Breaking the Spin Cycle: Teaching Complexity in the Age of Fake News

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abstract: This article describes a discussion-based approach for teaching college students to identify the characteristics of ethical journalism and scholarly writing, by comparing fake news with credible information in a strategically planned slideshow. Much has been written on the need to instruct our students about disinformation. This librarian shares a lesson plan that engages students’ critical thinking skills by using a blend of humor, analysis, and a compelling visual presentation. The teaching method is contextualized by research on the distrust of the press and scientific evidence since the rise of hyper-partisan cable news, Russian troll farms, and alternative facts.

Introduction

Throughout our culture, the old notions of “truth” and “knowledge” are in danger of being replaced by the new ones of “opinion,” “perception,” and “credibility.”

Michio Kakutani

What if truth is not an absolute or a relative, but a skill—a muscle, like memory, that collectively we have neglected so much that we have grown measurably weaker at using it? How might we rebuild it, going from chronic to bionic?

Kevin Young

In 2015, I knew I had a problem. After several years of teaching library instruction classes, I noticed that my conception of factuality and that of my students had diverged. Most students preferred Google and YouTube to do their research. When asked in my classes how they discerned the credibility of a website, most shrugged their shoulders. Students had been taught that any-
thing from a .gov, .edu, or .org site was reliable, although these suffixes did not ensure accuracy. They were not familiar with long-form magazine journalism, newspapers of record such as the New York Times and the Washington Post, or the scholarly books and articles that they would need to complete assignments. One student told our class that the New York Times offered free online subscriptions to our students “so they can manipulate us.” When asked which news sources were most reliable, some mentioned the Russian television network RT (Russia Today), unaware that the Kremlin sponsors it. A national study of middle school, high school, and college students by the Stanford History Education Group stated in 2016, “Our digital natives may be able to flit between Facebook and Twitter while simultaneously uploading a selfie to Instagram and texting a friend. But when it comes to evaluating information that flows through social media channels, they are easily duped.”

The Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York, where I teach, has an average population of 26,000 students, from 166 countries. They speak more than 100 languages. Half are first-generation college students. Seventy percent are black or Latinx. An average of 88 percent are eligible for the New York State Tuition Assistance Program. Despite the common clichés about the political opinions of urban people, our students are neither uniformly liberal nor uniformly progressive. Many come from traditional or religious families and are socially conservative. Most attend college while working multiple jobs and raising families. Some deal with poverty and housing insecurity. Because our public schools suffer from class-based and racial segregation, our students are significantly less prepared for college than their wealthier peers. We cannot assume that the students we serve can distinguish basic genres of writing; they may not know the difference between a fictional short story and a nonfiction essay, for instance, or between an objective newspaper article and a partisan opinion piece on a website. Therefore, the role of the teaching librarian in our community colleges necessarily includes basic instruction in how to assess and use all kinds of texts, both in print and online.

In our current political climate, the denigration of credible news reporting and scientific research calls into question the relevance of factual evidence. This problem was typified by White House counselor Kellyanne Conway’s phrase “alternative facts.” As E. J. Dionne, Norman Ornstein, and Thomas Mann wrote, “The trail to ‘alternative facts’ was blazed by a mistrust of those whose jobs and professional ethics required them to report and rely on real facts.” After President Donald Trump tweeted that the news media was “the enemy of the American people,” David Remnick reminded us of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin’s use of the term. The alt-right’s slur “lying press” or Lügenpresse is a page out of the Nazi propaganda playbook. The phrase fake news fosters cynicism in our students; perhaps it is preferable to use the term disinformation. Although we now associate President Donald Trump with the term fake news, the phrase was used previously in Russia and Ukraine as a political tool to spread confusion and to discredit the work of journalists.
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The American press has pushed back, particularly when conservatives attack First Amendment rights. In August 2018, after President Trump referred to the media as “the opposition party,” more than 350 news outlets nationwide, led by the Boston Globe, simultaneously posted editorials refuting the statement.¹² Some staunch conservatives have been equally troubled by this depiction of the press. After the 2016 election, right-wing talk radio host Charlie Sykes wrote that the conservative movement nurtured a distrust of traditional reporting for over two decades, to the detriment of the country: “One staple of every radio talk show was, of course, the bias of the mainstream media. This was, indeed, a target-rich environment. But as we learned this year, we had succeeded in persuading our audiences to ignore and discount any information from the mainstream media.”¹³

This is not just an American problem. In January 2018, the European commissioner for digital economy and society convened a panel of professionals called the High Level Expert Group to advise the European Commission on what ought to be done to mitigate the problems of disinformation online. Their final report recommended a set of complementary measures that included “action in support of media and information literacy for all citizens, including exchange of best practices and training for teachers” and “the use of media and information literacy approaches to counter disinformation and help users navigate our digital information environment.”¹⁴ While much has been written on the need to teach our students about disinformation, this article describes ways to develop their critical faculties. Recent attempts by political entities to manipulate large numbers of people in an online environment make it more crucial than ever to discern fact from fakery.

