

Teaching Media in a ‘Post-Truth’ Age: Fake News, Media Bias and the Challenge for Media Literacy Education

David Buckingham

Emeritus Professor, Loughborough University, UK
Visiting Professor, Kings College London

Published in Cultura y Educación 31(2):1-19, 2019

PLEASE NOTE: This is an adapted version of a couple of blog posts from my website (www.davidbuckingham.net), rather than a formal academic paper. More detailed references and links may be found at the site.

In the wake of the election of Donald Trump, there has been considerable debate about the problem of so-called ‘fake news’. Trump’s opponents have accused his supporters – including the Russian government – of circulating fabricated news stories in order to gain support. Yet Trump himself has also frequently used the term to discredit what he claims is false information about him. The problem is somewhat less evident in the UK, although the Brexit campaign and the attempts to unseat Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Party leader have raised similar issues about media bias and misrepresentation. Last year, an official UK parliamentary enquiry was announced on the topic.

The dangers of fake news are fairly self-evident. The democratic political process depends upon the circulation of reliable information. If information can no longer be trusted, citizens have little basis on which to make political decisions. It is for this reason that Barack Obama has gone so far as to describe fake news as ‘a threat to democracy’. On both sides of the Atlantic, there have been calls for children to be taught about fake news in the classroom, in the hope that a more media literate audience might somehow be more able to protect itself.

In this paper, I want to consider some of the difficulties that might be faced in addressing this situation. I will argue that fake news is not an isolated phenomenon, but that it needs to be understood in a much broader social, economic and cultural context. I also want to look at some of the practical possibilities and difficulties of teaching in this area. While I argue in favour of media literacy, I also suggest that fake news is a problem that is unlikely to be solved very easily.

What is fake news?

Most simply, fake news is news that is fabricated, and deliberately intended to mislead or deceive. As such, it’s important to distinguish it from satirical parodies of news (as published on sites such as *The Onion* in the US) – although some readers may not always appreciate the difference. Fake news typically appears on sites that masquerade as genuine news sites, although it is often picked up and re-circulated by mainstream media.

Fake news often has a political dimension: it is intended as a form of misinformation or propaganda that is designed to exert political influence. It may even constitute a form of ‘cyberwarfare’ between nations (although the history of the Cold War suggests that such activities are far from new). However, in some cases, it may have a primarily economic motivation. Fake news often functions as ‘clickbait’, which will generate revenue through advertising and the selling of user data. The basic business model of networking services like Facebook and of search engines like Google depends upon this. As such, the fake news phenomenon needs to be understood in relation to the wider political economy of the internet.

These political and economic motivations may also be blurred. Although the Russian government may have been involved, much of the pro-Trump fake news generated during the 2016 election campaign apparently came from a cluster of sites run by teenagers in the Macedonian town of Veles. These entrepreneurial young people claimed that they were making easy money simply giving Trump supporters what they wanted to hear.

There are now so many examples of fake news stories that it is bound to become harder to identify them, or to tell fake from true. Many are blatantly and obviously absurd. Perhaps my favourite example was the story about North Korean leader Kim Jong Un being voted the sexiest man alive. The story was posted on the US satirical site *The Onion* in 2012, but it was taken seriously by the official Chinese newspaper the *China People’s Daily*, which apparently featured a 55-page photo spread on its website. However, there are limits to such absurdity. During the 2016 Presidential campaign, the so-called ‘Pizzagate’ story alleged that Hillary Clinton was involved in a paedophile sex trafficking ring run out of a Washington restaurant. Yet the laughter turned sour when a white supremacist turned up at the pizza parlour firing an automatic weapon.

While there is little doubt that fake news was used extensively in support of Trump’s campaign, and is particularly driven by the political right, the charge runs across the political spectrum. *Return of Kings* is just one extreme right-wing site that identifies ‘fake news’ purportedly circulated by so-called liberal media. Trump’s claim that the US Intelligence Services have been circulating fake news about the Russian support for his election campaign – and about his exploits in Russian hotel rooms – is a further example. It may have already happened, but in the near future we are bound to see fake news stories about fake news.

In some ways, the debate about fake news can be seen as a further deflation of the bubble of internet hype – especially of the idea that networked technology would lead to a flowering of civic participation and democratic politics. While some of us were sceptical about such claims from the outset, others – including early technology enthusiasts such as Timothy Wu and *Wired* magazine – have taken a little longer to get there. While such technology might well be a great resource for progressive political activists, recent experience has shown that it is also a valuable tool for anti-democratic

forces, including the resurgent extreme right and those who peddle racism and other forms of abuse. The so-called ‘alt-right’ can also play the game of creating memes, optimizing search engines, trolling and tagging and going viral. Indeed, present evidence would suggest that many of them are much better at these things than those on the political left.

