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Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: Combating fake news on social media

The fight against bad sources and false authorities is one that librarians have been engaged in for a very long time. While the inaccurate information may not always have been called “fake news”, misinformation, propaganda, conspiracy, exaggeration, manipulated facts and out and out lies have always been combated by librarians through information literacy. It is nearly impossible to go a day in this current news climate without reading or hearing the term “fake news”; whether it is being tweeted by the 45th president of the United States, discussed in the media, detailed in articles about social media, or addressed by librarians in literature, conversation, conferences, tweets and blog posts. The inescapable phrase was named word of the year for 2017 by both the American Dialect Society (“Fake News”, 2018) and Collins Dictionary (Meza, 2017). While the official definitions provided by a number of different sources may vary, the gist of what is meant by fake news is that it is information that is largely inaccurate, misleading, unsubstantiated, manipulated or completely fabricated that is being passed off as truthful, authoritative and accurate. Along with the countless popular articles on the topic of fake news, scholarly articles in multiple disciplines have only just begun to address the complexities involved with digital disinformation, particularly in regards to its relationship with social media.

The phrase “fake news” may seem to be a recent term, it has actually been around since the end of the 19th century and is not limited to just discussing political news according to Merriam-Webster [1]. In discussions about the spread of misinformation, it should also be remembered that previous technologies such as radio have contributed to the spread of propaganda, bias and misinformation long before Facebook and Twitter (Chen, 2017). Burkhardt (2017) takes things even further back to the pre-printing press era in her discussion on combating fake news in the digital era. Commisso (2017) gives a brief history of fake news along with an

intriguing discussion about the responsibility and task of archiving the fake news. It is clear that the phrase and the fight have been around far longer than the current technologies that are being used to both disseminate and combat the vast amounts of disinformation. While the concept of fake news and the fight against it have historically existed, the tools have changed, and need to continue to change at the pace in which the fake news is being spread. This spread, fueled by the technologies of social media is happening at an astonishing pace. Many librarians and educators are taking this task on admirably as is evident by the literature, discussions, panels, libguides, presentations, articles and discussions.

Newer techniques for confirming accuracy and authority are now being taught in response to the changing environment. Librarians and educators are finding that previous indicators for accuracy and authority of digital resources are no longer as apparent as they used to be, largely because the technology has made those indicators less useful. Early web education did not need to take into account that fake websites would look just as sophisticated, if not more, than their truthful counterparts, or that images could be faked so quickly and easily by even those with limited technological skills. A search on “fake tweet generator” provides pages of options, including a “best of” list. These sites all vary in their degrees of accuracy and sophistication, but obviously there is a demand for such a service. Entire conversations on various social media sites can be faked using similar technology, find one of the hundreds of websites available, simply enter the information, take a screenshot and share an entire fabricated conversation with your followers.

Another technique for spreading disinformation is the sharing and re-sharing of photos and images in falsified contexts. For example, a picture of crowds gathering to celebrate the NBA team the Cleveland Cavaliers has appeared more than once with claims of it representing

other gatherings in other locations (Lohr, 2017).

Librarians and educators are including the very important tool of reverse image search in their literacy toolkit in an effort to show how easy it is to verify an image for the purposes of authenticating content. The ability to verify images is an excellent way to quickly debunk articles that contain these pictures out of context. Challenges continue of course with technology making it harder to spot fake social media posts and photoshopped images. The continuing rise in popularity of video, specifically streaming video indicates a need for better tools for confirming their authenticity as technology begins to allow manipulation of video in ways not previously thought of.

The discussions around fake news focus on many of the social media apps that have been discussed previously in this column, largely Facebook and Twitter. It is clear that the social media apps contribute to the speed in which digital disinformation is spread and perpetuated. Reuters reports that more than half of online users get their news from social media platforms with social media overtaking television as the main source for news for 18-24 year olds (Mis, 2016). As librarians dedicated to educating against this disinformation, it is important that we be aware of how the content is spreading, what the companies are doing about it and think about the ways in which we can combat the fake news which, at times seems to be an overwhelming task.

