Shellie Jeffries, John Kroondyk, Francine Paolini, and Christina Radisauskas

Says who?

Librarians tackle fake news

Like many, the librarians at Aquinas College were concerned about the impact that fake—and just plain inaccurate—news had on the political discourse surrounding the 2016 election. Our concerns intensified when, on the heels of the election, the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) released a study (Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning) that revealed the difficulties many students have in distinguishing between real facts and erroneous information.

Librarians everywhere grappled with how to best address these concerns and combat the spread of fake/inaccurate news. But we are fortunate to teach a required one-credit, eight-week information literacy course that is offered in a computer classroom during our fall and spring semesters, so we had the means to discuss the issue and reach a significant number of students. We all made a commitment to talk about problematic news in our spring semester classes and spent last December developing our lesson plans, each of us taking a very different approach. This article describes what we did, what we hoped to accomplish, what worked well, and what we might do better in the future.

Shellie Jeffries

I wanted my students to learn more about fake news, but also to be aware of misinformation in general, the biases of media outlets, and their own confirmation bias; understand that professional journalists in the "mainstream media" have a code of ethics, which means their reporting is factual and sourced; and develop strategies for evaluating the information that comes their way on social media and elsewhere. During the 75-minute class session, I followed this lesson plan:

• After a brief discussion of confirmation bias, I initiated a Think-Pair-Share activity, asking students to answer and discuss these questions: Where do you go for news? What news sources do you consider reliable? What makes them reliable?
• I displayed the Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics to the class and briefly went over its main points.
• I gave students a blank copy of Vanessa Otero's infographic of bias in news outlets, along with a list of news companies, and asked them to write in where they thought each company belonged on

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the spectrum. After a discussion about their choices, I revealed Otero's version (emphasizing it was one person's opinion). I recommended that students at least be aware of the biases of news companies and, perhaps more importantly, identify and read those publications that provide accurate and reliable news.

- I showed (with permission) an image from the SHEG study and asked students the same questions about it that were asked in the study.
- For homework, I gave students two assignments, one asking them to thoroughly investigate a news story they found via social media (or they could use a preselected one) by completing a worksheet. The other directed them to read an article specifically covering fake news and answer questions about it, including listing two things they would do to combat the spread of fake news.

The responses on the assignments were very thoughtful and indicated students were developing an awareness of "bad" news, how to think critically about it, and how to avoid it. Further, in a reflection later in the course, students made these comments about the lesson:

"I found the fake news articles project to be helpful because now I can prove to my parents that the stuff they read online is false."

"I think a big part of this course was learning that one can't always trust what is passed down as information, be critical and analyze everything you see through a clear lens."

"The fake article assignment was great and funny at the same time, it was hard to believe that there are really websites that supply fake news like that . . . and I would never in a million years use sites like those to use in a paper, it was very helpful in that sense."

Given the discussion comments and results of the assignments, I feel the various parts of the lesson working together achieved the goals I had and don't an-

ticipate significantly modifying this lesson plan for future classes.

Christina Radisauskas

My goal for the whole course is simple, yet not easily achievable: get students to slow down and scrutinize information before absorbing it into their knowledge base. The goal of this lesson was the same: question political (or any other kind of) news before believing and/or disseminating it.

I decided to break students into five small groups and assign two-to-four readings on different aspects of the topic to each group. Students individually read all the assigned articles as homework and also submitted a written reflection on their readings. The issues discussed in the articles were:

- how/why fake news spreads so easily,
- the history of fake news/yellow journalism,
- students' inability to detect misinformation,
- social media's influence, and
- actual fake news articles with their rebuttals.

The following week, students were grouped according to assigned readings. I gave each group 20 minutes to discuss their impressions of the readings, and to address questions I had posed to the class. Each group then presented the content of their readings and their impressions to the class.

Reflections, conversations with others in their group, and their presentations indicated students were engaged with the content. In fact, they presented with more gusto than I normally see. Their written responses showed that overall, there was a lack of awareness about the phenomenon of fake news, and that their eyes had been opened to what's going on. Dedicating most of one class to student presentations was time well spent, as students seemed

genuinely interested in what others had to say.

Because the presentations were rough (as expected), I believe that more detailed instruction and more time to plan the presentations would have resulted in a better learning experience.

John Kroondyk

I chose a very different path than my colleagues for my lesson. My goal was to unpack the term *fake news* and connect it to the use of evaluation criteria. I presented the topic informally with the aim of opening in-class discussion and placing the term in a broader context.

I began the class by displaying a phony syllabus written in the style of a webpage with ad space and clickbait. After presenting it as if it were real, I asked the students what they thought. Several students commented on how the syllabus was similar to what they see online, and I connected this to the need for evaluation criteria.

