish and European democracies, the 2019 Danish elections brought existing fears of foreign interference, digital technologies, and manipulation to the forefront. Echoing the rest of Europe (Monsees 2021), fears of fake news sparked widespread debate in Denmark about the boundaries between “real” and “fake” news and the role of journalism in protecting democracy from the anticipated threat. Both journalists

and other media actors contributed to this metajournalistic discourse, including news editors, academics, politicians, government officials, and social media company representatives. In the end, however, no orchestrated fake news campaign took place (Nielsen and Andersen 2019).

Studying the 2019 Danish elections, I argue, provides insights into both metajournalistic discourse in the specific context of Denmark as well as broader struggles about the state and future of journalism. Accordingly, I approach the elections as a context-specific case that enables an analytical move from the “from the specific to the abstract” (Carlson 2016, 363), i.e., from the intricacies of the Danish media landscape to wider fears and concerns around fake news and journalism in Europe and beyond.

Methods

Study Sample and Data Collection

The article draws on 34 qualitative interviews with journalists, government officials, social media representatives, and media experts as well as 42 editorials from nine Danish news outlets. The two types of data—interviews and editorials—were collected in order to capture both the public stances of news organisations and individual reflections based on personal experience from key actors in coverage and debate around fake news. While qualitative interviews are not commonly used in research on metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016), these can help bring forth less visible discursive positions as well as internal tensions in the journalistic profession (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018; Moon 2021). As such, including both editorials and interviews—while different in rhetorical scope—draws our attention to the relationship and tensions between official rhetoric from journalistic institutions and less visible forms of metajournalistic discourse from actors inside and around journalism.

Interviewees were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. By tracking news coverage during the elections, I invited journalists who wrote on fake news to participate as well as sources quoted as experts and/or stakeholders in news coverage. I personally conducted all interviews over a two-month period spanning roughly one month before and one month after the 2019 Danish elections (late April till late June 2019). During interviews, participants were encouraged to propose other relevant research subjects (most often colleagues within the same organisation).

Of the 34 interviewees, 16 worked as professional journalists—five in editorial positions—at 10 different national media outlets (see Table 1). 14 interviewees participated based on their contribution(s) to Danish news media as experts on fake news (and related topics). 10 of these media experts were employed at five different Danish universities, while two worked at other public research institutions and two worked as consultants specialised in social media analysis. In addition to the media experts, two interviewees participated based on their contributions to media coverage of fake news in their roles as Nordic officials at a major social media company. Finally, two participated due to their employment at a Danish government institution with expertise on disinformation. The latter two agreed to participate on the condition of not being cited directly in research publications. Informed consent was secured from all interviewees.¹ Personal identities have been anonymised to protect participants' privacy.

Table 1. Overview of interviewees and their roles and affiliations.

Interviewees	#	Institutions	#
<i>Journalists</i>	16	<i>Journalistic institutions</i>	10
• Managing editor	5	• Public service broadcaster	3
• Journalist	11	• Broadsheet newspaper	3
		• News magazine	2
		• Digitally native news outlet	2
<i>Professionals cited as experts on fake news</i>	14	<i>Institutions of expert sources</i>	9
		• University	5
		• Other research institution	2
		• Private consultancy firm	2
<i>Government officials</i>	2	<i>Government department</i>	1
<i>Social media company representatives</i>	2	<i>Social media company</i>	1
Total:	34		21

The interviews lasted 63 minutes on average, each following a semi-structured interview guide. Four different interview guides were developed, one for each primary type of research participant: (1) journalist, (2) media expert, (3) social media company representative and (4) public official (i.e., government employee). Interview guides contained overlapping questions about the interviewee's connection to the topic of fake news, their views on the threat of fake news in Denmark, views on different terms used in media debates (e.g., fake news, misinformation, and disinformation), and their perception of the role and values of journalism in the context of fake news.

Following a qualitative approach, the interview guides did not contain any pre-formulated definitions of key terms, seeking instead to capture "descriptions of the interviewees' lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena" (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018, 16). As such, interviewees were not presented with an authoritative definition of fake news but were rather asked a series of questions about their personal understanding of the term. This enabled the study to probe into the interviewees' perspectives on the meaning of fake news and analyse tensions as to how different actors make sense of it as both a phenomenon and contested signifier.

