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Beyond 'Fake News': Opportunities and Constraints for Teaching News Literacy

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Abstract

Teaching news literacy has, in recent decades, become cross-disciplinary, and as a result, more collaborative. This paper centers the importance of this collaboration by describing a workshop designed and taught by a media studies professor, a media literacy expert, and their subject librarian. In this essay, we discuss the workshop in terms of best practices for teaching about media and information literacy in an era marked by digital news consumption and the proliferation of claims of "fake news." First, we elaborate on the value of the collaboration between the discipline, the library, and the field, as it allowed us to draw on converging literacies – media and information. Next, we address some of the constraints of the "fake news" narrative when it comes to news literacy efforts. Finally, we share lessons learned from teaching news literacy to account for contemporary news production and consumption.

Keywords: Media literacy, information literacy, news literacy, fake news, pedagogy

Beyond 'Fake News': Opportunities and Constraints for Teaching News Literacy

Introduction

A media studies professor, a media literacy expert, and their subject librarian[1] walk into a bar. Well, actually, a classroom. Their aim? To team teach a news literacy workshop entitled *Beyond 'fake news': Digging into media literacy and cognitive bias* for the campus community. Why these three? To gain the full benefit from the often-overlooked connections between media and information literacies (Lee & So, 2014; Livingstone, Van Couvering, & Thumin, 2008). In this essay, our workshop serves as a starting point for a discussion about the importance of collaboration across disciplines when teaching news literacy, potential consequences of using fake news as a priming strategy, and lessons learned regarding news literacy instruction in a climate of fake news and general distrust of "the media".

Media and Information Literacy

Recent years have shown a growing recognition of the inherent similarities between media and information literacies. Media literacy education has been conceptualized as "a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms" (Center for Media Literacy, 2020) with special attention to students' agentic roles in growing their media literacy. Similarly, the Association of College and Research Libraries (2016;

[1] A subject librarian is a librarian who, aside from being an information literacy expert, also specializes in a particular field of study.

ACRL, see also Jones-Jang, Mortensen, & Liu, 2019) has defined information literacy as a framework through which people develop their abilities to find, access, and critically evaluate information, all while understanding the ethical responsibilities associated with acting on information and creating new knowledge. An important parallel that emerges from the definitions of these two concepts is an emphasis on the evaluation and critique of the ways in which meanings are embedded in the information/media we consume and create (Koltay, 2011).

Moving beyond mere definitional relationships, several scholars have argued that the critical approach that underpins both literacies and that is centered on issues of power and influence, allows for the combination of the two. Bussell (2018) illustrates the value of merging the two literacies through a course assignment that explores connections between the means of media production (i.e., who wields power and influence), and the messages produced and shared by those in power. Assessing this dynamic is a central tenet of critical media literacy (CML; Kellner & Share, 2007; Kersch & Lesley, 2019), and Bussell highlights how this aligns with the "Information has Value" frame of the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (ACRL, 2016).[2] Similarly, critical information literacy (CIL) has been described as an examination of "the ways in which systems of power shape the creation, distribution, and reception of information" (Drabinski & Tewell, 2019, p. 1),

[2] This frame emphasizes a recognition of ways that information production may privilege some voices/information over others.

underlining the notion that CIL and CML share core principles regarding "the teaching of knowledge structures and considerations of power and agency in both education and media creation and consumption" (p. 2). Brayton and Casey (2019) go even further to argue that there is no discernible difference between "information" and "media" in the digital age, and that a convergent approach to teaching media and information literacies is needed, coining the phrase *critical media and information literacy* (CMIL). Referring to CML and CIL as "natural allies" (p. 131), CMIL evinces the importance of being an active, rather than passive, participant in one's learning, and questioning the power structures responsible for the production and distribution of information.

Teaching about Information and Media Literacy

It is in this convergence of literacies that we saw an opportunity to collaboratively design a news literacy workshop. Aiming to de/construct the news, this workshop had students dissect mainstream news sources to understand the many conventions and constraints that shape news media (and how news media shape us), as well as construct a news headline to gain a deeper understanding of notions of "objectivity," audience-targeting, and the tradeoff between information and entertainment.

Each teaching partner played an integral role in achieving these goals. First, taking a traditional media literacy approach, the media studies professor introduced concepts related to the roles that the news plays in informing the public about issues they choose to engage with, as well as socializing

audiences to cultural norms and practices. Next, adopting a critical media literacy perspective, the media literacy specialist helped participants peel back the most visible layer of the news (the content we consume) to better understand the extent to which the news is shaped, and constrained, by the individuals and organizations that create it. This section centered on guiding students to recognize connections between news gatekeepers, political influences, and dominant cultural values and understand how all of these pressures shape the media and information landscape, a direct link to the examination of power structures that is central to CMIL. Using two headlines on the same topic, but from different news outlets, the subject librarian/information literacy expert then facilitated an activity that asked participants to consider how their personal biases might influence the ways they respond to, and evaluate, the information they encounter in the news, and the extent to which they could identify journalistic preferences in the wording of the headlines[3]. Not only did this activity draw on the evaluative components of media and information literacies, but it set the stage for the final activity.

