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Understanding and Undermining Fake News From the Classroom

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Beyond 12

Fake News and the Post-Truth Era

It's too soon to know what will define Donald Trump's presidency, but one of the defining characteristics of his campaign was a near-total disregard for facts. According to PolitiFact ("Donald Trump's file," n.d.), about 70% of Trump's statements have been either mostly false, completely false, or outright lies. Candidate Trump wasn't the only one dealing in dishonesty, but the ubiquity of falsehood surrounding his election contributed to the Oxford Dictionaries naming *post-truth* its 2016 Word of the Year.

Fake news (Drobnic Holan, 2016) might be the most pernicious form of post-truth. PolitiFact called fake news its Lie of the Year, pointing out that fake news is "the boldest sign of a post-truth society" (para. 12) and that it "found a willing enabler in Trump" (para. 8). Americans should perceive this phenomenon as an existential threat to democracy. What truths remain self-evident if truth itself becomes counterfeit? A post-truth society has no moral center, no basis for conversation, no shared future.

If the Trump era is to be the era of post-truth, then schools will have a particularly critical role to play in teaching students to favor reason and evidence over sentiment and preconception. More simply, we need to get better at teaching what Carl Sagan (1995) called "the fine art of baloney detection" (p. 201). Educators must also help students explore and deliberate on political issues. This article examines several particular challenges of fake news on the internet, and offers strategies and resources to support critical thinking and positive political engagement in the classroom.

The Particular Challenges of Fake News on the Internet

Fake news has a long and brutal history (Soll, 2016) that far precedes what contemporary readers might think of as "real news." The three elements that separate fake news from real news are fabrication (i.e., fake news is conjured rather than reported), deception (i.e., fake news is designed to persuade rather than inform), and virality (i.e., fake news thrives on superficiality and escalation rather than depth and moderation). What's new about the modern version? Drobnic Holan (2016) describes it aptly as "made-up stuff, 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" (para. 2). Fake news on the internet is fueled by technologies and business models that present at least four particular challenges that suggest new approaches to the way teachers and students approach media.

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The first challenge of fake news on the internet is a new organizing principle used by social media to present information. Imagine walking into the bulk-food section of your local grocery store where you can scoop and bag your own dried goods. You fill a bag with flour and then head home to bake a cake. However, as you eat the cake, you suddenly realize that it doesn't taste right. In fact, it tastes really wrong. You go back to the grocery store and, to your horror, realize that you accidentally took home a bag of rat poison, which was right next to the flour. They're both fine white powders.

Why does that thought experiment seem far-fetched? Likely, it's because the idea of two completely different kinds of items sitting next to each other on a shelf violates the organizing principle that we expect in grocery stores. Typically, grocery stores group items by product category rather than, say, texture or color. The same principle extends to news: Grocery stores typically don't position *The New York Times* alongside *National Enquirer* because most people understand that tabloids and gossip magazines are in a different category than the real news. (We might label that category "junk" since it's often next to the candy bars in the checkout line.)

In contrast, social media companies like Facebook leverage novel technologies and business models to decouple content from its original source and re-aggregate it under a different organizing principle. This ability to mix and match articles from different sources has forced major changes in traditional news outlets and given birth to countless new ones. For example, in 2015, the *Washington Post* (WashPostPR, 2015) announced that it would begin releasing all of its content—about 1,200 pieces each day—as individual items on Facebook. As a result, Facebook can place a story from the *Post* next to something as fake as a story about Hillary Clinton selling weapons to ISIS (e.g., "BOOM! Wikileaks Confirms," 2016), so long as both publishers pay for the spot.

On one hand, this decoupling and re-aggregating enables individuals to consume content from a variety of sources within a single application. On the other, it means that everyone consuming news via social media—62% of adults according to Pew Research Center (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016)—needs to assess the veracity of every single article that comes across their feed individually. Understanding this new organizing principle is critical for navigating the information ecosystem.

The second challenge of fake news on the internet is anonymity. Pseudonymous authorship is nothing new and, in many cases, serves a legitimate purpose; but the internet has enabled and normalized anonymous publication in new ways, which is problematic in the world of news. The ability to obscure one's identity by publishing from behind a handle (or multiple handles) is central to the model of platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Anonymity is anathema to professional journalism because it undermines the reader's ability to assess an author's credibility. Anonymity is also a shield from personal responsibility, empowering people to create and spread false information with practically no individual consequences. As a result, the identifiability and track record of journalists—a "trusted filter within civil society" (Soll, 2016, para. 17)—has never been more valuable.