To include the public stances of media institutions, I systematically collected editorials through InfoMedia, a database of all major Nordic news publications, spanning a seven-month period around the 2019 Danish elections (1 December 2018 to 30 June 2019). Four different search queries were used to compile editorials from nine Danish national news outlets (see Table 2): "fake news," "falske nyheder" [fake news in Danish], "misinformation," and "desinformation" [disinformation in Danish].

Table 2. Sample of newspaper editorials.

Media outlet	Type of news outlet	Editorials
<i>Politiken</i>	Broadsheet newspaper	13
<i>Ekstra Bladet</i>	Tabloid newspaper	7
<i>Kristeligt Dagblad</i>	Broadsheet newspaper	5
<i>Berlingske</i>	Broadsheet newspaper	5
<i>Information</i>	Broadsheet newspaper	3
<i>TV2.dk</i>	Public service broadcaster	3
<i>B.T.</i>	Tabloid newspaper	3
<i>Jyllands-Posten</i>	Broadsheet newspaper	2
<i>DR.dk</i>	Public service broadcaster	1
Total	-	42

Qualitative Discourse Analysis

Editorials and interviews were analysed as one comprehensive dataset using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis programme for thematic coding and discourse analysis. The analysis followed three overlapping phases informed by the Essex School of Discourse Theory (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). This theoretical framework offers a valuable lens for studying metajournalistic discourse, drawing our attention to “the hegemonic formation of social relation—of discourses—that necessarily involve hierarchies of power and relations of inclusion and exclusion” (Dahlberg 2011, 41).

As highlighted by Carlson (2016), studying metajournalistic discourse involves examining rhetorical struggles to demarcate “boundaries around actors, norms, and practice” as well as who are “included or excluded within the boundaries of acceptable actors to create news” (Carlson 2016, 362). The Essex School of Discourse Theory is productive in this regard, as it approaches identity as contingent upon discursive struggles to obtain *hegemony* (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). i.e., dominance over boundaries of specific discursive formations. This directs our attention towards the role of the *constitutive outside*; signifiers designated as being outside or in opposition to a given identity as an “exterior to the community that makes its existence possible” (Mouffe 1993, 69). In the context of fake news, this means studying the ways in which different actors mobilise imaginaries around fake news as a constitutive outside to legitimise ideals about what constitutes “real news” and “real journalism.”

The first phase of the analysis involved coding the material and identifying key themes, sub-themes, and *nodal points*—i.e., “privileged signifiers that fix the meaning of a signifying chain” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 112). Nodal points serve as discursive anchors that link systems of meaning through their coupling to other signifiers. In the studied material, “journalism,” “objectivity,” and “fake news” all represent nodal points mobilised by different actors to support various discursive positions. The second stage revolved around identifying *logics of equivalence* across the material, signifying chains through which specific ideas, objects, and subject positions are coupled to each other in opposition to an antagonised “other” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). In the studied data, this involved identifying who or what is blamed for fake news and who or what is designated as the solutions. Finally, the third phase revolved around (re-)problematizing the findings, revisiting the studied material to nuance, affirm, and challenge the results. Table 3 presents an overview of key themes and sub-themes identified in the analysis.

Table 3. Key themes and sub-themes from the analysis.

Key themes	Sub-themes				
The threat of fake news against Denmark	Journalists' assessment of threat levels	Authorities' assessment of threat levels	Foreign sources of fake news	Domestic sources of fake news	Technological threats
Media institutions' response to fake news	Organizational restructurings	Self-branding	Level of priority and resources	Collaboration with tech companies	
Journalists' mitigation of fake news	The rise of journalistic interest	Cases of fake news in Denmark	Finding fake news	Challenges of journalistic reporting	The use of different concepts (fake news, disinformation etc.)
Journalists' contribution to fake news	The tempo of journalism	Partisan media	Blurring of boundaries (news, ads, and opinion)	Admitting errors	Technical abilities of journalists
Attacks on news media (Trump style)	Accusations from politicians	Accusations from citizens	Accusations from alternative media		
The future of journalism	Education	Collaboration between journalists	Journalism's gatekeeping function	Public funding	Private funding

Findings

At the heart of metajournalistic discourse around fake news, I find a series of tensions, as different actors appropriate the fake news signifier to support contrasting discursive positions on the state and future of journalism. As a nodal point in metajournalistic discourse during the 2019 Danish elections, fake news is opposingly mobilised as: (1) deriving from antagonised “others” versus from within journalism; (2) calling for a return to traditional journalistic values versus a renewal of journalism; and (3) calling for a pre-emptive versus detached role of journalists. These contrasts are particularly notable between the public stances of editors-in-chief, on the one hand, and individual reflections of news reporters and media experts, on the other. While the former group predominantly constructs journalism as the de facto antithesis to fake news—calling for a strengthening of legacy media institutions and traditional journalistic values—the latter group highlights how contemporary journalistic practices might contribute to a proliferation of falsehoods, calling for change and reform.

