Teach Real English!
Teaching materials based on current research

Queen Mary
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Teaching Unit 23: Fake news and "fake news"

Background

This unit explores the topic of 'fake news', including what people mean when they use the term and why it has become such a major issue only in recent years. The unit provides teachers and students with real-world examples for discussion and guides users through the main discussion points to focus on.

Discussion points

What is Fake News?

Researchers who study news language have often focused their attention on cases like economic news stories (see Teaching Unit 22), where differences in news coverage can be attributed to biases in the outlook of the news outlet (Fowler et al. 1979; Fairclough 1995), to the historically evolved practices of editors and reporters (Bell 1991; Cotter 2010), or to "spin" from news sources who give out the original information (Jacobs 1999). We still generally assume that news writers and their organizations have a commitment to reporting true facts and giving a accurate picture of reality as they see it. Harcup puts it more directly when he says newspapers are "said to be in the business of truth telling and serving only their readers" (2009: 5). In day to day reporting, however, this general objective is somewhat remote as news workers focus more narrowly on verifying each fact and transmitting it in a way that can be matched with the source. As Cotter says, "accuracy in both reporting and writing domains is of the essence and is the basis of maintaining credibility" (2010: 42).

Sometimes, however, news is distorted or falsified deliberately — that is, the underlying facts are known by the news outlets to be very different to those reported, or do not exist at all. News may be distorted or falsified to manipulate people into perceiving the world differently from the way it is, and acting on those perceptions. Citizens may be induced to back political leaders and policies that are contrary to their interests, or to go to war on occasions when they would not be ready to do so if they were better informed, or encouraged to discriminate against others in their midst.

Earlier studies of news manipulation called it *propaganda.* In Europe, this kind of manipulation was associated in particular with the Nazi regime in Germany and the Soviet and affiliated communist regimes in Russia and central Europe and Asia. What is or should be shocking in these cases is the collusion of the news media, who are supposed to be pursuing the truth. Such cases are different from publicity fakes and stunts, in which someone else, for their own purposes, tricks or guides the media into showing things differently from the way they otherwise would.

More recently the term *fake news* has become popular in discussions of news quality focusing on intentional distortion of reality*.*

Points for discussion:
- Have you heard about fake news?
- What kinds of news do you think it covers?
- What makes it fake?
- Can you think of any examples?
- Does fake news still count as news? (see discussion of *fake* below)
- Do you think there is a hard division between fake news and non-fake news?
- Do you think there should be laws against deceiving the public? What do you think they would say?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the adjective *fake* as 'spurious' or 'counterfeit', both words meaning 'not real'; its collocations include *fake fur*, *fake tan*, and the musician's album of song outlines known as a *fakebook.* Of course, fake fur is still a type of fur, just made of synthetic materials; fake tan still denotes a browner color to the skin, just produced by a surface chemical reaction instead of sun exposure; and a musician playing from a fakebook is still playing the music, just improvising from chords rather than seeing every note written out. Clearly *fake* is a complex word.

The following exercise uses the NOW corpus (https://corpus.byu.edu/now) a searchable online collection of news texts from 2010 to the present housed at Brigham Young University. Below is a list of 25 search results for "fake news" on 13 April 2018. You can click through the publication names to read individual stories.

Discussion points:
- For each use, what can you tell about the use of the term "fake news"?
- Who uses it?
- What are they calling "fake news"? What are they referring to?
- Do you think there would be broad agreement that this is a good use of the term?
- Do you agree?

Sort the uses into different groups, however you like, to see if any patterns emerge. Some notes are provided in capital letters. Other questions that students may wish to discuss:
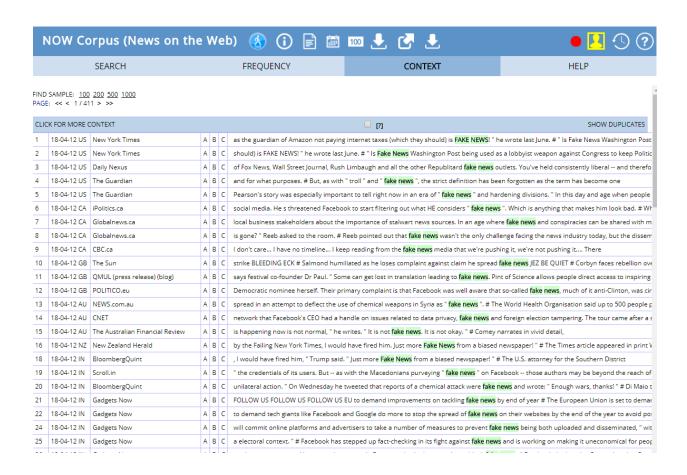- How does the source (e.g. Trump) relate to our interpretation of the text?
- How is stylization used to adjust alignment to the term, e.g. capitals, initial capitals, quotation marks, "so-called"?