‘Post-truth’: a broader problem

Fake news is by no means an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it should be seen as a symptom of much broader tendencies, both within the media system and within the wider political culture. It is partly for this reason that the problem is not so straightforward, and is unlikely to be so easy to eradicate.

The term ‘post-truth’ – famously, the Oxford English Dictionary’s word of the year for 2016 – gives some sense of this broader context. The OED editors defined post-truth as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’. As this implies, the term post-truth represents a critical, even sarcastic, claim about the world, rather than a celebratory one. It describes a situation in which politicians in particular have not only made false promises or tried to manipulate public debate, but actually told outright lies, and managed to do so with impunity.

Back in 1710, the English satirist Jonathan Swift noted that ‘falsehood flies, and the truth comes limping after it.’ One could argue that fake news has always been with us, and that these issues are by no means confined to new media. Even so, the rise of social media has made it much easier for lies and misinformation to be circulated from person to person, bypassing the gatekeepers and regulators who controlled old media. As I have argued, the prevalence of fake news is partly a consequence of the changing business models of media and technology companies in the age of ‘digital capitalism’.

Yet fake news is not simply a media phenomenon: it is also about the behaviour of politicians themselves. Again, one might argue that politicians have always made false claims, and indeed told blatant lies, in their attempts to mislead the public – although the success of individuals like Donald Trump, Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson would suggest that they are increasingly able to get away with it.

The rise of fake news may also reflect a broader decline in public trust. Figures consistently suggest that ordinary citizens are placing less and less trust in authority figures – not least in politicians, and in the media themselves. This growing scepticism was encapsulated in the famous statement made by the former UK Education Secretary, Michael Gove, during the Brexit campaign. Gove was party to the false claim made during that campaign that Britain was paying £350 million a week to the EU, and that after Brexit this money would be diverted into our National Health Service. Yet when challenged by leading economists, Gove claimed that ‘people in this country have had enough of experts’ – as though established sources of knowledge

carried no weight against the superior wisdom of ‘the people’. Paradoxically, this is precisely the argument that is mobilized by populist politicians – themselves members of a political elite – who seek to win the trust of voters.

While misinformation and media manipulation may be well-established phenomena, they are taking on a new form in the digital age. So what solutions might be sought to this problem?

Technical solutions

As with other problematic aspects of online content, such as pornography, some have called for a system of labeling. Sites might be encouraged – or even required – to obtain some kind of official certificate of approval from fact-checkers. ‘White lists’ of trustworthy sites might be established, or repeat offenders warned and then taken down by internet service providers.

Such responses would clearly require collaboration on the part of the technology companies. Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg initially denied that his company had anything to do with the spread of fake news, although he has subsequently backtracked a little. Facebook has undertaken to block advertising on self-evidently fraudulent sites, and Google has claimed it will do this via its Adsense service. Facebook has also partnered with fact-checking websites on an initiative that will tag articles whose veracity is ‘disputed’.

However, any further steps along these lines seem unlikely. They would imply that these companies are not merely technology companies, but *media* companies – and this is something they are very keen to avoid. Requiring them to take responsibility for content would completely undermine their basic economic model, which is premised on the claim that they are simply technological services that users are free to use in any way they choose.

The place of media literacy

With governments unlikely or unwilling to challenge this free-market argument, commentators often look to media literacy education as some kind of alternative solution. For example, when a recent study by researchers at Stanford University found that most young people were unable to distinguish between real and fake news, there were calls for them to be taught ‘internet literacy’¹. (It’s not clear why this argument applied only to young people, but we can let that pass...). The influential website Vice, for example, ran the story under the headline: ‘we need to teach kids to be skeptical’.

Most media literacy educators would welcome these arguments, but they could also be forgiven for a degree of weariness. Isn’t that exactly what we’ve

¹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/most-students-dont-know-when-news-is-fake-stanford-study-finds-1479752576>

been trying to do for decades – despite the fact that we have been consistently marginalized within the mainstream curriculum?

Certainly, these are not new issues for media educators. Media Studies teaching (at least in the UK) has always addressed questions about news bias and representation – to the point where it almost seems like an old-fashioned concern. The advent of the internet raised new questions about credibility, and about the need for information literacy: yet these have been on the agenda for media educators for many years.

However, there is a broader problem here. Media literacy is often invoked in a spirit of ‘solutionism’. When media regulation seems impossible, media literacy is often seen as the acceptable answer – and indeed a magical panacea – for all media-related social and psychological ills. If people are worried about violence, sexualisation, obesity, drugs or consumerism (or almost any other social problem), media literacy is often seen to be the answer: it’s the media’s fault – but let the teachers deal with it!

This argument clearly frames media literacy as a protectionist enterprise, a kind of prophylactic. It oversimplifies the problems it purports to address, overstates the influence of media on young people, and underestimates the complexity of media education itself. Thus, violence in society is not simply caused by media violence, and it will not be reduced by simply telling students that movies are teaching them the wrong lessons – or indeed by stopping them watching TV or using social media, as some propose.