### Teaching for Complexity

Stephanie Bluemle wrote in 2018 about the challenges that teaching librarians face when Americans disagree about what constitutes an authoritative source. Her discussion of the frame “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual” in the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education identified a problem that the Framework’s authors did not anticipate: “Insofar as the frame advocates questioning authority, it does so from a social justice perspective; it does not consider, nor does it know what to do with, a form of questioning that exists outside, or in opposition to, the tenets of twenty-first-century social justice.”¹⁵ The Framework does not address a world in which distrust of traditional academic, government, and media sources could actually foster a less democratic social order. Bluemle’s call for a creative “repertoire of methods for teaching source evaluation that take into account the full complexity of legitimate cognitive authority” is timely. If we want to convince students that they must look beyond their own personal biases and habitual search strategies, we must develop a more contextual approach.
In designing a lesson on disinformation, I did not aim to follow the positions and language of the Framework or any other information literacy document. Instead, I focused on choosing examples that encourage students to consider the corroboration of evidence and the motivations of a source’s writers, regardless of their political affiliations. Emily Drabinski uses Kairos, a Greek word meaning the opportune or decisive moment, as a theoretical alternative to global standards and frameworks. Her approach more closely reflects the way that I engage with students: “Kairos demands apprehension of the moment, and calls for action that is appropriate to that moment . . . Kairos shifts the object of analysis away from abstract standards and toward a local, material capacity to discern content and pedagogy in a given classroom situation.”6

Students deserve a more substantial treatment of genre and meaning than standards and checklists can provide. Mark Meola, in his critique of checklists as source evaluation guides, stated, “Comparative thinking plays a key role in evaluative judgments.”7 Conversations that embrace the larger picture, with its nuanced facets, counteract the habit of categorical thinking. Referring to the name of a commonly used checklist acronym for currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose, Mike Caulfield wrote, “I think I want less CRAAP and more process.”8 What would this process look like? To figure that out, I turned to my students for guidance.

Although our students may lack formal training to assess information, they are no strangers to complexity—situations that have many parts and that are not easy to comprehend.9 They live in a world of inequality and difficult choices. Students bring what they have seen in life into the classroom. Personal experience contextualizes academic pursuits. The topics they choose to write about for college papers demonstrate the range of problems that they navigate in their daily lives: reintegration for veterans, immigration, domestic abuse, mass incarceration, and issues of gender and sexuality, among others. Knowing that our students are living amid complexity, my lesson plan began with three principles: (1) I wanted to create a space of inquiry where students could use the decision-making skills that they already have from life to examine issues of credibility. (2) As screenwriters do, I wanted to show, not tell, using slides of articles that students could examine critically. (3) I wanted the lesson to have an international perspective, to show that disinformation is a worldwide problem and to counteract a nationalist mind-set.

In a time of increasingly partisan national conversations characterized by simplistic blaming, rather than listening, we benefit from discussions that engage with the nuances of social topics. For our students to succeed in an increasingly complex information environment, they need to develop the skills to assess what they read. The economist Joseph Stiglitz recognized that, just as corporate management “has an incentive to increase asymmetries of information in order to enhance its market power, increase
its discretion, so too [do people] in public life.” I agree with Stiglitz that to make good
decisions and create an equitable society, one must distinguish complete and credible
information from that which is misleading or incomplete. Therefore, I chose an interac-
tive approach that compared news stories in a contextual slideshow to teach the defining
characteristics of ethical journalism and scholarly writing. The following sections explain
the development of the lesson, my rationale for choosing the examples, why I presented
them in their order, and suggestions for building a similar lesson.

#foxnewsfacts and Islamophobia

The project began before the 2016 presidential campaign. In 2015, as I searched for a way
to drive home the importance of fact-based evidence, a story in the New York Times caught
my eye: “Fox News Beats a Retreat after Gaffes about Islam.” It exemplified the role of
biased or overtly partisan news sources in spreading stereotypes and became my first
example for students on the topic of disinformation. Fox News guest Steven Emerson,
a self-described expert on terrorism, told conservative commentator Sean Hannity
that, in Europe, there are “no-go zones for non-Muslims” that even the police will not
enter. On other Fox News shows, Emerson stated that in certain London neighbor-
hoods, “Muslim religious police” beat “anyone who doesn’t dress according to religious
Muslim attire” and that the British city of Birmingham was “a totally Muslim city where
non-Muslims simply don’t go in.” Yet the most recent census at the time (2011) from
the United Kingdom’s Office for National Statistics showed that Birmingham’s Muslim
population was only 22 percent. Why did the Fox News story matter? According to
journalist Gabriel Sherman: “In 2002, Fox News passed CNN as the number-one-rated
cable news network; within seven years . . . its profits were believed to exceed those of
its cable news rivals and the broadcast evening newscasts combined.” Forbes’s “World’s
Most Valuable Brands 2018” states that Fox News is now valued at $11.7 billion, adding:
“Fox News is in 90 million homes and is the dominant cable news network with the
most viewers for 16 straight years. The U.S. presidential election pushed ratings up 36
percent in 2016 and tops among all networks, besting previous No. 1 ESPN.” By the
end of 2018, Fox News Channel recorded the highest prime-time ratings in its 22-year
history. Clearly, despite a disregard for factual evidence, its partisan narratives were
compelling to a significant section of American viewers. As Charlie Sykes wrote, “The
echo chamber had morphed into a full-blown alternate reality silo of conspiracy theories,
fake news and propaganda.”

