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FAKE NEWS, LIES, AND A FOR-CREDIT CLASS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM TEACHING A 7-WEEK FAKE NEWS UNDERGRADUATE LIBRARY COURSE

JO ANGELA OEHRLI

INTRODUCTION

This paper will describe the course proposal process, course content development, and instructional materials for a for-credit, fake news course at University of Michigan Ann Arbor. A companion website (<https://sites.google.com/umich.edu/library-fake-news>) includes the syllabus, lesson plans, assignments, and final project instructions. This paper will highlight both successful content and along with challenges faced. Finally, a few class exercises appropriate for integration into one-shot library sessions will be suggested.

THE COURSE PROPOSAL

After the 2016 election, it became clear that evaluating online material was an important civic skill. The library's Learning Programs and Initiatives (LPI) Director met with a College of Literature, Science and the Arts (LSA) Associate Dean in January 2017 and casually mentioned that the university should offer a library class about fake news. The Associate Dean encouraged her to write a course proposal. The LPI Director asked the Psychology & Sociology Librarian (Hailey Mooney), the Communication & Information Studies Librarian (Shevon Desai), and a Learning Librarian (me) to develop the proposal with her. Most library classes are 7-week, mini-courses. In general, classes meet two hours per week and students earn one course credit.

Once a title was agreed upon (*Fake News, Lies, and Propaganda: How to Sort Fact from Fiction*), a course description and course objectives needed to be created. The course title, description, learning objectives, and structure & administration of the course were combined into a course proposal and sent to the Associate Dean at LSA. See <https://sites.google.com/umich.edu/library-fake-news> for a copy of the course proposal, including themes and course objectives. It was difficult to narrow the themes and objectives for a mini-course. The short period of the class and the desire to use class time for active learning rather than lecture influenced the development of the proposal. The Associate Dean accepted the proposal for the Fall 2017 semester. The Director of LPI stepped away from the process and Hailey Mooney, Shevon Desai, and I worked on the course development during the summer of 2017.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The course development team decided to first create a fake news Research Guide (<http://guides.lib.umich.edu/fakenews>). Planning the guide was an excellent way to prepare for course development because it forced the team to consider the essentials of the topic. In addition, it became clear that all team members preferred a critical thinking approach to the subject rather than a checklist approach. Also, other approaches seemed to consider aspects such as political perspective and even authenticity in a binary fashion. For example, the Blue Feed Red Feed tool created by the Wall Street Journal (<http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/>) only presented conservative and liberal Facebook feeds. Some tools such as the Factitious game (<http://factitious.augamestudio.com/#/>) had players only identify news as fake or real when there are many types of misleading information such as propaganda, satire, misinformation, and disinformation. We saw the issues around fake news as much more complex. For example, can someone have strong religious convictions—a point of view often contributed to conservatives—and

still be liberal? With sections such as “Where do news sources fit on the political bias spectrum?” we have received positive feedback from many national educators.

The team first developed a final project once work on the course began. This approach forced us to think deeply about what we wanted the students to know at the end of the course. Each team member created their own final project. In general terms, one final project included creating an annotated bibliography of multiple fake news sources. Another asked students to create and then apply a personal strategy for engaging with the news. Finally, a third asked students to find multiple fake news stories and answer deep questions about each article. We thought aspects of each final project idea might be combined to create a larger project for each student.

At that time, the course instructor had not yet been determined, and the team did not know how long it would take for a course instructor to be hired. We hoped that one of the librarians developing the course would be teaching it. With this constraint, and knowing that each instructor’s teaching style would be unique, the final project ideas were set aside. The team members decided to split up the course development and created many potential class activities for each of two classes. Again, this was done to create some flexibility for the final instructor while also giving the instructor some ideas from which to start.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

In August 2017, we found out that I would teach the class. I selected course materials from our work and decided that the first day of class would be crucial. I wanted to set up a positive environment with some parameters around constructive class discussion. Based on an activity created by my colleague Amanda Peters, I asked students about the worst class discussions that they had ever had. By discussing what went wrong, we were able to illustrate how every point of view is valuable. In addition, because of the fluid nature of fake news (see below in the *Challenges* section), I did not include class-by-class readings and activities on the syllabus on the first day. I wanted some flexibility should something important happen over the 7 weeks. I uploaded slides, course materials, and homework assignments into the Canvas course site on a week-by-week basis.

I also decided that I wanted participation to be part of the course grade, but I didn’t want face-to-face engagement to be the only way students could participate. I created a Google Doc for each student and gave each of them editing privileges. This document was only shared between me and the student, and I named it their journal. Journals were used throughout the course as reflective tools. In midterm evaluations that students knew were going to be shared anonymously with the academic community, I learned

“The journals are working well because they allow you to see what we are doing with our class time even if we don't speak up.”

“I love the openness of the instructor and the private journals we have that are included in our participation. Sometimes a point I would love to make in class is not something I can go as in-depth as I'd like to verbally, so I will put it in my journal so it doesn't go unacknowledged that I have these thoughts.”

Participation was a third of their grade. Homework assignments and their final projects made up the other two-thirds. There was no textbook for the class. I have created a website that includes the syllabus and all lesson plans, slides, homework assignments, and the final project at <https://sites.google.com/umich.edu/library-fake-news>.

THE CLASS

As of May 2018, the class has been taught twice. There was a mix of sophomores through seniors in each of the two classes as well as students from multiple programs. Students enjoyed attending a diversely-populated class.

“I think the most important thing to understand is that everyone had different backgrounds going into this class. This means we all had different majors, different ages, and different interests for why we're taking this class. That creates a small think-tank-like community where we can be completely open and honest with our thoughts and can hear different opinions, thoughts etc.”

