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IDENTIFYING DISINFORMATION IN SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING

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MENTOR: JAQUELYN W. WALSH

Abstract

This paper examines the pro-Confederacy movement's attempt to distort history through textbook revision and the anti-vaccine movement's attempt at legitimacy through Dr. Andrew Wakefield, to argue in favor of strengthened media literacy as a brace against the effects of disinformation and propaganda. Previous definitions of misinformation and disinformation overlap and are as yet unclear and therefore should be further studied. Lost Cause mythologists worked diligently to propagate school textbooks that portrayed skewed versions of history that cast Southern Confederates' cause as noble and honorable while obscuring the real reason for the Civil War. Similarly, Dr. Andrew Wakefield falsified data to publish an anti-vaccine study that took years to discredit and to be retracted. While undergraduate students can rely on the CRAAP and BEAM methods of identifying problematic texts, they should be prepared to also engage in lateral reading to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest. Lateral reading is used in this essay to analyze a conspiracy theorist's links to Russian governmental propaganda outlets.

The South is still waging a culture war about the cause of the Civil War. Bias is a powerful motivator and can have far-reaching consequences. As seen in social movements that take the form of scholarly attempts to influence public opinion, even if the attempt fails, the same lie repeated over and over will cause people doubts about and difficulty in identifying the facts. This is because "the more times we hear something repeated, the more likely it is that we will remember it, even if it is not true" (Burkhardt 29). This paper will discuss the pro-Confederacy movement's attempt to distort history through textbook revision, to argue in favor of strengthened information literacy as a brace against the effects of disinformation and propaganda.

Misleading stories and journal articles can wreak havoc on the attempt to identify accurate sources of information. Misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda are all difficult to define and often overlap in the realm of academic dishonesty, in the forms of research misconduct and conflicts of interest. Because of the difficulty in gathering "reliable self-report data," the frequency at which academic scholars perpetrate research misconduct is not yet known (Pratt et al. 511). These researchers also clearly define research misconduct as "nefarious acts committed by those who are in the process of

proposing, conducting, reviewing or reporting research. . . . Such acts include data fabrication, plagiarism, and data falsification . . . authorship fraud, publishing fraud, grant fraud, and problems with institutional oversight” (Pratt et al. 510–512). Academics have developed their own investigations, such as a clear, formal peer-review process within academic journals (Bohannon 60) and critical articles investigating and exposing fraudulent journals (Pisanski 481), to address the problems that Pratt et al. argue “threaten public health and public safety and undermine public confidence” (511). Although undergraduate students cannot depend solely on their own independent investigations, they can ensure greater information literacy, “the ability to interpret text and content, detect ideologies, and understand how information is produced, dispersed, and consumed” (Bousalis et al. 43–44), by scrutinizing research sources with methodical fact-checking instruments that detect bias, such as the CRAAP test (Blakeslee), the BEAM method (Lenker), and lateral reading (Fielding). This essay will utilize portions of the CRAAP test and will perform lateral reading to evaluate a random textbook selection.

Current definitions of misinformation and disinformation are woefully “imprecise” (Karlova and Lee 1). Misinformation can be defined as “that which contradicts the best expert evidence available at the time” (Vraga and Bode 136). Language and information technology researcher Victoria L. Rubin differentiates misinformation from disinformation by calculating intent. Misinformation is “unintentional and includes errors or inaccuracies, while disinformation is deliberately deceptive, false, or misleading” (1017, quoting Jack Fox). To be deliberately deceptive is to “knowingly and intentionally transmit [a message in order] to foster a false belief or conclusion by the perceiver” (Buller and Burgoon qtd. in Rubin 1017). Karlova and Lee argue that misinformation and disinformation often intersect in some contexts because information is subjective:

While disinformation may be true, accurate, and current, and thereby informative, it needs be only misleading, relative to some situation. Since misinformation must be false . . . and disinformation may not be false, misinformation and disinformation are intersecting subcategories of information. (4)

Defining a term “on only the intent seems somewhat limiting” because the intent of the original speaker or writer can change with “context . . . and time” (Karlova and Lee 5, 7). Disinformation and misinformation are “highly complex concepts” that may merit further scholarly research in order to be defined (8). Disinformation is multifaceted. According to Brisola and Doyle, “disinformation involves information decontextualized, fragmented, manipulated, tendentious and removed from its historicity, that erases, distorts, subtracts, labels or confuses reality” (278).