1	18-04-12 US	New York Times	A	B	C	as the guardian of Amazon not paying internet taxes (which they should) is **FAKE NEWS**! " he wrote last June. # " Is Fake News Washington Post TRUMP TWEET
2	18-04-12 US	New York Times	A	B	C	should) is FAKE NEWS! " he wrote last June. # " Is **Fake News** Washington Post being used as a lobbyist weapon against Congress to keep Politicians from TRUMP TWEET
3	18-04-12 US	Daily Nexus	A	B	C	of Fox News, Wall Street Journal, Rush Limbaugh and all the other Republitard **fake news** outlets. You've held consistently liberal -- and therefore true -- views all COMMENT ON WEBSITE OF UNIVERSITY NEWSPAPER IN US
4	18-04-12 US	The Guardian	A	B	C	and for what purposes. # But, as with " troll " and " **fake news** ", the strict definition has been forgotten as the term has become one DISCUSSION OF FAKE NEWS AS A PROBLEM
5	18-04-12 US	The Guardian	A	B	C	Pearson's story was especially important to tell right now in an era of " **fake news** " and hardening divisions. " In this day and age when people have DISCUSSION OF FAKE NEWS AS A PROBLEM
6	18-04-12 CA	iPolitics.ca	A	B	C	social media. He s threatened Facebook to start filtering out what HE considers " **fake news** ". Which is anything that makes him look bad. # What nonsense COMMENT ON GUN CONTROL STORY ON CANADIAN NEWS SITE
7	18-04-12 CA	Globalnews.ca	A	B	C	local business stakeholders about the importance of stalwart news sources. In an age where **fake news** and conspiracies can be shared with millions by a simple click of a button DISCUSSION OF FAKE NEWS AS A PROBLEM
8	18-04-12 CA	Globalnews.ca	A	B	C	is gone? " Reeb asked to the room. # Reeb pointed out that **fake news** wasn't the only challenge facing the news industry today, but the dissemination DISCUSSION OF FAKE NEWS AS A PROBLEM
9	18-04-12 CA	CBC.ca	A	B	C	I don't care... I have no timeline... I keep reading from the **fake news** media that we're pushing it, we're not pushing it.... There QUOTES TRUMP IN TRADE DEAL STORY
10	18-04-12 GB	The Sun	A	B	C	strike BLEEDING ECK # Salmond humiliated as he loses complaint against claim he spread **fake news** JEZ BE QUIET # Corbyn faces rebellion over Syria as frontbencher calls for IN HEADLINE ABOUT FORMER SNP CHIEF - GONE FROM PAGE NOW
11	18-04-12 GB	QMUL (press release) (blog)	A	B	C	says festival co-founder Dr Paul. " Some can get lost in translation leading to **fake news**. Pint of Science allows people direct access to inspiring scientists and encourages open QMUL RESEARCHER CONCERNED ABOUT ACCURATE SCIENCE NEWS

1 2	18-04-12 GB	POLITICO.eu	A	B	C	Democratic nominee herself. Their primary complaint is that Facebook was well aware that so-called **fake news**, much of it anti-Clinton, was circulating unchecked on the site, yet REPORT ON ZUCKERBERG HEARINGS - "SO CALLED" IS INTERESTING
1 3	18-04-12 AU	NEWS.com.au	A	B	C	spread in an attempt to deflect the use of chemical weapons in Syria as " **fake news** ". # The World Health Organisation said up to 500 people presented at IMPLIES TERM USED BY RUSSIANS - NOT A DIRECT QUOTE THOUGH
1 4	18-04-12 AU	CNET	A	B	C	network that Facebook's CEO had a handle on issues related to data privacy, **fake news** and foreign election tampering. The tour came after a scandal erupted last month REPORT ON ZUCKERBERG HEARINGS
1 5	18-04-12 AU	The Australian Financial Review	A	B	C	is happening now is not normal, " he writes. " It is not **fake news**. It is not okay. " # Comey narrates in vivid detail, HIDDEN BEHIND PAYWALL - COMEY SAYING THE STRUGGLE FOR TRUTH IN WASHINGTON IS REAL
1 6	18-04-12 NZ	New Zealand Herald	A	B	C	by the Failing New York Times, I would have fired him. Just more **Fake News** from a biased newspaper! " # The Times article appeared in print Wednesday TRUMP TWEET
1 8	18-04-12 IN	BloombergQuint	A	B	C	, I would have fired him, " Trump said. " Just more **Fake News** from a biased newspaper! " # The U.S. attorney for the Southern District TRUMP TWEET
1 9	18-04-12 IN	Scroll.in	A	B	C	" the credentials of its users. But -- as with the Macedonians purveying " **fake news** " on Facebook -- those authors may be beyond the reach of American courts THINK TANKER-RESEARCHER ACCUSES MACEDONIANS
2 0	18-04-12 IN	BloombergQuint	A	B	C	unilateral action. " On Wednesday he tweeted that reports of a chemical attack were **fake news** and wrote: " Enough wars, thanks! " # Di Maio told ITALIAN POLITICIAN TWEETS THAT SOME REPORTS ARE FAKE NEWS
2 1	18-04-12 IN	Gadgets Now	A	B	C	FOLLOW US FOLLOW US FOLLOW US EU to demand improvements on tackling **fake news** by end of year # The European Union is set to demand tech giants EU DEMANDS GOOGLE, FACEBOOK DO MORE TO COUNTER FAKE NEWS
2 2	18-04-12 IN	Gadgets Now	A	B	C	to demand tech giants like Facebook and Google do more to stop the spread of **fake news** on their websites by the end of the year to avoid possible regulatory actions EU DEMANDS GOOGLE, FACEBOOK DO MORE TO COUNTER FAKE NEWS
2 4	18-04-	Gadgets Now	A	B	C	will commit online platforms and advertisers to take a number of measures to prevent **fake news** being both uploaded and disseminated, " with a view to

