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My Failed Fake News Experiment

Jennifer Hill

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I remember exactly where I was when Donald Trump won the election. It was my freshman year at the University of Mary Washington, and some people on the floor of my residence hall had gathered in Marshall's dingy common room to watch the numbers roll in. I attempted to find solace in this group, but it didn't work. I specifically remember one guy saying, "I mean how bad could it be with Donald Trump as President?" I've seen him a couple of times since the election, but I've always wondered if he would stand by that now. After this comment, I retreated to my room, a single with minimum furniture and minimum decorations. I turned on my tiny TV with its hazy and blurry screen. As the night went on, I grew grateful for the haziness of my TV as it distanced me from what was happening. It was early in the morning, maybe 2 or 3 AM, when it became clear. They won. I'm not directly referring to Donald Trump in this case, but *them.* The people who spread fake news and planted seeds of doubt into American minds. *They* had won, and truth was dead.

My inspiration

After the election, I became obsessed. How could Americans, who pride themselves on their free press and truth in journalism, succumb to these influences? I grew desperate for answers. That's when I stumbled upon Craig Silverman.[1] Craig Silverman has been studying fake news since the 1990s. Silverman, the former head of BuzzFeed's Canadian division, was asked by the company to once again take up his research into fake news. Before the 2016 election, Silverman tried to raise the alarm to Americans about the pervasiveness of fake news. Unfortunately, it was too late. Many were already devoted to this fake news, wholeheartedly believing in the alternative reality presented to them. After the election, I continued to follow Silverman's writing because I appreciated his devotion to identifying fake news and finding the truth.

Shortly after the election, Pizzagate happened.[2] Pizzagate was a conspiracy theory that high-ranking government officials, including Hillary Clinton and her staff, were running an underground human trafficking and child sex ring. It was believed that the Comet Ping Pong restaurant and pizzeria in Washington D.C. was involved in these illicit activities. These rumours were spread on various social media platforms and prompted a man from North Carolina, armed with a rifle, to travel to the Washington D.C. restaurant to investigate the claims. By this point, we had already seen what fake news could do for elections. However, we had not seen what fake news could do to prompt violence. This incident also hit close to home. As a native

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[1] https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman
[2] https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/zoetillman/comet-ping-pong-pizzagate-shooter-pleads-guilty-to-weapons

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Northern-Virginian, D.C. holds a weird, sacred spot in my heart. To see someone attempt to inflict violence on people who are almost my neighbors was terrifying. Around this time, another fake news researcher, Mike Caulfield, came to speak at UMW.[3] I attended, grateful that fake news was being discussed not only by journalists, but by students, scientists, and historians. During the Q&A, I asked Mike if he thought more incidents like Pizzagate would happen. He agreed. Fake news could prompt people to want to hurt others.

This was a scary thought and it sat with me for quite some time. Fake news, in an ironic sense, was becoming real. It poses a real threat to many of our systems and institutions that rely on facts and truth, a threat to our wellness and safety. This threat prompted me to grapple with fake news in my own way.

My intention and plans

In my sophomore year, my fake news project began to take form. How could I prompt students, faculty, and staff to think about fake news and the media they consume? Well, what better way than to impersonate the thing you are trying to fix? I decided that I would write fake news about my University. This was tricky. At multiple times during my university career, I have been at odds with this institution. Especially during my sophomore year, you could say we were not on the best of terms. This brought up the first thing I would have to be wary of during my project; not punching down or insulting the university. I was not afraid of the repercussions, but I believed that to make the most effective project that anyone would listen to it my intentions would have to be clear and unmistakable.

For about three years, I had a Google Doc that I would add fake news stories ideas to. Then, in a flash, it was my senior year and it was time to put my Google Doc ideas into action. I planned to create a fake news website that would claim to report real news. I wanted to call it *Underground Mary Washington*. This, of course, is a play on the University's initials and a food place that was open during my first three years called The Underground. I wanted this website name to be a clear reflection of the University that would make those at UMW trust this website.

