TMQ

Discerning Fake Information: A critical approach for media and information studies

Melissa Villa-Nichols

LIBRARIES

P U B L I S H I N G

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A critical approach for media and information studies

Melissa Villa-Nichols, University of Rhode Island

Overview

"Fake news" has recently received a large amount of media and public attention in the United States. This exercise teaches students how to search out fake news stories, identify some of the common practices and visual tells of fake news and false information, and search reliable sources for correct information. This lesson seeks to teach students how to identify misinformation and fake news, give students the set of skills to apply to discerning fake news, and to identify and understand the political and social context of misinformation and fake news.

The purpose of this exercise is to teach media studies students how to discern false information and news, and to understand the political and social context of the life cycle of false information. This exercise was developed within the context of library and information science/studies (LIS), however the research skills are applicable more broadly to all students of media studies and can help them understand the information context in which fake news circulates.

Rationale

Recent circulations of fake news have increased the call for librarians and media studies to be the respondents to this mis- and disinformation context. Within and outside of LIS, advocates have noted the relevance of libraries and students of media studies to this information crisis, from The Christian Science Monitor (Hoover 2017) to the Public Broadcasting Service (Barclay 2017), media outlets and the general public are discussing the relevance of libraries and media outlets to this very crisis.

Although fake news has recently become a buzzword in United States public discourse, librarians and media studies have long discussed misinformation and disinformation on the internet; and have long advocated for students to view themselves as information curators, or educators on information literacy (Cassel and Hiremath 2013). Scholars of critical information studies have advocated that information and media studies students be educated not only on finding and educating on correct information sources, but also on understanding the political and social context in which information is produced and circulated (Honma 2005, Noble 2013).

The social context of misinformation is also a critical component for media studies students to understand. This involves not only knowing how to identity and spot fake news, but to find out where the fake news was generated from, and that source's implicit bias. Todd Honma notes that within such information institutions as libraries, having the tools to find information is of "limited value" as stated by Audre Lorde (1985, 105), when that information is devoid of the political context that organizes the production, organization, and consumption of that information (Honma 2005, 19). This context includes issues of social justice, racial and gender inequality, growing income gaps due to hypercapitalism, and intersectional identities. Likewise, information with context has the agency to resist systems of inequality, "Information devoid of social context fails to live up to its potential as a transformative agent in a world increasingly shaped by racial inequality and the global spread of neoimperialist capitalism" (Honma 2005, 19).

Understanding the context of the fake news includes being aware of the political bias of information, especially information that circulates through information technologies such as the internet.

Communication scholars such as Langdon Winner argue that the information technologies that deliver this information are not value-free, but politically constructed (Winner 1986). New media scholar Rayvon Fouché finds that racial and gendered formation of power organize these technologies (2012), and therefore impact how this information bias is delivered to users. New media scholar Safiya Noble finds that information bias in such algorithms as the Google Search reproduce old biases and old formations of racism (Noble, 2017).

As information outlets and curators, students of media studies, libraries, and information science/studies have been tasked with the important national job of educating on fake news and searching for reliable sources, it is imperative that media and information studies students are trained to identify fake information, are familiar with the sources of fake news and false information, and understand the political and social context of false information.

General Timeline

The following timeline assumes class periods around about 90 minutes in length. This activity can be done in person or synchronous online, with the technology to break students up into groups. The lesson should take about 30 minutes, the students will talk in groups for 40 minutes, and then be brought back together to discuss their experiences for 20 minutes.

Prior to class (10 minutes)

- Review the lecture and slides
- Assign students to read over the Topeka & Shawnee Public Library's guidelines "How to Spot Fake News"
- Assign students to watch Safiya Noble's "Challenging the Algorithms of Oppression" in order to understand information bias

Lesson Plan

Lecture (30 minutes): Fake News and Misinformation

This assignment begins with a mini lecture on the problem of fake news and false information. Instructor explains that users of information and Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are increasingly searching for information without a guide. This trend can be seen in Craig Silverman's recent chart that demonstrates that, by August of 2016 to the 2017 election day in November, the total Facebook engagements for the top 20 election stories moved from mainstream news to "fake news" (Silverman 2016).

