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“DON’T GIVE ME BULLSHIT”: CONSTRUCTING A FRAMEWORK OF RESPONSE TO FAKE NEWS

GENEVIEVE GARCÍA DE MÜELLER AND RANDALL W. MONTY

Preamble

In the days and weeks following the tumultuous 2016 United States presidential election, the country was rife with responses of jubilation, disbelief, and distress. It was apparent that a critical point had been reached, “a complete break from the history that precedes it” (Girshin and Stewart-Harris, this volume), although what that point was remained unclear. Most of the responses to the election grappled with what exactly had just happened, proposing a rationale for why it happened, and forming an explanation of what it meant. Adjacent to the election and these reactions is the concept of *fake news*, a sort of pseudo-response concept and act. *Fake news* is not a good faith response. Although not relegated to just conservative spaces, fake news in many cases is at once racialized violence and an appeal to conservative ideals rather than facts. In response to the emergence of fake news as a mainstream rhetorical trope, we, like many writing faculty across the country, found ourselves embedding into our courses ways for students to resist fake news, using the theoretical framework of *bullshit*. In our specific courses, we offer a system for helping students to civically engage in political discussions and actions in truthful and socially just ways (Pennycook et al). In the following pages, we consider, in an era of alternative facts as a key positioning tactic in the highest political office, how do concepts like rhetoric, agency, and credibility matter when constructing writing pedagogy?

Drawing on two course designs—one for first-year writing and one for an upper-division rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies course taken by English majors and other students—this chapter addresses the fundamental question of fake news in three ways: identifying a theoretical problem, issuing a call for action, and recommending an act of reflection. First, by using scholarship on the rhetoric of bullshit, we define fake news and provide a framework of inquiry evaluating the credibility of secondary sources. Then we describe two courses that offered spaces for students to identify, dismantle, and resist fake news. Finally, we consider why and how writing studies should deal with, theorize, and navigate fake news in the writing classroom.

When a rhetor invokes the concept of fake news or alternative facts, they abhor any rhetorical response embedded in logic or critical thought—meaning that when a person talks bullshit, they get bullshit in return. Fake news has been defined as “a deliberate attempt to get people to react to one’s misinformation” (McIntyre 109) or “last-ditch efforts to save an order of legitimacy and meaning that is breaking down” (Kotsko 115). People who invoke fake news seem to be doing something either malicious or desperate. Fake news claims are uninterested in facilitating dialogue or debate; people who propagate fake news are enacting an anti-democratic form of demagoguery designed to spread propaganda, conspiracy theories, and misinformation (Mercieca; Roberts-Miller). At the same time, fake news can be understood as a rhetorical device, a strategy employed to achieve a certain type of reaction. Such is the paradox of fake news, a certain kind of bullshit: it demands a response, but does nothing to warrant one, and thus it necessarily rejects any response. In the current moment, however, many composition instructors feel compelled to respond through social media engagement, scholarly inquiry, and thematic course design. One way to theorize our way through this paradox is to define what fake news is and provide a framework through which to respond. By using theories on the rhetoric of bullshit, composition instructors may become more adept at constructing these frames of reference and resistance.

The systematic marketization of public education via outsourcing of services to educational technology companies, corporate sponsorships of academic programs, framing education as training for job skills, and the positioning of students as customers, combined with social media algorithms creating online echo chambers, has resulted in an environment where people in the US seem less-equipped to critically assess and thoughtfully react to differing perspectives (Nussbaum). Given all of these factors that seem intent on disrupting, obfuscating, and deceiving well-meaning seekers of information, it is increasingly necessary that we prepare students to be critical consumers and composers of discourse, both in public and academic contexts.

Throughout the special issue of *Literacy in Composition Studies* themed “Literacy, Democracy, and Fake News,” contributing authors repeat the need for pedagogical approaches specifically designed to help students develop critical literacies suitable for evaluating information encountered on social media and through online networks (Miller and Leon). As a response, in this chapter, we illustrate frameworks of analysis to identify fake news and bullshit, providing pathways for students to navigate an oversaturated content-driven media environment and make political choices based on facts and evidence. A fundamental aspect of this intellectual work involves helping students understand where information originates, how it is presented (Laflen, this volume), and through which means it reaches its various audiences (Daniel-Wariya, Branson, and Sanchez, this volume). Before we illustrate two ways to introduce a critical literacy of source evaluation in the writing classroom, we define fake news using a framework and theory of bullshit.

