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Trump, J.K. Rowling, and Confirmation Bias: An Experiential Lesson in Fake News

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Like many educators, I wanted to find some way to incorporate the issue of fake news into my teaching. Below is an account of my experience which is useful, I think, in terms of its reproducibility but also for the lessons it teaches about the intractableness and urgency of these issues. Given the ways in which fake news continues to be an issue and what we know about students' (and all our) vulnerability to manipulation by the media, I suspect this lesson will continue to have value for a long time.

The lesson centers around a news story I came across that I thought would work well in my classroom. The story had the following selling points: 1) it involved the author J.K. Rowling, a household name to my students, 2) it involved clear-cut and indisputable manipulation of the details of an incident – fake news, 3) it played to my students' antipathy to Trump and hence their confirmation bias, and 4) it is actually a story in which Trump was not the villain I knew they would assume him to be.

My lesson was a brief unit in my first semester English Composition class at New Jersey City University (NJCU), a comprehensive, public university. Designated as both an Hispanic-serving and a minority-serving institution, NJCU serves a broadly diverse student population: 25% White, 21% Black, 34% Hispanic, and 9% Asian. 77% of our students receive financial aid, with approximately 64% receiving Pell Grants. Many are the first in their families to attend college. In general, NJCU students are far less likely to be Trump supporters and somewhat more likely to be politically aware than the typical college student. In particular, Trump's attacks on DACA students and immigrants have resonated painfully with many NJCU students.

The lesson was labeled on my syllabus as Fake News. I began with a caution: I asked any students who knew the "trick" behind my lesson to refrain from speaking out (and I would advise any teachers who reproduce this lesson to do the same). None of the students in my three sections of College Composition, however, was aware of the story, so my caution was unnecessary and none, incredibly enough, was tipped off by the syllabus.

First, I showed my students a brief, 24-second video clip. I directed the students to ignore the title – "Trump doesn't ignore wheelchair boy - Monty shows Trump his secret service patch." (I will discuss the title below.) The video shows President Trump greeting a group of people standing behind his dais; he chats with them as he exits the room. The voice of a small, disabled boy, Monty, is captured on the video, calling out "Mama," and reaching his hand up and towards Trump. In the video clip, Trump does not stop to shake the boy's hand or engage him in any way.

Without any oral discussion, I asked students to post their responses to the video clip on Today'sMeet – a closed, backchannel chat platform that allows students to engage in written conversation (Daniels and Daniels).¹ Note: the platform asks students for nicknames when they post, and I let my students enter whatever they want as their nicknames, allowing, then, for students to choose

pseudonyms or vague nicknames and creating an atmosphere of relative anonymity. In this sense, students, if they wish, can post their comments with some sense of confidentiality and the resulting written conversation is more inclusive and safe. (The platform also allows the instructor immediately to hide any inappropriate comments, should that become necessary, which was a useful feature as I worried about a student revealing the backstory behind my lesson, but that never occurred.)

In response to my simple prompt – "post any and all thoughts," the students posted comments along the lines of this one: "The boy was trying to get a handshake from Trump. It seems like Trump ignored him." A few actually argued against the title of the video: "the title says that Trump didn't ignore wheelchair boy but in the video he clearly did." Notice here that my students did not, as I asked, ignore the video title; the content of the video overwhelmed them, and they assumed that the title was inaccurate. Many immediately injected negative feelings about Trump into the discussion: "The fact he treated a handicapped kid like that irritates me"; "That was foul"; "the boy is disabled . . . that makes it so much worse"; "Absolutely messed up. He has no shame."

Without any further oral discussion, I asked the students to watch the video again and to offer additional comments on Today'sMeet. The students became increasingly adamant in their condemnation of Trump: "He completely ignored the kid. All he had to do was look down and say hello" and "I honestly cannot stand him."

Next, I shared an excerpt from an article in the *Washington Examiner*:

Someone published the clip from the 13-minute event on YouTube and alleged Trump had ignored 3-year-old Monty's requests for a handshake. The video circulated on Twitter, and caught the attention of Rowling, author of the "Harry Potter" series.

"Trump imitated a disabled reporter. Now he pretends not to see a child in a wheelchair, as though frightened he might catch his condition," Rowling said referencing Monty, who has spina bifida, in one of eight tweets transmitted to her 11.4 million followers on Friday, July 28.