Fake News from Antagonised “Others” Versus Within Journalism

The first tension in metajournalistic discourse revolves around fake news as an exterior or interior threat to journalism, i.e., questions about whether journalism solely presents solutions to fake news or whether journalistic practices potentially contribute to falsehoods and manipulation. In editorials during the 2019 Danish elections, editors-in-chief predominantly articulate fake news as exterior and dichotomous to journalism: “We know the best cure against misinformation: trustworthy and transparent journalism delivered by established media ... We are your guarantee for fair coverage you can trust and analyses you can navigate after” (Jensen 2019b).

According to editors-in-chief, fake news represents a new and alien threat that affirms the authority and legitimacy of traditional media. Danish voters need established media

more than ever before since they could otherwise face a “stream of information and misinformation that will pour from all media platforms” (Dyrby 2019). Thankfully, editors proclaim, Denmark has a “good press ... far better than its reputation” (Bjerager 2019). Legacy journalists protect citizens from “fake news and troll armies that could become part of political reality” (Østergaard and Jensen 2019). If only Danes keep subscribing to established media, democracy should be in safe hands, since journalism represents “your foundation for an enlightened election” (Henriksen 2019).

From this discursive position, fake news is imagined as an external danger against which journalism protects democracy. Fake news derives from antagonised “others” in the form of foreign troll armies, online robots, and rogue states (Kamph 2019; Østergaard and Jensen 2019; Jensen 2019b). Journalists stand in the way of these malicious actors, not only by performing specific professional duties, such as factchecking, but also by being antithetical to fake news in an *a priori* sense: “The best defence against misinformation and junk media is skilful journalism” (Jensen 2019a). Journalism is per definition the opposite of fake news, this view holds.

By deriving from antagonised “others,” fake news affirms the need for established media in times of challenges for traditional journalistic business models. Despite the ubiquity of digital media channels—enabling many-to-many communication—fake news proves “what journalism is worth” (Bro 2019). Editors-in-chief thus mobilise imaginaries around fake news as a constitutive outside to reassert both their own professional identity and institutional authority. Fake news is an exterior threat to democracy—a foreign “other”—in the face of which journalism’s importance is once again cemented.

A sense of renewed importance of journalism is not only found in the fairly polished and promotional rhetoric of editorials, but also in interviews with news reporters: “I feel we have realised we are still important—that it is important we are here ... That is really nice, actually. In a way, there is now work for us to do again” (Respondent 9, journalist at a public service broadcaster). As a novel societal threat, fake news “forces us to keep hammering the point that we are damn important for democracy” (Respondent 25, journalist at a national broadsheet newspaper). In contrast to editors-in-chief, however, news reporters and media experts often underline that journalism not only presents solutions to fake news, but also potentially contributes to problems.

In interviews, news reporters and media experts raise concern about how contemporary journalistic practices might contribute to a proliferation of falsehoods due to an increasing speed, a decline of specialised knowledge, and an unwillingness to look inwards and admit mistakes at established news outlets. Several voices argue that journalists potentially contribute to manipulation due to a fast-paced work culture with insufficient time for research: “I think journalists should be taught more about how we can be manipulated into promoting specific agendas ... Things in the news stream move faster today. And we have perhaps relaxed our standards a bit” (Respondent 9, journalist at a public service broadcaster). According to media experts, journalists increasingly lack specialised knowledge and time for proper preparation, potentially contributing to errors: “I think journalists should turn down the speed of publication and do research properly. There is nothing worse than a journalist calling and asking: ‘What is fake news?’ ‘Well, maybe you should have found out before calling me?’” (Respondent 28, media expert).

