

# The Imperative of Responsibility in the Era of Fake News

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**Abstract:** Fake news concern has caught the attention of the researchers by the necessity to identify solutions in order to combat this phenomenon. Thus, intervention in the field of ethics could be a possible solution. Therefore, we propose to update, rethink and reformulate the imperative of responsibility of Hans Jonas in the era of fake news. In order to do this, we will start with some clarifications on fake news, arguing that the appeal to the responsibility of the actors involved in creating and spreading the phenomenon has a threefold responsibility: towards us, towards others and towards those from the future. This could lead to a better life; therefore, using the phenomenological method, we briefly describe the fake news phenomenon; and completing this method with the hermeneutic analysis, we propose a new imperative of responsibility that would respond to the actions and behaviour of people in the fake news era. The purpose of the present study is to suggest a new imperative of responsibility, which brings together critical reflection and commitment to self and otherness. Starting from this, a digital ethics can be developed based on the concept of responsibility.

**Keywords:** fake news, ethics, responsibility

## INTRODUCTION

Fake news has become a global problem in recent years, with the development of technology favouring the spread of this phenomenon. Therefore, given its nature – which we will clarify in the next section – there is an immediate need to find solutions to combat fake news. Thus, we can distinguish between two types of solutions: 1) related to the fight against fake news following the manifestation of the

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phenomenon (ex-post), and 2) certain solutions to prevent fake news before the phenomenon manifests itself in society (ex-ante). The latter solutions can be identified in the field of modern ethics. In other words, ethics is becoming both a tool and a solution against fake news, through further research in this field related to the ethics of technology or digital ethics – because fake news usually appears in the digital environment. Therefore, ethical intervention on this phenomenon is reasonable.

In this paper, we begin with a brief discussion about what the problem of fake news represents. Thus, following some conceptual clarifications and assuming that this issue is a topical one, with serious consequences for society, we will turn our attention to a possible reaction in the field of ethics, which could be an answer against the negative effects of the research phenomenon. As fake news cannot be completely removed as a problem in itself, by invoking responsibility from the actors involved, both fake news creators and potential receivers, the spread of this phenomenon can be slowed down.

Further, starting from Hans Jonas' conception on the relationship between ethics and technology, we are going to rethink and update the imperative proposed by him. Jonas reformulated the categorical Kantian imperative because this proved to be useless in the face of new technology challenges. Thus, in our turn, we will update the imperative of responsibility, so that it can serve as a means of improving fake news.

Starting from the hypothesis that ethics can answer the need for a solution to the problem of fake news, we focus on the following objectives: 1) establishing the relationship between ethics and the issue of fake news as an amplified phenomenon of technology, 2) showing that the imperative formulated by Hans Jonas could be adapted to the issue under discussion, 3) establishing that the imperative of responsibility concerns both fake news creators and consumers, and 4) aiming to reformulate the imperative of responsibility, so that it corresponds to the human action of the fake news era.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the problem and the proposed objectives, we will use the phenomenological description as a working method when discussing what fake news phenomenon consists of, as well as the conceptual distinctions around it. On the other hand, we will complete the phenomenological method with the hermeneutic analysis, as it is necessary to rethink and reinterpret the imperative of responsibility formulated by Jonas.

## ETHICS AND FAKE NEWS

Fake news aroused the interest of the academic space, becoming in a very short time an important topic in the research agenda (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). The effort and interest in studying fake news are also supported by national and international public organisations, in order to understand and explain this phenomenon, so that, in the end, it can be ameliorated in the short term and combated in the long term, with measures adapted and based on data. Philosophically, fake news can be approached both as a concept, when theoretical issues are being discussed, and as a phenomenon, when its implications and effects are addressed, as well as possible countermeasures techniques (Hagiu and Bortos 2021a).

In order to advance the discussion on how ethics intervenes in the issue of fake news, we need to clarify what this is. Gelfert (2018, 108) defines fake news as “the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design”. So, we can develop the idea that fake news impostorates the format and content of classic news. In a similar way, Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken (2019, 69) define fake news as “the broad spread of stories treated by those who spread them as having been produced by standard journalistic practices, but that have not in fact been produced by such practices”. However, we cannot overlook the role that receivers play in the studied phenomenon. Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2017) highlight the role of the audience in co-creating content and the fact that fake news is not necessarily a journalistic product, the audience being rather an agent actively involved in spreading fake information, creating meanings, negotiating these and developing fake narratives. In addition, the authors describe two characteristics of fake news, respectively a low level of facticity and an immediate intention to deceive and harm (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2017), that’s why Park et al. (2020, 164) classify fake news as a form of non-information.

