

December 2017

# Op Ed-Opinions and Editorials-Educators, Not Engineers, Should Lead the Fight Against Fake News

Adam Blackwell

*ProQuest*, [ablackwella2@gmail.com](mailto:ablackwella2@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Blackwell, Adam (2017) "Op Ed-Opinions and Editorials-Educators, Not Engineers, Should Lead the Fight Against Fake News," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 29: Iss. 6, Article 16.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7880>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

## Op Ed — Educators, Not Engineers, Should Lead the Fight Against Fake News

by Adam Blackwell (Product Manager Lead, ProQuest) &lt;ablackwella2@gmail.com&gt;

In “Why We’re All So Anxious,” a short video put out by **Alain de Botton’s School of Life**, we learn that anxiety is an evolutionary outgrowth of watching our kinsmen get “trampled and torn apart by wild animals.” Anxiety, we are told, is a “permanent feature of life.” It is “irrevocable [and] existential,” and it ruins “a dominant share of our brief time on earth.”<sup>1</sup>

That sounds about right.

But, day to day, we rarely think about anxiety in this way. We don’t think about it as an inexorable part of the human condition, the price we all pay for remaining alive. Instead, we tend to view anxiety as an unnecessary emotion, which, if we just played our cards right, we could go through life without experiencing. The trouble with this view of anxiety is not just that it’s wrong but that it leads us to do things that make our anxiety worse.

One of these things, paradoxically, is avoiding information that makes us anxious. In trying to reduce the number of times that something triggers our anxiety, we are engaging in a form of what psychologists call “avoidance behavior.”<sup>2</sup> And the long-term impact of avoidance behavior, unfortunately, is more anxiety.

Let’s say your child is suffering from headaches. To avoid intensifying your anxiety about your child’s health, you may decide against mentioning the headaches to a pediatrician. While this decision may spare you the anxiety that comes with discussion of what’s causing your child’s headaches, in the long run, such avoidance is likely to make you more anxious. That’s partly because, in addition to not discussing the possible scary explanations for your child’s headaches, you’ll not be discussing baseline statistics that would point to very benign causes. But there’s another less obvious reason why this kind of avoidance escalates our normal human anxiety into something more intense. When we avoid something, we are effectively telling our brain that the thing we’re avoiding is not just anxiety-producing but, like the fierce cats that once roamed the savannah, positively dangerous!

If you’ve done any cognitive behavioral therapy, you’ll know that the antidote usually recommended for combatting anxiety

is not avoidance but, on the contrary, *engagement*. The engagement-centered approach is premised on the assumption that very little of what happens in the world is inherently anxiety-producing. Instead, it’s the thoughts we have *in response* to what happens in the world that provoke high levels of anxiety. The trick then is to identify these thoughts, tease out from them any distortions, and reframe them in a positive way.

In the case of your child’s headache, it’s not the headache itself that causes you anxiety but perhaps the thought that the headache is a symptom of a serious illness. There are multiple possible distortions in this thought, one of which is likely emotional reasoning, or mistaking your subjective feelings for objective reality. A more positive framing would involve acknowledging that, while serious illness is a *possible* cause of your child’s headache, it is extremely improbable and, in the absence of other symptoms, commonplace factors like dehydration and fatigue are more likely causes. This reframing creates an opportunity for you to teach your child the health benefits of drinking plenty of water and getting enough sleep.

What does all this have to do with fake news? Well, if a recent BBC World Service survey is representative, the answer is quite a lot.<sup>3</sup> Of the more than 16,000 adults polled in 18 countries, nearly 80% reported feeling anxiety about the spread of fake news, or news that’s not merely sloppy, biased, or exaggerated but is flat out, demonstrably, and intentionally false.<sup>4,5</sup> Among educators, I’d bet that number is even higher.

