



The need for an educated public: Understanding fake news

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WASHINGTON, November 18, 2017 – Fake news is proliferating. Facebook has acknowledged that after last year’s presidential election, between January 2015 and August 2017, 146 million Americans may have seen Russian misinformation on its platform. Google’s YouTube reports 1,108 Russian-linked videos and Twitter reports 36,746 accounts. The Economist says:

“Far from bringing enlightenment. Social media have [sic] been spreading poison. Russia’s trouble-making is only the start. From South Africa to Spain, politics is getting uglier. Part of the reason is that, by spreading untruth and outrage, corroding voters’ judgment and aggravating partisanship, social media erode the conditions...that foster liberty...Nor are social media alone in their power to polarize—just look at cable t.v. and talk radio.”

Social Media influence Fake News

Russia has been particularly active in spreading false news to advance its political interests. It has used social media as part of its efforts in Ukraine, Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the U.S. Recently, Russia initiated a campaign to promote Catalan independence from Spain. New investigations released early in November in London suggest that the Russians meddled in Britain’s referendum last year to leave the European Union.

On November 1, representatives of Facebook, Google and Twitter answered hostile questions on Capitol Hill about their role in spreading false news during the 2016 presidential election. The hearings came about because of reports that during the presidential campaign, Russian-controlled entities bought ads and posted content about divisive political issues in an attempt to sow discord.

We now know that the Russians uploaded more than a thousand videos to YouTube and published more than 130,000 messages on Twitter about the election.

American gullibility and Fake News

The reason the Russians, and other purveyors of false news, often succeed has more to do with us than it does with them. New York Times columnist Timothy Egan notes:

“We’re getting played because too many Americans are ill-equipped to perform the basic functions of citizenship. If the point of the Russian campaign...was to get people to think there is no such thing as knowable truth, the bad guys have won.”

Because we have stopped teaching history and civics in many of our public schools, we have an ill-informed public which is easily led astray by false news. Nearly one in three Americans cannot name a single branch of government. When National Public Radio tweet out sections of the Declaration of Independence last year, many people were outraged. They mistook Thomas Jefferson’s words for political propaganda.

Timothy Egan suggests:

“Suppose we treated citizenship like getting a driver’s license. People would have to pass a simple test on American values, history, and geography before they were allowed to have a say in the system. We do that for immigrants, and 97 percent of them pass, according to one study. Yet one in three Americans fail the immigrant citizenship test..The test includes questions like, ‘What ocean is on the West Coast on the United States?’ ...One reason that public schools were established across the land was to produce an informed citizenry. And up until the 1960s, it was common for students to take three separate courses in civics and government before they got out of high school. Now only a handful of states require proficiency in civics as a condition of graduation.”

Testing Americans ability to recognize Fake News

In a National Assessment of Educational Progress test most fourth graders were unable to say why Abraham Lincoln was an important figure, and few high school seniors were able to identify China as the North Korean ally that fought American troops during the Korean War. Overall, 20 percent of fourth graders, 17 percent of eighth graders and 12 percent of high school seniors demonstrated proficiency on the exam.

Diane Ravitch, an education historian who was invited by the national assessment’s governing board to review the results, said she was particularly disturbed by the fact that only 2 percent of 12th graders correctly answered a question concerning Brown v. Board of Education, (Topeka, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), the landmark United States Supreme Court case in which the Court says state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students is unconstitutional, and which Ravitch called “very likely the most important decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in the past seven decades.”

Students, given an excerpt from Brown v. Board, were unable to articulate the importance of the 1954 Act. Given the following statement, students were asked what social problem the 1954 ruling fixes:

“We conclude that in the field of public education, *separate but equal has no place, separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.*” and were asked .

“The answer was right in front of them,” says Ravitch. “This is alarming.”

The evidence of our failure to teach our history is abundant. Fewer than half of eighth graders knew the purpose of the Bill of Rights on a recent national civics examination, and only one in ten demonstrated an acceptable knowledge of the checks and balances among the legislative, executive and judicial branches.