From this alternative discursive position, fake news does not simply derive from malicious, foreign “others,” but also from within journalism itself. Instead of coupling fake news solely to trolls, robots, and bad actors, this view holds that journalists need to self-reflect and reconsider their practices. Several voices raise concern about a lack of willingness to look inwards and admit mistakes in the news industry. There is “definitely a lack of self-justice in the media,” as formulated by a managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper (Respondent 8): “In that way, I think it can sometimes feel phony when news media talk about themselves as bulwarks against fake news.” Journalists who report on fake news similarly describe feelings of frustration when uncovering errors and cases of disinformation in competing newspapers due to a lack of willingness to take responsibility:

I did a story showing how [competing newspapers] had pretty much shared tweets from Russian operatives. It was very hard to get through to them. They were like ‘Yes, we have now removed the tweet.’ But hey, they have a responsibility! It is just very hard for them to admit it ... I do not think there is enough of a realisation in the industry that we can easily be deceived. (Respondent 34, journalist at a digital native news outlet)

Journalists also highlight how opinion pages in established news outlets potentially contribute to misinformation, since newspapers often have lax requirements regarding accuracy and factchecking. Opinion pages are “definitely a relevant thing to bring up when we talk about misinformation,” since “readers are typically not very attentive towards labels—whether it is an opinion piece or a news article” (Respondent 8, managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper). Several voices argue that there is an element of hypocrisy to the fact that media institutions present themselves as guardians against fake news while refusing to enforce stricter factchecking standards:

When they [competing newspaper] criticise Facebook for allowing all kinds of misinformation and extreme content and giving it reach, I think they should also look at inwards and say: ‘Have our opinion pages been run properly?’ I think it has definitely been a place where people could get away with saying things that were very far from the scientific consensus. (Respondent 1, managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper)

Fake News as a Call for Tradition Versus Change in Journalism

A second tension in metajournalistic discourse around fake news pertains to the need for strengthening traditional journalistic values versus moving in new directions. Some voices highlight the need to combat fake news through established journalistic virtues, such as objectivity and traditional factchecking, downplaying the need for new norms, practices, and alliances. Others see the rise of fake news as a development that calls for a departure from the journalistic status quo and towards new forms of journalism. As summarised by a media expert at a public research institution: “Some journalists keep saying: “Listen, fake news is nothing new, we do not need to invent anything, just keep doing journalism.” And then others are saying: “This is new! We need to develop factchecking as a practice” (Respondent 4, media expert).

In editorials, editors-in-chief predominantly adopt the first position, underlining the importance of traditional journalistic virtues. Fake news calls for “credible and impartial coverage” (French 2019) and “facts, nuance, credibility, and transparency” (Østergaard and Jensen 2019) that can prove “why we cannot just rely on neither emotions nor

algorithms” (Bro 2019). Objectivity and impartiality function as nodal points in this regard (i.e., privileged signifiers), as editors-in-chief mobilise these through logics of equivalence to position journalism as the antithesis to fake news.

Fake news is articulated as the opposite of “real news,” with real news being synonymous with established news outlets that “enlighten skilfully and objectively” (Henriksen 2019). The signifiers of “journalism,” “objectivity,” “impartiality,” “traditional journalistic values,” and “established media” are all discursively coupled as interchangeable, positioned dichotomously to fake news deriving from antagonised “others.” To save democracy from fake news, in other words, society needs journalism and journalism needs existing media institutions and the values of objectivity and impartiality:

Fundamentally, I think the fake news scare we experienced since November 2016 has had a lot of positive effects on how the press perceives its own role. Because now we are suddenly forced to explain why we need to have authority. We return to the old virtues that have been forgotten ... using objectivity in our methods. (Respondent 1, managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper)

Voices supporting this position argue that journalists do not need “to do anything differently. We just need to keep using our methods that gets us to the truth—we do not need to do anything new” (Respondent 25, journalist at a national broadsheet newspaper). While fake news might be a novel threat to democracy, the solution to fake news is already here in the form of journalists “basically just doing our job” (Respondent 1, managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper).

In contrast to this view, other actors—particularly younger news reporters and media experts from universities and other research institutions—call for a reassessment of established journalistic norms and practices to mitigate the threat of fake news. These voices argue that fake news—especially on social media—requires “abilities that we do not currently have as journalists” (Respondent 14, journalist at a national broadsheet newspaper). Traditional journalistic methods fall short, calling for new forms of research and writing, “new alliances,” and “new tools and experts” (Respondent 5, journalist at a news magazine).