One international student took the course in its first semester and several more took it in the second semester. The course will be taught again in Fall 2018.

Successes

The students were surprised by the critical thinking approach but enjoyed it. Midterm evaluations support this where I saw many quotes like this one.

“This course is unique because it doesn’t teach us some specific knowledge but more of a way of critical thinking, learn how to identify fake news, reflect on our experience, common sense, opinion and biases.”

I asked the students to develop a personal strategy to engage with the news and while I did show them some “canned” strategies developed by specific organizations, students were able to discuss the benefits and risks of using someone else’s strategy in interesting ways. Throughout the course students had productive conversations which brought to light important aspects to consider when engaging with the news. This seemed just as effective as course content that I presented. They could then adapt and parse different ideas to make their own personal strategy.

“The class is discussion and question driven, which I think is powerful. We’re not being told how to find fake news, but rather being given the tools and thought processes to analyze it ourselves. This differentiates the class from other classes as we can’t just memorize the course material, we have to actually come up with our own ideas and own opinions about things which is awesome.”

“I love the energy and the amount of talking/listening that we do. Not only do I learn from my peers but also from the content presented by the professor.”

One hour of the class is devoted to a news panel. I am lucky that the university is situated in a major metropolitan area, and I’m at an R1 university where world class news media participate in the Knight-Wallace program. I have been able to draw on reporters, producers, and news researchers to come to class. Despite having CNN’s Director of Political Research and reporters from both the *Detroit News* and *Detroit Free Press*, students have been most impressed with the editors of the campus newspaper.

Finally, the amount of homework seems to match student expectations for a 1 credit class and complements the in-class material.

“... the assignments are also very helpful for understanding the content in this course. The readings are applicable, and not too long.”

“The homework is working well because it gives me the ability to explore my interests in the context of what I’m learning.”

Challenges

As mentioned previously, the subject of fake news is extremely fluid. As fake news is being created in response to national events such as the Houston flood, the Las Vegas shooting, and the events at the Stoneman Douglas High School, these fake news stories are ripe to include in the curriculum. Something must be cut when something else is added. In addition, the scholarly literature is evolving as many researchers are examining the rhetoric around the 2016 election and publishing their findings. In fact, it has been very difficult to manage the amount of course content, and students have noticed.

“I wish we would dig deeper into certain aspects of the course because sometimes it feels like there is too much ground to cover in a short amount of time, leading to a wider understanding, but maybe not a deeper one.”

“I wish that we could sometimes slow things down because I love a lot of the topics but we go by so briefly. Maybe the speed of the class is because it’s a mini course.”

One international student in particular did struggle with the pace of the class. The work for the final project which was a synthesis of all coursework did become a hardship for some students so I have revised that assignment to reduce what is required without diminishing the rigorous nature of the work.

Finally, teaching students about bias can be difficult. I waited until the second to last class to discuss bias in depth so that students could feel comfortable with each other. I used the Project Implicit tests (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>) as homework the first time I taught the class, but there didn’t seem to be enough depth in the questions and students wrote more about how the tests could be “gamed” to get a preferred answer. The second time I taught the class, I consulted with the Library’s Diversity Officer who gave me some great metaphors to talk about bias (see course site for more explanation). What did work well in both sections of the class is to put small bias exercises into the curriculum leading up to the 6th week. For example, the exercise involving social media, the Blue Feed Red Feed site, and the comparison to a library database like *Issues and Controversies* almost always becomes an exercise where bias is discussed and students start recognizing their own bias.

MATERIALS APPROPRIATE FOR ONE-SHOT CONTENT

In general, there are many components of this topic that could be authentically incorporated into a one-shot library workshop. If you are looking for a topic in which to demonstrate a library database, you could use the topic “fake news” and find really interesting articles in almost any database because it is an interdisciplinary topic. One subject that is almost always covered in a one-shot workshop is the issue around evaluating sources. Bias might be a component to consider in evaluating sources. I ask students at the beginning of the bias class, “What does bias mean to you?” This inevitably results in a conversation about how bias means different things to different people and how bias influences what you read. A stunning illustration of bias is the Blue Feed Red Feed web site. When students compare how issues are presented on that site to how an issue is presented in a library database such as *Issues and Controversies*, it often shows the value of these kinds of library databases.

CONCLUSION

The librarians who developed this course have been asked to deliver lectures about fake news both locally and nationally. Campus interest has also been high. As social media companies continue to uncover their roles in the dissemination of false information and as more research is done around topics such as the 2016 election, it does appear that the public interest in this topic will continue. In addition to the course materials found on the companion site to this paper (<https://sites.google.com/umich.edu/library-fake-news>), I have also made a public version of the Winter 2018 Canvas site (<https://umich.instructure.com/courses/257337>). Finally, if you are a Canvas campus, look for the class in Canvas Commons. Hopefully these materials will assist you as you help students engage with the news in your own practice. Teaching students how to recognize fake news is an important task, best illustrated by a final quote from one of these students.

“I want educators to understand that this class is not about just fake news and how to be less gullible. I see it as a complex discussion about the nature of being a person in today’s climate and who is constantly exposed to media from all sources- it’s a way for people from all walks of life to figure out how to navigate this complex world and modify their perspective to understand how the information they are presented with is going to help them and enrich them, but also how to be skeptical of what they hear and learn so they can be a more educated citizen who understands their world and how to understand everyone else’s. I took this class because as a member of a group who is often targeted by misinformation and I want to help people understand that what they are reading is fake and is not what reflective of me or anyone else.”