

Impact of "Fake News" on Unconscious Bias

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posted on Tue, Apr 11 2017 1:33 pm by **Shirley Engelmeier**

There has been a great deal of discussion on the topic of fake news recently, particularly in the leadup and aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In November 2016, the BBC published a story titled "[The Rise and Rise of Fake News](#)." In December 2016, Steven Rosenbaum wrote an article titled "[Why the Fake News Debate Gets it Wrong](#)." In February 2017, NPR's All Things Considered aired a piece called, "[With 'Fake News,' Trump Moves From Alternative Facts to Alternative Language](#)."

Certainly, fake news is nothing new. There have always been pranksters and charlatans seeking to deceive the masses. What *is* new, though, is the increasingly diverse sources of media available in the Internet Age. The BBC piece cites "[research](#)" suggesting an increasing proportion of US adults are getting their news from social media, it's likely that more and more of us are seeing — and believing — information that is not just inaccurate, but totally made up."

In addition to being deceptive and providing incorrect information, fake news can lead to a reinforcement of unconscious biases. With so many sources of "news" and so much false information being portrayed as factual, media consumers can seek out and find media that reinforce their unconscious biases with increasing ease. Imagine someone who unconsciously links minority groups or immigrants with crime. It would be easy to find "facts" reinforcing those premises.

Fortunately, there are tools available and under development to combat the problem. In a NiemanLab piece on predictions for journalism in 2017 titled "[News Literacy, Bias and 'Hamilton'](#)," Mira Lowe predicts, "In 2017, there will be a closer look at unconscious bias in the reporting and distribution of information. Media and tech companies will create ways to test assumptions, expose preconceptions and challenge discriminatory data." According to Lowe, this is already happening: "This [Facebook Messenger bot to help people identify their biases](#) is just one example."

Lowe also points to [work by Tonya Mosley](#), a journalism fellow at Stanford University, who has demonstrated how unconscious bias can both skew journalists' coverage and influence consumer perceptions of that coverage. Based on her research, Mosley has created workshops to help journalists discover how they may be subject to unconscious bias—and how that bias may impact their work. "More efforts such as hers will help us and our newsrooms deepen our coverage on race, identity, and inequality as we understand our own biases," says Lowe.

As we've stressed time and again, a crucial step in combating unconscious bias is recognizing those biases in the first place. But when media supporting those biases are not only readily available but packaged as authentic news, the challenge for all of us is to think critically and question our underlying biases with increased rigor.

How are you doing with that? Be inclusive!

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