The third challenge of fake news on the internet is the filter bubble. This phenomenon was originally described by Eli Pariser (2011) in the context of online-search products whose algorithms learn to deliver personalized results to each user. The result is that two different people can search for the same term on the same search engine,

but receive different results. In *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*, Frank Pasquale (2015) warns that hyper-personalization creates "a perfect little world of our own, a world tailored so exquisitely to our individual interests and preferences that it is different from the world as seen by anyone else" (p. 60). This uniqueness is particularly problematic in the context of news because productive discourse in a diverse society requires participants to share a common base of facts.

Filter bubbles confound the deceptively simple act of internet searches. As *Education Week*'s Liana Heitin (2016) recently noted, "[P]art of digital literacy is learning to search for content in an online space. Students have to query a search engine using keywords and navigate those results" ("Finding and consuming," para. 9). Before the algorithmic search, teachers could expect students to apply a common research protocol to a question or subject and discover similar information. There were simply fewer sources of truth at the end of each search. "At least with a dead-tree newspaper," writes Pasquale (2015), "we know that everybody looking at it sees the same thing" (p. 60).

Digital literacy must reckon with the effects of filter bubbles, which are difficult to deconstruct because of their opacity. Corporations like Google have every incentive to keep the logic underlying our personalized search results a secret. "[T]heir dominance is so complete," writes Pasquale, "and their technology so complex, that they have escaped pressures for transparency and accountability that kept traditional media answerable to the public" (p. 61). Teachers and students—indeed, all of us—are left with the disconcerting task of relying on search engines to navigate the world of information that has been selected for us by a for-profit enterprise. "Instead of a balanced information diet," says Pariser (2011), "you can end up surrounded by information junk food." Recall where the tabloids live in the grocery store.

The fourth challenge of fake news on the internet is echo chambers. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg (2016a) published a post after the election to directly address claims that fake news on Facebook had a material impact on the election. He wrote that "more than 99% of what people see [on Facebook] is authentic" (para. 4). A user (Williquette, 2016) commented on Zuckerberg's post, arguing that his personal feed seemed to have a greater share of fake news than what the company's CEO was claiming. Replying to the user, Zuckerberg (2016b) wrote, "The stat I mentioned [about fake news] is across the whole system. Depending on which pages you personally follow and who your friends are, you may see more or less. The power of Facebook is that you control what you see by who you choose to connect with." Likely without realizing it, Zuckerberg described the mechanism of the echo chamber. As Sam Sanders (2016) of NPR noted, "At its core, [Facebook is] a platform meant to connect users with people they already like, not to foster discussion with those you might disagree with" ("A problem with format," para. 2).

Although it's true that Facebook users are free to connect with whomever they want, those connections, and every other action a user takes on the site, feed algorithms that directly govern what each user sees in their news feed. These content algorithms are complex (McGee, 2013) and constantly changing (Blank & Xu, 2016). Not unlike slot machines, which are designed to addict their users (Dow Schüll, 2013), social media algorithms are designed to identify your preferences and then aggressively "reward" you with content that's satisfyingly affirming. Fake news thrives in this environment with

headlines, images, and ideas that prey on our prejudice and corroborate the other content in our feed.

The Political Classroom

Thus, educators must create appropriate spaces to help students meet these particular challenges accompanying fake news on the internet. Space, in this context, is not physical, but the intellectual and emotional permission to explore political topics. Although the underlying ideology of post-truth is nonpartisan, its expression as fake news almost always takes sides. Therefore, in order for educators and students to address these issues, they must embrace what Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy (2015) call "the political classroom."

Few could argue that education is apolitical. At the same time, however, public education should not promote any particular political party or partisan ideology. Hess and McAvoy describe this paradox as "the need to provide students with a nonpartisan political education on the one hand, with the need to prepare them to participate in the actual, highly partisan political community on the other" (p. 4). Their research reveals several aspects of positive political classrooms.

The first is a student-centered learning objective. The purpose of the political classroom should be to "help students develop their ability to deliberate political questions" (p. 4). This puts students at the center of the exercise, empowering them to be proactive participants in the process and encouraging them to engage with other students as equals. In this way, student-centered learning is critical training to combat the passive acceptance of offensive and inaccurate information that is often found in fake news.

The second aspect of positive political classroom space is the distinction between deliberation and discussion. Drawing on Walter Parker (2003), Hess and McAvoy (2015) explain that discussions are meant to share information and explore topics, whereas deliberations are meant to employ that information in order to resolve some shared problem or question. "To clarify this difference," write Hess and McAvoy, "students might *discuss* the meaning of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution but *deliberate* the question 'Should there be laws against the private ownership of assault weapons?'" (p. 5).

A third important aspect of the space is social equality. One practical consequence of segregation is the existence of classrooms that lack the diversity of society in general. This presents a challenge to the positive political classroom and democratic education. In these situations, teachers may need to enrich the space and challenge students by introducing new ideas. Alternatively, a heterogeneous classroom may contain fault lines around privilege and prejudice, requiring teachers to moderate these dynamics to ensure that every student's voice is represented equally in deliberation.