"This monster of narcissism values only himself and his pale reflections. The disabled, minorities, transgender people, the poor, women (unless related to him by ties of blood, and therefore his creations) are treated with contempt, because they do not resemble Trump," she continued.

"How stunning and how horrible, that Trump cannot bring himself to shake the hand of a small boy who only wanted to touch the President," the Harry Potter author continued.

Thousands, including Chelsea Clinton, retweeted Rowling. (Quinn)

Again, without any oral discussion, I asked the students to react in writing on Today'sMeet. Many responded in agreement with Rowling's tweets: "Rowling

couldn't have put it any better" and "I agree with JK Rowling, I think that was an act of disrespect and ignorance." A few noted and praised the fact that Rowling's reaction was informed by the well-known incident in November 2015 in which Trump had disparaged a disabled reporter, Serge F. Kovaleski (Haberma).

Student opinion began to diverge slightly, however, not in how to read the video but in relation to Rowling's response. A few students questioned Rowling's decision to insert herself into the realm of politics: "J.K Rowling needs to stick to fiction." In response to these sorts of comments, several students defended Rowling's right to share her views: "she's allowed to post her opinions just because she has a massive following doesn't mean she has to stay quiet" and "J.K. Rowling has a strong influence . . . and speaking out helps the voices those afraid to speak." In other words, for many students, Rowling's authority and credibility reinforced their initial reaction to the video; for a few, her credentials as a novelist were insufficient to give her opinions on the video particular authority.

Next, I showed the students a second video, entitled "Trump Gives a Statement on Healthcare." We watched the video from timestamp 2:10 until 2:35; Trump is introduced by Vice President Pence and then enters the room and greets the people standing behind the dais. This video, as rapidly became clear to the students, is from the beginning of the same event to which Rowling had reacted, and it features the president directly and for a sustained period of time bending down to engage, nearly exclusively, with the disabled boy, Monty. (The video also includes Trump's Address.)

In fact, the first video I showed my students, the video to which J.K. Rowling had reacted, was an excerpt from the second video, an excerpt which, taken out of the full context, makes it look as if Trump ignored Monty. Indeed, the brief excerpt, particularly given the fact that we hear Monty calling out to his mother and reaching up his hand as if towards Trump, plays effectively and nearly irresistibly on our heartstrings. The earlier clip and the full video, however, make clear that President Trump had not ignored Monty; in fact, he had paid special attention to the boy during his entrance.

It's worth noting that both videos seem entirely credible because they contain video from The White House official YouTube channel. The first video, the misleading clip, works to cast Trump in a negative light simply by presenting one moment from the event entirely out of context. The short clip makes it look as if Trump is callously ignoring a vocal and engaging young disabled boy; the full video makes clear that Trump engaged the child fully and extensively at the beginning of the event.

The misleading clip was edited down and re-posted from the White House channel onto YouTube by someone, whose identity remains unknown (the original misleading clip has since been removed from YouTube). The clip circulated widely, capturing the attention of many, including J.K. Rowling. The video I shared with my students is a facsimile of what Rowling and others saw.

Hence the title for the clip I showed: "Trump doesn't ignore wheelchair boy - Monty shows Trump his secret service patch."

Again, I asked the students to respond, this time to the video clip in which Trump engages with Monty, and I was surprised by the uniformity with which they blamed what they called "the media": "The media tends to crucify Trump, sometimes, unnecessarily"; "This video shows that you can't always be quick to make assumptions on things in the media because they don't cover the whole story sometimes"; and "I'm just saying the media lied to us." Many students at this point labelled the episode: "#fakenews."

I probed the students to unpack their understanding of "the media." What did they understand the term to mean? What is J.K. Rowling's relationship to the media? After all, she isn't a journalist. And was she offering news or opinion? I also asked students to think about the source of the misleading video. Was it posted by a credible news source?

The students, however, were not able to process this distinction between a personal opinion posted by a person (albeit a celebrity) on social media and a piece of news media. Like Trump, for the students, there was no distinction to be made between social media and news media. One student pointed out the dictionary definition of media: "the means of communication, as radio and television, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet, that reach or influence people widely" (dictionary.com). When I tried to press the students on the difference between credible, reliable news organizations and other media sources (like a random person who posts video clips of his cat on YouTube), they were resistant (which is surely indicative of how thoroughly discredited the mainstream news media has become in our post-truth environment).

