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Not All 'Fake News' Is Equal: How Should Higher Education Respond to Fake News and in the post-Truth Era

Abstract

In examining how higher education ought to respond to 'fake news' and the landscape of the 'post-truth' world, it is imperative to distinguish between accidental, ignorant, or intentional factual inaccuracies. The motives of accidental, ignorant, or disinformation are not uniform and, as such, the responses by institutions of higher education must not be uniform either. With increased literacy, as well as increased ease of publication and dissemination, the dangers of misinformation have been magnified. Stakeholders in higher education ought to develop multiple strategies responding to 'fake news' that are unique to the divergent forms of misinformation in the 'post-truth' world.

Keywords

media literacy, fake news, post-truth

In examining how higher education ought to respond to 'fake news' and the landscape of the 'post-truth' world, it is imperative to distinguish between accidental, ignorant, or intentional factual inaccuracies. The motives of accidental, ignorant, or disinformation are not uniform and, as such, the responses by institutions of higher education must not be uniform either. These three forms of erroneous information are as old as literacy itself, but with increased literacy as well as increased access to forms of dissemination and publication, the dangers of untrue information have been magnified. Stakeholders in higher education ought to develop multiple strategies responding to 'fake news' that are unique to the divergent forms of misinformation in the 'post-truth' world.

Accidental 'Fake News'

Accidental misinformation occurs for a variety of reasons. In mainstream journalism, misinformation can occur when journalists do not follow established journalistic standards. For example, in 2014 *Rolling Stone* published "A Rape on Campus" by Sabrina Erdely concerning an alleged gang rape at Duke University that was later determined to be unverifiable. Erdely broke journalistic standards by publishing without investigating the claims before publication and *Rolling Stone* rushed to publish without following procedures as well. And, in addition to the damage to reputation of the accused, Erdely's fake news jump-started the careers of both Richard B. Spencer and Stephen Miller (Wiedeman, 2017). For years, Miller has regularly repeated baseless fake news about widespread voter fraud (Kessler, 2017, Sanders, 2017). Thus, from a certain perspective, mainstream fake news begot fringe fake news.

Similarly, accidental misinformation in academia can occur when researchers take shortcuts to research and do not adhere to established academic research standards. One of the most peculiar cases of academic fraud in recent years may be the case of Sir David Latchman. Latchman oversees a research laboratory with multiple accusations of academic malfeasance and is listed as co-author on numerous articles of altered research, yet incredulously was exonerated of wrongdoing by reason of ignorance (Cressey, 2017). At best, Latchman repeatedly allowed himself to be used as a co-author without reviewing the articles. As Draconian as it may seem, identifying poor research and consistent consequences regarding employment of poor researchers may be the most appropriate manner of response to 'fake news' and the landscape of the 'post-Truth' world.

Fake news can also be a result of poor business models regarding the creation of educational materials. Course designers in higher education and the educational materials industry are not required to have advanced degrees in their areas of responsibility. Course designers may seem more cost efficient than PhD's, but at what "cost"? Undereducated content developers mean undereducated course content. For example, a recent audit of course content for an *Introduction to Political Science* at a local institution revealed that the course developer was unaware that the primary liberal and conservative parties in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland were Labour and Conservative, not Liberal and Conservative. The course materials incorrectly included hyperlinks to <https://www.conservatives.com/> and <https://www.libdems.org.uk/> but not to <https://labour.org.uk/>. This is an example of failed

business operations regarding higher education and not a nefarious agenda to mislead. Of course, this is not to say that degrees and credentials are a panacea to fake news as discussed later in this article.

Ignorance

Ignorant and intentional misinformation is more complicated and the response by higher education must be more complicated as well. Ignorant misinformation may be subdivided into ignorant misinformation based upon poor education and ignorant misinformation based upon neoliberalism. The question remains: Is the misinformation innocently ignorant or maliciously ignorant?

Ignorant Misinformation: Poor Education

The solution to ignorant misinformation borne out of poor education is simple enough: more and/or better education. Specifically, increased educational outcomes tied to critical thinking is the most successful tool to combating the spread of unintentional misinformation. Many educational institutions espouse the value of critical thinking, but unless there are measurable outcomes tied to course level, program level, and institutional level outcomes, then ‘critical thinking’ is as vague and hollow an educational term as the other in vogue terms of educational lexicon as ‘rigor’ and ‘lifelong learning.’