In the United Kingdom, however, Emerson’s depiction of the city of Birmingham
set off a Twitter-storm of broad ridicule, prompting Conservative Prime Minister Da-
vid Cameron to state on television that Emerson was “clearly a complete idiot.” Fox
was compelled to issue two apologies for Emerson’s remarks, delivered by anchor
Julie Banderas and host Jeanine Pirro. Emerson himself apologized for the “terrible
error.” The mockery on Twitter, using the hashtag #foxnewsfacts, included pictures of
ingham-covered jam jars “wearing hijab” (see Figure 1) and a resident who offered
to ride with anyone who was afraid to set foot in the city, writing “#illridewithyou.”
Author Kamila Shamsie tweeted, “The city is now called Birming because Ham is not
halal.” The reaction on social media created awareness of the issue worldwide—and
engaged my students by appealing to their sense of humor. When I projected a slide of the original New York Times article, followed by the reactions on Twitter, students began the class laughing. They were delighted that the media giant Fox News was humbled by tweeting. It also prompted them to critique the ways that Muslims are stereotyped in the media by Islamophobic statements. The humorous slides served another purpose after Trump’s election. Some students had mentioned that they worried about expressing candid opinions in class because the political climate was so combative. To encourage them to speak up despite their reluctance, I began the session with a humorous response to disinformation that created an atmosphere of community through shared laughter.

**Dissecting Hoaxes**

Another dubious news story that I used successfully in class was the Hillary Clinton Parkinson’s hoax that circulated in the summer of 2016, prior to the presidential election. It was crucial, when using political examples like this in class, to clearly state that the lesson was not about partisan politics or for whom to vote, but rather about disinformation on the Web and how to fact-check a claim. I first heard this story from a neighbor who believed that Secretary Clinton had seizures. She showed me online videos, circulated by conspiracy theorists Paul Joseph Watson and Ted Noel, that claimed Clinton had either debilitating brain damage or Parkinson’s disease (see Figure 2). By combining GIF (graphics interchange format) files into a loop, Clinton’s characteristic head nods and shoulder movements had been turned into a video mimicking seizures—although anyone who has ever seen a real seizure would be skeptical. Tech-savvy students in the class enjoyed explaining to their peers how a GIF worked, which increased students’ engagement. Because the same footage was repeated on so many websites, my neighbor was irrefutably convinced that Secretary Clinton was ill. In *Post-Truth*, Lee McIntyre wrote, “The ‘repetition effect’ (which says that we are more likely to believe a message if it has been repeated to us many times) was well known to car salesmen and Hitler’s propaganda minister alike.” Therefore, I asked students, “If a claim is repeated, does that make it true?”

Showing websites where hoaxes are investigated enables students to see how they can conduct their own fact-checking searches. The Parkinson’s hoax was disputed on the fact-checking site Snopes and the FactCheck.org site of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, an organization for the study of law and government at the University of Pennsylvania. Most importantly, Associated Press reporter Lisa Lerer, who was videotaped questioning Clinton on the campaign trail in one of the seizure hoax videos, issued a statement that Clinton did not have a seizure at the event. The Parkinson’s Foundation also made a formal statement, citing their national medical director Michael S. Okun, chair of the Department of Neurology at the University of Florida, and other experts. They found that Clinton’s movements did not present as typical symptoms of Parkinson’s: “While Secretary Clinton does not show signs of Parkinson’s in the opinions of senior neurologists, even if she did, a diagnosis of Parkinson’s should not be seen as a disqualifying condition for high office—and, in fact, in recent times it has not been.”

Adding that senators, representatives, an attorney general of the United States, and an astronaut “performed admirably in challenging jobs while living with Parkinson’s,”
Figure 1. A Twitter feed showing gingham-covered jam jars “wearing hijab” mocks Fox News stories about Muslims in the United Kingdom.

