

Fake News

REAL JOURNALISM TAKES TIME —
AND READING IT TAKES THOUGHT

by Camilla Mortensen

Did you absolutely love that article you read about Bernie Sanders on *Occupy Democrats* and agree with every word? Did you hate that story on NPR because the public radio network reported on the timber industry as if it had valid points on cutting down trees?

Before you pull a Trump and scream “fake news!” and before you post “media blackout!” on your Facebook feed and accuse the media of not covering a specific news topic, take a minute to think about what fake news actually is.

“Fake news means so many things,” says Todd Milbourn, a former daily news reporter turned journalism instructor at the University of Oregon. “At the outset it was really clear — Macedonian teenagers in their basement hacking away on articles ginned up to make some money on the election.”

But a few short months later, Milbourn says, “everybody has their own definition.”

Milbourn has been doing a series of presentations around Oregon on fake news, together with fellow UO journalism instructor and former daily reporter Lisa Heyamoto. They will give a talk on the topic at the City Club of Eugene April 7.

There are fake news articles fabricated out of whole cloth and pushed on social media, Milbourn says, “but you also have ways information is amplified in different ways, articles that are poorly sourced, articles that are accurate line-by-line but the overall tone and takeaway are done disingenuously.”

The “silver lining,” Heyamoto says, is that “we are having a national conversation about credible information.” It’s long overdue, she says. “The problem is we are having it as shouting matches.”

So how do we combat fake news? “Good old fashioned critical thinking.”

Think about, she says: Who wrote it? Where did the information come from? What is the purpose of the article?

“But that takes a lot of time,” Heyamoto says. She says that we used to have dedicated news time where you sat down with the physical paper and said, “Now I will consume the news.” But these days we read the news in moments waiting for the bus, waiting to pick up the kids — in the middle of “all the things that come at you in life.”

And on social media, Heyamoto says, we get both neutral and partisan news mixed in with kid and food pictures — “all of this info in the same moment.”

She now sets aside time that is dedicated to news consumption “where I get a foundation on what’s going on — and I treat social media as a dessert.”

Milbourn compares reading the news to buying a dishwasher: “One thing is, if you buy a dishwasher you are going to go on Consumer Reports, do a little research, ask ‘What model am I looking for?’ and ‘What will work for me?’” It’s a deliberate investment, he says, rather than the passive way we consume social media.

On a national level, NPR has an ombudsman, Elizabeth Jensen, who looks into that media organization’s ethics, fairness and accuracy. Jensen reports to NPR’s CEO, not the newsroom, she told *EW* on a recent swing through Eugene. She presents the public’s opinion to the newsroom and explains the newsroom to the public, she says, and she doesn’t speak for NPR.

Jensen points to a Nov. 16, 2016, post-election column in which she addressed NPR’s reporting on the presidential campaigns and listener complaints that they heard more



PHOTO BY BRIAN BULL/KLCC

about Trump than Clinton. “The final story totals were 461 pieces with Trump as the main focus to 262 focused on Clinton,” she writes.

Such ethical transparency is something readers can use to evaluate their news sources.

“Journalists can be more transparent in their reporting,” Heyamoto says. “Part of the wonder of journalism is the way that you put that story out there. People have gotten used to not seeing behind the curtain and not seeing how hard journalists are working to get the news.”

She says the hallmarks of a good media outlet are “verification, triangulation, transparency and context.”

And when it comes to “media blackouts,” Milbourn says, “Let’s look at the difference between the media

and journalism — journalism is a subset of that with an emphasis on verification.”

In fake news, he says, you don’t see verification. Real journalism uses “on the ground shoe leather,” he says, and public records requests, “not just sharing things on social media, but picking up the phone, talking to people at Standing Rock” and getting information that can be verified and tested independently.

That takes time. And money.

“Take that moment,” Milbourn says, “and do some research on ‘what is my media diet.’” See what fits your needs. Then, he says, “Pay for that stuff. Spend your time there.”

With news subscriptions costing only a few dollars a month, Milbourn says, we should “put as much thought into the media we consume as we do in buying a dishwasher.”

Contested Truths

AN INTERVIEW WITH OREGONIAN
COLUMNIST SAMANTHA SWINDLER

by Rick Levin

EW talked to Samantha Swindler, a columnist for *The Oregonian* and president of the Oregon Territory chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, to get her take on the media chaos.

What forces — historically, socially, politically — have led to the current distrust and suspicion of the media?

I honestly don’t know if I’m the best person to answer this question. I see a lot of forces at play — mainly new technology that allows anyone to create a “news site” and disruption of the traditional media revenue model — that make this historically unique. But I also don’t know if distrust of the media is a new thing. Maybe what’s unique is that the definition of “media” has so greatly expanded.

Is this unprecedented in U.S. history, either in terms of public attitudes toward the media or the current administration’s attacks (Trump’s “enemy of the people” claim)?

Maybe what’s different now is how little news people seem to consume. When I hang out with non-news people, I realize that most Americans don’t follow the news. They don’t care. They see stuff on their social media feeds and that’s it.

What have the media done to contribute to this attitude? Or, from another angle, what set the stage for so many people to be able to dismiss reporting outright as “fake” news? Where did we fall short?

I don’t know if I can point to a specific moment or action, but there are trends that I find have hurt media credibility. Of course, there’s the creation of the 24-hour news cycle and the constant need to say something on-air, even where there’s nothing new or substantive to add about breaking news. That has led to inaccurate information as stories are developing. We also don’t do ourselves any favors when we chase “trending” viral news and just regurgitate it without additional context or critical thinking. When we’re just sharing other people’s cat videos or viral Facebook posts, how do we distinguish what we’re doing as journalism rather than just social media?

Ah, but I see the flipside of this one as well. How do you pay for journalism if you don’t get the clicks for cat videos? I’m oversimplifying with that statement, but fewer people are paying for journalism, so it’s harder to fund the meatier stuff.



What would be the best response from the press in terms of combating negative public perceptions?

We need to be more transparent in how we collect the news, why we do what we do and why we make the news decisions we make. There’s been more of that, but I think total transparency about the journalism process, engaging with readers and viewers about our process, will help. Transparency is more important than objectivity.

Do you see this as a larger crisis in attitudes toward truth, verification and the First Amendment?

We have a larger crisis in the lack of civics education. I think we’ve become lazy when it comes to civic involvement. Isn’t there a famous quote, that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance? We’ve not been vigilant. Vote. Run for office. Vet your news source. Question your assumptions. Consume ideas that question your worldview. All those things are connected, in my mind.