All of us who taught classes before the huge print-to-electronic (or P-to-E) migration have witnessed a flattening not just of news but of *all* sources of information. In the pre-internet era, you knew you were reading a newspaper article when you got ink on your hands, and you knew when an article came from a scholarly journal because it was archived in a bound volume that had to be checked out at the reference desk. With digitization, sources that once looked and felt different now look and feel the same.

Consequently, students at every level are struggling to make very basic distinctions.<sup>6</sup> And if they can’t tell the difference

between a newspaper article, a scholarly journal article, and a blog, what are the odds they’ll succeed in distinguishing a *real* news article from a carefully composed *fake* one?

The challenge of helping already struggling students navigate fake news minefields in a rapidly changing digital environment is daunting. Perhaps thinking about the difficulties increases your anxiety, while tempting you to move on to more manageable tasks. But before devoting your next lesson to correct citations, spend some time identifying the specific thoughts that are making you anxious about fake news. There could be many such thoughts. Here’s one that I’ve often had: fake news makes people believe things they wouldn’t otherwise believe.

Sit with this thought for a moment, though, and it’s likely you’ll note distortions. For me, the most significant of them is probably my use of anecdotes to posit a larger trend. One such anecdote involved a North Carolina man whose consumption of fake news on Reddit apparently led him to believe that a pro-Clinton pedophile ring was operating out of a popular pizza restaurant in Washington, DC. A closer-to-home anecdote involved an old friend, whose encounter with fake news on a virulently anti-Semitic conspiracy site seemed to turn her from an outspoken #NeverTrump into a true believer in Making America Great Again.

Even if we uncritically accept it was fake news that changed the North Carolina man’s and my friend’s beliefs, we don’t have evidence that their experiences are representative. Indeed, when we look at the data, we see a very different picture. Studies show we are far more likely to believe fake news than’s consistent with our existing beliefs than we are to believe fake news that challenges them.<sup>7</sup> What this means in practice is that fake news rarely changes our beliefs but, instead, simply reinforces the beliefs we already hold.

There’s another probable distortion in the thought that fake news changes people’s beliefs, and that is that fake news is particularly susceptible to misuse. But, once again, this assumption crumbles when subjected to scrutiny. If fake news simply reinforces our beliefs, then there’s nothing special about it. *All* news, not just fake news, can be used (or misused) to validate false beliefs.

In the late 1990s, when I was teaching composition at the **University of Utah**,



*continued on page 51*

a student was researching the impact of liberalizing marijuana policies. Passionately pro-legalization, he claimed that a massive increase in marijuana use would have no negative health effects. None of the sources he had consulted were *fake* in the way we understand the term today. But by drawing on small, incomplete, or badly designed pro-legalization studies and ignoring several larger and more carefully controlled cautionary studies, he'd reinforced his false belief that there were no risks to public health of making marijuana widely available.

The point I am trying to drive home here is our students' biggest problem isn't that they occasionally mistake fake news for real news. It's that they so often use *all* types of news to reinforce their existing beliefs. No doubt they've always been selective in what they read and watch, but, in an era where social media and customized alerts have largely replaced national and regional news, many students curate their news sources to such an extent that they expose themselves *only* to news that reinforces their beliefs. As a result, these beliefs persist largely unchallenged — and many of the false ones go uncorrected.

In treating the uncritical consumption of fake news as a symptom of the more fundamental problem of excessive curation, I am suggesting that the market for fake news is shaped less by the opportunism of a few tech-savvy Macedonian teens than it is by the longstanding desire of students, and indeed all of us, to define the world in a

way that frees us to believe what we want.<sup>8</sup> As **Sir Francis Bacon** observed nearly 400 years ago:

The human understanding, once it has adopted opinions, either because they were already accepted and believed, or because it likes them, draws everything else to support and agree with them.<sup>9</sup>

Conceived of in human rather than technological terms, fake news is a problem that falls comfortably within the educator's wheelhouse. As librarians and instructors, we have seen students misusing sources for years; we've read dozens of student papers where sources have been co-opted to validate beliefs that fly in the face of the scientific consensus; and, above all, we've seen how students use information not as a means of learning new things about the world but, instead, as a means of reassuring themselves they know enough already. Our experiences in the classroom, more than tweaks to Facebook algorithms, are what we'll need to mount a successful campaign against the scourge of fake news.