Of course, education is not a panacea to misinformation. In 2016, researchers at the Stanford History Education Group of the Stanford Graduate School of Education released a study on critical thinking and the Internet which concluded that students are often fooled by sponsored content and inconsistently recognize political bias of social messages (Donald, 2016). The researchers extended the study to identify critical thinking skills and the Internet regarding adult researchers. In 2017, the second study concluded that the more successful critical thinkers read laterally whereas those who read the Internet vertically are more likely to be duped by fake news (Spector, 2017). The lateral researchers used a variety of sites and searches to validate the information in the study, whereas the vertical researchers tended to focus on a singular source but read that site in a more detailed process than the lateral researchers. It is imperative that educators and all stakeholders instill effective tools of media literacy such as thinking laterally when validating or evaluating information.

An important tool in the arsenal of critical thinking is Assignment: Media Literacy (Hobbs, n.d.). Assignment: Media Literacy was created by Renee Hobbs and *The Discovery Channel*. Hobbs is the Director of the Media Education Lab at the University of Rhode Island and has developed validated measures of media literacy competencies for adolescents. The integration of systematic media literacy in K-12 education is imperative in the post-truth era. However, media literacy and critical thinking are not the only tools to combat fake news.

Critical thinking by educators and students alike must be buttressed with content knowledge as well. A History Major at University of Colorado Boulder entering without any college credits from secondary school must take 39 credits in history to earn a Bachelor of Arts in History.¹ At the same institution, a Social Studies Education Major need only take 24 credit of

¹ <https://www.colorado.edu/history/sites/default/files/attached-files/Four-year%20plans.pdf>

history to earn a Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Social Studies Education.² The same pattern exists at all undergraduate programs. Education majors are required to take, understandably, education courses. Unfortunately, the effect is that social studies teachers have significantly less of a background in the content area than peers who major in the content field itself.

Another issue in education is the lack of compensation parity with other professional degrees. This phenomenon has its roots in gender discrimination. Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the landmark decision in *Weeks v. Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Co.*, 5 Cir. (1969),³ most women in the labor market were limited to employment as secretaries, nurses and teachers (Baig, 2013). Increased employment opportunities for women (a benefit to society, but possibly a detriment to education), increased bureaucracy of public education, salary and benefit stagnation, have also contributed to the decreases in quality education nationwide. With decreased quality education, the opportunities for misinformation in the social studies increases with few foreseeable solutions.

Ignorant Misinformation: Neotribalism

As a result of the 2007-2008 Great Recession as well as the election of the first non-White President of the United States, there seems to be a resurgence of neotribalism in the United States regarding education, ethnoracial identification, and politics. The emergence of multiple histories (multi-ethnoracial history, economic history, social history, etc.) has led to reactionary educational, racial, and political movements that seek to restore Great Man Theory to the prominent and/or dominant position in the social studies classrooms of America. This dynamic was particularly noticeable in the 2014 Jefferson County (Colorado) School Board protests that grabbed national attention (Mitchell & Erdahl, 2014). Great Man Theory typically reduces or limits history to the biographies of kings, presidents, and wars. Great Man Theory is expedient and often patriotic but fails to include 'history from below' and non-dominant narratives. Indeed, the inclusion of multiple historical perspectives with public education has been derided as revisionism and unpatriotic. With the ease of publishing non-peer reviewed materials, disaffected and alienated demographic groups have increase the generation ignorant misinformation intended to soothe wounded neotribalism egos and protect a disappearing identity, even if that identity construction was based upon a selectively perceived reality in the first place.

As mentioned earlier, Sabrina Eldely's article "A Rape on Campus" helped facilitate the careers of both Richard B. Spencer and Stephen Miller (Wiedeman, 2017). While Miller has regularly repeated baseless fake news about widespread voter fraud (Kessler, 2017, Sanders, 2017), Spencer created the modern Alt-Right movement (a term which Spencer credits himself with coining). While it may be unclear what the distinction is between fake news and hate speech, since 2017 Twitter has removed the blue checkmark from accounts linked to hate speech and is allegedly seeking to remove Russian bots from the social media platform (Rosenberg,

² <https://catalog.colorado.edu/undergraduate/colleges-schools/education/programs-study/teacher-licensure-program/undergraduate-nondegree/#socialstudies-text>

³ <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/408/228/450803/>

2017). However, the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy has tracked Russian influence operations on Twitter. The Hamilton 68 project tracks over 600 Russian accounts on Twitter,⁴ yet the accounts are still allowed to operate by Twitter (Solon, 2018). Which is the third type of misinformation: intentional fake news or disinformation.

The Nexus Between Neo-Tribalism and Intentional Fake News

The difference between ignorant neotribalism and intentional disinformation is the almost indistinguishable. Increasingly political ideology has become a dominant aspect of identity construction by Americans (Sullivan, 2018). No longer do Americans identify themselves and demonize others based upon race and religion, but increasingly political ideology is a lens to judge the patriotism of others. Too often, the ideology of the sources of information is now deemed as the sole determinant of the validity of the information. After all, "If Fox News says it, it must be true and, if MSN says it, then it must be wrong" and vice versa. As a result, Americans are easily manipulated by fake news that targets the preconceived notion that political opposites are enemies of the state (Farhi, 2017, Martineau, 2017) and not merely stakeholders with an alternative perspective. After all, as the adage goes, "if you repeat a lie enough, you come to believe it."