Once clarified, in order to reach the ethical dimension of this issue, we need to question how the phenomenon of fake news originated. Thus, we can advance the idea that we are not facing a completely new phenomenon, but we are discussing the evolution of old phenomena, such as manipulation, propaganda and disinformation, which have been transformed and amplified with the development and spread of technologies. The phenomenon of fake news, transferred to the online environment, circulates at a much higher speed (in real time, most of

the time) and can include different types of content (text, audio, images, video or mixes between any of them). Therefore, the problem we face is not a new one and we are facing a set of existing problems combined with a technology that can be approached as a channel of communication and transmission of information. In the age of fake news (Albright 2017), anyone with access to a device and an Internet connection can become involved in this phenomenon, whether or not they are aware of it.

However, the problem discussed is not limited to the technological dimension; we can differentiate at least four types of actors that can be involved and impacted, directly or indirectly, by this phenomenon: the sources that create and transmit information or the manipulators, the messages and their content, the channels that are peddling the messages, as well as the audience, the receivers (Hagiú and Bortoş 2021b). Therefore, we can note that the development of technology has facilitated the transfer of old phenomena (like misinformation and disinformation) in the digital environment and thus the new phenomenon of fake news was born. Since it is about people's behaviour (sending or receiving fake news), ethics can be a response and a way to ameliorate this phenomenon. So, it is justified to call for accountability and to formulate an imperative as solutions, at least in the short term, in order to combat the phenomenon of fake news.

In the next section, we will discuss the imperative of responsibility formulated by Hans Jonas, trying to adapt it and rethink it in the lines of a possible digital ethics.

## RETHINKING THE IMPERATIVE OF RESPONSIBILITY IN THE ERA OF FAKE NEWS

Kant (1997, 31) discusses the categorical imperative that must function as a law of nature: "act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature". He distinguishes between maxims and imperatives: "[i]mperatives, therefore, hold objectively and are quite distinct from maxims, which are subjective principles" (Kant 2015, 18). Hans Jonas (1984) returned to these things. In essence, he observes that the Kantian theory of morality no longer corresponded to the specifics of the activities that people carried out in the age of technology (second half of the twentieth century). Moreover, an imperative must respond to human action as such (Jonas 1984, 11), and therefore, since human action in the twentieth century differs from that of Kant's century, we can no longer regard the

categorical imperative as the law of nature. Also, he notes that “[t]he new imperative invokes a different consistency: not that of the act with itself, but that of its eventual *effects* with the continuance of human agency in times to come” (Ibid, 12).

In other words, the imperative of responsibility, as Jonas calls it, acts as an axiom, so without the need for any demonstration, as in the case of the categorical Kantian imperative, for example. The imperative of responsibility has been formulated in several ways: 1) “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human-life” or 2) “Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life”, or 3) “Do not compromise the conditions for an indefinite continuation of humanity on earth”, or 4) “In your present choices, include the future wholeness of Man among the objects of your will” (Jonas 1984, 11). Therefore, a significant idea for the current technological age or for the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab 2017) is that, in classical ethical theories, the notion of responsibility has been limited (Jonas 1973, 31). So, the purpose of the new directions of ethics should be borne in mind precisely this notion. As he notes in another paper: “[i]n rethinking the concept of responsibility and of its extension – never conceived of before – to the behaviour of our whole species toward the whole of nature, philosophy will be taking a first step in the direction of assuming this responsibility” (Jonas 1994, 832). It is clear that since such a philosophy of responsibility requires a forward-looking approach, the ethics of responsibility should be complemented by appropriate policies, even if, as one Jonas commentator noted, “[t]he contemporary global orientation of humanity thus reminds us more of a moral hazard with our future than a politics of responsibility” (Turcan 2017, 38). In fact, Paul Ricœur (1995, 295) notes that Hans Jonas’ efforts were aimed at provoking a revolution in ethics by raising the principle of responsibility to the rank of a categorical imperative, so that both the consequences of political power decisions and the consequences of citizens’ actions in the technological age lead to the maintenance of a habitable planet.

Therefore, the imperative of responsibility, in any of the framings mentioned, as well as the idea of Jonas to leave a habitable planet to those who come after us can be interpreted in many ways, without detracting from their importance. For example, the current technological age or the age of new technologies or, still, the fourth industrial revolution that Schwab (2017) talks about, requests more

than ever the need for a principle of responsibility. As we emphasized in the previous section, this idea can be discussed in the context of fake news. Thus, we ask ourselves: what is the status of the imperative of responsibility (as an axiom) in the age of fake news? Moreover, can the imperative of responsibility as formulated by Hans Jonas be a solution to what we can call the fake news problem? As long as the manifestation of the fake news phenomenon takes advantage of a certain vulnerability of the human person, the imperative of responsibility guides us to a responsibility both to the current world and to the world of the future, taking into account the harmful effects produced by fake news in the long run – for example, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) explain how exposure to fake narratives contributed to Donald Trump’s election victory in the United States, which proves the magnitude of the discussed phenomenon. But, certainly, this way of thinking about responsibility is symmetrical: I am responsible for my actions, but at the same time others must take me into account when they act. As one of Jonas’ critics writes, “our vulnerability means that we too can be objects of responsibility for others, provided the necessary conditions hold” (Coyne 2021, 134).