Finally, whether we're feeling anxious about headaches, fake news, or the misuse of information, there is always a temptation to avoid doing things that could intensify our anxiety. As a result, we may resist thinking about, and actively trying to resolve, some significant problems. This is generally a mistake. Because while avoidance may buy us some temporary relief, in the long run, it increases our anxiety. The big cats won't stay away forever. There will come a day when we'll have to confront them. 🐾

#### Endnotes

1. schoolofflifechannel. "Why We're All So Anxious." YouTube, YouTube, 6 May 2015, <https://youtu.be/mW0gj3n4D1Q>.
2. **Dymond, Simon, and Bryan Roche.** "A Contemporary Behavior Analysis of Anxiety and Avoidance." *The Behavior Analyst*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2009, pp. 7-27, PsycINFO, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/756304163?accountid=131239>.
3. "Fake Internet Content a High Concern, but Appetite for Regulation Weakens: BBC World Service Poll - Media Centre." BBC, BBC, <https://youtu.be/mW0gj3n4D1Q>.
4. **Allcott, Hunt, and Matthew Gentzkow.** "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31.2 (2017): 211-36. Print. 26 May 2017.
5. **Townsend, Tess.** "Facebook Hoaxes." Inc. 21 Nov. 2016. Web. 26 May 2017.
6. Stanford History Education Group. "Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning." 22 Nov. 2016, <https://purl.stanford.edu/>, p.4. Web. 3 Oct. 2017.
7. **Lazer, David et al** "Combating Fake News: An Agenda for Research and Action." Shorenstein Center, 10 May 2017, <https://shorensteincenter.org/combating-fake-news-agenda-for-research/>. Accessed 26 May 2017.
8. **Subramanian, Samanth.** "Inside the Macedonian Fake-News Complex." *Wired*, Conde Nast, 2 February 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news/>. Accessed 26 May 2017.
9. Qtd. in **Taubes, Garry.** "Vegetable Oils, (Francis) Bacon, Bing Crosby and the American Heart Association." 16 June 2017. <http://www.cardiobrief.org/2017/06/16/guest-post-vegetable-oils-francis-bacon-bing-crosby-and-the-american-heart-association/>. Accessed 30 June 2017.

## ATG Special Report — Charlotte Initiative E-book Symposium

### Charleston Marriott Courtyard, November 6, 2017

by **Rebecca Lenzini** (President, The Charleston Company) <[rlenzini@charlestonco.com](mailto:rlenzini@charlestonco.com)>

As the website for this symposium noted, "For the past two years attendees of the **Charleston Conference** have heard about **The Charlotte Initiative for Permanent Acquisition of E-books**, by **Academic Libraries** the **Andrew W. Mellon** funded

research grant designed to study the current state of eBooks in the academic market." <http://charlotteinitiative.uncc.edu/>

The two-year project is now coming to a close, with the final report due in December 2017. Participants of the grant are sharing their findings, with the goal of helping to continue the conversations begun during the investigations. As part of that effort, members of the

Project Team offered a free symposium to all **Charleston Conference** attendees on November 6, 2017, at the Marriott Courtyard. The symposium presented overview findings from the Environmental Scan Research, as well as Publisher and Vendor Perspectives, and highlights from the four research team findings.

**Charles Hamaker**, the project's Initial Principal Investigator, kicked off the afternoon by reminding the audience of the original goals of the project which were to example three core principles proposed for eBook licenses:

- Provision of irrevocable perpetual access and archival rights.
- Allowance for unlimited simultaneous users.
- Freedom from any Digital Rights Management (DRM), including (but not limited to) use of proprietary formats, restricted access to content, or time-limited access terms.

*continued on page 52*