Figure 2. A screenshot from an online video circulated in 2016 claiming that Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton’s nodding head was a symptom of Parkinson’s disease.
the statement debunks both the false diagnosis and prejudicial attitudes toward those who live with the disease. The Clinton story was also useful to introduce information bubbles and the ways that Facebook and Google curate your news feed. Watching one YouTube video on Clinton’s health brings up a collection of related videos on the sidebar that say the same thing, which leads the viewer to assume that the diagnosis is verified. Presenting slides of these websites to students enables them to visualize the concepts, critically analyze how hoaxes spread across the Internet, and learn how to check expert sites to understand whether a story is true or false. The #QAnon hoax, in which “Q,” an anonymous individual claiming to be a high-level government official, dropped cryptic hints—called “breadcrumbs”—on the Internet forums 4-chan and 8-chan about fictitious plots against the Trump administration, or the Pizzagate incident, in which Clinton’s campaign chairman was falsely accused of sex trafficking, could also show students how conspiracy theorists construct tenuous connections from scant evidence.

Some professors may prefer to avoid political hoaxes and choose examples from science. News articles on climate change denial are useful to introduce the peer-review process that precedes the publication of scientific research on climate theory—and how distrust of scientific information has become normalized on the Internet. I have paired slides of articles about the “chemtrails” hoax, which claims that the condensation trails left by aircraft consist of chemical or biological agents, with scientific studies, news reports, and statements by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) that disprove the statement. This demonstrates how to gather evidence from experts to refute hoaxes. After the slides, students actively search for credible evidence in the library instruction portion of the class. Active discussion and research practice are the key elements of my approach.

Good sources to share with students are Sarah Harrison Smith’s *A Fact Checker’s Bible*, Lucas Graves’s *Deciding What’s True: The Rise of Political Fact-Checking in American Journalism*, and the fact-checking pages on the website of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, a nonprofit journalism school in St. Petersburg, Florida. One of the best educational sites for teaching students to assess the credibility of news sources is the British Broadcasting Corporation’s BBC Academy web page, “BBC Editorial Standards: A Simple Guide.” It provides active learning modules on accuracy, impartiality, offensive language, privacy, fairness, consent, crime reporting, conflicts of interest, and other important aspects of ethical journalism. The BBC’s modules are much more effective in teaching
students the underpinnings of credible journalism than is a disinformation game like Factitious. Factitious focuses merely on whether the news article is real and does little to help students differentiate in-depth original reporting from less substantial or aggregated news articles.36

**Textual Analysis of News about Black Lives Matter**

After 2016, instead of using individual examples of disinformation at the beginning of class, I turned my fake news images into a 15– to 20–minute slideshow and class discussion that I led before we worked on the students’ assigned research topics. The slideshow appealed to visual learners and used the graphics of digital journalism to make the lesson compelling. Students get many handouts in class and often pay little attention to them. A visual presentation is more memorable than an attempt to drive discussion using black-and-white paper-based exercises. Projecting article paragraphs on the screen allowed students to do close readings of the texts. I began with the #foxnewsfacts story to create an atmosphere of collaboration, followed by the Hillary Clinton slides to introduce hoaxes. Then students were shown a structured, discussion-based lesson that asked them to analyze how a single news topic, the Black Lives Matter movement, is framed by media sources. It worked well because our urban students are familiar with the movement and issues of police behavior in their own communities.

Beginning with an online article from the National Review website, written by conservative writer David French, I asked students to discuss what they think when they first read the headline “The Numbers Are In: Black Lives Matter Is Wrong about Police” (see Figure 3).37 Students questioned its tone of certainty. They wanted to know how it got its numbers. How big was the sample? What does French mean when he writes that Black Lives Matter is wrong? When asked if the Black Lives Matter movement can be framed by the words right and wrong, students agree that it is more complicated than that; some have family members who serve as police, yet also know people who have been harassed due to racial profiling.

A second slide showed the text of French’s article, which states that the numbers come from “an unprecedented, case-by-case study of police shootings” in 2015, gathered by the Washington Post’s reporters. We examined statements in the National Review article and compared them to the relevant text from the Washington Post, pictured in the next slide.38 Certain key statistics in the Post study were omitted from the National Review summary or were misinterpreted. When asked, students classify the National Review article as “opinion” or even “prejudiced” because of its claims, for example: “Racial disparities in the use of force are largely explained by racial disparities in criminality. Different American demographics commit crimes at different rates.”39 The article’s implication that black people are more inclined to be criminals elicits eye rolls from some students. The National Review article also accuses the Washington Post of “hyping” the racial injustice demonstrated by certain statistics.40 I then showed the section of the Post’s report that French quoted. In fact, the Post’s report is balanced and sympathetic to police as well as to victims, including a broad range of statistics on multiple Web pages that draw a complicated picture of police shootings. The authors make clear distinctions between cases in which the use of force was justified against armed assailants and those in which
unarmed persons were killed. By comparing the Post’s detailed investigation to the simplistic summary published in the National Review, students begin to understand the importance of fact-checking the claims made in a short opinion piece and the work that goes into a yearlong investigative report.

