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"FAKE NEWS" AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION: THEORY INFORMS PRACTICE

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"Fake news" was rampant in the 2016 U.S. election season, and continues to stay in the headlines in one form or another. There has been an increase in news and opinion articles about corporate technology monopolies, the negative impacts of social media and too much screen time, the viral spread of conspiracy theories, Russian propaganda, and online privacy. All of these issues are part of the fake news phenomenon. Among the proposed solutions, we've seen an increase in calls for media and civic literacy, including state proposed legislation to mandate literacy programs in schools (Foley, 2017). Literacy needs entail a role for librarians and highlight the necessity of an informed voting public to a democratic society.

Fake news is a manifestation of broader issues in the modern information environment that impact the knowledge and dispositions required to be information literate. My presentation will address the social contexts of fake news and the implications for information literacy instruction, specifically the relevance of critical theories to achieving the democratic aims of education and librarianship. I will show how a sociological viewpoint and a social problems perspective can inform the inclusion of critical content in the library classroom. I will focus on a narrow set of core issues from the fake news phenomenon that relate to concepts in information evaluation and search, and show relationships to the *Framework for Information Literacy* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015). This discussion is intended as a basis for identifying how concepts and skills taught by librarians on a regular basis relate to fake news, in order to consider how to address the real-world (public and civic) information literacy needs of students.

THEORY INFORMS PRACTICE: ROOTS OF CRITICAL INFORMATION LITERACY

The role of the sociologist is to help to connect theory with practice: to think critically about society, question the status quo, and open up dialogue to positively advance society (Plummer, 2010). *Praxis* is the willful use of theory to inform practice in order to work towards a goal of social change. This definition originated in the work of Karl Marx ("praxis, n.," 2007), who is among the most influential theorists to the field of sociology and the development of *critical theory*. Marx is best known for his critique of capitalism based on class conflict and inequality (Pampel, 2000). Critical theory continues a critique of capitalism and its culture, values, and ideologies (Billings & Jennings, 2001; Langman, 2007). Critical theorists seek to understand why people are complicit in their own domination through studying epistemology: how people come to know and understand their world. This includes studying the role of

ideologies in the shaping of consciousness through systems such as mass media. Critical theory is an emancipatory theory that works towards freeing people from oppression and domination within capitalist systems. From critical theory comes critical pedagogy (Dowty, 2007), for which praxis is a core concept that encompasses the goal of education to allow space for reflection to inform action in support of social equality. Critical librarianship and critical information literacy are those applications of critical theory and pedagogy to our own discipline and practice, as librarians.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

At the core of sociological thought is the *sociological imagination*—a form of critical consciousness and a way of seeing the world that defines sociology as a distinct discipline. The sociological imagination is the ability to see personal troubles as public issues and to consider the impact of broader social and historical contexts on personal situations. C. Wright Mills wrote the book on *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills, 1959), which defines the concept and situates it within a discussion of the promise of sociology to understand and seek to improve upon the problems and issues of our times, through the application and practice of the sociological imagination.

The sociological imagination gives us a way to think broadly about why so many individuals were exposed to and susceptible to believing fake news. At the same time, it underscores the need for a critical information literacy. In his discussion of the political aspects of the sociological imagination, Mills points to the role of social scientists and educators as working towards the fulfillment of universally democratic values (rather than the particular agenda of a given political party). The political ideals that are inherent to the application of the sociological imagination are the value of truth and fact, the role of reason in human affairs, and human freedom (Mills, 1959, pp. 178–179). Therefore, a liberal education should have the goal of imparting the sociological imagination to students in order to promote reason and the ability for self-education, and to cultivate a sensibility of critical thinking and self-knowledge (Mills, 1959, pp. 186–187). These are necessary skills and dispositions in order to make sense of "conflicting definitions of reality itself" in a social milieu shaped by powerful interests that often promote policy with propaganda based on opinion, myth, and lies (Mills, 1959, p. 191). Mills reasons that truth is political because perceptions are manipulated to serve the aims of the powerful over the public good (1959, pp. 178–179). This theoretical discussion is directly connected to the need for critical pedagogy: "The educational and political role of social science in a democracy is to help cultivate and sustain publics and individuals that are able to develop, to live with, and to act upon adequate definitions of personal and social realities" (Mills, 1959, p. 192). Mills claims that educated publics of this nature would in fact be radical in U.S. society, which does not live up to its democratic rhetoric in actual practice (1959, pp. 188, 191).