Defining Fake News

In this section, we draw on multiple theoretical foundations to define and work towards a framework of fake news. Because of the fluidity of fake news in terms of form and functions, we find

it necessary to approach fake news as a theory of rhetoric, rather than as a genre or a set of features. Theorizing our way through fake news has been a fundamental aspect of this work. We reference intersecting theories of bullshit as a function of social encounters, conspiracy bullshit, pseudo-profound bullshit, and framework discourse analysis as a means of constructing this theoretical framework and creating a working baseline definition. In short, via this theoretical grappling, fake news can be understood as discourse that is insincerely packaged and presented as newsworthy, insightful, or informative for the purpose of obscuring, obfuscating, and misleading audiences, and of flattening “distinctions among claims to authority” (Leake, this volume). Most often, it is lies or misdirection packaged and presented as objective truth. Typically, fake news is composed and shared by agents seeking primarily to reinforce their own beliefs but also to gain political advantage, receive monetary payment, or simply troll¹ others (Riche). Importantly, there is a recognizable distinction between fake news—which intends to deceive—and news, reporting, or opinion that happens to be (or is later proved to be) factually incorrect. Similarly, it is necessary to draw a line between fake news, as we’re investigating it, and broken political promises. Finally, fake news of the variety we’re interested in almost always seeks to have a political influence, such as in the case of the 2016 US presidential election, and to influence the results of a democratic process.²

A productive definition of fake news is less concerned with identifying or labeling which news or news sources are fake—that’s what fact checkers (and, presumably, journalists) do. Instead, we are interested in approaching fake news as a rhetorical device in and of itself, its utterance the beginning and end of the presumably invoked or entered-into debate. In this way, “fake news” is not strictly a comment on the verifiability or validity of the accuracy of a source’s claims; rather it functions as a synecdoche for the entirety of the source. Characterizing a particular story, report, or idea as “fake news” is an attempt to brand the targeted source as not only inaccurate in the specifically-cited instance, but as necessarily biased and perpetually operating under false or misinformed pretenses. The source that is accused of being fake shouldn’t be taken on its own terms, as it is evidence that the entire operation is faulty. Consequently, the validity or truthfulness of the story or instance is immaterial to this kind of assertion. Thought of in rhetorical terms, fake news is perhaps best understood as *arhetorical*, a slightly modified concept of Aristotle’s *alogos*, something that Debra Hawhee defines as “without reference to rationality,” that “is nonrational (as opposed to *irrational*)” (13-14). Along similar lines, James Rushing Daniel defines “antirhetorical rhetoric” as a sort of tautology that “manufactures the appearance of neutrality” and places dissent outside the parameters of argument, while Patricia Roberts-Miller notes that irrational argument is an indicator of demagoguery.

When we say that fake news is *arhetorical*, we’re not saying that it is *not* rhetorical, we’re saying that fake news has no consideration for rhetoric. However, to provide an equally *arhetorical* response to fake news, or not to respond at all, would be to fall into fake news’s trap. Fake news, both a phenomenon of misinformation and a rhetorical strategy, can have harmful effects on the lived material lives of people, and those with the least power within a given society are positioned to suffer the most. Therefore, conflating *arhetorical*-ness for inconsequentiality is a mistake. Instead, just as Aristotle positioned *logos* as an appropriate response to *logos*, we’re positioning rhetoric as an

appropriate response to the *ar*hetorical, to fake news.

In contemporary parlance, fake news *is related to* bullshit, but it is not *only* bullshit. Harry G. Frankfurt encompassed bullshit as a sort of anti-craft phoniness where the bullshitter is decidedly “trying to get away with something” untruthful (or at least insincere) relating to topics that people would generally not feel comfortable speaking openly about (2). This is why, according to Frankfurt, “politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that [it] can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept” (6). As an indicator of both form and function, discussions of politics are prevalent in contemporary contexts, particularly in conversations taking place across social media spaces.

Bullshit and fake news have much in common. Therefore, applying James Fredal’s framework of “taurascatic” rhetoric, the study of bullshit can be useful for interpreting and analyzing fake news because, like rhetoric itself, taurascatic analysis is concerned with political and semantic interactions. Furthermore, “An understanding of rhetoric will help in the analysis of bullshit—its distinctive qualities and its types—and, more to the point, an analysis of bullshit will clarify the identifying features of rhetoric” (243). A taurascatic approach to fake news will emphasize the role of response, both in terms of how fake news functions as response and of how individuals can respond to fake news.

An important distinction is that bullshit is not anti-truth, it is *atr*uthful—it is so disinterested in achieving a semblance of factual or verifiable truth that accuracy is rendered as entirely outside the framework. Fake news can be understood as bullshit because the speaker or media outlet is interested in influencing the reader but not interested in providing any new or accurate information. In other words, the deception is both the means and the ends.

Investigating how power, in both rhetoric and bullshit, operates as a negotiable function of the interaction between speaker and audience, Fredal defines “bullshit as a function of social encounters” wherein

one party in an encounter feels superior enough (in position, authority, or rhetorical skill, for example) to dispense with the rituals of cooperative interaction, leading the other to feel treated without due deference; when one participant in an exchange appears to have been undeservedly slighted; or when one side of a dialogue is unjustly disregarded. (253, 256)

Because of this power imbalance, an audience might not even be aware that they are being bullshitted.

