The Ethics of Fake News

Overview

President Donald J. Trump popularized the term "Fake News" during the 2016 U.S. election. Although this term is now used frequently by politicians and the media, much confusion remains over the meaning of the term and what actually "counts" as fake news. The UNESCO Handbook on *Journalism, 'Fake News,' & Disinformation* distinguishes between three categories that include:

- Mis-information: false connection or misleading content
- Dis-information: false context, imposter, manipulated or fabricated content
- Mal-information: Some leaks, harassment, or hate speech

However, some questions still remain about these categories. For example, President Trump sometimes seems to use the term to refer to reporting that he doesn't *like.* Addressing these definitional questions might help us better understand other ethical issues such as where fake news comes from, who creates it, and whether it is being spread intentionally or accidentally.

Discussion Questions

1. How should we define fake news?
    - What is the difference between real and fake news? For example, how might we draw a line between false statements and political spin? Is there a difference?
    - What benefits might be had from using more specific terms such as mis- or dis-information?
    - Do these terms leave anything out? If so, what?
    - How do you recognize it? Do you know it when you see it?
    - Have you believed something you later found out to be fake news or misinformation?

2. How does fake news spread?
    - Who is sharing it? Who is producing it? Why?
    - Do you think it's possible to prevent its spread? If so, whose responsibility is it?
    - Does social media contribute positively or negatively to the spreading of fake news?

3. Is fake news a *new* problem?
    - Are there historical parallels to the problems we associate with fake news?
    - Is there something unique about fake news that makes it different from these historical parallels?

4. Who *can* we trust?
- Are there any news sources that you can trust at face value, without additional verification?
- What strategies do you or *should* you take before sharing news on social media?

5. How much influence do public figures have in spreading fake news?
- How effective is the influence of political figures? Professional athletes? Celebrities? Politicians?
- Is there a correlation between social status and the potential to spread fake news? Do figures take their reputation into account when making a statement?

<u>Mini-Prompts</u>

"Because the tools that the public relies on to gauge truth, fairness, and accuracy are designed around the codification of sentiment and the monetization of attention, the 'fake news' battle cannot be won at the level of content alone. 'Indisputable facts play only a partial role in shaping the framing words and images that flow into an audience's consciousness,' notes Entman (2007). Given this scenario, objectivity, while important at the reporting level, is less valuable for establishing trust between news organizations and audiences in the 'fake news' era. As more actors opt to go 'direct' to their audiences using platforms like Twitter, news organizations will be forced to 'follow the conversation' instead of leading the way to establish narratives that accurately inform the public through their reporting. In this regard, as Richard Tofel argues, 'publishing [news] and then fact-checking is not enough,' (2015)." - Jonathan Albright, Columbia University

Question: Do you find yourself relying more on the judgment of news outlets or social media? Do you trust one more than the other? What are the advantages/pitfalls of both?

> *"Many cannot even tell these days which sources are biased. And if one believes that all media are biased, perhaps it makes less difference to choose an information source that is biased in one's favor. Those who have provided charts that attempt to measure the reliability of various media sources since the [2016] election have been met with threats of bodily harm."* — Lee McIntyre in *Post-Truth*

Question: Much of the media literacy efforts in the United States are oriented around helping students build their skepticism toward all information sources, deconstructing it, and asking detailed questions about its source and veracity. How might this pedagogical model of skepticism, built around helping students see the bias in all information sources, impact the way we consume information?