The final activity, wherein students were asked to take on the role of news producer, touched on another dimension of the convergence between media and information literacy: the need for participants to actively partake in their own learning process. This last part of the workshop engaged students in a roleplaying activity in which they were given background information,

[3] This activity, the "headline activity," can be found in the Appendix.

several facts, and images related to a racial profiling incident at a community pool (based on actual events). Participants worked in groups to create a news headline based on 1) the specific news outlet assigned to them, and 2) information available to them, and selected a photo to accompany their headline. The workshop ended with a discussion of each group's decision-making process regarding their word choice and image selection, and how those decisions reflected ways in which news, and specifically the information newsmakers choose to include in a story, are not only constructed for specific purposes, but told from a point of view and for a particular audience. An ethos of empowerment grounded the approach that we took to designing the final activity, with a focus on cultivating active (rather than passive) participation in newsmaking scenarios, reflecting the critical media information literacy model introduced by Brayton and Casey (2019, cf. Kersch & Lesley, 2019).

This 90-minute, one-time workshop was open to anyone to attend. It took place at the campus library, a central location and hub of activity, in early November 2019. Thirty-one people participated in the workshop, including graduate students, faculty and staff members, undergraduates, and members of the community. Unsolicited feedback received after the workshop indicated participants' satisfaction with the content we covered, as well as an appreciation that the material made them think about the workshop topics long after the workshop was over.

Fake News as a Constraint

The natural alliance between media and information literacy is nowhere as obvious as with the expansion of educational strategies aimed at teaching about fake news. This is no surprise considering recent findings that although young people are adept at using the Internet for site navigation, they struggle to evaluate the veracity of the online content they encounter and are "easily duped" (Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, & Ortega 2016, p. 4). Since the 2016 election, fake news has also been seen as an important driver in the need for news literacy among the general population (e.g., Farmer, 2019; Jones-Jang, et al., 2019). However, while fake news is an important element of news literacy (Ireland, 2018), focusing on fake news can constrain attempts to teach news literacy in ways that are important to recognize.

The first constraint arises from the definition of fake news itself. Fake news is often described as a typology that ranges from satire and parody to fabrication and, at the far end of the spectrum, manipulation (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). This definition, however, exposes the ambiguity associated with our understanding of fake news; it can be both an attempt at humor, where people in the know easily recognize the news as not real, but it can also be an overt attempt at persuasion, where recognition becomes difficult. When teaching about fake news, many news literacy programs aim to teach people to recognize misinformation (e.g., Eberhart, 2019). This approach fails to acknowledge that fake news can include popular parody such as *The Daily Show* and *The Onion* and bestows a one-dimensionality on fake news that does not do justice to the complexity of the concept. Additionally, it gives people

who *do* consume parody the false sense that they are immune to fake news. The weaponization of fake news as a rhetorical device, by political actors and their supporters, to marginalize or delegitimize critical news coverage (Dentith, 2016; Mason, Krutka & Stoddard, 2018) further obfuscates the public's understanding of fake news.

Furthermore, a focus on fake news reduces news literacy to a binary construction, i.e., it becomes about recognizing "real" new and fails to acknowledge that critical news consumption is also about understanding the nuances of news construction and how that impacts news content (e.g., Maksl, Craft, Ashley, & Miller, 2017). Likewise, it is important to promote tools such as NewsGuard and AllSides with care. These tools may reinforce the tendency to view news media through right/left, good/bad, or real/fake binaries. Reducing the news media landscape to an easily referenced spectrum of bias or to a hierarchy of journalistic value can serve the casual consumer, but works against the purpose of news literacy, especially critical news literacy, because it fails to acknowledge one of its key goals: learning that news is not an objective representation of reality and that "every source is biased and subjective" (Malik, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013, p. 8). Even some news literacy scholars, when discussing fake news, appear to grapple with the notion that all news, due to its constructed nature, does contain some bias. As Jones-Jang et al., (2019) in their work on fake news and news literacy state, "*Some* news is not a complete, wholly unbiased representation of reality" (p. 5, italics ours), implying that some news *is* an objective reflection of the world out there.