Similar to how Frankfurt recognizes bullshit as *atr*uthful, Fredal’s focus on interactions of unequal power positions bullshit as *ad*iscursive. In doing so, he differentiates bullshit from rhetoric: “If bullshit is one-sided discourse, and arises in encounters characterized by the perception of arrogance and insult, then rhetoric must be defined as discourse that affords due regard to all participants in an encounter and all perspectives in a dialogue or discourse, particularly the non-dominant positions most likely to go unheard” (256). In other words, rhetoric at least *tries* to get things right.

Roberts-Miller introduced how racist white nationalist/supremacist groups and their audiences use a certain kind of “conspiracy bullshit” in order to make and support claims. The strategic approach detailed by Roberts-Miller confirms group and individual biases through a tautological process that consists of three characteristics: (1) the lack of substantiating evidence is viewed as confirmation for

their original claims, (2) evidence that is disconfirmed by traditionally reliable sources is viewed as further proof of the evidence's validity, and (3) the bullshitter will simply find new evidence whenever the original evidence is substantially disproven. As is the nature of bullshit, these characteristics are *acoherent*. They are constituted of arguments that are not beholden to any sort of recognizable logic or consistency, but, as Roberts-Miller shows, whose only purposes are to meet their influencing goals for certain audiences: "The ideal audience of this data does not exactly understand how it relates to the claims . . . but does understand that it signifies the identity of the ingroup—that the rhetor who presents the data is trustworthy because he or she has performed ingroup identity" (466).

Gordon Pennycook et al. reconcile the contradiction that attempts to define bullshit end up sounding like more bullshit. Focusing specifically on pseudo-profound bullshit, "which consists of seemingly impressive assertions that are presented as true and meaningful but are actually vacuous" these researchers conducted a quartet of scaffolded studies that assessed and scaled individual's receptivity to this particular kind of bullshit (549). In this way, pseudo-profound bullshit can be understood as sort of *aepistemological*, in that it "it attempts to impress rather than to inform; to be engaging rather than instructive" (550). Pseudo-profound bullshit is disinterested in sincere attempts at making or discovering meaning. Ultimately, Pennycook et al.'s research led to the articulation of specific detection strategies, such as conflict detection, analytic and reflective thinking, avoidance of ontological confusion, critical reflection of epistemologically suspect beliefs, and reflective open-mindedness.

Like Pennycook et al., Gee works on a method of reflective open mindedness via what he terms Framework Discourse Analysis (FDA). He embeds FDA at an intersection of the Quine-Duhem Thesis, Karl R. Popper, and Abdolkarim Soroush. According to Gee, the Quine-Duhem thesis states, "while we can never be sure a given isolated claim is true, we can hope that, over time, our theories come closer and closer to the truth in the sense that they make better and better predictions and offer deeper and more inclusive explanations of phenomena" (344). Gee claims that Popper wants to "make participants in [a] debate more aware of their own theories and practices in ways that might improve them and allow, in the future, for their convergence, to some extent, with currently conflicting theories" (345) Summarizing Saroush, Gee says that arguments "should be aimed not at conversion, but at reflection on our own frameworks and those of others" (345). The point then of debate and argumentation is to get closer to a truth via collective efforts. Rather than seeking looking out, we are looking in. The responsibility of "debaters" and "arguers" is to allow critique to be a means of self-reflection and growth. In this way, true debate lacks ego.

Paradoxically, as these authors allude to, there may be benefits to bullshit, such as signaling shared values, easing anxiety among speakers, and building in-group identities. However, when employed as a rhetorical trope in order to deceive or misdirect, bullshit has dangerous implications. Therefore, students (or other consumers of popular and news media) need to be prepared to evaluate and assess information that they encounter, including fake news and those who circulate it. Fake news, like bullshit, is most effective when employed by those benefitting from systemic or material power in order to persuade or control those with less power. Within real world contexts, fake news evokes a response in spite of its *arhetorical*-ness. Therefore, it is incumbent upon students of rhetoric

to be prepared to respond, to sincerely made claims as well as to fake news and bullshit, in academic, professional, and social contexts. With this as a goal, the audience for responses to fake news are not exclusively (or perhaps at all) the bullshitters. Rather, that audience is those who are impacted by the bullshitter.

By using the above theoretical frameworks, we created two courses centered on providing a space for students to identify, define, and resist fake news. In the following section, we outline the structure, content, and rationale for these courses.