The sociological imagination is an intellectual tool to make sense of personal and social reality in general and in specific facets of our lives. Trying to understand the nature of reality or the sociology of knowledge is a tricky endeavor and another talk altogether—suffice it to say that despite the relative nature of reality there are certain social facts and truths that unite us in a common world.

THE SOCIAL PROBLEM OF FAKE NEWS

Sources of recorded information are one way that we share and create our reality and represent our society. In particular, news and other popular information sources play a major role in shaping our understanding of current events and the world around us. That is why the issue of fake news strikes at the heart of our modern information society. However you define fake news, it is now a ubiquitous feature of the information landscape and represents a major social problem.

From a sociological perspective there are a variety of ways to conceptualize social problems (Kerbo & Coleman, 2007). Rather than personally identifying a "social ill" that needs to be "cured," an issue is categorized as a social problem when enough public voices define it as such: social problems are socially constructed (Heiner, 2002). An issue may be long-standing but only be considered as a social problem when heightened attention is given to the matter. This may happen when the issue starts to affect powerful and privileged groups in a greater way than before and is given more attention in the media. The sociological approach explains why issues of propaganda and sensationalized information have long been around, but why fake news is now in the public eye as a social problem.

The 2016 U.S. election made "fake news" a household phrase. Powerful actors took up the issue: Donald Trump, the media, Congress. The scientific research community and the broader populace have also taken note. Fake news is an umbrella term for various issues that are broadly related to the creation and spread of false information. Both liberals and conservatives agree that fake news is a problem, although they have different takes on the exact nature of the problem as either an attempt to de-legitimize facts, a debunking of the mainstream media, or a cover for censorship (Caplan, Hanson, & Donovan, 2018).

Some of the ways the term fake news is used include:

- A *type of information*: disinformation, misinformation, satire
- A *nihilification*: a derogatory term used for the purposes of de-legitimization

The contours of the current fake news phenomenon maps out a complex landscape that reflects aspects of many social forces as well as historical, economic, political, psychological, technological, and cultural factors (Caplan et al., 2018; Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

CRITICAL CONNECTIONS: SOCIOLOGY, FAKE NEWS, AND INFORMATION LITERACY

Looking at fake news sociologically identifies public issues that relate to the ability to function as an information literate individual. Within the confines of the traditional one-shot academic library workshop, a critical approach identifies connections between standard class material and critical issues that are raised by the fake news phenomenon and brings them to the surface, enhancing the overall content of the class.

The conceptual nature of the *Framework for Information Literacy* makes it adaptable to use in informing critical information literacy practice (Bauder & Rod, 2016), despite shortcomings in not taking an explicitly critical stance (Battista et al., 2015; Seale, 2016). Another useful tool will be the forthcoming *Framework* Sociology Disciplinary Companion Document, currently under development by the ACRL-ANSS Information Literacy Committee,

which will directly apply the sociological perspective by using the *Sociological Literacy Framework* (Ferguson & Carbonaro, 2016) to guide the integration of information and sociological literacy. In order to facilitate further future analysis, I will identify connections to the *Framework for Information Literacy* with parenthetical notations of specific frames in the following discussion.

I will focus on two main abilities taught in typical library instruction: information evaluation and search. In parallel, most of the phenomena encompassed by the fake news problem can be categorized within a dual epicenter composed of the underlying concepts of the *post-truth* era and *information disorder*. It is widely acknowledged that we are in post-truth times, wherein emotion, opinion, and personal beliefs are more important than objective facts in politics and public debate (Wang, 2016). Post-truth sensibilities are thriving in the context of a disordered information system that has undergone recent rapid change and is now dominated by the Internet and social media. There are a number of inter-related features of these key issues that can be raised within the library classroom.

Post-truth and Information Evaluation

The post-truth concept can be roughly tracked to the need to engage in evaluation of information sources. The post-truth mentality encompasses the sentiment that all truth is relative.

Rethink discussions of bias

The acknowledgement of bias is important to evaluation ("Authority is Constructed and Contextual"). It is easy to fall into a trap of overwhelming skepticism that because bias is everywhere, nothing can be trusted (Barclay, 2017). This is part of why opinions, emotions, and narratives begin to carry more weight than facts. Cognitive biases explain individual behavior; social behavior operates at the level of ideologies, which are reinforced by mass media. In the Marxist view, ideologies are those "ruling ideas [that] are the ideas of the ruling classes" (Marx as cited in Henning, 2007). Expanding discussion of bias as embedded in information systems and reflective of structures of social stratification moves beyond examining characteristics of individual authors.