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Researchers are working hard to think through the dangers of an unregulated Internet on which "someone" can post a misleading video, like that about Trump, and move millions of people and public opinion. In "Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning," the Stanford History Education Group "worr[ies] that democracy is threatened by the ease at which disinformation about civic issues is allowed to spread and

flourish" (5). Projects like that at Stanford intend to measure and ultimately improve students' abilities to "reason about the information on the Internet" (4). My students' reaction to the Rowling/Trump video, however, makes clear that while we (students, Rowling, all of us) may be vulnerable to manipulation through unscrupulous actors using our vast media channels like YouTube and Twitter, many of us have no counterbalancing trust. The danger is that everything out there becomes undifferentiated, untrustworthy media. I'll return to this issue below.

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In my classroom, one student was more nuanced in his/her/their analysis of the Rowling/Trump episode. The student noted, "This is a prime example of what's wrong with the Internet. Everyone is an expert, and does no research into their misguided opinions." This student continued, "I know for a fact she [Rowling] didn't take the 30 seconds [to look] into YouTube to look up the full video."

This student wanted to claim superiority to Rowling and her insufficient research and misguided reaction. But was that superiority justified? I had forced all of my students to react to the misleading video, and none of them had raised any questions, even given the title of the video and the title of our lesson on my syllabus. At this point, I pointed out that none of the students themselves had shown suspicion about the video, and that they too had felt confident enough to condemn Trump and the episode based on what they had seen (and on their own views about Trump). Indeed, my lesson was based on the power of this experience. It's one thing to read about and condemn Rowling's mistake; my goal was to simulate her mistake in the classroom so that my students could experience being duped just like the esteemed author of *Harry Potter* had been.

I continued the lesson with a discussion of the ensuing events, including a response from Monty's mother and her explanation that, among other things, the boy was raising his arm not to shake Trump's hand but to show the secret service patch he had been given earlier that day. We also read Rowling's apology.

Next, we turned to media coverage of the Rowling tweetstorm incident. I offered students a range of sources across the political spectrum to review – *CNN*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Politifact*, and *The Washington Post* – and encouraged them to seek out others on their own. They noticed how thoroughly the media covered Rowling's

reaction to the misleading video – including the now-deleted tweets both from Rowling attacking Trump and from Monty's mother in response. They also noticed, across the media coverage, the extent of the backlash against Rowling: "everybody is bashing Rowling for her mistake and are making it seem like she is a terrible individual." The students generally found the criticism of Rowling disproportionate: "she was one of many to overreact to the video so I don't think she should be bashed for it." Indeed, given that they had all fallen for the misleading Trump video, they were more generous towards Rowling than others in the media were.

Finally, we listened to a brief discussion on WNYC's *On the Media* with Melissa Zimdars, a professor at Merrimack College, about how to navigate a world of fake news. In particular, the discussion raised the important issue of confirmation bias, the idea that we are all more likely to believe those stories that confirm our existing ideas. My classroom experiment had relied on and exposed that confirmation bias in my students. The students, many of whom are immigrants and/or students of color, were already disinclined to support Trump; this confirmation bias meant they were more likely to accept the misleading video of his seemingly boorish behavior towards a disabled child as confirmation of Trump's heartlessness and arrogance. (I did have one avowed Trump supporter in one of my sections, but unfortunately, he was absent on the day of this lesson. It would have been fascinating to see how his presence affected the way the lesson played out.)

Having personally experienced being "duped," the students were primed to listen carefully to the suggestions Zimdars offers about avoiding fake news. As the students remarked, "it is the first time I felt duped"; "Well I feel lied to . . . and now I'm definitely going to overthink anything I see on the internet"; and "They got me." Fake news was no longer an abstraction; the lesson had allowed my students to experience personally their vulnerability.