Similar arguments apply to fake news. As I have argued, fake news is a symptom of much broader tendencies in the worlds of politics and media. People (and not just children) may be inclined to believe it for quite complex reasons. And we can’t stop them believing it just by encouraging them to check the facts, or think rationally about the issues.

Teaching about media bias

Of course, this is not to say we shouldn’t try. The US media educator Frank Baker has assiduously gathered a set of checklists and recommendations for educators trying to tackle fake news in the classroom². Students are encouraged to cross-check online information, to verify and compare sources, to analyse the design and construction of sites, to check the provenance of the material, and to think about the producers’ motivations. Here is one such example of a ‘checklist’ of ideas about how to deal with fake news, produced by a US media literacy group (see figure 1, over page).

Such proposals are useful, although (as I shall argue) there are reasons to question how practical they are. Furthermore, they seem to imply that it will be a straightforward matter to distinguish sites that are ‘fake’ from those that are (by implication) to be trusted. By contrast, I would argue that these questions

² <http://frankwbaker.com/mlc/fake-news-recommendations/>

need to be addressed in relation to news in general: it is not simply a matter of spotting what's fake, but of identifying the forms of bias that are present in all sources of information more broadly.



Fig 1: Fake News Checklist

In the UK, we have a longer history of teaching about media bias, especially in the context of Media Studies courses in schools. As Robert Entman has argued, bias remains 'a curiously undertheorized staple of public discourse about the media'³. Like 'stereotype', it is a commonsense concept that frequently recurs in everyday discussion. We might argue that it is simply old-fashioned and irrelevant in a 'post-truth' era. Yet bias remains a useful umbrella term, albeit one that teachers and students need to work with and interrogate.

So what and how might we teach about media bias? Firstly, like other key concepts in media theory, we need to question and problematise the idea. Alongside bias, there is a cluster of terms that are frequently used interchangeably, such as objectivity, impartiality, fairness and balance. Yet while these terms may overlap, they do not mean exactly the same thing. Carefully separating these out, and looking at instances of each, would seem to be a necessary first step. There are several taxonomies of types of media bias that might be useful here⁴ – although again, they need to be used carefully and critically.

³ 'Framing bias: media in the distribution of power', Journal of Communication 57(1): 163-173

⁴ Steven J. Allan: <https://capitalresearch.org/article/media-bias-8-types-a-classic-kind-a/>

At the same time, we need to recognize the inevitability of bias. What we perceive as bias in the first place obviously depends upon our own biases – our own prejudices, assumptions or preconceptions. In the age of the ‘filter bubble’, there is a risk that this is becoming easier to ignore. We are increasingly able to select and customise our media environment in ways that are likely to confirm those biases. Encouraging students to reflect on their own media practices in this respect, and the sources of their own information and judgments, would help to illuminate the complexities at stake.

Secondly, we need to refine the idea of bias in order to apply it to a wider range of situations. Bias may be evident not just in overt commentary, but also (and perhaps more powerfully) in what a given report chooses to focus on and to ignore. It may be apparent in the connections that are made (explicitly or implicitly) across news stories, and in how key topics are defined in the first place. There is bound to be bias in how the news agenda is set – in what is seen to *count* as news in the first place, and in how particular topics are framed or defined – that is, what is included or excluded from consideration, or what is seen to be relevant or irrelevant. These two ideas – *agenda-setting* and *framing* – have generated considerable amounts of research. One could well argue that these less overt forms of bias are actually more influential, because they are harder for readers to notice, and hence to resist.

Thirdly, there is the issue of how we understand the institutional causes of bias. In some instances, bias may be a result of the direct interference of media owners or proprietors. Yet this kind of institutional bias is often less direct: it is about the ‘culture’ of a news organisation, and how its staff are encouraged to behave. It may also reflect what the owners and the employees believe about the relationship between the institution and its audience. Journalists often argue that the bias of their own reporting simply reflects that of their readers. In this sense, there can be an economic motivation for bias: people will not pay to consume things that conflict with their own biases. Bias sells.

Issues of bias, truth and falsehood, and even ‘fake news’, are obviously legitimate topics for media education. However, I think we need to take care here. As I have argued, fake news is merely a manifestation of much broader problems, which apply to ‘real’ news as well. Looking to media literacy as a solution may be to oversimplify the problem, and to underestimate the difficulty of the task. I will elaborate on these arguments below.

Problems with media literacy

Firstly, there are some significant pedagogical problems in how we might deal with fake news. Assessing the reliability and credibility of sources is arguably much more difficult with online media than used to be the case with ‘old’ media, although this is something that experienced media educators can probably handle. However, in this case, judging truth and falsehood must depend to some extent on knowing about *content* as well as *form* –

understanding the topics at hand, rather than just how they are presented. This is particularly difficult in a context where most of one's students are unlikely to be interested in political or social issues, let alone knowledgeable about them (although again, this applies to adults just as much as young people).

