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LESSON PLANS

Evaluating Sources in a 'Post-Truth' World: Ideas for Teaching and Learning About Fake News

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Back in 2015, when we published our lesson plan Fake News vs. Real News: Determining the Reliability of Sources, we had no way of knowing that, a year later, the Oxford Dictionaries would declare "post-truth" the 2016 word of the year; that fake news would play a role in the 2016 presidential election; that it would cause real violence; and that the president-elect of the United States would use the term to condemn mainstream media outlets he opposes.

Back then, to convince teachers that the skill was important, we quoted Peter Adams of the News Literacy Project on the "digital naïveté" of the "digital natives" we teach. Now, however, we doubt that we need to convince anyone.

These days, invented stories created in a "fake news factory"— or by a 23-year-old in need of cash — go viral, while articles from traditional sources like The Times are called "fake news" by those who see them as hostile to their agenda.

That, writes Sabrina Tavernise in "As Fake News Spreads Lies, More Readers Shrug at the Truth," leads to an insidious problem:

> Fake news, and the proliferation of raw opinion that passes for news, is creating confusion, punching holes in what is true, causing a kind of fun-house effect that leaves the reader doubting everything, including real news.

In this lesson, we update our 2015 post with new resources for helping your students navigate this uneasy landscape. Divided into two sections — The Problems and The Possible Solutions — it offers practical activities and questions throughout. (Update: We also now have a companion lesson for E.L.L. students.)

As always, we welcome your ideas; please post them in the comments.

The Problems

Why Does This Matter? Framing the Problem for Students:

First, have your students look at the image below. Ask them, "Does this provide strong evidence about the conditions near the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant? Why or why not?"

After they answer, explain that this is one of the problems that the Stanford History Education Group recently posed to thousands across the United States that resulted in their conclusion that students — from middle school through college — are shockingly ill-equipped to manage the emerging media landscape.

Nearly four in 10 high school students believed, based on the headline, that this photograph of deformed daisies provided strong evidence of toxic conditions near the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in Japan, even though no source or location was given for the photo, The Wall Street Journal wrote in an article about the research. How did your students do in comparison?

Before they read that article, put them into partners or groups and ask them to wrestle with three questions:

• *What does the phrase "fake news" mean?*

• *When have you or someone you know fallen for or shared fake or inaccurate news of some kind?*

• *Why does it matter if we can't tell real news from fake news?*

As they share their thoughts with the whole class, collect and record as many answers and examples as you can, since these responses will probably anticipate many of the issues raised in the exercises below. As you and your class discuss and read further, you can return to your list and add more.

Finally, invite them to read about the Stanford Group's research. How many of the issues raised in this piece were also on your class's list?

Understanding Different Types of Unreliable News:

> New Yorker cartoon by @JoeDator:
> pic.twitter.com/z7CVSXyUN6
>
> — Katherine Schulten (@KSchulten) Nov. 28, 2016

Narrowly defined, "fake news" means a made-up article with an intention to deceive, often geared toward getting clicks. But the issue has become a political battering ram, and in the process, the definition of fake news has blurred, writes Sabrina Tavernise in this article.

Help your students understand the many ways the term "fake news" can be used. What are the differences between:

• Satirical news from a site like The Onion ("Dolphin Spends Amazing Vacation Swimming With Stockbroker")

• The daily clickbait in our social media feeds

• News that shows a highly partisan bias

• Outright invented news, like pieces that claimed, just before the election, that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald J. Trump, or that Donald Trump had once said that "Republicans are the dumbest group of voters."

Are some of these forms of unreliable news more dangerous than others? Which? Why?

What happens when mainstream media is labeled "fake news" by those who see certain stories as hostile to their political agenda?

What if the president-elect spreads fake news himself? Below, a tweet with one of the best-known examples, but here are nine more.

> In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally
>
> — Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) Nov. 27, 2016

(As part of this discussion, you might also want to ask your students how they know when something in a traditional news outlet like The New York Times is opinion and when it is straight news. We have a lesson plan, with an embedded quiz, that can help. But as traditional news outlets compete with talking heads and bloggers for readers online, the line between fact and opinion sometimes seems blurred. For example, what is the difference between news and "news analysis"?)

Follow a Case Study in How Fake News Spreads:

> And BOOM! The old big bad post is gone! Its memory shall live on! Thanks all! Let's keep the conversation moving! https://t.co/DHz37Le9i8 pic.twitter.com/YME1TN4q4D
>
> — erictucker (@erictucker) Nov. 12, 2016

How did Eric Tucker, a man in Austin, Tex., with only about 40 Twitter followers, fuel a nationwide conspiracy theory about demonstrations against Mr. Trump — one that the president-elect joined in promoting?

