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The Fake News Phenomenon: An Opportunity for the Library Community to Make a Splash?

by **Donald A. Barclay** (Deputy University Librarian, University of California, Merced) <dbarclay@ucmerced.edu>

When media coverage of the fake news phenomenon blew up in the waning months of 2016, many were taken by surprise. I suspect, however, that most librarians had thoughts similar to mine: “Wait a minute! This is about information literacy. I’ve been rolling that rock up the hill my entire career.” While the idea of individuals forming opinions and making decisions on the basis of misinformation is discouraging, the furor over fake news represents an opportunity for the library community to show some leadership and, as difficult as the challenge may be, take meaningful action to help people become more savvy users of information. Before considering what actions the library community might take, though, it is important to understand the nuances of the problem.

Understanding Propaganda And Fake News

Propaganda and fake news are two related, but different, phenomena. Understanding the difference between the two is the key first step in taking action against their influences.

Propaganda — a type of misinformation intentionally created to further political purposes — has been around for millennia and almost certainly predates written language. The oldest example of written propaganda is a description of the conquests of **Darius the Great** dating from 515 BCE. Since that time, the world has endured an almost constant stream of propaganda generated by societies as diverse as India’s Maurya Empire, Ancient Rome, the Qing Dynasty, and (perhaps most notoriously) Nazi Germany. Typically, propaganda consists of a mix of a small amount of fact with a large dose of fiction. When the Nazi party was coming to power, **Adolf Hitler** and his henchmen spread propaganda about the harm caused to Germany by the punitive Treaty of Versailles. There was some truth to what the Nazis said about the Treaty of Versailles, but Nazi propagandists greatly exaggerated its impact and completely fabricated stories blaming the treaty on German Jews and other Nazi scapegoats. While propaganda is most closely associated with political aims, its definition is sometimes expanded to include such non-political activities as commercial advertising. For example, the tobacco industry’s decades-long efforts to promote cigarette smoking can be seen as a case study of commercial advertising crossing the line into the realm of propaganda.

Broadly speaking, fake news resembles propaganda in that it contains far more fiction than fact, yet differs in that fake news is not inspired by a political agenda. Although not as ancient as propaganda, fake news predates the Digital Age. For example, *The Weekly World News* (established in 1979) was a supermarket tabloid best known for its sensationalistic black-and-white covers and painfully fake

news stories on such unlikely phenomena as cryptids, aliens, and dead celebrities spotted alive and well. Going back even further, in 1844 the *New York Sun* published a fake news story about a balloon crossing of the Atlantic accomplished in a mere three days. While the balloon hoax is remembered today mainly because it was written by none other than **Edgar Allan Poe**, it was neither the first nor the only fake news story to be spread through the medium of ink on paper.

Approaching the topic less broadly, fake news turns out to be a nuanced concept. Certain politicians (and their adherents) narrowly define fake news as “any information that contradicts my worldview” and freely apply the fake news label without regard to the offending information’s accuracy or lack thereof. An entirely different genre of fake news consists of satirical stories created for purposes more humorous than political. The long-running web publication *The Onion* is perhaps the leading U.S. source of satirical fake news stories, though it is certainly not the only such source. Taken out of context, satirical stories can be mistaken for serious news and opinion, a fate that has befallen satire since at least the time of **Jonathan Swift’s** “A Modest Proposal” (if not well before). Yet another genre of fake news consists of items created solely for the purpose of attracting the largest possible number of readers or viewers. In the digital age, this type of mercenary, for-profit fake news often takes the form of fabricated clickbait articles that appeal to the reader’s politics, prejudices, or sense of outrage. An alternative clickbait strategy is the use of tempting “You won’t believe...” headlines designed to attract clicks that translate into advertising revenue.

Those who create for-profit fake news reap big payoffs when their stories go viral. In August 2016 *The Guardian* reported that teenagers in the small town of Veles, Macedonia were running over 150 websites featuring pro-**Donald-Trump** fake news stories simply as a way to earn money rather than out of any politically motivated interest in the U.S. elections. In March 2017, *Sixty Minutes* reported on a purveyor of fake news named **Jestin Coler** who claimed to earn \$10,000 a month from advertising revenues generated by such fabricated stories as his report that the U.S. Army had quarantined an entire Texas town due to an Ebola outbreak or another story claiming that anyone who signs up for Obamacare is implanted with a RFID tracking chip.