Established journalistic values and practices might even contribute to a proliferation of falsehoods, this position holds, as journalism is not well equipped to deal with disinformation. This calls for change and reform:

You need different capabilities to mitigate this [disinformation] ... I really think that needs to be a priority. Especially since we have structural problems in Denmark, which fundamentally revolve around the fact that journalism in Denmark is a quite poorly educated profession ... So, I would like to see journalists getting sharper in this area. (Respondent 13, media expert)

To mitigate the threat of fake news—especially online—journalists need to re-evaluate their norms and practices, perhaps even “throwing out the objective journalist role, because it just does not really work when you describe the Web” (Respondent 34, journalist at a digitally native news outlet). Journalists need to “go back and say: ‘How have we been deceived? ... ‘How have we been used? And with what consequences?’” (Respondent 34, journalist at a digitally native news outlet).

From this alternative discursive position, journalism and fake news are intertwined phenomena, rather than opposites. Digital transformations have led to journalists

being manipulated in new ways. Accordingly, the rise of fake news does not merit a continuation of the status quo, but rather a change in journalistic practices—a call for reform. In this way, fake news is mobilised as a nodal point in two conflicting views on the state and future of journalism; one that favours the status quo and one that seeks to move the profession in new directions.

Fake News as a Call for Pre-emptive Versus Detached Journalism

A third tension in metajournalistic discourse revolves around the role of journalists and journalism in mitigating fake news as a societal threat. Some voices underline the importance of pre-emptively protecting against fake news by educating citizens on how to avoid deception from nefarious actors. Others call for more detached and critical approaches, worrying that contemporary journalism alienates readers by overemphasising potential risks around fake news, underestimating peoples' capabilities to separate facts from fiction, and insufficiently criticising government narratives of impending disinformation attacks.

The first discursive position, once again found primarily in editorials, emphasises the journalistic importance of educating people about the dangers of fake news and how to avoid them: "At *Politiken*, we see it as our task to do everything in our power to make sure the election is not decided by false profiles and fake news" (Jensen 2019b). Fake news represents a growing societal threat that journalists must diligently prepare citizens to withstand (French 2019). Journalists need to be on high alert *in advance* of fake news, proactively teaching people how to spot and reject falsehoods before "Russian troll armies turns the general election into a battlefield" (Jensen 2018).

One of journalism's key societal functions, this position holds, is to "strengthen peoples' critical senses" (Respondent 16, journalist at a digitally native news outlet) and "get the population to understand that there are risks we need to be aware of" (Respondent 31, media expert). Alongside other forms of preventive initiatives—such as government task forces and social media company regulation—journalism serves as a societal "insurance" or "burglary alarm" against fake news, as formulated by a Nordic official from a major social media company (Respondent 20): "Hopefully, your house doesn't burn and there is no Russian attack on us."

In contrast to this discursive position, another view holds that journalists ought to take a more detached and critical stance, providing information without overemphasising risks that have yet to materialise, instructing people on how to behave, or accepting government claims.

Journalists should critically reflect on whether they are "good enough at investigating and writing about the problem [of misinformation]" (Geist 2019), considering that they largely adopt government narratives of impending digital attacks from foreign actors, neglecting how the government itself "peddle lies to voters" (Geist 2019). Danish authorities have tended to "cry wolf" about fake news "and then nothing has happened" (Respondent 22, managing editor at a national newspaper). Journalists have failed to sufficiently question the senders' motives when relaying threat assessments from Danish intelligence agencies and politicians (Kastrup 2018). At the same time, journalists have tended to write in a patronising tone that underestimates people's abilities to avoid manipulation:

We advertise that our media outlets are a kind of bulwark against fake news I think it is true that we have an obligation in the media to make sure we avoid a situation where people are uninformed. But people are not stupid, you know? And that is what provokes me a bit when you blow up this misinformation thing. (Respondent 18, Journalist at a national broadsheet newspaper)