Later I asked the students what fake news means to them and whether it is a useful term. Students defined the term as including complete falsehoods as well as stories with a grain of truth that are misrepresented.

I then explained the importance of differentiating between these four potential categories where the term might be used: Misinformation/disinformation, propaganda/bias, inflammatory misrepresentations, and advertising/clickbait. I closed by stressing the importance of specificity when evaluating sources online.

I feel that adding humor by using the fake syllabus worked well with the students, and presenting fake news within a larger context helped them make their own connections. I plan on reusing the phony syllabus and discussing it in class. That said, in the future, I may place less emphasis on fake news and simply return to the perennial need for critical evaluation. I am concerned that the term is polarizing and overused. However, if it continues to be used in popular media, I will attempt to unpack it with students in future semesters.

Francine Paolini

My goal in teaching about fake news was similar to Christina's: encourage students to think critically about the information they read. I began my fake news lecture by polling students to determine their awareness of the burgeoning phenomenon. For the most part, they were newly cognizant of the topic.

I then shared the International Federation of Library Association's (IFLA) handout, "How to Spot Fake News," and urged them to use the IFLA criteria as a set of best practices when engaging in research or even when simply scrolling through social media.

I then showed two popular election memes featuring Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton and challenged the entire class to authenticate them using their best web skills. Once they determined both memes were false, I advised them that memes often engage strong emotions and cautioned students to be aware that such states of mind can create a barrier to critical thinking. I emphasized that using sites like Snopes.com and FactCheck.org should be common practice when suspicions arise regarding both recurring memes and questionable news.

Following the lecture, I assigned a reading about fake news and a short related assignment, which asked students to summarize the content of the article, identify the author's claims and determine if they were credible, and comment on the value of the author's solutions to the problem of fake news.

The next week, I opened my lecture with a wrap-up discussion of the assignment. A lively conversation ensued with many students describing an evolution in the way they had viewed their social media feeds during the previous week. Many

Notes

1. "UC Merced Library Fights 'Fake News' with Campaign, Exhibit," *Panorama,* March 30, 2017, accessed May 12, 2017, http://panorama.ucmerced.edu/news/uc-merced-library-fights-fake-news-campaign-exhibit.

2. Vanessa Otero, "High Resolution File Formats for Full Chart and Blank Versions of News Quality Chart," *All Generalizations are False,* last modified January 23, 2017, accessed May 12 2017, www.allgeneralizationsarefalse.com/.

3. Sara Davidson Squibb, "About the Exhibit," *Elevate Your News Evaluation,* accessed May 12, 2017, http://libguides.ucmerced.edu/elevate-news-evaluation/about.

4. Donald Barclay, "Ferreting Out Fake News," *UC Merced Facebook,* last modified March 17, 2017, accessed May 12, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/ucmerced/videos/10154585516649151/.

5. Sara Davidson Squibb, "News Evaluation—Beyond the Checklist," *Community of Online Research Assignment* (CORA), last modified May 9, 2017, accessed May 12, 2017, https://www.projectcora.org/assignment/news-evaluation-%E2%80%93-beyond-checklist.

6. Climate *Feedback,* accessed May 12, 2017, http://climatefeedback.org/.

7. "About," *Climate Feedback,* accessed May 12, 2017, http://climatefeedback.org/about/.

8. Sara Davidson Squibb, "Downloads," *Elevate Your News Evaluation,* accessed May 18, 2017, http://libguides.ucmerced.edu/elevate-news-evaluation/downloads. ✁

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of them admitted they had taken at face value stories viewed in their social media feeds and vowed to parse them more critically moving forward. One young man expressed he no longer trusted anything he saw online.

Overall, I found the lecture, discussion, and assignment to be valuable exercises in raising the consciousness of students about the veracity of web sources and plan to continue using them in the future.

Conclusion

Fake news, misinformation, and yellow journalism have been around for decades. As tools to combat actual fake news improve and people become more aware of it, truly made up stories may decrease and the phrase *fake news* may fade from social discourse. (Or it may become unhelpfully polarizing.)

Beyond fake news, though, with the ever-shorter news cycle, the expanding dominance of social media, and the current political environment, there is increased concern about the facile, widespread dissemination of biased, inaccurate news stories in general. It is likely that our students —and everyone else—will continue to be bombarded by them.

Thus, academic librarians, with our emphasis on information literacy and with the guidance of the Framework (particularly "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual"), have a role to play in raising awareness about specious news and in promoting strategies for thinking critically about information.

As our varied lesson plans show, there is no single approach to talking about fake news to effectively help students develop critical thinking and source evaluation skills. But our experiences discussing the issue in our course and the responses of our students indicate that it is worthwhile to address the challenges of identifying misleading, inaccurate, biased news, no matter what you end up calling it. ✁