When does disinformation turn into propaganda? Brett Silverstein, professor of psychology at City College of New York, defines propaganda as “communications delivered with conscious intent of manipulation,” insisting that propaganda is disseminated “in a variety of ways, ranging from intentional disinformation promulgated by governments to much more subtle examples” (51). Much research has been done on

propaganda and its many types, but Gregory Asmolov, lecturer of digital entrepreneurship and marketing at King's College, London, articulates the most thoughtful definition of propaganda as "not only a way to change a person's perception of the environment via symbolic means, but also a way to change the behavior of a target audience in order to change the environment" (7). Sociologist Alfred McClung Lee further defines propaganda, arguing that it is also a chaotic "barrage of words, symbols, ideas, and events with which members of publics are assailed in efforts to change attitudes, prejudices, opinions, loyalties, and modes of living" (128).

Considering the limitations indicated by Karlova and Lee, determining the intent of scholarly literature can be quite complicated; however, one needs only to trace the history of American textbooks to see how bias, disinformation, and propaganda have played a key role in scholastic publishing for decades. During the Civil War, Southern educators worked to promote "Southern education and textbooks . . . culminating . . . in the creation of the Educational Association of the Confederate States" (Curtis 437). After the South lost the Civil War, Southern Confederate associations established smaller groups to oversee the rewriting of history through the introduction of Confederate monuments to public spaces and via schoolbooks for public education that "reinforced a Lost Cause narrative of the war for Southern audiences while competing with Northern versions of events" (Bailey, "Textbooks" 512; Bohan et al.). The intent was to propagate a Lost Cause curriculum at an institutional level through education in order to "sustain a mythology of Reconstruction" (Anthony 60) that reaffirmed White¹ supremacy, minimized the horrors of slavery, and advocated for segregation.

The Sons of Confederate Veterans, United Confederate Veterans, and United Daughters of the Confederacy formed a group called the Rutherford History Committee, named in honor of Confederate historian Mildred Lewis Rutherford (Bailey, "Mildred Lewis Rutherford" 532). Through this committee, White Lost Cause mythologists fought to censor "Northern-based historical materials" in Southern classrooms (Bailey, "Textbooks" 512, 516). They also scrutinized incoming history books using "a measuring rod," which was a list of "demands" indicated by Rutherford, who listed the following requirements, among others:

Reject a book that speaks of the Constitution other than a compact between Sovereign States. Reject a text-book that does not clearly outline the interferences with the rights guaranteed to the South by the Constitution, and which caused secession. Reject a book that says the South fought to hold her slaves. Reject a book that speaks of the slaveholder of the South as cruel and unjust to his slaves. Reject a text-book that glorifies Abraham Lincoln and vilifies Jefferson Davis. Reject a text-book that omits to tell of the South's heroes and their deeds. (Rutherford 5)

Books that were accepted into Southern classrooms thus falsely described enslaved people as "content" and "adequately fed, well cared for, and apparently happy"

and also argued that the Civil War was waged entirely because of states' rights, ignoring slavery as a principal motivating factor (Springston 266 qtd. in Bohan et al. 3; Zimmerman 55). There were "romanticized . . . White" versions of these textbooks in the South and "integrated" versions sold in the North (Bohan et al. 3). By the 1960s, the White versions for the South were referred to as "mint julep editions" (Bohan et al. 3; Zimmerman 64).

Jonathan Zimmerman, Director of the History of Education Program at New York University's Steinhardt School of Education, provides a necessary perspective of Northern people of color fighting back against racist and bigoted textbooks in the post-World War II era in his article "*Brown*-ing the American Textbook: History, Psychology, and the Origins of Modern Multiculturalism." In the 1940s and 1950s, Black Americans in the North campaigning for the removal of "racist slurs" in integrated textbooks were met with resistance from White liberals, who viewed "textbooks as irrelevant to the formation of anti-Black views" (Zimmerman 49). After the Second World War, White educators focused more on instilling a national identity in the classroom and "downplay[ed] factual textbooks" in favor of more "hands-on activities in 'democratic living'—via games, skits, and songs" (Zimmerman 51). Undergraduate researcher Tyler Brunner recalls that, in the middle of the twentieth century, textbooks shifted to a more homogenous vision of America and of traditional values, to the detriment of depictions of slavery:

If material did not fit the way America *should* be in the eyes of those most bent on tradition, then it was to have no place within the textbook. Slavery might have been viewed differently during the 1950s, but according to the logic being followed by textbooks written during the 1950s, when slavery did occur it was acceptable simply because it was an American way of life, it was merely the tradition then. (7)

Upon further review, racism was not limited to only history textbooks but was also espoused across academic curricula. A 1950s geography book "praised colonialism in Africa"; biology textbooks introduced eugenics; music texts referred to Black people as "'darkey,' 'nigger,' and so on"²; and reading texts such as *Little Black Sambo* were used widely in elementary schools despite the derogatory representation of the characters through stylized stereotypes of Black people (Zimmerman 53–54).

