Fake or Fact? Tools for Combating Online Disinformation

Beth Downey
Research and Instruction Librarian
Mississippi State University Libraries
Workshop Topics

• Participants will have a better understanding of what “Fake News” means.
• Participants will be equipped with tools to recognize, avoid, and combat misinformation.
• Participants will learn strategies how to distinguish fake from fact.
Oxford Dictionaries 2016

“Word of the Year”

Post-truth

• (n.) relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.
A deceptively edited video of Joe Biden signals what’s coming

Biden opened by talking about how English common law in the 1300s allowed for husbands to beat their wives, and then said that we had inherited this “cultural problem.” Biden then talked at great length about his father’s teachings to him, his work in the Senate on domestic violence, and other related matters.

Towards the end, Biden circled back to English common law, and said this:

Folks, this is about changing the culture, our culture, our culture. It’s not imported from some African nation or some Asian nation. It’s our English jurisprudential culture, our European culture, that says it’s all right.

The edited video removes that first sentence and the very last clause, so all you hear is this:

Our culture, our culture. It’s not imported from some African nation or some Asian nation. It’s our English jurisprudential culture, our European culture.
Twitter doesn’t give you the entire story...

Leach right now at his presser: "I like Lane. I know you're not supposed to like anything from Ole Miss ... I like playing against crummy coaches more than I do good coaches."

12:32 PM · Jan 10, 2020 · TweetDeck

64 Retweets 418 Likes

What is missing from the middle?
I really like Lane. I know you’re not really supposed to like anything from Ole Miss, but I’ve always liked him. He’s kind of an entertaining guy. Then all those guys I know – Nick [Saban] and Jimbo [Fisher]. This conference is loaded with quality coaches. That’s what makes it exciting. But the fact of the matter is I came from a conference loaded with quality coaches too, not to diminish either conference. The resources vary. The opportunities vary. I like playing against crummy coaches more than really good ones, but you know, as I look around these conferences, there’s no hiding from good coaches. You’re going to run into a good coach and you’re going to have to fight like crazy in every conference you’re in with regard to the quality of some of these coaches.

“...but I’ve always liked him. He’s kind of an entertaining guy. Then all those guys I know—Nick [Saban] and Jimbo [Fisher]. This conference is loaded with quality coaches. That’s what makes it exciting. But the fact of the matter is I came from a conference loaded with quality coaches too, not to diminish either conference. The resources vary. The opportunities vary.”

--Mike Leach, press conference, January 10, 2020
It’s not real!

Above: actual photo from Africa Geographic in 2005.
Us white girls, who grew up with The Little Mermaid, deserved a true-to-color Ariel. Disney, you made a huge mistake by hiring Halle Bailey. This is going in the TRASH.

Brandon Wall
@Walldo

This viral tweet complaining about the Little Mermaid casting being racist has a profile pic stolen from an Instagram model. The “half black best friend” pic is taken from god knows where, but shows up in a bunch of Pinterest BFF roundups.

one of my best friends is literally half black, but i’m being called racist 😭

8:10 PM · Jul 3, 2019 · TweetDeck

9.4K Retweets 27.5K Likes
Left: Rebeccs’ Twitter profile.
Right: Instagram user whose image was stolen for profile picture.
Left: Original Tweet.
Right: Screenshot from YouTube “unboxing” video.
Left: Rebeccs’ follow-up tweet.
Right: Pinterest “BFF” images.
And it had a *terrible* ratio!

- Comments were overwhelming and *negative*!

  - (More on what “ratio” means later)
How do we define Fake News?
Start with defining “Bias”:

- **Bias**
  - A predisposition or tendency that distorts your ability to fairly weigh the evidence and prevents you from reaching a fair or accurate judgment

- **Confirmation Bias**
  - Pursuing information that reassures or reflects a person’s particular point of view
“If Google Was a Guy (Part 3)” – College Humor

“Vaccines cause autism”

Well, I have 1 million results that say they don’t...

...and one result that says they do.

I knew it.
How Misinfodemics Spread Disease

Researchers are finding more and more that online misinformation fuels the spread of diseases such as tooth decay, Ebola, and measles.

NAT GYENES AND AN XIAO MINA AUG 30, 2018

Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton slips on the steps walking into SC Strong, a non-profit facility in Charleston, South Carolina, February 27, 2016.

MARK MAKELA/GETTY IMAGES
Today 8:56 AM

Remember that these are easy to fake.

