



Can you tell when news is fake?

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John Sprague looks at the effects of fake and sensationalist news reporting

My first reaction on reading the *Wall Street Journal* headline 'Most Students Don't Know When News Is Fake, Stanford Study Finds' was a sense of reassurance as a TOK teacher, as I try to give students the opportunity to develop just the sorts of skills that the study suggests they lack. My second thought, however, after weeks of US election analysis, was 'Is this article itself reliable?' It seems to have all the hallmarks of the sorts of articles which have been shown to be fake. Appeal to authority? Check. Sensationalist tone in the headline? Check. Overconfident empirical claims emanating from the human sciences? Check. It seemed only to be missing

a claim about how 'You won't believe what happened next!'

Controlling what we read?

Since the UK's Brexit vote and the US presidential election, the role of the internet and social media has come under scrutiny. The question is how and under what circumstances are our habits of news consumption reliable? How can we filter through the never-ending news streams on social media? Over and above filtering through what our friends are posting is the worry over the effect of the algorithms used by sites like Facebook and Google, which make decisions about what to present to us.

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg has tried to downplay the effect of the streams and algorithms, but Google seems to recognise the possible effects.



The article 'Google's clever plan to stop aspiring ISIS recruits' (www.tinyurl.com/zqjaq9v) explains, without irony, how the search engine is researching ways of influencing the beliefs of those using the search engine. In a project using what Google calls the 'redirect method', users searching for extremist material are shown, in the ad bar or suggested links, sites that debunk extremist movements. The idea is that those searching for extremist sites will also be shown sites hosting counter-arguments, with the hope that these might temper the extremist position.

The general goal is a good thing: the world is better off with fewer extremists and terrorist organisations. The deeper point is far more concerning: it's a clear admission that the ways in which we construct knowledge are deeply influenced by the context, and that the supposedly neutral sources of that information might be consciously attempting to manipulate that construction. If Google is manipulating knowledge, is there anywhere where we can obtain reliable information?

Ruining the medium?

Maria Bustillos introduces the notion of **dismediation**, which is 'a form of propaganda that seeks to undermine the medium by which it travels'. The fact that we are inundated with flawed, biased and sometimes simply fake news masquerading as truth creates an

environment in which the whole medium comes into disrepute:

[This] style of twisting the facts has poisoned the well of public discourse for a whole generation of American adults—for all of us—by persuading so many that the confected "news" peddled on Fox is more or less equivalent to that on any other channel.

While the internet still contains reliable sources of knowledge, the frequency of sensationalist and fake news means that we risk losing the ability or even motivation to identify credible sources. It's no wonder that some students find it difficult to tell the difference. Bustillos worries that the 'systems of trust' which hold a society together are breaking and without them 'civilized society hasn't got a chance'.

A number of knowledge questions can be extracted from these concerns, in addition to the general questions about how we construct reliable knowledge:

- What are the roles of experts or authorities in knowledge?
- How does the instant availability of information create a personal sense of being informed, and is this genuine?
- What are the processes governing becoming an expert within a community of experts in a field?
- How will the rise of the internet-expert impact disciplines and their methods designed to promote reliability?
- What effect will the 'instant expert' phenomenon have on the shared knowledge of an area of knowledge's community of knowers?

Further reading

Bustillos, M. (2016) 'When Truth Falls Apart', www.tinyurl.com/zedsf5a

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