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Lie versus Lie: Disassembling Disinformation Piece by Piece

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INTRODUCTION

When I encountered intense media cynicism among students in my LIB 103 for-credit course in the spring of 2019, I set out to find a more effective method of helping them develop an understanding of authority as constructed and contextual. Rooting my process in student cognitive development theory and the research into media skepticism, I created the “Lie vs. Lie” assignment. By having students create and then debunk “fake news” pages, instruction librarians can engage them with the content and give them a clearer understanding of how information is created—and how to spot a lie.

THE SETTING

The course in which I introduced this activity was LIB 103: Introduction to Library Research and Technology. The overall course focus is on trends and issues relating to information, and on information retrieval and analysis. Specific content covered includes the information cycle, information evaluation, library resources and searching skills, and other current information issues. The course is aimed primarily at freshmen, sophomores, and other early career students.

WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?: MEDIA CYNICISM AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

Prior to my first time teaching LIB 103, my understanding of the main issues college students struggled with when it came to news media literacy was rooted primarily in the articles on K-12 media literacy that I’d been reading in preparation for my class. The general consensus was that students were too credulous—that they lacked both the tools to critically evaluate their news consumption, and also the awareness of the need to do so. Students were typically presented as uncritical, omnivorous consumers, taking anything they found online at face value. Consequently, most of the emphasis in the news media-related training and materials I encountered was focused on raising student awareness of the existence of misinformation and disinformation, and exhorting them to be more critical in their approach to news sources, especially online.

Once I began teaching the class, however, the responses I was getting from my students were unexpected. Rather than being too credulous, my students consistently expressed the belief that all news media was equally biased and untrustworthy, and that they therefore did not find it worthwhile to engage with any news, especially that shared by mainstream media outlets. At best, they indicated that they received their news casually from friends on social media, rather than seeking it out in news sources. My attempts to explain the nuances in news media trustworthiness were generally met with skepticism or outright incredulity, leading me to begin investigating the literature on college students and media skepticism to better plan my in-class approach.

Student Cognitive Development Theory

W. G. Perry’s Student Cognitive Development Theory provided a vital lens through which to better understand my students’ beliefs (Perry, 1981). In student cognitive development theory, students proceed through three phases of learning, each one accompanied by dispositions not unlike those described in the Framework: Dualism, Multiplicity, and Relativism. In Dualism, students see the world in black and white; they expect clear, true or false answers to all questions, and they expect those answers to

be handed down by unquestionably trustworthy authorities (Perry, 1981). This phase roughly describes the viewpoint of student's being excessively credulous in their media use, and also the students I regularly taught in my one-shot library sessions for the First Year Seminar course.

My students in LIB 103, however, seemed to be best described by the Multiplicity stage. Students in this stage have come to realize that experts do not have all the answers, but proceed from this realization to the belief that if some experts are sometimes wrong, all experts are untrustworthy. Students in this stage tend to feel their personal experiences and beliefs do not need to be supported by external evidence or facts, as evidence is untrustworthy (Perry, 1981).

Ultimately, my goal for my students is to eventually reach Relativism, a position that allows for ambiguity and balance. Relativism aligns well with the Frame of "Authority is Constructed and Contextual;" it's a stage in which students can recognize that some sources may be partially or wholly untrustworthy, but truth is possible to find. Relativism encourages information literacy by empowering students to engage in critical thinking about news media rather than disengage entirely.

Media Skepticism and Cynicism: The Research

This difference—between thoughtfully and critically engaging with the news rather than disconnecting from it—can also be described as the difference between media skepticism and media cynicism. Media skepticism can best be described as a "questioning" mindset when approaching news content. By encouraging increased information seeking behaviors, media skepticism tends to improve knowledge and civic engagement (Hutchens, 2016). The combination of media skepticism with relatively high trust in credible or authoritative sources appeared to lead to the most informed media consumers (Hutchens, 2016).

