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Interrogating Fake News in the Composition Classroom: Pedagogical Plans

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The current American president, Donald J. Trump, has used the term *fake news* for all media that criticize him, his ideologies, or his policies. Although the president has usually targeted the entire mainstream press, in a January 17, 2018 GOP blog entitled “The Highly Anticipated 2017 Fake News Awards,” his team pinpointed certain newspapers and networks for their biased journalistic mistakes: ABC, *Time*, *The New York Times* (two stories), *The Washington Post* (two stories), CNN (four stories), and *Newsweek*. These media outlets subsequently addressed their errors, retracted their stories, and even disciplined their writers—responsible habits of sound journalism—but this blog ignored these corrections. After disparaging these media sources for their reporting mistakes, many of which hardly deserved the charge of “fake news,” the blog ended with an encomium to President Trump and his accomplishments, which ironically contained exaggerated, fabricated claims (actual fake news) about economic growth, the rising employment rates of Hispanics and African Americans, and the retreat of ISIS. In fact, in the period of January 2017 to December 30, 2018, President Trump has voiced an astounding 7,645 false or misleading claims. Not surprisingly, the greatest number of half-truths concern immigration, the subject of his first major campaign speech in June 27, 2015, when he referred to the US as a “dumping ground” for Mexico’s worst (Capehart, 2017). Several of these false claims derive from certain statements repeated over one hundred times (*Washington Post*, 2018). This iteration matters because in the already chaotic and confusing media ecosphere, “when we see multiple messages about the same topic, our brains use that as a short-cut to credibility” (Wardle, 2017). In other words, if repeated often enough, even the most outlandish claims, such as the earth being flat or climate change being an alarmist global hoax, may acquire the semblance of truth.

Despite President Trump’s misuse of the word and his own falsifications, the phenomenon of *fake news* is far more complicated and far more dangerous. Some have categorized fake news according to its complexity of information and its intention to deceive, whether they divide it into seven types (Wardle, 2017) or only two types (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017); or according to its goals of satirizing an event/person, making money, and/or promoting an agenda (Barclay, 2018). Others equate fake news with propaganda, hoaxes, and falsifications “masterfully manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are easily spread online to large audiences willing to believe the fictions and spread the word” (Holnan, 2016). On the other hand, Benkler, Faris, & Roberts (2018) reject *fake news* altogether for more precise terms delineating types of fabrications and their respective purposes: *propaganda and disinformation*, which manipulate people “for political ends”; *bullshit*, profit-driven communication that completely disregards the truth; and *misinformation*, unintentionally misleading information that is not politically motivated (p. 24). These authors also argue that the creators and disseminators of false claims may not have the goal of persuasion, but manipulation, or, at the worst, disorientation. Disorientation is the debilitating condition in which the target population, overwhelmed by too many fabrications and confusing messages, is completely unable to distinguish truths from falsehoods (p. 24). Conservative talk-show host Rush Limbaugh, who has long railed against “the four corners of deceit” (academia, government, science, and the

media) (Horn, 2010) is one of the biggest generators of disorientation, a condition endangering if not disabling democracy.

Recently, a new genre of fake news, *deep fakes*, has raised the stakes on both the spread of disinformation and the difficulty of distinguishing between the real and the unreal, between fact and fiction. Deep fakes, a portmanteau of the terms *deep learning* and *fake* are video and/or audio fabrications generated from existing data, which may or may not be detectable depending on the expertise of their creators. Although this machine learning technique was originally limited to the AI community, the emergence of FakeApp, and the 2017 Reddit posts of celebrities' heads on adult film stars' bodies brought this genre to public attention (Schwartz, 2018). Creating a deep fake still takes subsequent skill, but machine-learning techniques may enable regular citizens to circumvent and adapt the technology to avoid detection. In the worst case scenario, deep fakes could be used to create propaganda to support ideologies and damage reputations. Imagine, for instance, the catastrophic effects of a deep fake of candidate Elizabeth Warren shouting racist epithets if it were released a few days before the US election. This is but one example of how deep fakes, like all fake news, may “be weaponized in ways that weaken the fabric of democracy itself” (Schwartz, 2018).

Both the normalization and popularity of fake news, in all its forms, have also led some to argue that we are currently living in an era of post-truth. According to Holnan, PolitiFact named all fake news “2016 Lie of the Year” whereas Oxford named *post-truth* its “2016 Word of the Year,” which seemed appropriate given the mistruths involved in both the Brexit fiasco and the American presidential campaigns. We are living through a fuzzy time in which facts may or may not have a relationship with the truth, an era in which “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (McIntyre, 2017, Location 173) or political affiliation. This last explanation is eerily close to Colbert's word *truthism*, a state referring to whether a fact *feels true* according to whether it motivates a person's emotions and supports their ideology—even if that fact is a deep fake video of ex-President Obama referring to the current U.S. leader as a “dipshit” (Vincent, 2018).