In order to overcome the threat of fake news, it's important to know where it comes from and what makes it tick. Read this case study, "How Fake News Spreads,"

with your students, and invite them to annotate as they go. What factors contributed to the spread of this news? What insights did they gain from the case study?

Then, your students might look into "Pizzagate," a story that led to a man firing a rifle in a Washington pizzeria. In "Dissecting the #PizzaGate Conspiracy Theories," The Times writes:

> In the span of a few weeks, a false rumor that Hillary Clinton and her top aides were involved in various crimes snowballed into a wild conspiracy theory that they were running a child-trafficking ring out of a Washington pizza parlor. The fast evolution of the false theory revealed how a powerful mix of fake news and social media led an armed North Carolina man to investigate the rumors about the pizza place.

Finally, try this exercise, created by the journalist Andrew Revkin for his graduate class in making the most of online communication at Pace University. In light of the role that fake news played in the election, he recently updated his idea on the self-publishing site Medium. He walks through examples for you to follow there.

Mr. Revkin calls this exercise a "backtrack journal." His charge to his students was this:

> Each week, determine the path one bit of information took to get to you. If it was a powerful photo of a drowned refugee child, did it come via Facebook? Twitter? If so, was it forwarded by a friend from some other friend or feed? Who created the content? Try to trace how information MOVES.

As he points out, this exercise shows the ways in which information moves through social media and how easily its origins can become obscured.

Consider the Effects of Fake News on Democracy:

The Stanford History Education Group's executive summary concludes, "At present, we worry that democracy is threatened by the ease at which disinformation

about civic issues is allowed to spread and flourish."

What "disinformation" have your students noticed this election season?

In "The Real Story About Fake News Is Partisanship," The Upshot writes:

> The fake-news phenomenon is not the result of personal failings. And it is not limited to one end of the political spectrum. Rather, Americans' deep bias against the political party they oppose is so strong that it acts as a kind of partisan prism for facts, refracting a different reality to Republicans than to Democrats.
>
> Partisan refraction has fueled the rise of fake news, according to researchers who study the phenomenon. But the repercussions go far beyond stories shared on Facebook and Reddit, affecting Americans' faith in government — and the government's ability to function.

Invite your students to read the whole article to see how it describes the way that partisan tribalism makes people more inclined to seek out and believe stories that justify their pre-existing partisan biases, whether or not they are true — and how "sharing those stories on social media is a way to show public support for one's partisan team — roughly the equivalent of painting your face with team colors on game day."

Does this ring true for your students? Do they think they believe "a wildly different sets of facts" than someone on the other side of the political aisle? How, according to the article, can that become a vicious cycle that leads to more and more political extremism?

What does it mean if, in the heated discussions over the effects of fake news on democracy and civil society, Donald J. Trump has often taken center stage? According to this article, "he has used false claims to attack his political opponents, question the legitimacy and loyalty of the Obama administration and other Democrats, and undermine the news media, the federal government and other institutions that many of his supporters do not trust."

After they have read and discussed, challenge your students to revisit the

question we posed originally — "Why does it matter if we can't tell real news from fake news?" — and add to their list anything they gleaned from the article or discussion.

Finally, invite them to apply these questions to this Op-Ed piece, published after Mr. Trump's Jan. 11 news conference. It begins:

> If there was any doubt, the uproar this week over BuzzFeed's publication of unverified allegations about President-elect Donald J. Trump made clear that the gatekeeper role once played by major news media organizations has vanished in the digital age.
>
> This poses a deep danger for legitimate, aggressive journalism, especially from the president-elect, who has been consistent in his heavy-handed demonization of any and all media whenever he dislikes critical but accurate stories about him.

Is Mr. Trump "encouraging the public not to believe reporting by responsible news organizations that are striving to hold the government accountable," as this writer asserts? What evidence can you offer for your argument? And, if so, what will that mean for our democracy? What role does a free press play in protecting a free society?

To make these questions tangible, students might try the following exercises:

— Have them work in small groups to take the front page of the print New York Times or any other traditional American newspaper and, with red markers, put an X over any article or image that they feel would probably not be published in a country without a law guaranteeing freedom of the press.

Have them share their results, perhaps using this activity sheet to take their analysis further. What can they conclude?

— Or invite them to look at this cartoon by Patrick Chappatte. What is it saying? How does it relate to the discussions they have had so far?

Some Possible Solutions

Ask the Right Questions:

Though one could argue, as this writer does, that the internet has loosened our grip on the truth, it also provides us with the tools to seek the truth.