Anonymous said:
It's extremely easy to create a screenshot of fake text on any website. (Though for this one I could have just gone low-tech and just messaged myself!)

Bill Gates
Yesterday at 2:55am
Think about how much more I could do with Photoshop and a little effort.

Hillary Clinton
This took me one minute to create

Joe Biden
With simple online tools

Hillary Clinton
And zero tech skills required!

Barack Obama
@BarackObama
So don't believe everything just because there's a screenshot.
Defining Bias (Cont.):

- **Media Bias**
  - A pattern of unfairness or willful inaccuracy over time by a specific journalist or news outlet. It cannot be proven by a single isolated incident.

- **Audience Bias**
  - Similar to Confirmation Bias
  - A tendency of individuals to see bias in news media reports because they are unconsciously viewing journalism through their own biases.
Vanessa Otero’s media bias chart (Ver. 4.0):
A Closer Look:

**Green** Rectangle: News; original fact reporting, may also include complex analysis.
A Closer Look:

Yellow: Fair interpretations of the news, may include opinion and *fair* persuasion. Orange: Extreme or unfair interpretations; selective or incomplete.
A Closer Look:

**RED**: Nonsense damaging to public discourse. Propaganda; contains misleading, inaccurate, or fabricated info.
Defining Fake News:

- Click Bait
  - Headlines that intentionally leave out crucial information to mislead user into clicking
Defining Fake News (Cont.):

- Fake News
  - Authentic material used in the wrong context
  - Imposter news sites designed to look like brands we already know
  - Fake news sites
  - Fake information
  - Manipulated content
  - Parody content
Fake News Categories (Melissa Zimdars, Merrimack College)

- **CATEGORY 1:** Fake, false, or regularly misleading websites that are shared on Facebook and social media. Some of these websites may rely on “outrage” by using distorted headlines and decontextualized or dubious information in order to generate likes, shares, and profits.
- **CATEGORY 2:** Websites that may circulate misleading and/or potentially unreliable information
- **CATEGORY 3:** Websites that sometimes use clickbait-y headlines and social media descriptions
- **CATEGORY 4:** Satire/comedy sites, which can offer important critical commentary on politics and society, but have the potential to be shared as actual/literal news
Learning to Evaluate:

THE PROBLEM WITH QUOTES FOUND ON THE INTERNET IS THAT THEY ARE OFTEN NOT TRUE.

-ABRAHAM LINCOLN
The CRAAP Test*

- **C** – Currency
- **R** – Relevance
- **A** – Authority
- **A** – Accuracy
- **P** – Purpose

*CRAAP Test adapted from CSU-Chico Library*
Currency: the timeliness of the information

- When was the information published or posted?
- Has the information been revised or updated?
- Is the information current or out-of-date for your topic?
- Are the links functional?
Relevance: the importance of the information for your needs

- Does the information relate to your topic or answer your question?
- Who is the intended audience?
- Is the information at an appropriate level?
- Have you looked at a variety of sources before determining which one you will use?
- Would you feel comfortable using this source for a research paper?
Authority: the source of information

- Who is the author/publisher/source/sponsor?
- Are the author’s credentials or organizational affiliations given?
- What are the author’s credentials or organizational affiliations?
- Is there contact information?
  - Publisher
  - Email address
- Does the URL reveal anything about the author or source? (.gov, .edu, .com, .mil, .org, .net)
Accuracy: the reliability, truthfulness, and correctness of the content

- Where does the information come from?
- Is the information supported by evidence?
- Has the information been reviewed or refereed?
- Can you verify any of the information in another source or from personal knowledge?
- Does the language or tone seem biased or free of emotion?
- Are there spelling, grammar, or other typographical errors?
Purpose – the reason the information exists

• What is the purpose of the information?
• Do the authors/sponsors make their intention or purpose clear?
• Is the information fact? opinion? propaganda?
• Does the point of view appear objective and impartial?
• Are there political, ideological, cultural, religious, institutional, or personal biases?
Online Tools to Evaluate

- **Snopes.com**: the original “debunking” site.
- **PolitiFact**: from the Poynter Institute, includes the “Truth-O-Meter.”
- **FactCheck.org**: from the Annenberg Public Policy Center
  - Includes “SciCheck” for scientific information.
- **Internet Archive**: See past versions of websites.
- **TinEye**: Reverse Image Search tool
- Google Image Search
- **Botometer**: checks Twitter account activity for signs of “bot” activity.
Bot or Not?