When Black activists implored Northern textbook authors to make changes, these activists "based their complaints upon history—that is, upon scholarly knowledge—rather than upon 'emotion' or 'sensitivity' as patronizing Whites often claimed" (Zimmerman 55). The New York National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons, NAACP, published a study comparing schoolbooks' depictions of enslaved people as happy with "scholarly works by Black historian Carter G. Woodson" to show that textbooks were inaccurate (Zimmerman 55). Further strengthening their argument on scholarly grounds, critics of Chicago textbooks pointed to *Black Reconstruction* by W. E. B. Dubois, which dispelled myths that "Blacks had 'looted' the South—and that the K. K. K. had 'saved' it—after the Civil War" (Zimmerman 55). Following *Brown v. Board of Education*, those in

favor of integration “warned that ‘segregated’ schoolbooks, like segregated schools, would harm minority children” (Zimmerman 60). In the 1960s, Black civic organizations such as the NAACP, Urban League, Congress of Racial Equality, and Black Panthers united around a campaign against racist textbooks in order to “promote Black ‘identity’ ” (Zimmerman 62). When the 1960s saw high dropout rates for Black students, this was attributed to “prejudiced history books” (Zimmerman 62). Because school courses “ignored or denigrated” people of color, there was less incentive to pay attention to the text or to learn (Zimmerman 62). As James Baldwin testified in a congressional hearing, “Anyone who is Black is taught . . . that Negroes are not a civilization or culture. You cannot educate a child if you first destroy his morale” (Zimmerman 62–63). Although Northern textbooks very slowly changed with the times, many references to racism had been removed by the 1970s, which posed problems for “depictions [of] Blacks ‘struggling for rights’—but rarely noted ‘what these guys are struggling against’ ” (Zimmerman 66, quoting Loewen Fitzgerald).

Although unwanted and found oppressive by historically underrepresented groups, the influence of Lost Cause textbooks has reverberated into the present-day South’s prevailing attitude of White supremacy, as the same Confederate associations continue operating to influence public opinion. For example, members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans of Lake Charles, Louisiana, appeared at Calcasieu Parish Police Jury and Lake Charles City Council meetings to argue in favor of keeping a Confederate monument on public taxpayer property in 2015, as they have for decades (Schmidt). Sociologist James W. Loewen argued that even modern Northern textbooks still soften the blow of White supremacy by “mystifying secession because they don’t want to offend Southern school districts and thereby lose sales” (“Why”).

Although school textbooks slowly changed to reflect a more balanced viewpoint, the damage was already done. A 2017 survey of American high school students conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that a mere 8% of senior students could accurately “identify slavery as the central cause of the Civil War” (9). This same survey found that 58% of teachers believe that current “textbooks [are still] inadequate” at conveying the topic of slavery (9). Upon examination of modern Louisiana textbook content standards, the grouping *Expectations for Social Studies in 2011* was found “shamefully vague when it comes to the history of American slavery” (32). One review of the report of this survey concluded that, through modern textbooks, “slavery is mistaught, mischaracterized, sanitized, and sentimentalized—leaving students poorly educated, and contemporary issues of race and racism misunderstood” (Anderson). James Loewen, reviewing 18 textbooks at a high school level, 12 of them published before 1994 and the rest in circulation since 2000, found that none of them gave a concrete “statement as to why the South seceded” (“Using Confederate Documents” 39). In his critique, Loewen details various school textbooks’ vague interpretations of the reasons for secession:

Holt American Nation, for example, says, “Within days of the election, the South Carolina legislature called a convention and unanimously voted to leave the Union. Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas soon passed similar acts of secession.” Similar to what? One book, *The American Pageant* . . . manages to select three long sentences that do not mention slavery. . . . Some actually claim secessionists seceded for “states’ rights,” although the documents make clear this is counterfactual. (“Using Confederate Documents” 39)

Even now, slavery is given as a “secondary cause” for secession (Loewen, “Using Confederate Documents” 40), despite an overwhelming body of primary documents that indicate, according to Loewen, that “it all came back to slavery in the end” (“Using Confederate Documents” 37).