Pose our Student Opinion question to your students, and invite them to post their responses: How do you know if what you read online is true? Before you hit "share," what questions should you ask?

After they answer, you might share On the Media's 11 guidelines shown in the image above. Listen to the whole show here for more detail, and find additional chapters in the group's clear and helpful "Breaking News Consumer's Handbook" here.

Or consult the Newseum's popular Believe It Or Not? lesson plan that walks teachers and students through basic news literacy. Students learn to ask these six "consumer questions" when vetting a story:

- Who made this?
- How was this made?
- Why was this made?
- When was this made?
- What is this missing?
- Where do I go from here?

Another great set of questions that elaborate on some of these is A Finder's Guide To Facts from National Public Radio.

Get Used to Regularly Consulting Fact-Checking Sites

These three nonpartisan sites below investigate the truth of various claims, including whether a zoo really named a baby gorilla Harambe McHarambeface and whether Ruth Bader Ginsburg is retiring from the Supreme Court.

You might invite your students take a look and find a rumor or news article they've read and present the real facts to the class:

FactCheck.org

Snopes.com

Politifact.com

And to check the authenticity of images, teach your students to reverse-Google them to find their origins.

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Curate Your Own News Ecosystem:

BuzzFeed recently worked backward by analyzing Mr. Trump's Twitter posts to map his "media ecosystem."

What would yours look like?

Invite students to spend 48 hours keeping track of the news articles they click on, read and share. Have them write down the source of each. Once they have finished, have them use Wordle to create a visual representation of where most of their news comes from.

Before they begin, you might show them the TED-Ed video introduction above about how the news business has changed and what we can do to consider what we see with a critical eye. (Note: Teachers can also use material at the site to customize lessons for students.)

Then ask students: "Where do you get most of your news? Is this source trustworthy? How do you know?" Ask students to do an internet search on their

most-viewed news sites for some insight into their trustworthiness, using some of the questions we posed in the "Ask the Right Questions" section.

After discussing what students have learned, ask them to curate their Twitter and Facebook accounts to ensure that they are getting their news from reliable sources in the future. At the same time, ask them to think about their "filter bubble" and make sure that they follow a mix of news from different perspectives and trustworthy sources.

To go even deeper, you might help them understand the concept of confirmation bias and ask them to think about ways that they, like all of us, have been vulnerable to it.

Take a Free Online News Literacy Course

Our friends at the Center for News Literacy have developed a Massive Open Online Course, or MOOC, offered through Coursera, called Making Sense of the News.

The organizers say the six-week course will give learners tools that teach you not *what* to read and consume, but rather *how* to critically consume information and make yourself more informed and engaged.

Test Yourself Weekly:

Every week in our News Quiz, we save the 10th question for news literacy — and most weeks it is the question the fewest students get right.

We list four recent news headlines — three from The Times and one from a satirical site like The Onion — and ask which is which. Though we often feature wacky news as "distracters," these are not trick questions. Close reading should reveal fairly quickly which headline just *can't* be true.

Try it.

Share

How are you fighting fake news in your own life and social media feeds? Teachers, what are you doing in your classroom? What resources have you found to add to our collection? Please post in the comments.

Additional Resources

From The Times:

Article | From Headline to Photograph, a Fake News Masterpiece

Article | Researchers Created Fake News. Here's What They Found.

Opinion | Lies in the Guise of News in the Trump Era

Opinion | All the Fake News That Was Fit to Print

Opinion | Fake News and the Internet Shell Game

Editorial | Facebook and the Digital Virus Called Fake News

From Around the Web:

To Share or Not to Share: Evaluating News and Other Online Content

KQED's The Lowdown | The Honest Truth about Fake News … and How Not to Fall for It (with Lesson Plan)

School Library Journal | Truth, truthiness, triangulation: A news literacy toolkit for a "post-truth" world

Teen Vogue | The Best Tips for Spotting Fake News in the Age of Trump

Middle Web | Students Need Our Help Detecting Fake News

NPR | Fake Or Real? How To Self-Check The News And Get The Facts

FiveThirtyEight | Fact-Checking Won’t Save Us From Fake News

The New Yorker | Solving the Problem of Fake News

CNN | Here’s how to outsmart fake news in your Facebook feed

Snopes | Field Guide to Fake News Sites and Hoax Purveyors

Cybrary Man’s Educational Websites

Frank LoMonte of the Student Press Law Center, on Medium | Fake news, real solutions

NPR | 5 Ways Teachers Are Fighting Fake News