My next example, the Washington Post news article “Turning Away from Street Protests, Black Lives Matter Movement Tries a New Tactic in the Age of Trump,” shows a more neutral form of reporting. The words right or wrong are not used. Instead, the article describes recent changes in the group’s approach to organizing. “The movement’s efforts have entered a new phase—one more focused on policy than protest—prompted by the election of President Trump.” Black Lives Matter activist Alicia Garza is quoted, explaining that instead of holding demonstrations, “People are channeling their energy into organizing locally, recognizing that in Trump’s America, our communities are under direct attack.” When asked to assess this article, students notice how it describes the evolution of the movement, includes quotations from its founders, and explains their work on social justice issues. Students discern that the authors of this article respect readers’ abilities to form their own conclusions. The importance of distinguishing factual reporting from opinion is backed up by a recent study from the Pew Research Center. In a 2018 survey of 5,235 adults, Pew researchers examined the abilities of readers to distinguish factual statements from opinion. One of their findings indicated that the reader’s trust in who was reporting mattered in how the information was interpreted and influenced the number of correct answers. “Almost four-in-ten Americans who have a lot of trust in the information from national news organizations (39%) correctly identified all five factual statements, compared with 18% of those who have not much or
no trust.” Knowing about and using factual news sources informed readers’ ability to make good assessments. Teaching librarians can do much to further our students’ awareness of reliable sources, whether from academic studies, long-form journalism, or news.

Another way to write about Black Lives Matter is through opinion pieces by experts. An op-ed piece in the New York Times titled “When Will Black Lives Matter in St. Louis?” was written by Nicole Nelson, an attorney who worked for ArchCity Defenders, a nonprofit civil rights law firm in St. Louis, Missouri. It is a good example of opinion writing that can be useful for students, since Nelson is a legal expert who knows the community. First-year college students seldom realize that papers like the New York Times or the Washington Post have separate news and opinion departments, with separate editors and staff, a standard practice in modern journalism. Otherwise, news reporting becomes suspiciously biased, influenced by inappropriate associations (with business or politics) that compromise credibility. Ethical journalists are trained to avoid such conflicts of interest. Showing a news article, followed by a responsible opinion piece like Nelson’s, allows us to discuss this practice with students. I use the International Fact-Checking Network’s code of principles from the Poynter Institute’s website to explain journalistic norms that inform our own reading of information. Most of my students did not know that political reporters at credible news organizations refrain from partisan organizing or donating to political causes and, in some cases, may even abstain from voting in primary elections to avoid becoming associated with a political party while covering an election.

That said, Donald Trump’s inflammatory statements and disregard for facts caused uneasiness in journalism circles, inspiring essays on whether it was acceptable for reporters to engage in advocacy in response to Trump’s remarks. In the Columbia Journalism Review, during the summer before the 2016 presidential election, David Mindich referred to Edward R. Murrow’s critical television report in 1954 on Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose hearings on Communist sympathizers in the government, the Hollywood film industry, and the United States Army were based on scant evidence. Mindich wrote, “If a politician’s rhetoric is dangerous, Murrow implied, all of us, including journalists, are complicit if we don’t stand up and oppose it.” The separation of immigrant children from their parents at the border between Mexico and the United States was a recent example of an injustice that journalists felt compelled to report.

My last example of writing about the Black Lives Matter movement was the most disturbing. In September 2017, CNN broke the story that a phony social media campaign called Blacktivist, linked to the Russian government, used Facebook and Twitter “in an apparent attempt to amplify racial tensions during the U.S. Presidential election.” According to CNN, at the time the story was reported, “The Facebook account had 360,000 likes, more than the verified Black Lives Matter account on Facebook, which currently has just over 301,000.” Blacktivist posted news of real demonstrations, targeting audiences in Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland, where Black Lives Matter protests had occurred. This way of writing about Black Lives Matter is the most cynical:
an attempt by a foreign government to interfere with the outcome of a presidential election by inflaming political divisions. Students were particularly shocked that a foreign government attempted to hijack the movement’s issues to manipulate the election and succeeded to the point where activists attended a real demonstration organized on Facebook by Blacktivist. This led to a discussion of how to check an organization’s credibility. It also prompted students to talk about the growing incivility in our public conversations, at a time when listening skills and diplomacy are especially needed to solve real social problems.

RT, Sputnik, and Trolls

The Blacktivist hoax was only one example of an attempt by the Russian government to influence public opinion in the United States and elsewhere through social media. The Internet Research Agency, a Russian “troll farm,” created social media accounts in the name of nonexistent people or organizations. The Russian government hires troll farms to spread disinformation and create an illusion of widespread public support for its positions, in Russia and abroad. A declassified report from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, jointly prepared by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the National Security Agency (NSA), stated:

Russia’s state-run propaganda machine—comprised of its domestic media apparatus, outlets targeting global audiences such as RT and Sputnik [a government-owned news agency and radio service], and a network of quasi-government trolls—contributed to the influence campaign by serving as a platform for Kremlin messaging to Russian and international audiences.