Although strong information literacy is a remedy to the ills of misinformation, further complications arise upon acquaintance with the caveats of scholarly endeavors. Academics fight back against these issues, not only through the higher-level control mechanism of peer review (Bohannon 60) but also through their own scholarly investigations to identify predatory publishers (Pisanski 481), discuss inconsistencies within other bodies of work (Ramsay and Robertshaw 6), and analyze the science of article retraction. Cokol et al. conducted a study that found that, of more than nine million articles published from 1950 to 2004, fewer than 1% had retractions issued by the publisher (423). Their results “suggest that high-impact journals are either more prone to publishing flawed manuscripts or scrutinized much more rigorously than low-impact journals” (Cokol et al. 423). David Dunning and Justin Kruger conducted experiments that demonstrated that those who do not know very much about a specific topic often overestimate their capability and thus are “particularly susceptible to manipulation” (Burkhardt 29). In order to stifle such attempts at manipulation, university librarians often equip first-year college students with the instruction needed to demonstrate selectivity through information literacy.

According to Mark Lenker, a teaching and learning librarian at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, there are at least two basic methods that teach college students to evaluate a source. The first method is “trust-based,” like the CRAAP test, which formalizes a student’s evaluation of “currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose” to determine the source’s level of trustworthiness (722). To utilize the CRAAP test, one must first evaluate currency, which assesses a source’s timeliness. When the article was first published or revised is considered because time-sensitive topics, such as current events in politics, may require recently published material. Second, one must assess relevance, which determines how important a source is for one’s needs. Third, the category of authority considers the source of the article and that source’s respective credentials. Fourth, one must determine accuracy, which is reflected by the level of evidence provided in bibliographic metadata, whether the data can be verified in other sources, and the overall reliability of the article. Lastly, one evaluates purpose, asking whether the material

is meant to “inform, teach, sell, entertain, or persuade” (“Evaluating Information—Applying the CRAAP Test”). The category of purpose also answers whether there may be biases associated with the article or if the article is misinformation, disinformation, or propaganda. Despite the availability of this tool, it is “unreasonable to expect students to conduct formal analysis for each source they consult” through trust-based methodology (Lenker 723). In practice, this method is not used very often for evaluating sources (Duby 4).

The second method, BEAM categorization, is “use-based” (Lenker 723) and considers the context of the background, exhibit, argument, and method of the source materials utilized in an academic essay (Bizup 72). BEAM assists students with understanding and crafting their arguments, but its use is limited because it fails to encourage one to “consider whether a [particular] source contributes to [one’s] learning” (Lenker 723–724).

Rather than limit oneself to trust-based or use-based methods, Jennifer A. Fielding recommends additional methods. She argues that student researchers should familiarize themselves with the fact-checking method of investigation through what she calls lateral reading (621). This occurs when researchers open more than one web browser tab to look up outside information beyond the sourced article, to discover things like how funds were raised, who was involved with the publishing organization, and the additional affiliations of the writers (Wineburg and McGrew qtd in Fielding 621).

University librarian Joanna M. Burkhardt advises student researchers to detect and/or avoid encounters with misinformation by comparing sources, especially those that do not necessarily agree with their own opinions, and to “approach news with skepticism” (26). One can even apply trust-based, use-based, and lateral reading methodologies to scrutinize journal articles as well as entire publications.

Although the CRAAP test and BEAM categorization are generally more suited for online content, their tenets could also be applied to textbooks. A more modern example can be found within the pages of the college sociology textbook *The Basics of Social Research*, by Earl Babbie, wherein he refers to the work of researcher Michel Chossudovsky (Babbie 35). Readers must take Chossudovsky’s statements provided by Babbie at face value because they are in a textbook. The reader will therefore continue without the knowledge of the problematic bias and conflict of interest demonstrated by Chossudovsky. While Babbie references Chossudovsky’s analytical theories, he is vague about Chossudovsky’s credentials and authority. Undergraduate readers can thus only speculate that Babbie attempted to introduce a theory on its own merits, though Babbie risks reliability and trustworthiness by including theorists who openly seek to subvert critical thinking by authoring questionable content at known repositories of Russian state-led propaganda.