I also wanted the website to seem credible down to the TLD (top-level domain) that I chose. I work at my university's Digital Knowledge Center as a tutor and manager. As a tutor, we have a presentation we give to students about choosing their domains and how to curate a digital identity. In this presentation, we demonstrate that students can choose any TLD that they want. This includes the typical .com, but also extends to .net and .org. Every time I do this presentation, students are shocked. Is anyone vetting these TLDs? Not really. We were raised

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[3] https://youtu.be/Gbjdz97Gc-M

with the belief that you should trust .orgs and after this presentation, I see students second-guessing all those sites they have used for research. Was that .org trustworthy? Maybe; maybe not.

This was another piece to my puzzle. After my fake news project, I wanted students to think about the sites they visit and to think about why they trust them. Another piece to my fake news puzzle was a second website I was going to call "Elucidation." This website was going to be the opposite of the *Underground Mary Washington* website. It was going to reveal the truth and fight with the *Underground Mary Washington* site. More on this later.

For years, I was gathering these pieces in my head: ideas, scattered and unconnected. It was in my Junior year when I had the great fortune of taking a course taught by my advisor, Zach Whalen. In this Electronic Literature class, we studied a variety of electronic literature works and mediums. It was here where I was first introduced to the idea of netprov. Netprov or "networked improv" narrative is a form of electronic literature that is networked, collaborative, and improvised in real-time. A signifier of netprov is that it uses social media and websites to facilitate a story. This medium, which was established by Rob Wittig and Mark C. Marino, fascinated me. I became even more entranced by Rob Wittig and Mark C. Marino's works, especially their netprov, Occupy MLA.[4] Occupy MLA was a 15-month long netprov that satirized the adjunctification of higher education. This netprov was told through the perspective of three fictional adjuncts who were rebelling against their institution and the ways they navigated the fallout from their insurgency. The goal of promoting a conversation about tenure in the Modern Language Association was achieved, albeit controversially, with much pushback from the MLA community at large.

Their netprov surrounding the MLA organization was the perfect inspiration for my fake news project. It was bold and cheeky. But through its almost guerilla-type use of social media, it prompted people to rethink the system of higher education. I sat there, poring over anything I could find about Wittig and Marino's netprovs. In their works I found exactly what I must do with my fake news project; create a network of social media accounts and websites to impersonate a fake news organization. Only through creating this network and sharing it with others could they critique and analyze their position in this network. I wanted to offer everyone a moment to think about how they get their media and why it's important to stand back and see the system spread information and fake news.

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[4] http://markcmarino.com/wordpress/?page_id=117

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Meet Daryl and Gabe

Another crucial part of netprov is its use of characters. In Wittig and Marino's MLA netprov, they were not writing as themselves, but through characters. This meta-writing is something I wanted to facilitate in my fake news netprov. I specifically wanted to comment on the types of people who report fake news. I also wanted to comment on the media producers I have worked for. I occasionally freelance and work with people who have good intentions about the media I produce but lack an understanding of how to "interweb." In other words, they consume media but do not understand that producing and spreading media is a completely different story. Thus, I wanted to create two characters who were the actual creators of this fake news.

The first character was Daryl Scott. I must admit, Daryl is quite stereotypical. That said, most of us have a Daryl in our lives. He is around 40-45 years old, white, and cis-gendered. Moreover, Daryl is intelligent and well-educated. However, Daryl is a troglodyte and not proficient in Internet lingo. He is angry at the world and what he views as encroachments on his rights. He is lonely. Alone and stubborn, Daryl forges his own path, no matter how that dark path may stray.