Even when the creator of a for-profit fake news article or video has no political motivation, such stories can have the same effect as propaganda, thus blurring the line between the two genres. Such blurring is one reason why throwing around highly charged terms like *propaganda* and *fake news* can be inexact and unhelpful. Another

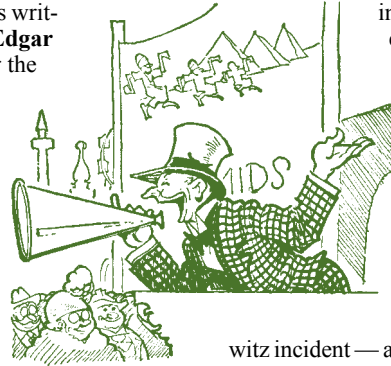
problem with both terms is that what a person labels as either propaganda or fake news greatly depends on one’s worldview. Just as devoted Nazis circa 1939 would not have considered Hitler’s ideas about the Treaty of Versailles to be propaganda, they would not have considered reports of the Gleiwitz incident — a fabricated report of an attack on a German radio station used to justify the brutal invasion of Poland — to be fake news. More troubling is that focusing exclusively on fake news can result in reductionist mindset in which any given piece of information must be either rejected as entirely false or accepted as entirely true.

Are We Seeing a New Phenomenon?

If misleading information — whether propaganda or fake news — is nothing new, is the recent concern over fake news nothing more than the latest moral panic, a case of collective hand wringing over things that have long been part of human culture? Not exactly. There are some troubling difference about the misleading information of today versus that of the past.

One obvious difference between the situation today versus all previous eras is the sheer amount of information in existence. By any measure — number of web pages, tweets, books, journal articles, images, videos, emails, bytes — the amount of information available in the Digital Age is beyond human comprehension. This permanent, ever worsening state of information overload has made the task of figuring out what information to trust and what to doubt more challenging than ever before. A second difference is how easy digital technology makes it to transmit a message to a (potentially) vast audience. Whereas in the past the cost of printing thousands of copies of a polemic or manifesto and delivering those copies to thousands of potential readers was daunting, today a webpage, tweet, meme, or image can be created and made public at so low a cost that a creator can risk churning out dozens — even hundreds — of messages in the hope that one will go viral and reach an audience of millions. A third difference is the ease with which today’s digital information can be copied and forwarded — possibly out

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of context and lacking key metadata, such as the name of the original creator of the information or its date of creation. A fourth, and final, difference is the ease with which digital information can be altered. Digital tools that make it simple to deceptively edit text, images, and video have been widely available for years. In 2016, Adobe raised the stakes by introducing a new technology described as “a Photoshop for audio.” With Adobe’s new technology and twenty minutes of any individual’s recorded voice, editing speech becomes as simple as editing text in a word processing document. Imagine, for example, how easy it would be for someone equipped with this technology and access to historic audio recordings to create, say, a convincing recording of **Lyndon Baines Johnson** admitting in his own voice that he was personally responsible for the assassination of **John F. Kennedy**.

But just as technology can make the problem of misleading information worse, it can also be used to fight back. Facebook, for example, has (somewhat belatedly) undertaken initiatives to flag fake news and discourage Facebook users from forwarding discredited stories. Websites like Snopes, Politico, and Blue Feed/Red Feed exist to help people make informed decisions about the information they encounter in their daily lives. The website Climate Feedback was established by climate scientists to evaluate stories on climate change and challenge stories that present unscientific information about climate change. In March 2017 the Omidyar Network pledged \$100M to fight fake news, a welcome development that should lead to even more resources that support seekers of trustworthy information.

While such efforts to fact check fake news and propaganda are commendable, the problem is that such resources exist as silos. Is it reasonable to expect that the average person will take the initiative to find and make use of any of these tiny islets spread across a vast ocean of digital information? Another problem with isolated fact checking resources is that any site claiming to be the enemy of misinformation could very well be the exact opposite. Given

the nature of the digital world, there is nothing to stop propagandists or purveyors of fake news from claiming that their site is the go-to destination for accurate, trustworthy, fact-checked information.

What Can Librarians Do?