Even if these critical skills can be cultivated, there is a further question about how far they will actually be applied outside the classroom. How many people are willing to routinely evaluate the reliability of online sources, or to cross-check information, as the above checklist proposes – especially in an age when we have become used to instant access to information? Personally, I am sorry to say that I rarely do this, and I doubt that I could persuade an average sixteen-year-old student to do so either.

Beyond this, there is the problem of epistemology. You don't have to be a complete relativist to acknowledge that a given 'fact' can be interpreted in many different ways by different people in different contexts. There are some absolute truths and some absolute falsehoods, but between them lies a very large grey area. Interpretation is a complicated business. As Maha Bali has pointed out, 'real' news often requires a great deal of critical and emotional energy to deal with⁵. As such, discerning true from false – or, rather, identifying and coming to terms with the elements of truth and falsehood in most representations of the world – may only be the beginning of a much more complex educational journey.

There's a danger here of assuming that we are dealing with a rational process – or at least one that can, by some pedagogical means, be *made* rational. But from an educational perspective, we surely have to begin with the question of why people might believe apparently 'fake' news in the first place. By no means all media use is rational. Where we decide to place our trust is as much to do with fantasy, emotion and desire, as with rational calculation. All of us are inclined to believe what we *want* to believe.

This is arguably much more complex at time when we can exercise much greater control over the media and sources to which we are exposed. In terms of digital media, this has led to growing concerns about the 'filter bubble', or the 'echo chamber effect'. We can easily filter out things we dislike or do not agree with, and thereby remain in a comfortable world where everything appears to confirm our existing world-view. Research suggests that people positively *want* to remain in such filter bubbles – and, more generally, that news that plays to already-established positions or prejudices is much more inclined to be liked (and hence to generate more income for social media companies)⁶. While this is partly a consequence of the proliferation and fragmentation of media, it is also a symptom of growing political polarization, and of diminishing trust in authority much more broadly.

⁵ <https://dmlcentral.net/fake-news-not-main-problem/#.WGxNy-N7HsA.twitter>

⁶ <https://theconversation.com/the-filter-bubble-isnt-just-facebook-s-fault-its-yours-69664>

False beliefs may derive from exposure to fake news, or be simply reconfirmed by it. But either way, it seems unlikely that they will be easily dispelled by a good dose of facts, or the force of rational argument. The history of media education certainly tells us this. Racism, for example, is unlikely to be dispelled by appeals to rationality, or by critically analyzing racism in the media. Indeed, it often proves extremely resistant to such teacherly strategies.

There is a further danger here, which media literacy education can easily play into. A critical perspective can easily slide into a generalized, superficial cynicism – a blanket distrust of everything and everyone, and especially of the media. This might appear nihilistic, but it is also quite a comforting position to adopt; and it is a stance that unites conspiracy theorists of all political persuasions.

Beyond media literacy

Ultimately, media literacy is an individualistic solution. Policy makers accept, however regrettably, that the media are not doing a good job in informing citizens and promoting democracy, and that regulating them is impossible. And so they pass responsibility down to the individual consumer: it's their problem to sort it out. As I have argued elsewhere⁷, this approach informs many governmental endorsements of media literacy, and the work of regulatory bodies: it is key to understanding the history of media literacy policy in the UK, for example. While it appears to be about empowering consumers, it effectively absolves governments of responsibility for addressing problems that arise in a media landscape that is increasingly driven by the imperatives of the free market.

So while media literacy might be part of the answer, it is not sufficient on its own. Media literacy needs to be linked to wider campaigns for media reform. This is partly about professional practices. There is now a growing need for professional journalists to be more sceptical, and more explicit, in their use of evidence, and more transparent themselves. Especially in the era of figures like President Trump, mainstream journalism has a much greater responsibility to perform its traditional role of 'speaking truth to power'.

However, there is a broader challenge posed by the 'non-professional' journalism of social media. As Evgeny Morozov⁸ argues, fake news ultimately exists because of the business model of what he calls 'digital capitalism': it exists because it's profitable. If we want to challenge fake news, we have to challenge the enormous power of digital advertising and the global companies that thrive on it. A first step here would be for these companies to admit that they are media companies, not merely technology companies; and to accept some of the responsibilities that follow from that. Morozov calls for better government regulation, and ultimately for the break-up of the big data

⁷ <https://davidbuckingham.net/2016/09/20/whatever-happened-to-media-literacy/>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/08/blaming-fake-news-not-the-answer-democracy-crisis>

companies. This might seem an unlikely outcome, perhaps. But surely understanding this bigger picture is what critical media literacy education should be all about.