Troll farms created false identities on Facebook and Twitter to spread political ideas that the Kremlin wished to promote. Russian interference of this type occurred in Europe during the invasion of eastern Ukraine and later influenced public opinion in France and the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom. According to historian Timothy Snyder, Russia used tactics of strategic relativism to weaken the European Union and the United States in its disinformation campaign. “In strategic relativism, the point is to transform international politics into a negative-sum game, where a skillful player will lose less than everyone else.” Snyder wrote that Russian President Vladimir Putin wanted to sow distrust of democratic systems in other countries to shore up authoritarianism in Russia. Russian disinformation stagecraft spread to other countries, including the United States, where its methods were adapted to manipulate and distract the public from more important issues. Social media sites were perfect tools of distraction, since it was difficult to check who posted the information. Disinformation campaigns tear the fabric of society, jeopardizing the security of organizations as large as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an alliance of 29 nations in Europe and North America, or as small as Comet Ping Pong, the pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C., that was falsely implicated in the Pizzagate conspiracy theory.
To demonstrate how information on a Facebook page might be unreliable, I showed my students the journalist Scott Shane’s article on the fake Americans who were created in Russian troll farms. “Melvin Reddick,” according to his Facebook profile, lived in Pennsylvania, but the photographs on his page “seemed to be borrowed from an unsuspecting Brazilian,” since the light sockets pictured were from Brazil. The high school and college he claimed to have attended had no record of a Melvin Reddick at their schools. Using Reddick’s fake profile to teach students about political interference allowed me to drive home three critical points: (1) The information we read on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter may not come from real organizations or individuals. One must check further for credibility, verify the identity of the author, read the “About” page of the website to find out what organization created it, and then search for more information about the author and organization to determine their authority. (2) We have the power to be responsible for our reading habits. If Americans have been duped by troll farms and bots, computer programs that simulate human activity on the Internet, perhaps it is time to consider what sources of information would be more reliable. (3) Faced with the glut of information on the Web, it is well worth learning how to use academic sources, which are vetted by editors and peer reviewers and are available at the library. Consulting scholarly sources for assignments is more efficient than spending days trawling the Web for less reliable information.

The Real Russian Journalists

Although troll farms were linked to the Russian government, it is important to remind American students that there are also ethical Russian journalists who uncover the facts even when their government discourages it. It would be misleading to teach students about Russian disinformation campaigns without also giving credit to the work of serious investigative journalists in Russia. Lyudmila Savchuck, a freelance investigative journalist, infiltrated the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg, Russia, to write about the inner workings of the same troll farm that was recently indicted by Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation. Students need to know that many honest journalists risk their safety, or even their lives, to report the facts. To furnish other examples, I show students the photographs of six Russian journalists who were assassinated for their work reporting on the war in Chechnya and exposing corruption in Russia, and Stanislav Markelov, the human rights lawyer who defended them, who...
was also killed. When the slide of the murdered journalists is shown in class, international students who come from countries where journalists have been imprisoned or killed nod their heads; they speak from experience that reporting requires courage. This reinforces the message that disinformation and censorship are problems for democracy in many countries. With the current disparagement, for political objectives, of substantial reporting, it is important to discuss these ideas and make them come alive for students by introducing the work of serious journalists. Although I start the slideshow with jokes about fake news, the context is serious. The odds are greater that students will use better research materials if they are encouraged to engage with complexity.

Big Tech’s Response

After the Russian interference reports came out, social media companies scrambled to come up with solutions to the disinformation that their platforms helped spread. Twitter banned RT and Sputnik from buying ads. As the European Commission’s Report of the Independent High Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation points out, however, it will take careful collaboration to understand how to combat disinformation without putting a burden on freedom of speech. We must ask: are profit-driven tech companies equipped to protect the Internet from hate speech and disinformation? The example of Paul Joseph Watson’s Infowars video about Clinton’s health that I used in my class is still available on YouTube as this article was written, in January 2019. After the 2018 shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, the response of YouTube’s CEO Susan Wojcicki was a new feature called “information cues”: If a viewer clicked on a conspiracy theory video, YouTube would provide a link to a Wikipedia page that presumably debunked the theory. Given that anonymous authors can edit a Wikipedia page, it remains unclear that high-level tech executives have the information literacy skills necessary to solve these problems. According to YouTube, 400 hours of video were uploaded to their platform every minute in 2015, the latest year for which statistics are available. How will they reliably monitor this content for accuracy? Information specialists could play an active role by collaborating with tech companies on open access initiatives that provide credible information. Since the search optimization algorithms of Google and other browsers are based on economic models that privilege the selling of niche ads to consumers, the short-term outlook for stopping the spread of disinformation is not optimistic. The massive hacking of 50 million Facebook accounts in September 2018 indicates that we should expect more foul play ahead of the 2020 elections.