Instead of seeing the primary role of journalists as pre-emptive educators—informing people about potential disinformation and how to avoid it—this discursive position holds that journalists ought to function as detached observers who remain critical of all claims from political actors, including assessments of fake news from government institutions. From this view, contemporary journalism has tended to overstate fake news by accepting “narratives of decay” (Respondent 1, managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper) about “Danish democracy being left in the hands of American designed algorithms and nefarious agendas from Russian troll factories” (Henriksen 2019). Journalists should ask themselves whether they have been successful in “balancing how bleak we portray things” (Respondent 1, managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper). In this way, fake news is once again mobilised to support two opposing views on how journalists ought to behave and how journalism should develop.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings show that metajournalistic discourse in Denmark is marked by tension, as different actors mobilise fake news to support conflicting arguments on the state and future of journalism. Although editors-in-chief, managing editors, news reporters, media experts, government officials, and social media company representatives all agree that journalism is key to addressing fake news, views differ markedly on the exact relationship between fake news and journalism. Prominent voices—especially editors-in-chief at established news outlets—argue that traditional journalistic values and institutions represent the antithesis to fake news, deriving from foreign “others.” In contrast, other voices—both inside and around journalism—argue that fake news calls for reflection and self-criticism in the news industry as well as changes to norms and practices.

Rather than simply being ambiguous, fake news obtains conflicting meanings as part of discursive struggles to (re-)shape what journalism is and ought to be. To those who seek to strengthen established media and traditional values, such as objectivity, fake news serves as a constitutive outside that affirms the need for legacy institutions and existing ways of doing things. To those who are critical of the journalistic status quo, fake news proves the need for reform, particularly in the context of digital capabilities, factchecking, opinion pages, the notion of objectivity, the speed of work, and journalists’ willingness to admit mistakes. Fake news thus acts, not only as a nodal point, but also as a floating signifier in metajournalistic discourse; a concept “whose meaning is ‘suspended’” (Laclau 2005, 131) between different, antagonistic, hegemonic projects.

The findings of this study contribute to existing research in three important ways. First, the results shows that fake news not only functions as a contested concept in struggles between politicians and journalists, which has been a primary focus of existing research (Carlson 2018; Waisbord 2018; Lischka 2019, 2021; Neo 2020). Fake news also functions as

a floating signifier within journalism itself, with different voices mobilising the term to support conflicting visions for the journalistic profession.

Second, the study contributes with new insights on how actors inside and around journalism reflect on challenges of covering fake news, for example in relation to digital capabilities, threat assessments, and the risk of overemphasizing dangers. The findings show that journalists are often aware of a potential negative role they might serve in disseminating falsehoods and creating a distorted image of democracy, something scholars have previously raised concerns about (Tsfati et al. 2020; Jungherr and Rauchfleisch 2022). Still, journalists express difficulties in overcoming said challenges and frustration with media institutions' unwillingness to acknowledge them.

Third, the study shows that fake news in metajournalistic discourse is not solely tied to a prevalence of false information. During the 2019 Danish elections, no major disinformation campaigns were detected, nor did journalists uncover prominent cases of falsehoods (Nielsen and Andersen 2019). Yet, news media wrote extensively on fake news, with editors-in-chief mobilising the signifier to bolster their own legitimacy. This highlights how fake news' centrality in metajournalistic discourse is as much tied to struggles over what journalism "is" as it is tied to specific threats posed by false information.

In terms of limitations, this study has not been able to assess how journalists, in practice, find and report on fake news, nor if there are contradictions between practice and metajournalistic discourse. For example, the study has not been able to evaluate how and to what extent journalists try to address the challenges of reporting on fake news brought up in interviews. The use of snowball sampling to identify research participants also limits the generalisability of the results. This points to a need for further research into both journalistic practices and metajournalistic discourse in further geo-political contexts.

Newsroom ethnography could provide valuable insights in future research, mapping the intricacies of how journalists; (1) negotiate fake news' importance in newsrooms, (2) evaluate threat assessments, (3) use digital tools, and (4) navigate risks of unintentionally spreading falsehoods. Ethnographic work could also contribute to a deeper understanding of internal tensions in editorial processes, for example between editors-in-chief and news reporters. Discourse theoretical perspectives might be useful for such endeavours since they emphasise the contingency and relationality of social formations and how the "creation of a 'we' ... can exist only by the demarcation of a 'they'" (Mouffe 2005, 15).

In sum, future research could hopefully contribute with new insights into both metajournalistic discourse and journalistic practices around fake news, thus increasing our understanding of ongoing struggles to define fake news as well as broader conflicts over the future of journalism in times of declining business models, political instability, and ubiquitous digital platforms.

Note

1. In accordance with Swedish research regulation, ethical pre-approval was not required nor applicable for this study since it did not involve sensitive personal data nor sought to affect research subjects physically or psychologically. The author consulted with the local Advisory Board for Research Ethics at their university to confirm this.

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