

# Chapter 9

## News Credibility and Media Literacy in the Digital Age

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### **ABSTRACT**

*With the hostile media phenomenon as an overarching framework, this chapter discusses how challenging it can be for media literacy education to successfully combat motivated reasoning in which individuals are likely to be hostile when exposed to news content that is incongruent with their personal point of view. Such discussion is vital in times when news audiences are cynical and skeptical towards both politicians and media agencies. Given the importance of understanding and studying individuals' perceptions of news biases and assessments of news credibility, this chapter makes a case for establishing more objective standards for journalistic work to overcome the challenges brought about by the rise of fake news in the digital era.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Today there are many news sources vying for our attention. Among them are outlets that provide information congruent with our predispositions, and some that provide information that is not. More problematically, some outlets offer accurate facts, whereas others offer wrong information. Such fabricated news reports, produced either for profit or for political purposes, are called “fake news” (Wardle, 2017).

With enormous amounts of false information out there, what distinguishes fake news as “fake news” is that the information provided takes on the look of real news items (Tandoc et al., 2017). The information can appear to mix humor with news, advertising with news, or false information in news format. According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), fake news can be defined as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers.” In other words, the term “fake news” can be distilled down to two components. First, the statement is knowingly false. Second, the statement is spread tactically to serve strategic purposes, and such purposes can be ideological or financial (Tandoc, Zheng, & Ling, 2017).

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News audiences can find it difficult to derive a source's intent—to discern if the information being provided is for profit or for political purposes—simply by reading the content. As an example, consider the misappropriation of images, a phenomenon that occurs when factual images are used to support a fabricated narrative (see Tandoc et al., 2017). A Twitter user assumed that buses he saw in Austin were being used to transport protesters to an anti-Trump rally, and he took photos and posted them with a comment condemning the protesters on his personal Twitter feed (Maheshwari, 2016). The post went viral, and many then believed people were paying protestors to join the rally. The user genuinely believed that the buses parked near the rally were from a bus company paid to join the protest, and viewers had no way of knowing the validity of the information. In this case, despite genuine intent, false information was widely spread. This demonstrates that the intent is often hard to discover just by looking at the outcome – the final news product.

In addition to identifying a news source's intent, audiences would need to determine if the content is false. The dilemma is that news is almost always expected to provide new information to news consumers. If news audiences know beforehand whether information being provided is true or false, or conversely, have to gain additional knowledge in order to accurately judge the credibility of content, then news is no longer performing its functions as news. From the audience's perspective, the focus shifts to how they process news and form perceptions of credibility, and in turn decide whether or not a piece of news is fake.

As many factors can impact individuals' credibility assessments of news items, it is unsurprising to see people come to associate the term “fake news” with different types of content. According to Neilson and Graves (2017), news audiences do not have a single straightforward way to distinguish between news and fake news, and their definitions of fake news vary widely. Instead, people perceive fake news on a spectrum ranging from poor journalism (superficial, inaccurate or sensational news) to propaganda (hyper-partisan content, politicians lying, or extreme spin) to misleading forms of advertising and sponsored content.

With such a wide range of definitions, the question then becomes how individuals come to define news content differently. This issue falls in line with research on hostile media perceptions (HMP), which directly addresses this question. HMP refers to how individuals have a tendency to interpret the exact same news story differently, even to the extent of rating it as biased toward two opposing positions. With perceived media bias as the outcome variable, scholars have long been studying how individuals with different points of view arrive at different conclusions of news bias.

With HMP as an overarching framework, this chapter discusses how challenging it can be for media literacy education to successfully combat motivated reasoning in which individuals are likely to be hostile when exposed to news content that is incongruent with their personal point of view. Given the importance of understanding and studying individuals' perceptions of news biases and assessments of news credibility, this chapter makes a case for establishing more objective standards for journalistic work to overcome the challenges brought about by the rise of fake news in the digital era.

## **Background**

Polls consistently show the public having low trust in the media, with a Gallup poll showing slightly less than half of Americans trust the mass media (Jones, 2018b). The poll also found that 62% of American adults believe that the news they encounter in traditional news media is biased, while 80% of American adults believe that to be the case with social media (Jones, 2018a). Such mistrust toward the mainstream

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