Big tech companies have the tendency to solve dysfunction with tech-driven solutions that compound the problem: After being criticized for the fake news that circulated on its platform, Facebook received more criticism for an experiment that it imposed without warning on six small countries: Bolivia, Cambodia, Guatemala, Serbia, Slovakia, and Sri Lanka. Posts from credible media organizations were shifted away from the news feed to an “explore” feed timeline, limiting Facebook’s core website to personal posts and paid advertisements. This effectively removed publishing platforms for the six countries’ news organizations. An editor in Guatemala complained that it was “killing 66% of our traffic. Just destroyed it. Years of really hard work were just swept away.”
Facebook’s head of news feed Adam Mosseri said that the purpose of the test was to see whether users preferred the site if “personal” and “public” posts were separated. However, the decision to limit this experiment to several small nations, regardless of its effect on their news organizations, betrays a feeling of superiority toward those countries and an attitude that news reporting is just another form of content that can be shifted at will. Facebook had chosen the option to avoid the responsibilities (and the regulation) that governments require from conventional news organizations. By 2018, Facebook began coming to terms with its responsibility as a platform where many people get their news. Attempting to stop the spread of disinformation, Facebook removed more than 800 American accounts related to political spam from influence campaigns. That action, in turn, posed complicated questions regarding censorship of social media going forward.

Recent reporting by technology journalist Jack Nicas covered the discrepancies in Facebook’s published statistics on how many fake Facebook accounts exist. In 2018, Facebook introduced a transparency page that disclosed how many fake accounts it had taken down, which indicated that “the scope was far larger than security filings had suggested.” Although Facebook had previously stated that 3 to 4 percent of its active users were fake, the accounts taken down each quarter amounted to 25 to 35 percent of its active users. Nicas has previously reported on the ease of creating multiple false identities on Facebook. Clearly the problem has grown beyond Facebook’s ability to monitor it. Also, Facebook has no compelling reason to let advertisers know that portions of their target audience are not real people.

**Pulling Back the Curtain**

Transparency is important. News organizations have opened up their research processes to educate the public about the ethics of accurate journalism on sites such as the New York Times “Insider” section online. These are good resources for teaching students to understand how journalists work. Another example is the Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative series in the Washington Post that looked into Senate candidate Roy Moore’s alleged involvement with teenage girls and an unsuccessful attempt by a right-wing organization to discredit that reporting. While working on the Roy Moore story, the Post’s reporters were approached by a woman named Jaime T. Phillips, who worked for Project Veritas, an organization that targets the mainstream news media. Phillips falsely claimed that Moore had impregnated her as a teenager. The Post’s team fact-checked Phillips’ background and her attempts to discredit other reporters, then videotaped reporter Stephanie McCrummen’s interview with Phillips that exposed her false claims. As Indira Lakshmanan wrote on the Poynter Institute website:

> The series was most extraordinary for its transparency, breaking the fourth wall between the newsroom and readers by revealing those techniques to readers—showing how reporters got the story. Pulling back the curtain on the journalistic process served not only to reassure the public about the Post’s motives, methods and findings, but also to inoculate the paper against false claims that the women were paid off by Moore’s opponents or the Post.

Like the Post’s reporters, I want to pull back the curtain on journalistic and academic writing to better inform students about their choices of information. Starting my
classes by using comparative examples of articles in a free discussion setting increases my students’ awareness of the importance of fact-checking and editing in professional journalism. It also serves as an excellent introduction to the peer review process in academic scholarship.

Concluding Suggestions

This article shares some of the examples that I used in class to engage students in the process of gathering information and making sense of an admittedly confusing time. Each of us will have our favorite examples, based on individual preference. The pleasure lies in designing a slideshow’s sequence to tell a vivid narrative that students can discuss together, regardless of their political views. Beginning the class with humorous slides draws students into the discussion. I found news examples by obsessively reading newspapers of record and long-form magazine journalism and by conducting keyword searches on news media websites. I tried to mix it up, using stories from different news organizations, to vary the perspective. Articles about the same event in the New York Times, the Washington Post, The Guardian, Politico, CNN, or the Wall Street Journal often emphasized different angles. I looked for the article that made the point most effectively—or most completely. When preparing the Black Lives Matter sequence, I searched “Black Lives Matter” on Google, just as my students might do, to see what result came up first on the browser. That’s how I found David French’s article “The Numbers Are In,” a perfect example of biased political spin posing as factual news—the sort of article we hope students will not use as evidence. Examples of hoaxes were found by doing searches on Google and YouTube.