• Check the account’s bio/profile description.
• Check for the blue verification check!
• Is there a profile picture? Use reverse image search!
• Check the account’s posting history:
  – Tweeting every few minutes in a full day
  – Amplifying fake news
  – Gains a LOT of followers in a short amount of time
  – Retweeting/promoting other bots

• Not a Bot? Next, check the ratio:
  – Remember, high number of comments/low number of retweets/likes are a sign the tweet’s content isn’t actually popular!

Exercise: Is this Tweet legit?

Go online and examine the tweet you are given. Answer the following questions:

• Is the profile real, or a possible “bot?” What online tools can you use to determine this?
• What is the ratio of comments, retweets, and likes? What does it mean to be “ratioed” on Twitter? What is a good versus a bad ratio?
https://twitter.com/SECOfficiating_/status/1185760942413496321

SEC Officiating @SECOfficiating_ - 10h
We understand the frustrations with the no call here. But there are two things to note:

1) the official at the post was in position to note any potential wrong doing by @Vol_Football so judgement is deferred to him

2) no telling who’s arm that is around the WR from this angle.

Rocky Top Insider @rockytopinsider - 10h
You be the judge
The REAL @SECOfficiating (notice, no underscore):

https://twitter.com/SECOfficiating/status/1182000439153319938
Richard Burr @SenatorBurr · 8h
If college athletes are going to make money off their likenesses while in school, their scholarships should be treated like income. I'll be introducing legislation that subjects scholarships given to athletes who choose to "cash in" to income taxes.

AP The Associated Press @AP · 10h
BREAKING: NCAA will permit athletes to be compensated for their names, images and likenesses, Board of Governors says. apne.ws/QJKYR3j
Even legitimate Twitter accounts can amplify fake news:

**United States trends**
1. Trending
   - #CNNisTrash
     - 56.8K Tweets
     - Katie Halper, @realdonaldtrump, @hogwash, and 4 more are Tweeting about this
2. Politics · Trending
   - #NeverWarren
     - 12.5K Tweets
     - @realdonaldtrump, @hogwash, No War On Iran, and 1 more are Tweeting about this
3. Politics · Trending
   - #WarrenisASnake
     - 5,036 Tweets
     - Noratories, and 1 more are Tweeting about this

---

**Ben Collins**
@oneunderscore_

FASCINATING data here about #NeverWarren, the No. 1 trend in the United States right now.

The top three tweets about the hashtag in the world—from @johnpavlovitz, @mehdirhasan, @deetwocents—all denounce people using it.

The algorithm is generating an opposite reality.

---

**Alex Stamos**
@alexstamos · 50m

1) Don’t use a hashtag to criticize that hashtag.

2) Stop quote-tweeting small-follower accounts as criticism.

3) Don’t believe that the population of “people” on Twitter is reflective of anything, including “candidate X’s followers.”
Research Guide

http://guides.library.msstate.edu/fakenews
Takeaways

• EVERYONE has bias. The key is to be aware and question it!
• Use fact-checking tools.
• Consume a variety of sources from different viewpoints, but avoid propagandistic/agenda setting outlets.
• Social media: check why something is trending, and if it is because it’s been ratioed or boosted.
• Evaluate everything online.
  – Apply the CRAAP test if you are unsure.
About Me

Beth Downey
Associate Professor, Instruction Librarian, MSU Libraries

edowney@library.msstate.edu
(662) 325-3834
Questions?
References

• CRAAP Test adapted from: http://www.csuchico.edu/lins/handouts/eval_websites.pdf
• Comic: https://userscontent2.emaze.com/images/737628b9-d6e3-42b3-bb59-e40debd0393a/81c012a7-ea7a-4fa2-bcdf-32692d410d2b.PNG
• Brandon Wall, Twitter post. July 3, 2019, 8:10 p.m. https://twitter.com/walldo/status/1146586972107841538
• Vanessa Otero’s Media Bias Chart: https://www.adfontesmedia.com/?v=402f03a963ba
• Shark Tweet: https://twitter.com/Jeggit/status/902048241646280704
• Fake Social Posts: http://pervocracy.tumblr.com/post/174819512994
• College Humor, “If Google Was a Guy (Part 3).” YouTube, July 12, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJD1Iwy5lUY