On the other hand, we can ask ourselves, in addition to the second section of this paper, why people distribute fake news. Is it a less thought-provoking or less reflected-provoking action? McPhetres, Rand, and Pennycook (2021, 625) ask themselves and note the following: “Why do people share fake news? One hypothesis is that people share news not because they are motivated to believe a certain thing, but because they are simply not thinking carefully about the news content”. So, people spread fake news because they do not discern what can and cannot be true. Thus, we ask ourselves: how can we act to be accountable to ourselves, to others, and especially to those in the future? The answer is laborious, because there is currently no panacea for the fake news issue, i.e. a solution to prevent the spread of this phenomenon. However, we can propose – we underline the fact that we propose, and not impose – the imperative of responsibility as an axiom for good behaviour.

Following the discussion in the previous section, we find the issue of fake news requires ethical expertise and, as we noted from the beginning of this paper, when we bring into discussion the responsibility for fake news, we are talking about the responsibility of those who produce fake news, and also of those who “consume” fake news, without critically reflecting on it. Therefore, the imperative of

responsibility in the age of fake news must take into account the critical reflection on actions for a better world and life. As such, we can provide the following reformulation: *Reflect critically so that you act responsibly!*

However, this new limited formulation of the imperative of responsibility requires some clarification when we discuss the spread of the fake news phenomenon. It is clear that critical reflection refers to the way fake news is transmitted. Thus, the creator of fake news, through his/her action, is not responsible to others and to the world of the future. The creator pursues his/her own goals (economic, political, religious, for example), devoid of morality. As such, suggesting an imperative of such a person's responsibility may draw his or her attention to the implications of his or her actions. On the other hand, if we think of the receivers of fake news, who can always turn into senders precisely because they do not critically reflect on the message they consume, the imperative of responsibility formulated above has a bipartite role: 1) critical reflection on the received message implies critical reflection on the consequences of its further sharing, and 2) the call to responsibility occurs when a potential receiver finds that he or she is dealing with a manipulative message and, in fact, acts responsibly by deciding not to spread it. Also, the intentions to reformulate the imperative of responsibility are the following: 1) to link critical reflection and responsibility (which really has its place in a possible new ethical theory from Jonas onwards) – in addition, both refer to our way of acting; 2) critical reflection: to reflect critically means first to reflect on the messages (of any kind) received, these being subjected to criticism, which is rather a kind of caution, of doubt (in the Cartesian sense) towards the discrepancy between the message and the facts it speaks of – that is to say, the fact that fake news most often acts as a breach in the correspondence theory of truth (Rose 2020) and therefore the critical effort should remove any such breaches; 3) as these are human actions, critical reflection on them should lead to a better understanding of human behaviour and, implicitly, to a better understanding of present and future society.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this paper, we seek to satisfy the proposed objectives. Thus, starting from the hypothesis that ethics can constitute a solution for preventing the spread of the phenomenon of fake news, we first established the place of ethics in the issue of fake news, arguing that in the age of

technology, human behaviour is as such and therefore new ethical behaviours must be proposed. On the other hand, as regards the imperative of responsibility formulated by Hans Jonas (following in the footsteps of Kant), we have precisely retained the notion of responsibility, which, in the opinion of the German thinker, has been circumvented by classical ethical theories. Therefore, since the behaviour and actions of people in the age of technology are specific, the Kantian categorical imperative can no longer answer them (not even as a law of nature, as the Königsberg thinker proposed). We also argued that the imperative of responsibility proposed by Jonas can be adapted or rethought in the age of fake news, respectively the behaviour and actions specific to this age. Moreover, we suggested that the responsibility, when we discuss the spread of the fake news phenomenon, lies with both the creator and the consumer (who in turn can become a sender by distributing false information). Finally, establishing these aspects, we have rethought a reformulation of the categorical imperative, which should draw attention to the fact that constantly (especially in the online environment, which is the most common channel used for sharing fake news) is necessary to use the critical reflection on messages (of any kind) received, which leads to a responsible conduct towards ourselves, towards others and towards those of the future.

Among the implications of this study, we mention the following: 1) the idea of developing an ethics that responds to the behaviour and human actions of the age of fake news, that focuses on the notion of responsibility, because it entails the notion of imputability; 2) an ethics based on responsibility can complement the new research directions in this field (such as digital ethics); 3) in addition, a responsible ethics can bridge the gap between the behaviour of people online and their behaviour offline, as Jonas' call for accountability in this paper implies a commitment to the people of the future.

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