The extent of media bias raises questions about power dynamics in mass media institutions. Although "fake news" is typically used as a jab by conservatives to assert that liberal bias de-legitimizes mainstream media, there are long-standing critiques of media bias from across the political spectrum and from the scholarly community (e.g., Jhally, 1997). There is agreement that the mainstream media is biased in representing the interests of the elite (owners of media corporations) ("Information Has Value"); however, characterization of the aims and goals of powerful interests vary.

Bias also is apparent in information retrieval systems. Search engines provide a reflection of society that represents societal truths, cultural norms, hegemonic ideas, and commercial interests (Bohémier, Maksin, & Crowley, 2017; Noble, 2014), not necessarily "correct" answers to a given query. Search box autocomplete suggestions may influence questions ("Research as Inquiry"). Web search engines are not neutral tools.

Talk about motivations: Propaganda and social media sharing

The various agents of fake news highlight how information may be produced with political and profit-based motives (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) ("Information Creation as a Process"). Propaganda is rampant; recognizing information as a means to influence ("Information Has Value") extends to awareness of advertising, corporate funding of research, partisan news, and information warfare. Your friends and family are also key sources online, particularly in social media, so consideration of their motivations for sharing information is also important ("Scholarship as Conversation"). The presence a person creates on social media is performative and can affirm group belonging (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) that unconsciously reproduces ideologies.

Establish trustworthiness

Lack of trust in institutions and sources of information is a hallmark of post-truth sentiments (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018). Emphasis is needed regarding how to establish trust in an uncertain world. In the determination of credibility ("Authority is Constructed and Contextual"), trustworthiness is a key dimension (Choi & Stvilia, 2015). Credibility extends to format and publication processes ("Information Creation as a Process"). Teaching trustworthiness deals with recognizing indicators of quality and how to tap into the overall consensus or debates on a given topic ("Scholarship as Conversation"; "Research as Inquiry"), such as conducting a well-rounded literature review that engages in both deep and lateral reading.

Information Disorder and Search

Navigating an environment of information disorder relates to the ability to effectively search for information. It encompasses the sensibilities geared towards the technologies, tools, and resources that are used to browse for and purposefully seek out information. Issues related to the production of information belong here as well, such as the explosion of information fostered by the Internet and its effects on news and journalism, but are out of scope for this discussion.

Question the gatekeepers

Computers act as gatekeepers, moderating the information that we see online. These interfaces and tools are primarily owned by private corporations; Google and Facebook dominate online information seeking, resulting in a concentration of power to shape the information that we see and a lack of transparency in understanding what we are shown. They use a surveillance capitalism business model that accumulates and commodifies personal information (Zuboff, 2015) ("Information has Value"). We trade privacy, often unwittingly, for convenient services that increasingly seek to modify our behavior in the interests of whoever collects or purchases our data. Digital gatekeepers may appear to be neutral, but they embody complex economic and social arrangements. Using the language of "google it" to indicate "do a web search" reinforces an unquestioning view of the search process and the information landscape and hides other search options ("Searching as Strategic Exploration").

Talk about opaque relevancy rankings

These are a troublesome outcome of the algorithmic mediation of information. Discussing how search tools and news feeds prioritize or diminish different information sources is essential ("Searching as Strategic Exploration"). Fake news has brought to the forefront ethical

questions regarding the responsibilities of search engines (Lewandowski, 2017) and other online information providers in providing access to information. Social media and search engines tailor results to match the preferences and history of the individual user. This is impacted by the profit motive, as surveillance capitalism based advertising models ("Information has Value") are designed to show you information that you are more likely to click on. Content that tends to get more clicks and "trends" (increase in visibility) tends towards the sensational and emotional (Tufekci, 2018). This can result in the "filter bubble" and "echo chamber" effects which limit information, reinforce existing worldviews, and increase social fragmentation.

CONCLUSION

In considering solutions to the fake news problem, the role of media literacy is routinely highlighted, along with fact-checking and technological fixes like rating or tagging sources with credibility indicators. While worthwhile, these solutions alone are inadequate in that they place the burden of responsibility at the individual level and fail to address systemic issues (Bulger & Davison, 2018). But as librarians, we are not necessarily easily positioned to make laws, regulations, or other policies that would directly impact systems. The key area for our contribution to solving the fake news problem is in supporting information literacy. By incorporating a critical stance in our instruction, we can contribute to public consciousness and active citizenship that encourages students to examine and reflect upon both self and society.

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