	12 IN					producing measurable effects EU DEMANDS GOOGLE, FACEBOOK DO MORE TO COUNTER FAKE NEWS
2 5	18-04-12 IN	Gadgets Now	A	B	C	a electoral context. " # Facebook has stepped up fact-checking in its fight against **fake news** and is working on making it uneconomical for people to post such content by EU DEMANDS GOOGLE, FACEBOOK DO MORE TO COUNTER FAKE NEWS

Here is what the original data looked like on the BYU site:

Changes in news outlets and how we receive news

When Queen Elizabeth was crowned in 1952, news arrived through thick newspapers, each with a clear brand whose executives and editors took responsibility for its contents. They trained their reporters and gathered and presented the news in ways that seem very homogeneous today. Only a few newsstands in big cities sold "foreign papers" where the news could be triangulated with other views. Television and radio were provided by the BBC, which also had a clear structure of responsibility and well known reporting and presentation practices, which were made transparent to the audience through

publications like the subscriber magazine *The Listener*. The relationship between government and the media was closely managed.

Now the Internet connects more sources to global audiences every year. There are also more independent news sources every year. Once blogging software was introduced (around 1999) it became easy to start a news site, especially if it is mainly reusing the reporting of others and not adding much value. At the same time, individual news stories are aggregated and remixed on social media and YouTube. Readers see the content and don't necessarily pay attention to tracing where it comes from. This system can give us a wide selection of facts and viewpoints, not just the official story, but it makes it hard to track facts to their sources and evaluate which sources are credible. Stories can also become distorted as they are passed through other media publishers and circulated to audiences who may be unfamiliar with their context - and with social media, audience members can be publishers too. This distortion cycle is common with media materials that "go viral." It is no wonder there are so many accusations of "fake news."

You may recognize that when a story originates with the *Guardian*, or any of the other established British broadsheets and broadcast outlets, it is generally considered believable unless something very unusual has occurred. You may be familiar with some other news outlets of similar status around the world. On the list of database results above, these include the *New York Times*, the *New Zealand Herald*, and the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC)*.* These newspapers enjoy a similar presumption of trustworthiness.

Consider the news outlets that appear in the database results above (also listed below for convenience).

- Look up some background on the news outlets, both those you are familiar with and those you are not. Wikipedia and the news outlets' own websites will do to start with. What can you tell from these websites about the news outlet's track record for accuracy?
- What factors affect how much you trust the stories from a news outlet? Consider size, ownership, existence of a print format. What else?
- How do you consider location - what country a news outlet is in, and how far away from you it is?
- How does the news outlet's writing style produce the expectation that its stories will be more or less accurate?
- Where else might you look to decide whether a news outlet, or an author, is generally credible (believable, trustworthy)? If there is no system for determining credibility, do you think it is possible to build one? How would it work?
- Conduct your own search on the NOW database, either on "fake news" or something else. How many more news outlets come up in the first 25 results?

New York Times	POLITICO.eu	Scroll.in
Daily Nexus	NEWS.com.au	Gadgets Now
iPolitics.ca	CNET	
Globalnews.ca	Australian Financial Review	
The Sun	New Zealand Herald	
QMUL (press release blog)	Bloomberg Quint	

References

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Harcup, Tony. 2015. *Journalism: principles and practice.* London: Sage.

Jacobs, Geert. 1999. *Preformulating the news: An analysis of the metapragmatics of press releases*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.