Daryl's compatriot in his fake news is Gabe Powell. In many ways Gabe and Daryl are similar, but in many ways, they diverge. In my story planning, I nicknamed Gabe "The Kid," as he is in his late 20s. He is innocent, submissive, a worrier, and a follower. Unlike Daryl, he is proficient in the Internet. He understands the current media environment and can fluently speak Internet lingo. The most important thing that Gabe shares with Daryl is his loneliness. He feels isolated and that no one can understand him. Well, until he meets Daryl. I never planned to fully divulge how Daryl and Gabe met, but I always pictured that it was on a fake news forum. I envision this forum as a place where people both produce and consume fake news. I must admit, that this was inspired by the intriguing Quadriga story as the men in that article met similarly.[5] Quadriga or Quadriga Fintech Solutions was, at one point, Canada's largest cryptocurrency exchange. However, after the mysterious death of its founder, Gerald Cotten, his deceitful past and relationship with Quadriga co-founder, Michael Patryn, was revealed. It was discovered that the duo met on TalkGold, a website known for facilitating Ponzi schemes. After discovering this sordid past, many alleged that Quadriga was a Ponzi scheme and not a verifiable cryptocurrency exchange. Besides that, Daryl and Gabe, despite their differences, found companionship in each other and their work in fake news.

It is important to note that Gabe is also in the fake news game for the money, as there is a lot of money to be made in the fake news gambit. Coupled with companionship, the money motivates

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[5] https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2019/11/the-strange-tale-of-quadriga-gerald-cotten

Gabe to stay with Daryl for quite some time. However, this relationship turns sour as Gabe and Daryl's differing beliefs fuel a growing divide in their friendship and work.

What's the story?

Once I made these characters, I had to give them a story, a purpose. When I was faced with this, I turned to Dan Harmon's Story Circles, which I had worked with in my Digital Media Studio class with Cartland Berge.[6] While usually made for humour, these story circles are based on the Hero's Journey, which is exactly what I wanted for Gabe. This story circle is composed of eight sections:

1. Comfort Zone
2. Need/Desire
3. Unfamiliar Situation
4. Adaptation
5. Get what they wanted
6. But they pay a price
7. Return to comfort zone or familiar situation
8. Having changed

These sections served as the basis for my plot, which I shall summarize below:

In the beginning, Daryl, in his comfort zone and is best described as an a** and a producer of fake news. He desires to fool people and to be heard or seen. He does not care how risky the story is; he wants to publish it. However, his usually smooth fake news company encounters a serious road bump. His only employee, Gabe, is slowly eaten away by what they are doing and leaves him and the company. This is an unfamiliar situation for Daryl, who is usually in unfailing control. Without Gabe, Daryl struggles to remain relevant and popular. Stubborn, as always, he attempts to continue producing fake news, even without his "magic man." He still manages to achieve what he wants: pure, unfettered chaos and a world in which untruths exist with the truth. Despite his success, he pays an intense price. He is once again lonely and no longer with his person who believes to be in the same "reality" as him. Simultaneously, this lonely state is comfortable for Daryl. Eventually, he grows defeated by Gabe's attacks and stops publishing fake news. He is changed as he, for the first time, experiences true loneliness after losing the only person he had in his life. He also for the first time in his life is scolded and scorned by the man he once thought of as a son. He is hurt and runs away to the radio silent section of West Virginia to find solace and get away from it all.

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[6] https://i.pinimg.com/736x/3b/48/2d/3b482d3884aae59ea0b6d24790b621d0.jpg

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Meanwhile, Gabe Powell experiences his own journey. In the beginning, Gabe allows money and companionship to overcome his better judgement. He is blinded by what he wants and silences his internal need for the truth. To start, he is a committed publisher of fake news and allows this to become a part of his identity, so he can bond with Daryl. However, deep inside of him, something is not right with this situation. Lying may be the most fun for most, but it is not for Gabe. What he is doing and condoning begins to uncomfortably sit with him, and he becomes overwhelmed by the need to do good. He breaks away and finds himself in uncharted territory: freedom from any overbearing powers. Gabe creates his own news website, *Elucidation*, which is rooted in the truth. Through this website, Gabe begins to fight back against Daryl and the fake news he is peddling. Every time Daryl publishes a fake news story, Gabe publishes a story that walks through the mistruths Daryl has created. Coming to terms with his newfound power, Gabe confidently mocks *Underground Mary Washington* and Daryl's attempts to lure him back. Gabe gets what he wants: truth and honesty in journalism. Yet, all is not well for long. Daryl stops producing *Underground Mary Washington*, and despite this being a victory, it is not. Gabe no longer has any UMW fake news to bust. Without a purpose, Gabe once again grows lonely. However, he settles with this loneliness as he knows that he does not need to give up his need for truth, for companionship. Gabe is now changed and empowered by the dizzying and confusing situation he was once in. He is motivated and decides that he will attend journalism school so that he can properly learn journalism and write well-formed critiques.