In identifying the problem of users searching without a guide or information curating skills, I also demonstrate how easy it is to find misleading information by showing the class a recent video that had been edited and recirculated as satire, however had presented itself as a "real" event that had happened. Because emotional intelligence and empathy with information users is a critical skill in reference librarianship especially, I begin with the intention of instilling empathy for the information user by demonstrating how easy it is to believe that a "fake news story" or "false information" is true, by its presentation (Zabel, 2011).

This part of the lesson draws on various library reference guides that teach users how to identify fake information. Indiana University East LibGuides identifies that information is fake if:

- It can't be verified: the article or link does not trace to sources
- It appeals to emotion: it may play on the audiences' feelings, not on facts
- The author is not an expert, such as a journalist, researcher, etc., they may be paid to generate fake news
- The information can't be found anywhere else
- Fake news comes from fake sites (Indiana University East 2017)

Then, navigate to "Finding Reliable Information," from the [Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library](#) (2016) to thoroughly understand how to find out if information is correctly sourced:

- Steps to finding out if information is correctly sourced:
  - **Consider the source** of the information
  - **Read beyond the headline, and into the text of the information**
  - **Check the author and their credentials**
  - **Check out the comments** for tips on if the information is fake or satire
  - **Determine if sources support the story; follow the sources to find out if they back up the story's claims**
  - **Check the date of the information**
  - **Ask yourself "Is it an Ad disguised as a story**?"
  - **Consider if the story or information is satire**: Many satire pieces are mistaken for real news
  - **Check your biases: Are your own biases slanting your belief in the story's reliability?**
  - **Ask the experts:** The American Library Association recommends the following sources as authoritative fact checking sites (Evaluating Information, ALA).
    - FactCheck.org: a nonprofit and nonpartisan project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania
    - Snopes: a website founded by David Mikkelson and is co-edited by journalists and lay editors to fact check information on the web
    - PoliFact: A fact-checking website run by editors and reporters from the *Tampa Bay Times*
    - PundiFact: A project by the *Tampa Bay Times* and Pynter Institute that checks claims made by pundits, columnists, bloggers, political analysis, and other media.

Discussion Groups Task (40 minutes): Search for false information and apply library searching principles

Students are broken up into small groups of 2-3 and tasked with seeking out the top fake news stories of 2016. Students are given a heading such as "#Pizzagate," and search the internet to:

- Find out more about the fake news story
- Using the above "Finding Reliable Information" guide, students apply all steps to the fake news story
- Find out where the story originally came from, what makes it fake news?
- Try to find a "correct" version of the fake news and where it went wrong

Task: Understanding the political and social context

After students apply the methods for uncovering fake news and false information, they are next tasked with understanding the political and social context of that false information. To do this, students search Google for "Martin Luther King Jr.," as though they are a student with an assignment. Students are told to click through the first page of Google search results and find which resources are reliable and unreliable. On the first page of the Google search results, students will come to "Martinlutherking.org," a website that presents itself as correct information and appeals to students with headlines such as "Attention Students: Try our MLK Pop Quiz." Applying the methods above, students will come to learn that this website is run by Stormfront, a white supremacist group that generates misinformation and distributes it on the internet.

Closing Discussion (20 minutes): Come back together as a class

Discussion questions for the class:
- Is information neutral?
- Is it generated with a political and social ideology? Can it be used to reproduce racism?

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Biography

Dr. Melissa Villa-Nicholas
University of Rhode Island
mvnicholas@uri.edu

Dr. Melissa Villa-Nicholas is an Assistant Professor at the University of Rhode Island's Graduate School of Library and Information Studies (GSLIS) in the Harrington School of Media and Communications. Her research interests include the history of Latina/os with information technologies and information spaces, Latina/o socio-techno practices, new media studies, and race/class/gender technology studies.