Navigating an Immersive Narratology: Factors to Explain the Reception of Fake News

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ABSTRACT
In direct response to the rise in fake news as a socio-cultural and political phenomenon, this article presents an analysis of the factors that may help to explain the reception of fake news. In addition, recent pronouncements made by the Trump White House seem to challenge the nature of an objective truth. An immersive narratology emphasizes that different universes of discourse can intermingle and overlap, with fact and fiction becoming difficult to distinguish in our increasingly mediated lives. A tenable definition of fake news is offered prior to exploring historical antecedents of fake news. Persuasion, construction, immersion, distribution, and polarization represent the core factors that demystify the reception of fake news regardless as to whether an individual believes a story. A concluding discussion offers a critical evaluation of the potential of fake news to augment the news media landscape in the coming years.

KEYWORDS
Alternative Facts, Donald Trump, Fake News, Narratology, Objective Truth, Social Media

INTRODUCTION
The year 2016 was marked by several events of historic proportion. The nomination and the election of Donald Trump, the defeat of Hillary Clinton, the surge in millennial popular support of Bernie Sanders’ socio-economic and political message, and the divisive rhetoric of the campaign are all symptoms in the apparent pendulum effect that has come to define Donald Trump’s electoral victory on November 8th, 2016. In the aftermath of the election, news pundits as well as everyday people sought ways to understand the factors that led to the historic and shocking Trump win. Despite his exaggerated claims that his electoral success was a “landslide”, his modest win remains historic due to his unconventional campaign during which he called for a ban on Muslims, publicly mocked a journalist with “arthrogryposis, a congenital condition affecting the joints” (Carmen, 2016), and publicly encouraged “Russia to hack his opponent because he believed that that would help his campaign” (Kosinski & Liptak, 2016). Obviously, there are numerous other actions Trump has taken which should be scrutinized, but one major revelation that 2016 has produced is awareness of so-called “fake news”.

On the surface, to consume fake news means ostensibly to lack the ability to discern journalistic news stories based on actual facts from news stories that are devoid of linkages to actual, factual, evidence- and/or testimony-based information. However, looking deeper “fake news” as a concept means to challenge the nature of news and its function. As linguist George Lakoff recently noted, “[c]alling real news fake is an attempt to hide the truth and undermine the function of the truth in a democracy” (Kurtzleben, 2017). As this article reveals, fake news matters not just because it grabs
attention or makes headlines, thus prompting further discussion about news not based on facts. Rather, fake news and also accusations that professional news agencies are sources of fake news are important factors to consider especially given the latter’s potential to further the political divide in the United States. In terms of conceptual orientation, fake news refers to news stories which are not based on objective or verifiable fact, evidence, testimony, etc., whereas claims that real news stories or professional news companies such as The New York Times or CNN embody fake news represents an existential challenge to their function in society. Disagreement with a fact-based news report based on personal opinion now appears to be justification for applying the moniker fake news whenever it seems appropriate. Prior to exploring the history of fake news, it is important to consider research studies on the human ability to tell the difference between real and fake news.

DIFFICULTIES IN DISCERNING REAL FROM FAKE

Recently, several studies have provided strong evidence that college students as well as adults in the general population fail at discerning real from fake news. According to a study conducted by Ipsos (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016), a majority of survey respondents who indicated their recall of a specific news story (which was actually fake, such as when Pope Francis endorsed Donald Trump or that an FBI agent linked to Hillary Clinton’s email leak was found dead), indicated further that the same news stories were somewhat or very true. Another recent study conducted at Stanford (2016) demonstrated that students from middle school to college are unable to judge the credibility of news stories shown to them. The lead author of the study, Sam Wineburg summarizes the conclusions by stating in an interview that it falls to educators “to teach them [students] how to thoughtfully engage in information seeking and evaluating in a cacophonous democracy” (McEvers, 2016). However, if we view the individual as merely a conduit for sharing or commenting on fake news online, as suggested above, we may assign responsibility to the social network to undertake measures to thwart the spread of fake news. Indeed, Facebook recently announced plans for an increased filtering system aimed at identifying and removing so-called fake news. According to a recent four-step plan Facebook has presented (Mosserri, 2016), users will be able to mark a given post as suspicious which will then be sent to “a group of outside fact-checkers” for a determination to be made as to whether or not the news story qualifies as fake (Farber, 2016).

It is critically important to acknowledge from as objective a standpoint as possible how peculiar it appears that neither the individuals who produce and disseminate fake news nor their intended audiences must assume accountability for determining whether something counts as real or fake. Curiously, we must now rely on Facebook and ostensibly other similar social media to protect us from the dangers of fake news. Prior to expounding on the central argument of this article, it is helpful first to examine historical antecedents of fake news.

Fake News, Historically Situated

Far from being a new phenomenon, the concept of fake news is less recent than the concept of real or objective news. Historically, the Gutenberg printing press allowed for news – both real and fake – to be printed and distributed massively for the first time. While Gutenberg’s intentions were to strengthen the voice of the Catholic Church, it enabled others, such as Martin Luther to express complete opposition to nearly everything the Church represented in his 95 theses in 1517. As noted by Falkvinge (2016), on a superficial level Luther was protesting the Church’s practice of indulgences as a means to offer salvation for a price. On a deeper level and salient for current times, Luther’s objection was against Church as the sole gatekeeper of truth. The Gutenberg press afforded individuals the ability to
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