Media cynicism, conversely, can be described as a disengagement response rather than a questioning response. When faced with the awareness of bias, misinformation, and disinformation, media cynics disconnect where media skeptics dig deeper. Perceived media bias and cynicism have a detrimental impact on overall news use, regardless of the type of news source (Ardevol-Abreu, 2017). Additionally, cynicism and a negative posture towards media "appear to directly undermine civic health" (Pinkleton, 2012). Clearly, student media cynicism has potentially serious consequences.

Finally, there is the issue my students indicated of engaging with news only when it was shared with them by a friend or on social media, a behavior that appears to be rooted at least in part in their cynicism. This behavior, it turns out, also has a name: "News-Finds-Me." The "News-Finds-Me" information consumer does not actively seek news, instead believing that they will remain sufficiently informed by passively receiving it through social media or their peers (de Zuniga, 2017). Unfortunately, this behavior both correlates to a higher reliance on social media and leads to less informed and knowledgeable individuals (de Zuniga, 2017). We know from previous studies that young adults' primary sources of information are social media and the adults in their lives, leaving them most vulnerable to being poorly informed due to media cynicism and disengagement (Rush, 2018).

THE LIE VS. LIE PROJECT

Rather than continue lecturing my students on the nuances of authority, I set out to develop a way to give them hands-on experience with the gray areas of the news media world. Specifically, I began to explore ways to help them better understand misinformation and disinformation by putting them in the role of disinformation creator. Just as building something—for instance, a piece of furniture—provides you with a clearer understanding of how it was created and how to disassemble it, I hoped that seeing disinformation from the inside would provide my students with more confidence in their own abilities to navigate it.

The Lie vs. Lie project was composed of three main parts: the pre-assignment activities and coverage, the Lie vs. Lie disinformation page, and the "Debunkathon." Students were asked to work in teams to create a convincing "fake news" webpage, then assigned an "opposite number" team whose fake news page they had to debunk using a mix of scholarly and reliable, substantive popular sources.

Pre-assignment Work

Before students could embark on their projects, however, they needed to be given the tools to dismantle fake news, as well as a solid groundwork for understanding source and information evaluation. Their first step in this process was to complete the Bad News Game (www.getbadnews.com). Produced as an educational activity, the Bad News Game introduces players to six disinformation tactics by placing them in the role of disinformation disseminator. Players must make choices about subject matter to cover and tactics to employ to earn the badge for each tactic, ultimately attempting to gain as many followers as possible. I assigned my students to play the game, making note of their significant choices and final scores, and we then discussed our experiences at the beginning of class the next day, reflecting on what seemed to work best.

In class itself, we discussed where my students got their information on current events (the results: friends, social media, or not at all), as well as how misinformation differs from disinformation, their beliefs about media bias and reliability, tactics of persuasion, and tools and techniques to help improve their information literacy. Students also engaged in the in-class “Current News: Bird’s Eye View” activity, in which they compared coverage of the same current news story across several publications, looking both for differences and for the commonalities that indicate the core of truth.

The Lie vs. Lie Webpage

To prepare for the Lie vs. Lie page itself, I dedicated one session of class to training students on the technology and reviewing their topics. As University of North Carolina Wilmington has access to Adobe Spark and was at the time encouraging professors to include it in their courses, I provided students with a walk through of the program, having them follow along with each step as I created a sample disinformation page. Students were also welcome to create their webpages through other programs, but all chose to use Adobe Spark for its ease and simplicity. Once I had completed the training, I met with each team individually to discuss their topic ideas and ensure that they were proceeding with a workable topic, as well as to give them tips on kinds of evidence they could bring into their page. The only rule for the topic was that it needed to be something that was possible to disprove with evidence and sources—so, no “proving a negative” claims. Students were not limited to health and science disinformation, but I did encourage them to consider the SciCheck section of the FactCheck website, as it is a good source of fake news ideas, as well as Snopes and other fact checking websites.