Consultation of source material related to his writings shows that Chossudovsky's "argument[s] . . . resemble a conspiracy theory" (Duhs 171–172). Brief lateral reading (Fielding) research on Chossudovsky reveals that he is a retired sociology professor who also owns and runs the news aggregate website Global Research, or Centre for Research on Globalization. According to an American government report compiled in 2020, Chossudovsky's site is "deeply enmeshed in Russia's broader disinformation and propaganda ecosystem," featuring a "large roster of fringe authors and conspiracy theorists [that] serves as a talent pool" (United States Department of State 25-26) to similar Russian and Chinese disinformation sites.

Through Global Research, Chossudovsky has published at least seven authors who are actually "false online personas created by the Main Directorate . . . popularly known as the GRU," Russia's military intelligence service (United States Department of State 30). Chossudovsky also often appears as an expert or a contributor on RT, which is funded by and "reflects the Russian government's official position" (Fisher), as well as Sputnik News, another Russian state-owned media company (Groll) that publishes propaganda (Feinberg). Any material by Chossudovsky scrutinized for authority and purpose may therefore fail; in this case, there are relevant concerns about Chossudovsky's association with controversial publications, and the possible purpose or intent of any of his work could be "part of a larger effort to sow disarray and distrust within Western democracies" (Lewis qtd. in Daigle). RT and Sputnik News are state-run media networks that the U.S. State Department's report on the Global Research website identified as a "proxy outlet . . . that proliferates Russia's disinformation and propaganda narratives" (11). In September 2020, FBI director Christopher Wray told the United States House committee that

Russian agents were mainly trying to affect the (November 3, 2020 presidential) election through "malign foreign influence," such as social media, state media and the use of proxies . . . to denigrate vice-president Biden and what the Russians see as kind of an anti-Russian establishment. (Greve)

One must also consider purpose when evaluating sources. Among the most recent claims published by Chossudovsky, one article falsely states that the 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak was engineered by the United States as a "bioweapon created to target Chinese people."

If sources originate from a place of bias or disinformation, what resources can one trust? Clearly, it is not enough to rely on one source, such as a textbook, without the reader's development in information literacy. Information literacy is critical to discerning whether a source should be trusted. Loewen recommends the use of primary documents (original historical artifacts) to verify what is written in textbooks and, more importantly, to get students thinking about the context in which history was written and the critical way it should be viewed ("Using Confederate Documents"). Barton goes further, stating

that primary documents should be supplemented with additional primary and secondary documents to “provide reliable testimony of the past” (qtd in Jarosz and Kutay 207).

Although the CRAAP test and BEAM method can be helpful for initial research, student researchers can go beyond the basics with the use of lateral reading and source comparison to assess credibility and identify potential sources of disinformation. Although it is not always time-efficient to engage in lateral reading for every source, one can review scholarly literature for any challenges or subsequent expansions on the work. Though Southern textbooks sought to redefine public opinion by touting triumph over Reconstruction, information literacy can be applied to such texts by evaluating the sources in relation to the textbooks of the North, along with the credentials of the people on the textbook boards that approved such disinformation to spread within Southern schools. Further historical review of the culture wars waged by Southern revisionists shows that corrections to the record were made possible by Black activists in the late twentieth century. The ability to understand information in textbooks is strengthened by primary and secondary documents to be empowered enough to analyze these documents together, to discern the reality from which they came about, and to identify and therefore resist the attempts of disinformation that could alienate the reader and distort the truth.

Notes

1. All terms used to indicate race or racial grouping have been capitalized. Modern Language Association of America guidelines are unclear on the application of capitalizations or lowercase to “White” or “Black,” while other formats advise against capitalization of “White.” The Associated Press (AP) updated its style guide to capitalize Black, but not White, following the murder of George Floyd. Those against the capitalized form in AP style state that “capitalizing the term White, as is done by White supremacists, risks subtly conveying legitimacy to such beliefs,” while those in favor argue that “capitalizing White would take power away from racists, since their similar use ‘would no longer be provocative defiance of the norm.’” (See David Bauder’s “AP Says It Will Capitalize Black but Not White.”) The author neither intends nor implies legitimacy of White supremacist beliefs through use of the capitalized form, “White.”

2. Assistant Professor of History Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor articulates the problematic inheritance of the pejorative slur *nigger*, indicating that a few terms must be referenced when using the word. On the use of the most offensive term, she says the following:

[A]lthough I will never personally speak the word in a public forum, opting instead for the colloquial (and admittedly fraught) phrase, “the n-word,” I choose here not to replace the actual word with the popular surrogate. . . . In the U.S. context, *nigger* was profoundly tied to ideas about slavery, race, labor, gender, and class.

Speaking about the word without considering these factors obscures its real meanings. (207)

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