While librarians cannot stop the phenomenon of untrustworthy information being spread via the tools and behaviors of the Digital Age, they can, and are, doing things to help individuals make better choices about what information to trust and what to doubt. A tangible example is the recent IFLA infographic “How To Spot Fake News,” a document I have frequently shared with others. Also, librarians readily recognized the recent uproar over fake news to be a rare teaching opportunity: after decades of relegation to the margins of education, the importance of being able to evaluate information is suddenly headline news. But as commendable and necessary as such actions on the part of librarians are, it feels a bit like the library community is trying to stop a forest fire with a squirt pistol. There is simply too much untrustworthy information coming too fast and from too many sources for high-touch techniques like reference interviews, lecture/demonstrations, or the sharing of well-made infographics to have the necessary impact.

Which is not to say that such techniques are worthless or should be entirely abandoned, merely that they are not going to win the day all by themselves. Individual initiatives that rely on substantial, on-going investments of librarian labor, such as compiling lists of untrustworthy websites or sharing techniques for ferreting out fake news, simply do not scale in the digital world. It is all a bit reminiscent of the librarian-backed initiative (circa mid-1990s) to catalog the entire Internet — a commendable goal that collapsed under the sheer impossibility of keeping up with the growth of online information. Instead of pursuing small wins, the library community should seize the opportunity presented by the fake news phenomenon to do something huge; namely, undertaking a thoroughly coordinated campaign to established libraries and librarians as the brand-name antidote to fake news, propaganda, and all forms of misinformation in much the same way that Google has established itself as

brand name for searching the web or Microsoft Word has established itself as the brand name for word processing.

While I cannot spell out every detail for making so large an initiative a reality, I have some thoughts on the high-level requirements:

- National and international library associations must agree to work jointly on this initiative and make it their top priority. The work must start soon, before the world becomes complacent about the fake news phenomenon and turns its fleeting attention elsewhere.
- A united library community must approach this initiative with as much impartiality as is humanly possible. If the initiative is perceived as being influenced by market forces, partisanship, or special interest, it will die on the vine.
- Librarians must leverage the power of digital technology to have any meaningful impact.

Of the above high-level requirements, finding a technological solution is probably the biggest stretch. That said, here is a blue-sky idea about how a technological solution might be achieved: A united library community teams with a willing technology giant (say Google or Facebook) to develop a search engine that employs algorithms designed to favor characteristics of trustworthiness and factuality rather than favoring a site’s popularity. Librarians and allied information scientists would be excellent consultants for identifying the characteristics of trustworthiness and factuality as well as for testing beta versions of the search engine. In the ideal scenario, the final product not only retrieves links ranked by trustworthiness, but also provides a sophisticated “Trustworthiness Rating” for each link retrieved.

Crazy idea? Probably. But we live in crazy times, times in which either doing nothing or doing what we have always done are not formulas for success. The library community must either fight the rising tide of misinformation or drown in it. In the words of the late, great **Johnny Cash**, “How high’s the water, Mama?” 🌿

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Open Access programs **Collabra** and **Luminos**. It has been an incredible transformation. The opportunity to lead the ground-breaking **PLOS** which has spearheaded a revolution in scientific communication was too tempting. **Alison** acknowledges that the OA market has evolved and matured. Her top priority will be charting what comes next for **PLOS** — how does it remain true to its mission and continue to push boundaries? **Alison** loves the public advocacy part of her work and is looking forward to expanding that at **PLOS**. Prior to

UC Press, **Alison** was Executive Vice President at **SAGE Publications, Inc.**, leading publishing programs across books, journals and digital platforms. Her 25 plus years in the publishing industry include leadership positions at **Blackwell Publishers** in Oxford, UK, and **Taylor & Francis Inc.**, in Philadelphia, U.S. **Alison** received her Bachelor of Arts degree from the **University of Bath** and her Masters in Business Administration from **The Open University**. Congratulations, **Alison!** Looking forward to the next steps!



NEWS FLASH! Congratulations to the incredible **Sharna Williams** who has retired from her job at the **Addlestone Library** of the **College of Charleston!** Even though **Sharna** has many talents (she is a great seamstress and gardener), **Sharna** will keep on working with the **Charleston Conference** and **Against the Grain**. Whew and Hooray!

The **Internet Archive** was honored with a **Lifetime Achievement Award** at the **21st Annual Webbys**, hailed by the **New York Times** as “one of the Internet’s

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