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“Fake news,” misinformation, and political bias: Teaching news literacy in the 21st century

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In an era where claims of “fake news” abound and more people turn to social media for their daily updates, knowing how to find and critically appraise information is more important than ever. The workshop discussed in this article aims to provide college students with the news literacy needed to make educated decisions about the information they find online.

Course(s)

This workshop is relevant for courses that address the evaluation of information, the value of different sources, the role played by personal biases, and the provenance of ideas, including Introduction to Communication, Public Speaking, Persuasive Communication, Health Communication, and Media Studies.

Objective(s)

- Compare and contrast the different meanings of “fake news” and misinformation
- Identify the various biases that impact selection and interpretation of information
- Develop a set of guidelines with which to evaluate information quality
- Apply evaluation guidelines to contemporary news items

Rationale

News literacy, or the ability to critically analyze and evaluate news content, is an essential component of contemporary citizenship (Craft, Ashley, & Maksi, 2016). In fact, some argue that democracy hinges on people’s ability to separate fact from fiction and recognize persuasion disguised as information (Auberry, 2018). However, today’s increasingly polarized political climate raises concerns about the number of false news stories in circulation, as well as people’s ability to recognize “fake news” (Figueira & Oliveira, 2017). A growing public mistrust in the media (Ingram, 2018), coupled with a lack of shared understanding about what constitutes a reliable news source (Ireland, 2018), further suggests that people no longer feel confident in the information they receive from the news.

Although misinformation and “fake news” are not new phenomena (Mansky, 2018), there has been a recent surge in the use of terms like “post-truth” (Wang, 2016) and “fake news” (Hodges, 2018). This climate of uncertainty about the reliability and veracity of the news is accelerated by a move away from traditional news media such as television, radio, and newspapers. Instead, more people, especially young adults, rely on the internet, and social media in particular, for their news (Mitchell, 2018). These sites, while effective in the rapid

dissemination of information, also aid in the diffusion of uncorroborated, or worse, incorrect information (e.g., Jang & Kim, 2018), with research showing that a quarter of Americans have shared false news on social media platforms (Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016).

Thus, the primary goal of this workshop is to demystify source evaluation in an era of “fake news” and equip undergraduate college students with ideas and tools to help them make informed decisions about the information they find online.

Description

In response to shifts in the current information landscape and the increasing prevalence of “fake news” and misinformation, a librarian specializing in information literacy and a faculty member with expertise in media literacy collaborated to create a workshop that helps students unpack the many meanings of “fake news” and think critically about the news that they consume and share.

Materials

Our content and slides built upon and were inspired by Penn State University’s (n.d.) fake news workshop (see their original workshop materials in the References section of this paper).¹

Implementation

Below is the step-by-step process we used in our “fake news” and misinformation workshop.

1. The workshop begins with an interactive polling activity that asks students to anonymously respond to two questions: “In your opinion, what is fake news?” and “Where do you typically get your news?”. We used Mentimeter, but other free and easy-to-use polling software includes Poll Everywhere and Socrative. This activity reflects the workshop’s focus on digital news by inviting students to respond through their phones or laptops, and creates opportunities to tie students’ responses to the workshop sections that follow.
2. Next, we define and contextualize the notion of “fake news” through academic research (see Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018) and misinformation typologies, like those from the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy (Wardle, 2017). We emphasize that “fake news” is a misnomer. The phrase implies something is either fake or real; yet,

¹ Penn State University’s (PSU) slides provided inspiration for our workshop (of note, their content grew out of a session held at the [University of Minnesota-Duluth](#)). Building on this foundation, we omitted some original material in order to design new content for our local audience. While maintaining the general organization of ideas created by PSU, our workshop included modified introductory poll questions, a revised approach to defining “fake news,” and additional, relevant resources that demonstrated the many expressions of “fake news” (step #2). We developed step #3 to align with our focus on news literacy, and created the “which one is real” headline activity to give attendees additional practice wrestling with assumptions of credibility (step #4). To expand on notions of 21st century news artifacts, we added a meme discussion in step #4. Lastly, we inserted unique examples into our discussion of cognitive biases (step #5), created step #6 to engage students in their own ideas of information assessment, and transformed the activity in step #7 to focus on locally relevant content.

much of what is dubbed “fake news” lies on a continuum ranging from parody to propaganda (cf. Ireland, 2018). This is also an opportunity to connect outside definitions and examples of “fake news” to students’ responses in the polling activity described above.

