



Book Review

Review of *Teaching About Fake News: Lesson Plans for Different Disciplines and Audiences*

Savanna Nolan, University of Georgia

ABSTRACT

Review of Benjes-Small, C., Wittig, C., & Oberlies, M.K. (Eds.) (2021). *Teaching about fake news: Lesson plans for different disciplines and audiences*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries. 321 pp.

KEYWORDS

Fake news, information literacy, instruction, student activities, lessons, engagement, active learning

SUGGESTED CITATION

Nolan, S. (2022). Review of *Teaching about fake news: Lesson plans for different disciplines and audiences*. *Journal of New Librarianship*, 7(2), 7–9.

<https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/12/3>

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



“Fake news” has become a broad and imprecise buzzword that covers multitudes of important and specific information literacy subtopics. While it will be impossible to convey all the required nuance to understand “fake news” in a single class—or possibly even a single semester— this book of lesson plans helps librarians pick one specific facet and audience type and begin chipping away towards understanding.

The book is made up of 23 chapters, with each chapter including an abstract, introduction, a brief article for the instructor, a learning activity for students, and endnotes. The learning activity sections are particularly rich, including recommended readings for the intended students, student learning outcomes, and notes on preparing, teaching, and running the activity.

The “article” portion of the chapters serve as a crash course in the specific subtopic for the instructor, and I found them to be well-researched and current. For example, the first chapter, titled “The Net Is Not Neutral: Teaching Hidden Biases in Everyday Internet Use” discusses how the modern internet has outgrown traditional evaluation approaches like CRAAP and instead highlighting Mike Caufield’s novel SIFT approach. This point is made in a single sentence, yet the thorough and thoughtful bibliography immediately point the reader to Caufield’s work, where the acronym SIFT stands for Stop, Investigate the Source, Find Better Coverage, and Trace claims, quotes and media back to the original context. Caufield argues that this networked approach is more appropriate than CRAAP for our internet era precisely because it focuses on recontextualizing news back to its original situation. We have been presented with a goldmine of information, and this topic isn’t even what the bulk of the chapter is about; the chapter spends a significant amount of time discussing the work of 2021 McArthur Fellow Dr. Safiya Umoja Noble and her work demonstrating racial bias in search algorithms. In short, these endnotes are thoughtful, and even the most cursory glance at them allow the article portion to serve as a gateway into further research for the librarian.

Our students, of course, are not going to become experts in algorithmic bias in one lecture. The related activity for this chapter instead focuses on merely exposing them to the notion of algorithmic bias, generally by repeating Dr. Noble’s initial research and searching for phrases like “beauty” and “professor” in Google images to see what the algorithm reflects—specifically regarding representation of minorities and women. I ran this exercise in class and it ran with an ease that surprised me. My students noticed that on that particular day and in our particular location, all of the “Muslim women” images showed women likely of Middle Eastern origin wearing head coverings. Of course, my students pointed out, many Muslim women do not wear head coverings and there are significant populations of Muslims outside of the Middle East, like those in Southeast Asia. When my undergraduate students were asked for their own search terms, they came up with thoughtful responses like “Christian man” and “athlete.” It led us to have a very interesting discussion about what is and is not considered the “standard,” and greatly reinforced Dr. Noble’s work.

The other chapter I have had the chance to execute in class is chapter 17, titled “How the Scientific Method Invalidates ‘Fake News.’” Per the book’s suggestion, I assigned my undergraduates a clip from John Oliver’s “Last Week Tonight” that discussed scientific “fake news”—individual studies that purport outrageous claims, like certain foods causing or curing cancer, which are then widely reported on as puff pieces for morning news shows. I paired this with another article from Vox that the book also recommended, and which was featured as a source in the John Oliver sketch.

After having the students respond to and discuss the readings for the day for about fifteen minutes, I was then ready to run the in-class activity, which the book claimed would take about 30 minutes. In small groups, the students reviewed a story from CBS news about a Japanese study claiming that painting zebra stripes on black cows would lower the rate at which they were bitten by bugs, which (the CBS story claimed) could have massive economic implications. The students spent about 15 minutes reading the CBS story and the original study and completing a worksheet that was also provided in the chapter. Yet again, this exercise provided opportunity for my students to surprise me. As I expected, most of them readily found that according to the original study, only three cows were used for the study—hardly a reliable sample size. However, one of my students had the personal background to notice that the researchers also used pregnant cows, which are apparently notoriously ornery. I enjoyed the fact that this exercise was structured enough for me to deploy easily, but flexible enough for natural and unique conversations to occur in the classroom. And of course, I was also pleased that the whole exercise did end up taking about 30 minutes, as predicted.

The one flaw the book has, in my opinion, is that the overall structure is hidden. If you read the “How to Approach This Book” section (viii), you will see that the authors have organized the book into seven fake news subtopics: algorithms/altmetrics, visual literacy, media literacy, memes, business, science communication, the financial/political impact of fake news, and partnerships. This one note in the introduction is the only time I saw these subtopics stated. From the introduction text, it seems that chapters 1-3 are the algorithms/altmetrics chapters, but I am not sure I would personally connect those concepts to the material in chapter 2 on the specific information literacy risks senior citizens can face. While grouping the chapters into larger, explicitly labeled parts would certainly help the average user searching for a quick idea, I have doubts about how closely the chapters fit some of the overarching ideas. This is, however, a minor complaint when compared to the quality of the research and the ease of having templates for in class activities.

Teaching About Fake News is an excellent resource for both the casual librarian looking for additional activity ideas and the scholar looking to expand their research into modern digital literacy. Any library with instructional outreach would benefit from adding it to their collection, and I look forward to future editions as the topic evolve.