In a crowded information environment in which people rarely have time to dissect texts, and in which they encounter repeated mistruths, these fabrications spread, aided by the ease of digital technology.

My Understanding of The Composition Instructor's Role in the Post-Truth Environment

As the previous paragraphs indicate, there is an “epistemic crisis” (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018) invading American society in which educators should and must intervene. That is, educators have a responsibility to equip their students with tools for interrogating fabrications such as fake news. Using their own expertise and course curriculum, they must help students navigate and, ideally, not contribute to this current crisis. Educators must guide their students in not only understanding the phenomena of fake news, but also in assessing its negative impact on thinking critically, understanding key issues, and making informed decisions—all of which affect democracy and the public sphere. Unfortunately, I do not possess

the requisite skillset to explain machine-learning techniques nor the forensic technology to identify deep fakes, but as a composition teacher, I may facilitate students in strengthening their critical thinking and research skills, so that they may recognize more low-technological versions of fake news and distinguish truths from fabrications.

These tasks, though, are admittedly tricky in the current polarized political atmosphere dominated by a president who caters to a radicalized right and a Democratic house who wants to quash, repeatedly, the president's worse impulses and policies. Instructors must also contend with both a perceived, if not real, political gap between themselves and their students; that is, there is the prevailing stereotype that colleges and universities are havens for Republican-bashing liberals, places lacking what Cass Sunstein (2018) refers to as "ideological diversity." Furthermore, the current president, appealing to his populist base and following Limbaugh's lead about the "four corners of deceit," has also turned *liberal* and *smart* into potent pejoratives, ones he often, along with *fake news*, applies to the mainstream media. Thus, conservative students, such as those at my university—Michigan Tech in Houghton, Michigan—may arrive to class already deeply suspicious of their liberal instructors and their curriculum. These same students might also assume that the only prevalent (and harmful) media bias is a liberal one, echoing the sentiment of the most popular and main Republican network, Fox News,¹ whose deep affiliations with the radicalized right (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018) also make it a fake news megaphone. The situation becomes more complex when students confront these uncomfortable ideas in first-year courses, which are often seen as hurdles taught by members of an inexperienced graduate labor force, many of whom may be international students with outsiders' perspectives. As a very mature and liberal graduate student from Canada, I am in a particularly awkward position to instruct students on media bias and the dangers of fake news, for they often see my stance as elitist, anti-American, and even, gasp!, *socialist*. Therefore, in leading students through these tasks and their associated concepts, instructors must recognize and admit their own politics, while remaining as centrist as possible and stressing that respecting facts and recognizing mistruths are important to everyone across the political spectrum.

Next are summarized two lessons I have used and one that I plan to attempt for imparting to students the importance of creating reasonable arguments, of attacking unreasonable ones, and of recognizing faulty and/or slanted information: stressing the importance of Composition to a healthy public discourse, distinguishing between types of fabrications, and investigating media bias and its relationship to the factuality of information.

¹ Fox is currently the most watched television news network (Katz, 2018), with its October 2018 viewers totaling more than those of MSNBC and CNN combined. This network is growing increasingly popular, averaging more viewers in the 24-hour-day in October 2018 than in October 2016, the strategic month before the election. "FNC marked 28 consecutive months as the No. 1 basic cable network in prime time with nearly 1.7 million total viewers for the month of October 2018, and the 5th consecutive month as the most-watched basic cable network in prime time with more than 2.8 million viewers, according to Nielsen data" (Katz, 2018). To put this number in perspective, MSNBC's and CNN's viewers were 1,575,000 and 931,000. In October 2018, *Hannity* also claimed the title of the most watched cable news program, for the seventh month in a row.

For each of these lessons, there are summaries of key readings and brief explanations of classroom activities.

Stressing the Importance of the First-Year Composition Course

To develop an ethos of objectivity, and to stress the significance of composition beyond the classroom, I assign, near the beginning of the term, John Duffy's (2012) short article "[Virtuous Arguments](#)." Although written a few years ago to address Rush Limbaugh's inflammatory rhetoric about Sandra Fluke, this essay speaks even more to the current moment. Using key figures from across the political spectrum, such as Rush Limbaugh, Maxine Waters and Neil Boortz, Duffy argues that the state of public discourse is abysmal, toxic, and contagious. However, he contends that in composition classrooms lies at least a partial cure: in these, "there is a well-organized, systematic, and dedicated effort taking place each day to promote an ethical discourse grounded in the virtues of honesty, accountability, and generosity." He emphasizes that this course's instruction in argument is crucial not only for writing essays (and passing the course), but also for developing ethical reasoning; creating sound arguments is fundamentally about acknowledging "the rationality of the audience," developing a relationship of trust, and making "a statement of our own integrity, our willingness to support assertions with proofs." In other words, the first step in persuasion is respecting your reader by building an argument based on reasons and evidence, rather than emotions, and carefully checking your sources for both mis and disinformation.