Where is the line between *wanting* something to be true, and intentionally misleading people to believe it is true? On January 21, 2017, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer accused the media of deliberately underestimating the size of the crowd for President Trump's inaugural ceremony. He stated that the ceremony had drawn the "largest audience to ever witness an inauguration – period – both in person and around the globe" (Cillizza, 2017). The next day, White House Counselor Kellyanne Conway defended Spicer's false statement about the attendance numbers by saying Spicer was giving "alternative facts" (Blake, 2017). Were Spicer and Conway espousing neo-tribalistic hopes or intentionally spreading fake news? The world may never know.

Disinformation | Intentional Misinformation

While all misinformation is frustrating, ignorantly neotribalism and intentional misinformation are a clear and present danger to democratic society. The intentional creation of fake news to divide Americans is clearly related to rising battles of identity politics. Intentional misinformation is also created and disseminated both domestically and internationally. Recent research by Darren Linvill and Patrick Warren of Clemson University into Russian misinformation operations by the Internet Research Agency indicate a a global campaign of propaganda by the Russian government (Mak, 2018). However, Russian cyber-bots did not divide America, the Russians merely exploited a division that already existed (Moshiri, 2017).

The United States is responsible for its own influencing campaigns as well (Ventresca, 2004). Yet Americans are more vulnerable to misinformation campaigns by the People's Republic of China, North Korea and Russia than those autocratic states are vulnerable to similar campaigns by the United States. While democratic societies may be more vulnerable to misinformation than autocratic states, democratic states are not helpless. It is worth noting that

⁴ <https://dashboard.securingsdemocracy.org/>

Russia attempted to influence the 2017 French elections, but were not as successful as the operations to influence the 2016 American elections (Nossiter, Sanger, & Perloth, 2017; Tamkin, 2017). There are successful strategies to inoculate elections from fake news disseminated by foreign powers. The French government went to the major news providers, showed evidence of Russian influencing operations and what the operations might look like and, the French news providers ignored Russian influencing operations as the attacks unfolded (Daniels, 2017). The French news organizations were more vested in truth than ratings or political outcomes. Can the same be said of the American media?

Conclusion

The question remains, however, how do we inoculate elections from fake news perpetuated by internal sub-state actors who are intent on exploiting the post-truth world of today? It is imperative that institutions of higher learning not succumb to the temptation of constantly fighting and demonizing fake news. Some sources of fake news ought to be ignored depending upon the severity of the misinformation. The insidious danger of the post-truth era is that fighting fake news can have the unintended effect of strengthen and even entrench the forces of misinformation spreading fake news like the virology of conspiracy theories. From a psychological perspective, fake news and conspiracy theories are almost like a religious belief in a higher power; an excuse for a personal lack of control or influence in the world around us (Ludden, 2018). Essentially, it is the desire to be right and avoid the responsibility to question one's self.

Thus, knowing when to engage the purveyors of fake news, and when not to engage, is as much about emotional and social intelligence as it is the preservation of personal sanity. Goleman (1995) and Goleman (2006) are excellent resources for studying emotional and social intelligence. Advocates for media literacy must not become like Don Quixote's charging after each windmill of untruth. The epistemic responsibility lies upon the dealers in fake news, not the addicted consumers of fake news. As W. K. Clifford stated in his work *The Ethics of Belief* (1877), "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (Clifford, 1877).

Of course, some fake news should be actively exposed. Education and freedom of the press have always been the tools used to identify misinformation. Literacy education like Renee Hobbs' Assignment: Media Literacy to develop health skepticism and literacy competencies. Better compensation for primary and secondary educators would increase the pool of passionate critical thinkers in public education. Increasing content credit hours for educators and improved research methodology curriculum in higher education would increase both competencies and media literacy of educators. Finally, the use of higher education grants and projects to educate and pressure social media giants to continue policing their media platforms is imperative.

Educators and institutions of higher education must be humble in responding to fake news in a post-Truth Era; mockery and arrogance are the tools of fake news and must be avoided by those who would combat accidental, ignorant, and intentional misinformation. Love the purveyors of fake news but hate the fake news. It is civility that will ultimately *trump* fake news.

To paraphrase Theodore Parker and Martin Luther King, Jr., “Let us realize the arc of the infoverse is long, but it bends toward truth.”

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