Facebook

The social media network getting the most press about fake news recently has been Facebook. With 67% of Americans reporting that they get at least some of their news on social media and just under half getting their news from Facebook (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017, it is not surprising that this would be the case. Additionally, 44% of world-wide respondents reported getting their

news from Facebook, primarily via smartphones (Mis, 2016). Much of the discussion around Facebook involves the role of the proliferation of fake news in relation to global politics, specifically elections. The most recent announcement by Facebook after an earlier failed attempt to allow users to flag disputed news items (Kircher, M) is that it will ask the users to determine what is trustworthy through surveys presented to randomly selected users (Tiku, 2018). Many of the red flags that this approach raises are discussed by Clemm (2018) and Blue (2018), including the ability to fake trusted names, user bias, suppression of accurate new stories, and most importantly Facebook's actual intention to do anything that might affect their profit.

Twitter

The Pew Research Center reports that 11% of US adults get their news via Twitter (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017), a much smaller percentage than Facebook. Reuters reports 10% of adults getting news via Twitter worldwide (Mis, 2016). Despite the lower number getting their news from Twitter, there is no less fake news being shared on this social media platform. Twitter has not been as enthusiastic as Facebook with addressing the fake content being shared on its site. It has attempted to more aggressively address the hate speech that runs rampant (Lee, 2017) but has taken a less proactive approach to the fake content. In response to the accusations of Russian influence in elections, Twitter did email 678,000 users that may have interacted with Russian propaganda accounts (Vanian, 2018). However, in regards to taking any actions toward monitoring or identifying fake news, Twitter makes it clear that they do not wish to be involved in determining what is true or false and do not consider themselves to be in a position to be arbiters of truth, stating that "we are not going to remove content based on the fact this is untrue" (Borchers, 2018).

Snapchat

When addressing the problem with fake news and social media there is one network that is conspicuously absent from the discussion. While there is evidence that Snapchat is not heavily used for news sharing and procuring, with 5% of US adults reporting in the Pew Report (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017), it is notable that this is the only platform that can say it has found no evidence of political ad buys by anyone in Russia and apparently no evidence of fake news. The vice president for content explains that they “only work with authoritative and credible media companies, and we unashamedly have a significant team of producers, creators and journalists”. Snapchat relies on humans to mediate their content rather than algorithms or users like other Facebook (Chafkin, 2017). Another way Snapchat has addressed the problem of fake news is a format that segregates online socializing from online news reading, keeping the news content in it’s Discover tab separate from what is being shared by friends, providing a venue for authority and accuracy that does not exist when these two are not separate (Oremus, 2017).

Pinterest, Tumblr, Instagram

The social media apps that are primarily used for sharing of visual content; Tumblr, Instagram and Pinterest have not been unaffected by the challenge of fake news. Pinterest acknowledged that the “visual bookmarking site became a repository for political posts created by Russian operatives seeking to influence public opinion and promote divisiveness in the US” when users saved links to this fake content via Facebook and Twitter onto their Pinterest boards. Pinterest removed the content that was identified and was continuing to investigate (Musil, 2017).

Tumblr, where a mere 1% of the US population get their news (Shearer & Gottfried,

2017) seemed to have been spared, but a recent report by BuzzFeed reports that Tumblr “was in fact home to a powerful, largely unrevealed network of Russian trolls focused on black issues and activism”. At this time Tumblr has not responded to requests for comment by the reporters and there is no indication of how Tumblr may react to the content and the users affected by it (Silverman, 2018). With 7% of US users reportedly getting their news from Instagram (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017) , it is important to know how much this social media platform has also been affected by the proliferation of fake news. Owned by Facebook, it is unlikely that it remains immune to the problems, but at this time there is not much being explored beyond how Instagram is dealing with fake accounts and influencers.