Indeed, the issue of our broad vulnerability to this kind of manipulation arose at the end of the period in one of my three sections. One student raised the issue of Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election and quite astutely argued that the "Russians only fed Americans what they wanted to see and hear. [I]t is the fault of Americans for believing everything they see or hear." My classroom experiment, in fact, was taking place just as developments were breaking in *The New York Times* and elsewhere about the Russian Facebook ads designed to provoke and divide the American public and disrupt the election. Some students were well aware of the information surfacing about Russian interference, and a few connected this foul play on Facebook to the Trump/Rowling episode. One student raised the question of who had uploaded the misleading Trump video and to what purpose: "I do feel that whoever uploaded this video was trying to get a rise." Another student noted that Rowling was simply the victim who "fell for the trap."

Who laid the trap and for what purpose are questions that the news coverage of the Rowling/Trump incident did

not address. One particularly conspiracy-minded student suggested that Trump supporters might have been behind the doctored video. His logic: ensnare a liberal celebrity in a trap, get her to bash Trump unfairly, and then discredit and humiliate her for her mistake. The end result is more distrust in the media. Such far-out conspiracy theories are harder to dismiss in the wake of what we have learned about the Russians.

I mentioned earlier how insistently students conflated social media and media. In class, I pointed out to my students the fact that the individual (or organization) who posted the original video was not a credible, if left-slanting news organization, like *The New York Times* (although we don't know who it is who actually posted the video). But for the students, there was no distinction to be made between material posted on the web by malicious individuals and material posted by what we might call the reliable, if sometimes biased, news media. All of it, for them, was the media, and all of it was untrustworthy.

I fear that my lesson, like Trump's endless repetition of the terms "fake news" and "fake media," served to further my students' distrust of the media and not in a healthy or productive way. My goal had been to allow them to experience fake news, to understand their vulnerability to it, and to arm them with strategies to avoid it. I also hoped they would acknowledge the ways in which the mainstream news media's coverage of the Trump/Rowling episode was different from the manipulation they had experienced with the misleading video, which was wholly fake news. Indeed, comparing the different media responses to the episode, the students were able to reflect on the relative bias or slant among the different mainstream media outlets; they were also able to notice how different in scale this bias was in comparison to the entirely false agenda perpetrated by whoever posted the misleading video clip.

I did not, however, at least within the context of this lesson, get my students to view the news media as trustworthy, despite what they acknowledged about the thorough, well-documented coverage the Rowling/Trump episode received in the mainstream media. In the end, the Trump video, Rowling's knee-jerk response to it, the ensuing media frenzy, and then my lesson about these texts resulted in an overall heightening of distrust in all media – even what we see with our own eyes can't be trusted. I may have turned my students from "gullible rubes" into "gullible cynics" (Caulfield "Think"), for whom nothing is true. That skepticism of my students, engendered through some instructional trickery on my part, is, I think, a dangerous outcome.

Especially given the ways in which the Trump era has continued to demean the work of legitimate news organizations and to erode our trust in and ability to discern truth and facts from disinformation and blatant falsehoods, it is critical that lessons like mine be supplemented by the kinds of concrete strategies Michael Caulfield outlines in his brilliant and important book, *Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers*. Given the cynicism,

skepticism, and broad distrust of expertise and authority of our moment, our task must be to pair an understanding of the dangers of confirmation bias and fake news with skill-building so that our students are empowered to serve as their own arbiters of the truth, confident in their abilities to wield the powerful, existing "tools for trust" (Caulfield "Think"). Caulfield suggests "concrete strategies and tactics for tracing claims to sources and for analyzing the nature and reliability of those sources" (*Web 3*). The web, he argues as he outlines the fact-checking moves in his book, is not just the "largest propaganda machine ever created [it is also] the most amazing fact-checking tool even invented" (*Web 3*).

I look forward to teaching the Trump/Rowling episode again but this time as part of broader practice in distinguishing the fake and the real, including verification of real but dubious-sounding news items (news items that appear fake but are in fact real). With this practice, I hope my students will move past a position of dangerous and potentially disabling cynicism and into a position of strength as empowered arbiters, wielding the power of fact-checking tools, in order to verify or debunk what they see in "the media." Teaching students the tools of digital fact checking may be a lot to take on in a first semester college writing course, but surely this kind of digital literacy is precisely the appropriate and required learning outcome for today's educated citizens.

Notes

- ¹ TodaysMeet closed as of June 2018.
Backchannelchat.com seems comparable.

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