“These results confirm that we have a crisis on our hands,” said Sandra Day O’Connor, the former Supreme Court justice.

Charles N. Quigley, executive director of the Center for Civic Education, says that “The results confirm an alarming and continuing trend that civics in America is in decline. During the past decade or so, educational policy and practice appear to have focused more and more upon developing the worker at the expense of developing the citizen.”

Historically illiterate pawns of Fake News propaganda

Historian David McCullough says that, “We’re raising young people who are, by and large, historically illiterate. I know how much of these young people—even at the most esteemed institutions of higher learning, don’t know. It’s shocking.”

McCullough, who has lectured on more than 100 college campuses, tells of a young woman who came up to him after a lecture at a renowned university in the Midwest.

“Until I heard your talk this morning, I never realized the original thirteen colonies were all on the East Coast,” she said.

No Child Left Behind helps Fake News proliferation

One reason for students’ poor showing on recent tests underlines the neglect shown to the study of history by federal and state policymakers, both Republicans and Democrats, especially since 2002’s No Child Left Behind Act began requiring schools to raise scores in math and reading, but in no other subject.

Consider that the federal accountability standard has given schools and teachers an incentive to spend most of their time teaching to the math and reading tests, ignoring history.

According to a report issued by the Cato Institute, voters do not know enough about the issues and the candidates to cast an informed ballot.

“An informed electorate is a prerequisite for democracy,” writes Ilya Somin, assistant professor of law at George Mason University. “If voters do not know what is going on in politics, they cannot rationally exercise control over government policy.”

Uninformed College Students and Fake News

Most noteworthy is that more than two-thirds of college students and administrators taking part in a recent national survey were unable to identify freedom of religion and the press as being on of the Bill of Rights guarantees. Additionally, in surveys conducted by 339 colleges and universities, more than one-fourth of students and administrators did not list freedom of speech as an essential right protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution.

More than three-fourths did not name freedom of assembly and association or the right “*to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*”

Allan Charles Kors, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which commissioned the survey, states that, “If one thinks of the First Amendment as a foundational American Liberty, the ignorance and misunderstanding of it by administrators at our nation’s colleges and universities is frightening, and the general ignorance and misunderstanding of it by students is quite depressing.”

Critics charge that most textbooks, produced by a handful of commercial publishers, are. In the name of political correctness, failing to give students an honest account of American history and are exposing generations of children to cultural and historic amnesia. Paul Gagnon, emeritus professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, states:

“Secondary and college students, and indeed most of the rest of us, have only a feeble grasp of politics and a vague awareness of history. especially the political history of the United States and the world.”

Ignorance of history, not Russia, leads to Fake News

In his Jefferson Lecture for the National Endowment for the Humanities several years ago, historian David McCullough declared:

“Students today have no sense of geography, they don’t understand about struggle ... so many of the blessings and advantages we have, so many of the reasons why our civilization, our culture, has flourished aren’t understood; they’re not appreciated. And if you don’t have any appreciation of what people went through to get, to achieve, to build what you are benefiting from, then these things don’t mean very much to you. You just think, well, that’s the way it is. That’s our birthright. That just happened. But it didn’t just happen. And at what price? What grief? What disappointment? What suffering went on? I think that to be ignorant or indifferent to history isn’t just to be undereducated. It’s to be rude, ungrateful.”

Historian Paul Johnson points out:

“The study of history is a powerful antidote to contemporary arrogance. It is humbling to discover how many of our glib assumptions which seem to us novel and plausible, have been tested before, not once but many times and in innumerable guises; and discovered to be, at great human cost, wholly false.”

A society educationally disarmed, unable to tell what is truth, or fiction

Now that we are under assault by fake news, we have in effect left our society unable to resist, no longer able recognize the difference between truth and fiction.

We forget that free societies are rare in history. Their history and values are important to the next generation, otherwise their survival is questionable.

As Cicero (106-43 B.C.) understood:

“To remain ignorant of things that happened before you were born is to remain a child. What is a human life worth unless it is incorporated into the lives of one’s ancestors and set in a historical context?”