Using my completed story circles, I was able to create a plot structure. Like any typical plot structure, this graph contained exposition, rising action, conflict, climax, falling action, and a resolution. I then plotted my character development to this chart. After charting these points, I created a week-by-week plan of what was going to happen in my netprov. This focused more on the fake news stories I was going to write, which included:

- Jason Sudeikis, Famous UMW Alumnus, To Consider Donation To University[7]
- 5 Photos of Eagle Landing Before it Was a Res Hall[8]
- Mysterious Broadcast Causes Widespread Panic at Newly Reopened Willard Hall
- UMW to Construct One Desired Path, Vote for Your Choice
- UMW Dining to Consider All Gluten, All Nut Dining Option

The first two of these articles came to fruition. The process for writing these was interesting as I have never even written for a high school newspaper. Thus, I decided that the best course of action for me would be to follow the journalistic inverted pyramid. After refining the content of these articles, I published them onto the *Underground Mary Washington* website. Another piece

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[7] http://undergroundmarywashington.org/jason-sudeikis-famous-umw-alumnus-to-consider-donation-to-university/
[8] http://undergroundmarywashington.org/5-photographs-of-eagle-landing-before-it-was-a-residence-hall/

of netprov is a coordinated social media presence. Consequently, I also published these articles onto *Underground Mary Washington*'s Facebook and Twitter. I hoped that Facebook would catch that my page is associated with UMW and would recommend that people follow the page. This was incorrect and I did not get one like on my Facebook page. This was the first of many failures of my experiment.

The Failures

Because I wanted to keep my identity concealed, I kept this project quite mum. Only my parents and my roommate knew I was doing this project. In hindsight, I would have tried to gather a group of people who knew what I was doing and could have liked the page I had created. However, I did not want this project to get back to me. So, I kept posting on this Facebook page and the *Underground Mary Washington* Twitter profile and...nothing. It was disheartening for two reasons: no one was engaging with content and Facebook truly does not promote content like they used to. Facebook used to promote organic content (e.g. groups, pages, etc.) onto your feed, but now through this project, it has become abundantly clear to me that unless you pay to promote the content, it will go unnoticed. It was not for lack of trying. I tried to make memes and @ the right people, but it did not inspire the engagement I sought. This was a failure on my part to reach the audience I was trying so desperately to have communication and a conversation with.

Then coronavirus happened and the landscape shifted significantly. As soon as coronavirus hit the world's attention en masse, fake news came pouring out: flowing abundantly and willing itself to stick on anything and anyone. One of the first coronavirus fake news stories I saw was about Russia. The fake news producers attempted to convince people that the Russian government released Siberian tigers every night to scare people who broke quarantine. Marked as fake news on the Facebook platform, I assume that the fake news producers of this article went underground to avoid detection. However, as a fake news producer myself, I had to chuckle. I understood what these producers were doing; feeding into perceptions of something people have a limited understanding of (i.e. Russia) and the paranoia surrounding a situation (i.e. coronavirus). These were the exact techniques I attempted to use, especially feeding into people's perceptions of situations and rumours. Rumours are an amazing basis for fake news. In fact, rumour is what directly inspired my story on Eagle Landing.

However, fake news entering the public's conscience again due to coronavirus was also a killer for the project. It slowly became evident to me that we as a world are in a fragile state right now. Unsure of what the next few months are going to hold, we are willing to believe anything that entertains us and even attempts to answer questions we have. This is, in essence, what fake news

does. I felt guilty creating "believable" fake news for a weak audience to consume and believe. It felt unethical and a true abandonment of the goal of my netprov.