Of course, teachers are the most important ingredient in the political classroom. The space described here cannot exist in environments where teachers are simply expected to administer a rote curriculum, or where teachers are uncomfortable learning alongside their students. As Hess and McAvoy (2015) put it, "teachers have a responsibility to recognize that as professionals, their expertise about content, pedagogy, and their students make it not just acceptable but essential for them to participate in decisions about what and how to teach" (p. 208). If we are to escape the era of post-truth, then

school systems and educators themselves must renew commitments to the professionalization of teaching.

Domain Knowledge and Digital Literacy

The prevalence of fake news belies a widespread inability to distinguish fact from fiction. In addition to creating conducive spaces, educators and students must have a foundation of knowledge on which to base their deliberations and against which they can assess what they see in the world. This foundation of knowledge expands on traditional digital literacy curricula.

Many educators are familiar with efforts to teach digital literacy. However, in a brilliant blog post, Mike Caulfield (2016) explains an important shortcoming of traditional, process-based approaches to digital literacy:

> In the metaphor of most educators, there's a set of digital or information literacy skills, which is sort of like the factory process. And there's data, which is like raw material. You put the data through the critical literacy process and out comes useful information on the other side. . . . In reality, most literacies are heavily domain-dependent, and based not on skills, but on a body of knowledge that comes from mindful immersion in a context. (para. 2)

Take Rustling (2016), for example, which BuzzFeed (Silverman, 2016) found to be the most engaging piece of fake news on Facebook in 2016. The headline read, "Obama Signs Executive Order Banning the Pledge of Allegiance in Schools Nationwide." A knowledgeable consumer of information might know that the Pledge of Allegiance has generated controversy at various times throughout its history, and that attempts to ban its use in schools are not unprecedented (Nieves, 2002), which may lead them to click on the article if they came across this headline on Facebook. At that point, the knowledgeable consumer might quickly notice several glaring clues that the story is fake, such as the URL domain (abcnews.com.co), non-sequitur quotations attributed to the head of a fake charity (http://sockitforward.com), and the author's own spurious biography ("Articles by Jimmy Rustling," n.d.). Even if a knowledgeable consumer happened to believe that the story was true, they would likely expect it to be corroborated by other news sources.

How does a knowledgeable consumer know to look for these things? Surely some skill-based protocol may be applied, such as learning to "decode" URLs; but, as Caulfield (2016) writes,

> [T]he person who has immersed themselves in the material of the news over time in a reflective way starts that process with three-quarters a race's head start. They look at a page and they already have a hypothesis they can test—"Is this site a New World Order conspiracy site?" The person without the background starts from nothing and nowhere. (para. 12)

Domain knowledge cannot be separated from digital literacy.

Resources

There are many resources to help educators create appropriate spaces and tackle these issues with students. Embracing social media in the classroom is a good place to start. A recent episode of National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* (Turner & Lonsdorf, 2016) on the subject of fake news and schools points out that, "instead of teaching students the fundamentals of fact-checking, many schools simply ignore the problem, blocking social media sites on school computers" ("Damn," para. 5). Pretending that social media has no place in the classroom is arbitrary and foolish. Instead, teachers can work with students to consider the benefits and risks of social media. Ask, "What is social media great at? What is it bad at? How might we use social media in the pursuit of truth?"

There are also many new ways to find relevant and appropriate content for all students. Newsela.com offers teachers a library of current-events articles at five different reading levels on a variety of subjects. Many of the articles are also available in Spanish. There's also a text set (Newsela Staff, n.d.) specifically on media literacy. Countable.us and iCitizen.com are part of a growing list of free, nonpartisan apps designed to educate and engage people with all levels of government. Teachers should also explore Common Sense Media's K–12 Digital Citizenship Curriculum (https://www.commonsense.org/education/digital-citizenship), which offers free, standards-aligned lesson plans, games, and more on subjects like searching strategically and identifying high-quality sites. Another exciting resource is the News Literacy Project's checkology virtual classroom (http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/services/checkology), which helps teachers and students learn to discern the quality of various online media.

Post-truth and its expression as fake news are a threat to democracy, but educators are uniquely positioned to fight back. The single most important resource for understanding and undermining fake news is also the one thing that every educator strives to inspire in their students: critical thinking. All teachers, regardless of subject or grade level, can practice "the fine art of baloney detection" (Sagan, 1995, p. 201) with their students. Teachers can help students build political intelligence without promoting partisan politics. They can defend the importance of domain knowledge without renouncing skills and processes. They can exercise professional judgment without equivocating between truth and lies.

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