Ultimately, the process of walking students through the creation of a disinformation page is not unlike walking them through a traditional research process. Students were encouraged to identify their primary claim, as well as what evidence they would need to “prove” that claim, and what sources or authorities would be most likely to provide that evidence. Their finished products were required to present their claim in a convincing and compelling manner, make appropriate use of graphics and visual elements, and include at least three pages of content, not counting their title page. Towards the end of the semester, each team was required to present their disinformation page to the class, addressing as they did so why they chose their topic, presenting at least one example of real “fake news” that they used as inspiration, and explaining what tactics and techniques they used to convince the reader.

Debunkathon

Once students had created their disinformation webpages, it was time to set about debunking them. Each team had an identified “opposite number” team; they had several weeks to debunk the “opposite” team’s work using reliable sources. Teams were also required to meet with one of the subject liaison librarians, and to produce a bibliography of ten of the sources they had used in their debunking. During the next to last week of class, each team presented their debunking, explaining what evidence they had found to counter their opponents’ claims and how they’d found it, as well as demonstrating one library database that they found especially useful in their debunking process. They also had to prepare and present a PowerPoint of their evidence against the other team, linking the evidence to the sources from which it came.

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the Lie vs. Lie project was an enjoyable experience both for myself and my students. In contrast to previous semester long assignments I had tried, students seemed to enjoy the chance to be “bad” that the Lie vs. Lie assignment gave them, as well as to talk about controversial or taboo subjects in class. The assignment to debunk an opposing team’s work also provided them with a more concrete, intrinsic motivation than writing a paper about an abstract topic, without an immediate obvious purpose beyond their grade.

Future Directions

The assignment did also provide some challenges, which I intend to address in future iterations. One point worth noting is that, though I had intended to engage in more formal assessment this year, the course was sadly canceled, so I have not yet had an opportunity. It was also sometimes a challenge to keep students focused on discussing their disinformation techniques and tactics, rather than discussing (and pre-debunking) the fake claim itself. Finally, though I had a robust grading rubric, I had not created any objective measures of whether or not each team had successfully “debunked” their opposite number’s claim. In the future, I intend to create a debunking worksheet for teams to complete, in which they will be required to explicitly identify each claim being made, and each piece of evidence they have found to counter that claim.

Best Practices

As with all instruction endeavors, it’s best to begin this project by assessing the context. What is your current assignment load, and will you need to use this assignment to replace another? How many students are in your class, and how might this impact

your classroom environment during discussions or the amount of class time needed for presentations? It's also important to determine where this assignment fits in your course calendar—there may be class sessions or material you would want them to encounter before the assignment, or you may wish to use the assignment as a building block to scaffold later material on. When developing the assignment schedule within your calendar, it is also vital to build in checkpoints; at a minimum students will need the initial topic check-in, but as this project is a very creative, freeform undertaking, it can be easy for students to get off track.

Detailed rubrics and assignment descriptions are also valuable in any assignment, but they are particularly vital here. Because the project is composed of so many different parts and each part is so complex, it may be valuable to create both an overview assignment description and individual descriptions for each component, as well as detailed rubrics for each component, so students know precisely what they are trying to achieve. Instructors may also find it helpful to create strong sample disinformation pages for their students, to further guide them towards the desired end product.

Finally, I recommend that instructors hold at least one synchronous tech training for their students. Whether your class is using Adobe Spark, WordPress, Wix, or simply creating a webpage-like PowerPoint, ensuring that all teams are on equal footing will prevent last-minute tech catastrophes.

CONCLUSION

The “build it to take it apart” theory underlying the Lie vs. Lie project is one that may be repurposed to teach students many other learning objectives, both within and outside of information literacy. By having students take on the role of fake news creator, instructors can provide their classes with an engaging way to develop their information literacy skills and a more confident, nuanced understanding of disinformation and misinformation.

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