This realization was disappointing; all of it truly was, for this is my work and my ~~glory~~ failure. You are probably wondering, "why report on your failures?" As a Communication and Digital Studies major, I have become increasingly familiar with the filing drawer problem. This dilemma relates to publication bias and how researchers will not publish their failures or null hypothesis for fear of embarrassment and push-back. Not publishing failures is problematic and expensive, especially in the scientific realm, as other researchers will follow the same line of thinking and unknowingly and unnecessarily use research money to discover the same conclusion that a researcher has come to before.

Another consequence of the filing drawer problem is that not publishing failures means that others are not aware of the work you have been doing. As I mentioned before, only a handful of people knew about this project. Through publishing my failures, I hope to inform people of what I attempted to do and what I accomplished. Coming to terms with my failures has been difficult; however, I want to make the best of this. Thus, I have decided to conclude this long-winded article by detailing ways that you as a media consumer can avoid succumbing to fake news. Written in my own words, I hope that you find tips that help you consider your place in your media environment and how you consume media.

Take it from a "Fake News" Producer - Tips on Avoiding Fake News

1. If it confirms your beliefs, it's probably fake. If you are reading an article and going "I knew it! I knew I was right," it's probably fake. For example, with my Eagle Landing story, I tried to feed into the common rumor that Eagle Landing was a hotel before it was a residence hall. As a fake news producer, I tried to make you confirm the misdirected beliefs you already had.

2. Check it against another source. Rarely is only one new source the only one that wrote about a story, especially if the content deals with an important subject like the government, celebrities, or situations. If something sounds too good to be true, read another news source's take on the story and see what information overlaps. If you can't find the story on another news site, then it may be fake news or the topic at hand may be quite esoteric.

3. Be cautious of old news being remarketed as "new" news. A popular trick of fake news producers is to take an event from the past and to write a narrative around it to make it appear like the event just happened. I was going to attempt something similar with my story about Willard Hall and a widespread panic caused by a live TikTok stream. This

was inspired by a real event at UMW in which women staying in Willard Hall were stirred into a panic because of Orson Welles' famous "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast.[9] If a piece of news sounds familiar, search for another new source's take on the story.

4. If it encourages you to interact with it, it may be fake. When fake news producers are attempting to overtake your rational thinking, they will try to have you like, comment, or share the content. They are trying to stop your critical thinking and are trying to encourage you to act impulsively, to share without thinking.

5. Lastly, fake news tries to appeal to your locality. More accurately, fake news may specify your town (e.g. Washington D.C.), but can also speak broadly using terms like "your area." This use of "your area" is nonspecific and could be referring to anywhere. This is their goal, to make you think that their news directly applies to your life and that you must share it. They are preying on our desire to be the news producers for our friends. By offering us news that is "fresh" and possibly applicable to us, they are encouraging us to abandon reason and to spread their fake news.

The above is, of course, not an exhaustive list of advice. This list simply represents common tactics that fake news producers use and, well, I tried to use in my netprov. Being cognizant of the ways fake news producers try to dupe you is invaluable and will help you become more aware of the media you consume.

While this experiment did not turn out the way I intended, I am grateful for this opportunity to grapple with fake news. By acting as a fake news producer myself and encountering the issues fake news producers run into (i.e. lack of engagement with content), I was able to develop a deeper understanding of what fake news is, how it is produced, and why it is created. This helps me conclude that fake news will always exist. It will always be there to feed on loneliness and our newest social media environments that allow us to purport ourselves as experts to our friends. Fake news is not a disease, but a side effect of our thirst for information and news. While fake news may seem inevitable and unavoidable, it can be understood. Together we can all critique fake news and discover what fuels it and why it exists.

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[9]

https://www.richmond.com/discover-richmond/from-the-archives-the-war-of-the-worlds-rattles-virginia/article_c1883209-5b31-5991-b6ab-24459c392729.html