3. We then discuss how and why trust in the news has changed in recent years, connecting this to the concept of “truth”. We explain that although the news is a form of interpretation, people have learned to trust the news because of measures that journalists have implemented to mitigate or address bias (such as the use of multiple sources, impartial terms, and an awareness of personal preconceptions; for a complete list, see the *Bias and Objectivity* section of American Press Institute’s [Journalism Essentials guide](#)). This discussion addresses some of the changes in the news landscape, such as reductions in the journalism workforce, shifts in how people access the news, and the rise of citizen journalism, and helps explain why news consumers are not always sure who or what they can trust, a situation that makes it easier to promote fake news. This section also helps connect the current environment of “fake news” to how students use technology to access and share information.
4. Next, we present several group activities that demonstrate how difficult it is to assess the veracity of news content. Students first participate in two headline activities, wherein they 1) weigh in on which one of a set of four plausible headlines is fake, and 2) which one of a set of four questionable headlines is real. Responses tend toward a spread of results that lacks a clear, correct answer, which is productive for further discussion. This activity highlights the difficulty in determining fact from fiction when looking at surface characteristics, like a headline.

Following this, we engage in a similar activity using recent, debunked memes to further illustrate the ease with which misinformation is believed and shared online. This allows us to connect the session content to real-world, relatable examples, and begin a discussion of why misinformation spreads so quickly.

Selecting stories and memes that have been debated or debunked in Snopes, Politifact, or similar fact-checking sources provides good fodder for this activity.

5. The previous activity dovetails into a detailed conversation about personal biases and how they influence our perceptions of credibility. In this part of the session, we show students a media bias chart that most of them know and many think is useful (Otero, 2018),² and we talk about its advantages and drawbacks, including how it is informed by the creator’s own perspective(s). We then use this conversation to define and provide examples of personal biases that inform our perception of the news. Our focus is on cognitive biases, and how they are expressed in everyday actions students can relate to

² Find the most recent version here, <https://www.adfontesmedia.com>

(e.g., echo chambers and confirmation bias³ in social media feeds, and the impact of fluency heuristic on news interpretation).

6. A brief activity follows, in which students work in groups to brainstorm a shared list of criteria for scrutinizing the information they find online and determining its credibility, as well as ways they might verify that information. After each group has created their own set of guidelines and shared them with the class, we use these to corroborate and/or augment a list of ready-made criteria (e.g., the agenda, expertise, and reputation of an author or publication, conflicts of interest, evidence or sourcing of claims).
7. The final activity puts students' criteria into action. They are given three online news articles -two real, but politically divergent news articles, and one parody- that are thematically connected (our topic was gun rights/control) and asked to apply their criteria to these articles to determine which sources seem more or less credible and why. In line with the actual time most news consumers spend with a news article (2-3 mins; Mitchell, Matsa, & Stocking, 2016), they have five minutes to consider each article.

Debriefing

After completing the final activity, we facilitate a conversation regarding students' impressions of, and challenges with, the news articles they evaluated. Questions focus on helping students connect the activity to session content (e.g., "To what extent did your opinion of this topic influence your assessment of the veracity of this new article?"). To conclude, we point them to sources they can use to supplement their critical appraisal of the information they encounter (e.g., fact checkers), and emphasize the importance of consulting sources from a range of political persuasions to continue building their news literacy.

Appraisal

Timing

The workshop runs approximately 75 minutes. Modifications that account for time constraints in the classroom may include:

- breaking the content into a sequence of two shorter sessions
- teaching an in-class session with some of the final activity work modified for submission as homework (either individually or in groups).

Additional sessions, as timing permits, would allow for greater discussion of the effects of a rapidly changing media landscape, and their implications for the creation, dissemination, and consumption of the news.

Active learning

³ Find examples of relevant, short videos on confirmation bias here, <https://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2018/02/20/the-best-videos-explaining-confirmation-bias>. Find a list of cognitive biases here, <https://www.kqed.org/lowdown/26829/quiz-how-good-are-you-at-detecting-bias-with-lesson-plan>.

The interactive poll and headline activities prepared students for, and reinforced, the lecture portions of the session in a form of engagement that was educational and entertaining. Additionally, the discussions of “fake news” and subjectivity primed students to be critical of the news as they applied what they had learned throughout the session to the final, hands-on activity.

Impact

This is a high energy workshop and students are actively engaged, in large part due to the combination of lecture and active learning. Students often stay afterward to ask questions about sources they consult and recommendations for ways to do further legwork.

Regarding the brief activity described in #6, students often identify issues like authorship, publication’s point of view, audience, and supporting evidence as key criteria for determining a source’s reliability. Despite discussions of cognitive biases prior to the activity, very few include them in their list of criteria. There is room for further development of this component of news reception.

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