YouTube

The video sharing site, like its parent company Google has also been used as a network to create and spread fake news. It was first noted in 2012 that YouTube was becoming an important source of video news, interestingly enough with the warning that “there are not clear ethical standards about how to identify the sources of material in YouTube videos, leaving viewers in the dark about who posted a video or where the uploader got the footage in the clip...all this creates the potential for news to be manufactured, or even falsified” (Fahri, 2017). Today, Pew reports that 18% of US adults get their news via YouTube, second only to Facebook (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017) Reuters reports 19% of global users getting their news through the video sharing site (Mis, 2016). The ease with which anyone can create a YouTube channel and promote their content as news has led to an increase in YouTube personalities who vary in their authority and intention, resulting in many users getting their news from unverifiable sources and content. In August 2017, YouTube added a Breaking News tab to users feeds, highlighting

mostly traditional sources (Matney, 2017). This tab is perhaps an effort to combat the evidence that the site's recommend algorithm promotes conspiracy theories, violent content, inappropriate content in presumably child-safe content, and inaccurate information (Lewis, 2018). In an effort to combat the questionable content and be more transparent, YouTube announced in February 2018 that it would be warning users when they are viewing state-sponsored videos (Murphy, 2018). This is certainly a step towards providing more context for content, but it does not address the content coming from YouTubers who intentionally present false information to their thousands of followers. Compounding this challenge is the technology that allows for increasing manipulation of video which was previously not possible, necessitating more careful scrutiny of the video content being provided. This technology takes the popular "Bad Lip Reading" videos [2] to a much less entertaining and more sinister level where a former president's words can be manipulated to change history [3].

Message boards, social servers and forums

The social networks that provide users a place to post anonymously to boards and forums are in many cases the source of the disinformation and propaganda that makes its way to Facebook and Twitter and mainstream media as in the case of "Pizzagate" (BBC News, 2016). The anonymous nature of these sites and services which include Reddit, Discord and 4chan provide a petri dish for the growth of fake news which is easily then shared and promoted to the bigger social networks. These sites have very little oversight or human intervention, with moderators existing to only police for the most egregious content, often allowing questionable content to remain. According to the pew report, 4% of US adults get news from Reddit (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017), which brands itself as "the front page of the internet" [4]. Any user can post a link to the

different subreddits and it is left to the other users to determine whether the the content is verifiable based on their upvotes, downvotes or comments. It is quite easy to share links to fake content widely in these anonymous forums. Reddit keep a hands off approach to managing the content, only stepping in for extreme cases such as the recent trend of using technology to easily fake computer generated pornography (Romano, 2018). Discord and 4chan also do not monitor the content of the servers and forums, but rely on the users to report content that violates the terms of service, and then react to the content when it is exposed, as in the case of alt-right Discord servers being used to organize violent events (Coldewey, 2017).

The saturation of social networks with this fake news, propaganda, heavy bias and even conspiracy, is obviously a grave concern for everyone, not just information professionals. At times the sheer quantity and potential can be almost dystopian where the chilling question becomes, “what happens when anyone can make it appear as if anything has happened, regardless of whether or not it did?” (Warzel, 2018). The various efforts by the different social media platforms show unique approaches to the battle against this disinformation, and perhaps these can help inform and caution librarians. Pressure is coming from corporate sponsors, with Unilever warning Facebook and YouTube that they will pull their ads if the problem is not addressed (Vranica, 2018), and AT&T, concerned their ads would appear next to offensive material pulled their advertising and has yet to return as of February 2018 (Maheshwari, 2018). This corporate pressure is likely to get the attention of these for-profit companies, much more so than from users, journalists, citizens and educators.

Librarians can not wait for these platforms to correct themselves and it is obvious that these sites are not going away with obvious continued growth in users and in those users that obtain news from the sites. The importance of being aware of the networks and their approach to

combating fake news can not be overstated. Mixed in with the articles about changes to algorithms, corporate responsibility and government intervention are reminders that humans, while part of the problem can also be an important part of the solution. Librarians should consider adding conversations about the need for skepticism when getting news from social media; encouraging our users to question and take the extra steps to confirm. More and more articles refer to the need for media literacy and news literacy, all forms of information literacy. Absent in many of these discussions however is the role of librarians in these important lessons on verifying digital content. This is a moment where the need for more education on authority and accuracy is at its peak and librarians can consider not only exploring new techniques and methods but also placing themselves into these important discussions whenever possible.

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[2] <https://www.youtube.com/user/BadLipReading>

[3] <http://grail.cs.washington.edu/projects/AudioToObama/>

[4] <https://www.reddit.com/>

