Fake News in a Post-Truth Society: The Death of Critical Thinking?

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O’Rourke & Gibson
What is critical thinking?

• Working definition:

Critical thinking is thinking that involves the principled application of standards and criteria in the evaluation of practical and theoretical options for the purpose of reaching conclusions about those options.

(http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/crit_think/Chapter-Two-1.htm)

• Arguments constitute the evaluative application of standards and criteria
How is truth important here?

- Truth – understood as *correspondence to the facts* – is important in several ways:
  - The *principled* application of standards requires one to be sensitive to the facts
  - You need to get the options right in order to evaluate them in a principled way
  - Conclusions are going to be more defensible if they are true or are based in truth
Dissenting opinions

- Thrasymachus: “I say that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger” (Plat. Rep. 1.338c)
Dissenting opinions

- **Protagoras**: “it is equally possible to affirm and to deny anything of anything” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1007b20–22)
Dissenting opinions

- Scottie Nell Hughes: “There’s no such thing, unfortunately, anymore, of facts” (Diane Rehm Show)
Are we a “post-truth” society?

• What is post-truth?
  • Oxford Dictionaries 2016 Word of the Year

(http://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/12/02/502542397/is-being-post-truth-a-new-concept)
Are we a “post-truth” society?

• What is post-truth?
  • Oxford Dictionaries 2016 Word of the Year
  • Definition:

  “an adjective defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.’”

Are we a “post-truth” society?

• It would be good to go slow here…
• First, truth matters to most of us
• Second, truth has always been contested
  • On many matters, there are deep differences of opinion
  • In these matters, we often suspect bias, which is a subjective departure from the truth
Are we a “post-truth” society?

• Third, politicians have always had a casual relationship with the truth
• But at least it has been important to cultivate the appearance of honesty
• Until now?
Are we a “post-truth” society?

- Proposal: Two ways that we might be *post-truth*
  1. We allow candidates to assert contradictions and blatantly lie *without that being a deal-breaker*
  2. While committed on the surface to “truth”, we are not committed to the means of achieving it (e.g., science denialism)
How does fake news figure in?

• What is fake news?
  • It’s not new
How does fake news figure in?
How does fake news figure in?

• What is fake news?
  • You are familiar with various sorts of it
How does fake news figure in?

**INcredible Lettuce Seed Diet**
You don’t eat ‘em — you stick ‘em on your ears!

Bizarre disease turned this loving mom into a monster, police say

**World’s religious and medical leaders are outraged!**

**Chimp’s Head Put on Human Body**
Half man, half ape doing fine after shocking transplant!

**Human Water Balloon Gulps So Much H2O She’s Ready to Pop!**

CLIPPED! Cruel phone hoax makes woman cut off her hair

Twins are born a year apart!

World leaders warned space aliens plotting to invade the Earth!
How does fake news figure in?

Study Reveals: Babies Are Stupid

LOS ANGELES—A surprising new study released Monday by UCLA’s Institute For Child Development revealed that human babies, long thought by psychologists to be highly inquisitive and adaptable, are actually extraordinarily stupid.

The study, an 18-month battery of intelligence tests administered to over 3,500 babies, concluded categorically that babies are "so stupid, it's not even funny."

Sample Results:

Baby #2,678:

"It is unlikely that the presence of the babies' fecal matter, however foul-smelling, would have a measurable defensive effect against an attacker in a real-world situation," Bentley said.
How does fake news figure in?

• What is fake news?
  • Varieties of non-news “news”:
    • Satire or comedy
    • Rumor or gossip
    • Sponsored content
    • Non-mainstream interpretation of facts
    • Poorly reported or just incompetent news


• These aren’t necessarily fake news, though
How does fake news figure in?

• What is fake news?
  • A characterization:

  A story is *fake news* if it is (a) a story known to be false intentionally presented as if it were true, or (b) information that is known to be unreliable presented as if it were reliable, or (c) intentionally misleading information presented without any attempt to correct the reader.
Why is fake news important now?
Why is fake news important now?

• Social media increases the volume and rate of exposure to fake news
• Fake news is presented in ways that can be seductive and insidious
• We aren’t very good at identifying it
• It has been widely speculated that fake news had an impact on the recent election
How to spot fake news

1. Read more than just the headline and the first few lines – is it a joke?
2. What is the source of the article? Look that source up, esp. the “About Us” page

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/fake-news-guide-facebook_us_5831c6aae4b058ce7aaba169
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1. Read more than just the headline and the first few lines – is it a joke?
2. What is the source of the article? Look that source up, esp. the “About Us” page
3. Check the date and time of the publication – is it old news passed off as new?
4. Who is the author? Look the author up to see what you can find out about them

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How to spot fake news

5. Are there links and sources? If so, what can you learn about them? Are they legit?

6. Look at the photos and the quotes – search for them elsewhere

7. Don’t give in to confirmation bias! This is in part why echo chambers are so comfortable

8. Are other news outlets reporting it?

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/fake-news-guide-facebook_us_5831c6aae4b058ce7aaba169
How to spot fake news

9. Check with the “fake news” experts – e.g., snopes.org, FactCheck.org, PolitiFact.com

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/fake-news-guide-facebook_us_5831c6aae4b058ce7aaba169
Group exercise

Split up into groups of 5 and:

1. Find one fake news article
2. List the URL for it
3. Summarize it
4. List what you take to be the indicators of it as fake news
Final discussion

Is critical thinking important or just a naïve intellectual fetish?