In 2017 and early 2018, interference in the 2016 election was a top story. I built a file of articles to use as possible examples in my slideshow. Meanwhile, I experimented using various articles in class to see which stories engaged students. Some reports were less compelling to students than others because they did not intersect with issues that really mattered to them. For instance, news stories about how Facebook and Twitter struggled to manage the problem of disinformation were too technical to interest most of my students. Social justice topics, such as Black Lives Matter, Islamophobia, or the 2016 election, held students’ attention because these issues affected them directly. The Russian troll farm story also engaged students because it had dramatic cloak-and-dagger appeal. Recent articles about disinformation vis-à-vis the border wall, deportations, immigration, or the government shutdown would be perfect examples to use in 2019. The artful part of the job was designing a sequence that had a rhetorical logic. I tried to build a historical trajectory, starting with the earliest stories first and proceeding in a timeline, working in a documentary style to create a narrative. For example, the Blacktivist slide at the end of the Black Lives Matter portion segued to slides about the Russian disinformation efforts before the 2016 election. The fake Americans on Facebook slide preceded the Russian interference in Brexit slide, to suggest that interference was an international problem.
I avoided the temptation to merely deliver an informative lecture on disinformation illustrated by clever slides and instead encouraged student interaction. Students retain information more effectively if they are active participants. The slides were meant to visually introduce an idea and provoke dialogue. I asked open-ended questions to get everyone talking. If the class was reticent, I assured students that “there is no wrong answer here,” which usually prompted a few brave students to begin. I responded to each student’s comment, and as more students added interpretations, we connected them to create a larger contextual picture. If a student expressed confusion about what made a source “biased,” “impartial,” or “credible,” we discussed those complexities.

To make time for discussion, avoid using too many slides. I rarely used all the slides described here in a single presentation. The lesson was typically no longer than 20 minutes, if a library instruction class followed it. It was helpful to schedule a 90-minute session instead of just one hour, so the library instruction workshop that followed had ample time. A longer discussion was possible if I was delivering more than one research class to the same students. The lesson could also be used as part of a credit-bearing information literacy course or first-year experience course. Librarians can partner with other academic departments and administrators to offer media literacy classes to first-year students, who need them most, preferably in the first semester. Students frequently tell me that they wish they had had library instruction much earlier, before they were assigned their first research paper. Media and information literacy classes, as part of a first-year course, are essential to student success and reinforce course professors’ learning goals. Beyond building critical thinking skills and source evaluation, lesson plans like the one presented here create a space for students to discuss complex issues that matter to them. The class creates a forum for students who may not agree on contentious issues to share their opinions in a nonjudgmental environment, perhaps allowing them to exit the prison of categorical thinking.

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Disinformation at the Bus Stop: Where Do We Go from Here?

When I was first reading about Russian interference, I left work one night through an exit of our community college’s main building. I was surprised to see an ad for RT at the bus shelter right at the college’s door that read, “RT America. Ed Schultz. Is This American Enough for you?” The challenging tone of the ad copy struck me—I could imagine the smirk on the face of the writers who came up with it. Upon reflection, I realized that RT masquerades as an unbiased news outlet, not a political entity; the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA)’s advertising department probably viewed it as such when they vetted the ad for use on bus shelters. According to journalists Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, RT’s senior management promotes the idea that there is no such thing as “objective truth.” RT’s corporate slogan, dreamed up by the American advertising agency McCann, is “Question More,” an ironic banner for a company that is
not what it claims to be.81 Coincidentally, McCann’s slogan is “Truth Well Told.”82 When had truth become spin?

Interference from Russia is only part of a larger problem of disinformation. In October 2018, Sheera Frenkel of the New York Times reported, “Domestic sites are directly emulating the Russian playbook of 2016 by aggressively creating Facebook pages and accounts—many of them fake—that make it appear as if the ideas they are promoting enjoy widespread popularity, researchers said.”83 As the Spanish artist Francisco de Goya observed, “The sleep of reason produces monsters.”84 More than ever, we all must analyze what is handed to us, in the media and by our government, in the guise of information. Critiquing the idea that truth is relative, Timothy Snyder wrote, “Authoritarianism begins when we can no longer tell the true from the appealing. At the same time, the cynic who decides that there is no truth at all is the citizen who welcomes the tyrant.”85 The erosion of trust in the press and the fraying edges of our social compact are the first steps toward disenfranchisement. The conception that everything we read or hear is just another version of political spin, designed to advance the power of warring factions, is a philosophy that our democracy cannot afford. By manipulating the public’s emotions via fabricated crises, purveyors of disinformation distract us from government policies that ought to be examined more closely and from problems, such as climate change and inequality, that merit careful attention and urgent work. The society that our descendants will inhabit is at stake. We often tell students to follow their hearts to achieve their dreams. But the heart can be misled. Perhaps, it is time to encourage them to follow—and inform—their minds.

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Notes


8. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), “The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!” Twitter, February 17, 2017, 4:48 p.m., https://twitter.com/@realDonaldTrump/status/832708293516632065.


16. Ibid., 278.


30. Sykes, “Charlie Sykes on Where the Right Went Wrong.”


40. Ibid.


50. French, “The Numbers Are In.”

51. Ibid.

52. Kindy, Fisher, Tate, and Jenkins, “A Year of Reckoning.”


63. Ibid.


66. Snyder, The Road to Unfreedom, 193–94.


68. Snyder, The Road to Unfreedom, 195–96, 249.


Information about journalists Yuri Shchekochikhin, Anna Politkovskaya, Natalia Estemirova, Anastasia Baburova, Igor Domnikov, and Paul Klebnikov and activist lawyer Stanislav Markelov is available on the Committee to Protect Journalists database, https://cpj.org/.


96. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 278.