However, truth is not so much a characteristic of the news as it is "linked to what people do with information" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1872). This connects to the critical approach to news literacy which involves students examining the power structures inherent in all media content and moves beyond a fake/real binary. When centering news literacy pedagogy on the concept of fake news, the role of the consumer and their personal biases in processing the news becomes muddled as it focuses on the qualities (or lack thereof) of the news as the sole issue and diminishes the role played by news consumers' own perspectives in labeling news as fake or not.

Teaching News and Information Literacy: Lessons Learned and Ways Forward

Taking the constraints listed above, the process of designing the collaborative workshop described in the first section, and the anecdotal feedback received from participants, we will now offer several lessons learned and ways forward for teaching news and information literacy in an era of fake news.

Framing Fake News

One of the lessons learned is that the framing of a workshop, through its title and its promotion, is particularly important in the realm of news literacy. The term "fake news" carries significant rhetorical dimensions in the contemporary cultural and political landscape (Dentith, 2016), hence using that term to frame a news literacy program primes students to approach the program's content from the belief that there is a clear distinction between

news that is *fake* and news that is *real*, even if the program's intent is to move beyond that binary. For example, informal feedback about the workshop indicated that students' main takeaways centered on recognizing fake news, in spite of the workshop's focus on empowering students to recognize news as a construction and understand bias in news production and distribution. In addition, a report written for the university's student newspaper by a student who attended the workshop (whose title claimed to move "Beyond Fake News") focused entirely on issues of fake news and objectivity. While this illustrates news media's tendency to highlight a story's more salient and sensational elements, it also points to potentially larger issues with the ideas that students did or did not take away from the workshop. In recognition of this issue, the next iteration of the workshop is titled *Friend, Enemy, or Frenemy?: De/constructing News in the Digital Era*.

News Literacy as Critical Engagement

Critical news literacy in a digital post-truth era should focus less on the content and more on the critical engagement of the learner, empowering learners to distance themselves from the media and the message, as well as their own perspectives (AlNajjar, 2019). Designing hands-on activities that guide and enrich the content and that position learners as both decoders and encoders, is essential to critical news literacy. These critical competencies are, ultimately, more important than the ability to identify a media text within a typology of fake news, though there is room for that competency in a holistic news literacy program as well. As stated previously, learner-centered activities

within a critical news literacy framework should cultivate agency and active participation, while promoting awareness "of the role that media play, both positively and problematically, in shaping social thought" (Baker-Bell, Stanbrough, & Everett, 2017, p. 139). Despite issues with the framing of our workshop, this desire to engage students in their own learning proved effective. This was evidenced by some of the discussions during the share-out and discussion phase of the final activity. Students took issue with one group's decision to equate neutrality with objectivity and engaged in a spirited discussion about presenting a story involving racial profiling in a "neutral" way that fails to address issues of privilege, systemic racism, and inequality, effectively ignoring a major social narrative.

Collaborative Pedagogy

Finally, the workshop points to the value of the collaboration between the three partners, producing a learning experience that was more than the sum of its parts. To design the workshop, we worked together to create a shared understanding of what a critical and active news consumer looks like, organically creating a CMIL-based approach to the workshop. Subsequently, students engaged with insights from all three disciplines, and our activities, especially the final one where students were asked to confront their own bias *and* take on the role of news producer, showcased this collaborative approach. The effectiveness of this activity was reflected in students' feedback that addressed how they enjoyed and struggled with examining their own bias as well as the bias inherent in news production.

Conclusion

At a time when claims of fake news are increasingly common, media and information literacy is essential. Based on our experience, teaching people to be critical news consumers is best carried out from a collaborative and critical perspective that melds media and information literacy into CMIL. While it is essential that students possess the skills to distinguish more and less reliable sources of information, CMIL encourages students to question all sources of information and to view all news media messages as constructions. Collaborations between information and media literacy experts can help cultivate the application of CMIL in news literacy lessons. Finally, while fake news is an important element of any workshop addressing CMIL, educators should exercise caution when making this the focus of their program.

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Appendix

Headline Activity

Instructions

Look at the two headlines below. Feel free to open and scan the articles for more context.

Cory Booker unveils "bold" plan to curb gun violence

https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cory-booker-2020-booker-unveils-bold-plan-to-curb-gun-violence/

Cory Booker: Americans should be 'thrown in jail' if they won't give up their guns

https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/cory-booker-americans-should-be-thrown-in-jail-if-they-wont-give-up-their-guns

1. Where do you see bias, if at all?
2. How might your own confirmation bias emerge when reading these headlines?

   Reminder: confirmation bias is the propensity to agree with information that confirms pre-existing beliefs/assumptions, and to dismiss information that doesn't.
3. When can a point of view in the news be helpful? When can a point of view in the news be harmful?