Duffy's essay is assigned for its several pedagogical purposes. With its clear reasoning, strong examples, variety of sources, integration of naysayers, and respectful, yet impassioned tone, it acts as a model of virtuous argument that students may later emulate. The author also appears fair by including links to debased rhetoric from several political leaders, dismantling the idea that liberal professors customarily attack only the right. Duffy's linked sources also enable students to explore these unhealthy exchanges further and find comparative examples for classroom discussion. He also addresses how composition is often type casted as a useless class concerning only the aloof (and, they believe, impractical) studies of grammar and rhetoric. Instead, Duffy enthusiastically hales composition as a course that makes a difference: students learn not only how to create effective arguments, but also how to recognize ineffective, misinformed, and toxic ones—essential, valuable real-world skills for bettering discourse in the civic arena and improving democracy. His essay also underscores crucial points repeated throughout the term: analyzing bad arguments, misinformation, and disinformation in the polluted information environment *will* involve students confronting their own confirmation biases and performing the uncomfortable task of critiquing political leaders whose ideologies align with their own. To this end, when we read this article in class, I request that students bring in faulty and/or unfair statements from political leaders they both *respect* and *disrespect* so that they may practice the virtue of fairness while confronting their own prejudices.

In other words, Duffy's essay helps to situate composition as a course in which students recognize that it is their duty, not just as students, but as both American and global citizens, to understand the values of ethical arguments and the dangers of faulty reasoning and mistruths

everywhere, even those lurking in the most outrageous examples of fake news. Throughout the term, I regularly review this essay as well as iterate that composition helps them develop crucial critical thinking skills for navigating the murky post-truth waters.

Investigating Fake News and Its Dissemination

Once students are familiar with critiquing the strengths and weaknesses of arguments, tasks which begin with Duffy's essay and continue for several weeks on both written and multimodal texts, they progress to interrogating and categorizing fake news. This analysis takes place near the planning of their core research assignments (the annotated bibliography and the persuasive research essay). To distinguish between the current misuse of the term *fake news* and its actual definitions and ramifications, they will read selections from Barclay's *Fake News, Propaganda, and Plain Old Lies* (2018), which returns to yellow journalism to uncover the tangled, historical roots of fake news. Also assigned are Wardle's brief but pithy article "[Fake News: It's Complicated](#)" (2017) and its hyperlinks along with this [infographic](#) (nd.) from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, which offers clues for discerning fake news. In class, I also address the current misuse of the term *fake news*, unpack its various definitions, and direct them to other resources, such as various fake news wikis.

Students enjoy reading and responding to Wardle's article because of its nonpartisan position that people of all political beliefs are susceptible to fake news and that, for everyone, emotions and personal predispositions contribute to the spread of disinformation. The author also connects the growth of fake news to the transformation from a one-to-many broadcast system to a one-to-one system in which atoms of information are "targeted at users who are more likely to accept and share a particular message," whether it is a "misleading or fabricated article, image, video or meme" to those within their circle. This article, then, helps students understand how their partialities, prejudices, and (seemingly innocuous) social media practices, such as sharing questionable articles and suspected deep fakes without vetting them, might be contributing to the spread of falsifications and further confusion between truth and fiction. Lastly, she creates a useful matrix classifying types of fake news and the motivations for creating them.

In class, we first consider Wardle's pithy quote that fighting fake news involves instructing people "to second guess their instinctual reactions. If you find yourself incredibly angry at a piece of content or feeling smug (because your viewpoint has been reaffirmed), take another look." Students discuss whether they have ever shared a dubious story without thoroughly reading it or checking it because its content bothered or, alternatively, vindicated them. Often, Stephen Colbert's definition of *truthism* is raised in conjunction with sharing these texts.

After we review these sources in class, students form groups to locate at least two particularly viral but suspicious stories (or a story and a meme) circulating on social media, Twitter, and so on, ones they have shared and/or have been shared with them. They then analyze these texts according to two criteria: Wardle's misinformation matrix and the prompts from the IFLIA. That is, they first need to identify the type of fabrication as well as whether its

intent is to parody, manipulate, persuade, and so on. When using the IFLIA criteria, students must also evaluate the writer's credentials, political affiliation, and any potential bias in the story's original place of publication. Ideally, they begin this activity in class and then finish it at home by completing slides from a shared Google PowerPoint, thus contributing the content for the next day's class.

During or near this class session, students are also directed to these online sources: Fact-Check's [Misinformation directory](#) (2018) and [PolitiFact's Truth-0-Meter](#) (2019). In the past, students have admitted their unfamiliarity with these resources as well as their subsequent usefulness for evaluating circulating political untruths. These sources also create a bridge to the next learning module: recognizing media bias.

Analyzing Media Bias and its Relationship to Fake News

What is also key to understanding the fake news phenomena is grasping that both mis and disinformation emerge not only from haphazardly written stories shared on social media, but also from respected and/or well-known media outlets. By this point in the term, the class has discussed the relationship between confirmation bias and the echo chamber. Students are also working on their extended annotated bibliography for their research essay, in which they must summarize and analyze the arguments and evidence of their sources, the methods of these articles, and the credibility and potential bias of their authors. Because they may incorporate two newspaper/magazine articles from well-known sources, they often conflate *popular* and *respected*, a particularly dangerous habit in the current media atmosphere dominated by the right-leaning, fact-bending network Fox News, and by the trend of media outlets moving either further left or further right and producing viral, biased stories.

To make them more media-savvy, I first introduce them to Otero's [media bias org chart](#) (2018), and, on occasion, have even emphasized that all their newspaper/magazine sources belong to the green section, and, if absolutely necessary, the yellow. The website <https://mediabiasfactcheck.com> (2018) is also presented and reviewed for its content, organization, information, and methodology. This website's top menu divides media resources into the following categories: left bias, left-center bias, least biased, right-center bias, right bias, pro-science, conspiracy-pseudoscience, questionable sources, and satire. It also clearly distinguishes between media bias and factual reporting, so students may see that even if a source has a political slant with which they disagree, this source may still score highly on factual reporting and accurate information. Contrarily, a media source confirming their beliefs may or may not be reliable. This resource is introduced for two main reasons: students must use it to verify the credibility of every newspaper or magazine article for their annotated bibliography; and they will eventually recruit it for a future class activity.

That is, I am currently designing two classroom activities around the Media Bias/Fact Check website. First, students will be given a (paper or digital) version of the media bias factcheck arrow and then be divided into small groups. These groups will be assigned a controversial, polarized, but not overdone topic recently in the news, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline, the immigration debate, the defunding of the Special Olympics, and so on. Using the

chosen topic, they will a) either perform a simple Google Search and locate five to ten different sources; or b) analyze a selection of sources given to them. They will study these sources, analyzing them for their ideological bent, slanted language, and the credibility of information, fact-checking if necessary. Then, they will rank these sources before comparing their analyses with those on the Media Bias/Fact Check website. If there is a discrepancy, students will discuss why their evaluations differ, which raises the specter of their own political biases. That is, both very liberal and very conservative students often judge sources that disagree with their ideologies most harshly. Lastly, students will rate the sources from the most to least reputable, imagining how and if they could use them for a potential university research essay.

On the subsequent day in class, or as a discussion topic, I may also request that students deeply explore either the “Conspiracy-Pseudoscience” or “Questionable Sources” sections of the same website. If they are working in the first section, they must further investigate some of these conspiracies and generalize about those popular on both the left and the right. If they are assigned the second section, they will select a few of these questionable sources, travelling to their websites and analyzing their content for bias, factual claims, fabrications, fake news, and so on. Students will then upload their analyses online as Canvas posts, each one providing a deeper window into these sources, exposing the entire class to these fabrications. In the past, I have found that, in general, students not only really enjoy researching conspiracies and extremely unbelievable, biased fake news, but also tend to explore their findings further for future essays, such as researching the origins of certain conspiracies.

Conclusion: Emphasizing that Composition Matters to an Ethical Public Discourse

As is evident from these sample readings and basic lesson plans, teaching students how to navigate the post-truth world and the polluted media atmosphere does not necessarily mean re-inventing the wheel and discarding those sound practices, such as thinking critically, analyzing texts, conducting research, and scrutinizing sources, which are already situated in the composition curriculum. By using these and other associated activities, instructors may also appear centrist while helping students recognize their own biases, the slants of various media sources, and diverse types of untruths.

Whatever their curriculum, instructors must always emphasize that students have a significant role in detecting fake news, critiquing it, responding to it, and, ideally, eradicating it. Or, as Duffy (2012) puts it, in the first-year writing course of composition, students may not only work to move “us toward healthier, more productive, and more generous forms of public argument” but also endeavor to build a healthy public sphere in which fake news will fail to thrive.

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