Course Design and Rationale

Building primarily on Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple's critical discourse analysis framework of interrogating news values, the pedagogical projects described here develop ways to evaluate and navigate fake news by examining it in terms of structure and impact while showing practical strategies to use in composition classrooms that have become the front line for resistance. We combine our approach with Pennycook et al.'s strategy of open mindfulness, which states a *reflexive* open mind is non-critical and therefore more susceptible to bullshit, whereas a *reflective* open mind is more able to detect a seemingly truthful lie. We provide a critical strategy for deconstructing fake news, helping student readers to better navigate between fact and fiction.

We constructed our two courses, a lower-division composition course taught by Monty and an upper-division discourse analysis course taught by García de Müller, independently, using similar texts but divergent approaches. Since both courses were offered within the same institutional context—as part of a rhetoric, composition, and literacy program at a large, public, Hispanic Serving Institution in the US/Mexico border region of the Rio Grande Valley—a comparative study made thematic and logistical sense. However, it was not until after devising the thematic framework for our respective classes that we realized how much they shared with each other and with other courses being developed by colleagues at other institutions. Students and publics from and around our shared institutional context are more likely to be negatively impacted by Trump's bullshit, which “is centered on the preservation of a conception of American identity rooted in whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity” (Steudeman, “Demagoguery” 8) and its concurrent argument that the United States “needed protection from the hyper-masculinized image of the male Latino criminal entering our country” (Wingard 45). According to the course syllabus for Monty's lower-division comp course, the focus was to “develop thoughtful questions of inquiry, find supporting resources related to our self-selected topics, analyze and vet those sources for credibility and usefulness, compose informed arguments in our writing, and reflect on our own praxes.” Students in this class investigated instances of fake news and social media trends that pertained to their emerging areas of disciplinary interest and to those instances where the popular message contradicted expert or scholarly positions, in particular. Correspondingly, García de Müller's upper-division course used the theme of fake news as a way to teach discourse analysis as a model for navigating media and calling for action.

Student writing on the Internet shapes students' views of audience, which in turn shapes whether they take the position of persuader or inquirer. Rik Hunter argues, “With the development

of new writing technologies, allowing for new kinds of texts and new kinds of relations between readers and writers, come new literacies and new literate identities” (19). Examinations of these new literacies are lacking “a consideration of author and audience and writer and reader beyond either/or positions, i.e., writing-about or responding-to frameworks” (Hunter 21). Our courses, therefore, required students to explicitly outline their frameworks of response to internet discourse including how students determined which discourse was worthy of response.

As Gee argues, focusing on argument as a means of testing self-ideological frameworks of meaning, and meaning making, rather than persuasion or conversion allows for discussions from diametrically opposing viewpoints to be productive and generative. The implication of such a reflective orientated argumentation is asking, “What will it take to make me admit I am wrong?” Or perhaps better yet, “What will I do if I am wrong?” These two questions were the central focus of all student inquiry in each of these courses, as they prime students to critically examine their own processes of evaluating information they’re receiving and creating meaning in their own writing while also creating a scenario where the impulse to use bullshit is minimized. If the point of argumentation is self-reflection and collaboration then bullshit would not be a useful rhetorical tool. In other words, reflective questions such as these can potentially help students limit their own bullshit. Next, we explain how each course was constructed in terms of theme, assignments, reflections, and constructed collaborative framework.

First-Year Writing: Source Evaluations through Everyday Worknets

Monty based his first-year writing class assignment sequence on meeting a set of three objectives that divided the semester into three unofficial units. The first objective was to introduce and interrogate terms like “fake news” and “gaslighting” that had recently gained increased usage in popular discourse, an approach that Jacob W. Craig characterizes as helping students to develop “necessary literacies to discern the credibility of information found online” (25). Second, students synthesized concepts of social media use (Buck), textisms (Grace et al), and worknet theory (Mueller) in order to develop individual frameworks for coding their everyday and academic reading and writing. The third objective consisted of identifying potentials for transfer between students’ everyday mobile and online reading and writing practices and their academic work, specifically for evaluating credibility in secondary sources. Together, these objectives comprised a theme for the course of investigating the complexity of credibility in a contemporary era of instantaneous dissemination of information and rapid-fire response.

As a way to prime their thinking for the course theme, students began the semester by reading two popular news pieces that challenged the credibility of sources they might otherwise consider to be trustworthy: the Office of the President of the United States and the internet search engine Google. These articles had received prominent circulation across social media in the months after the 2016 US presidential election: “Donald Trump Is Gaslighting America” from the online magazine *Teen Vogue* (Duca), and “Google, Democracy and the Truth about Internet Search,” written for the British news website *The Guardian* (Cadwalladr). Students read these articles alongside sources like the Stanford History Education Group’s report on students’ abilities to judge the credibility

of information of online sources (Wineburg et al) and Bethany Davila's study of indexicality as it relates to standard language ideologies, racial privilege, and assumptions of intelligence; these readings helped to establish the need for strategies for evaluating credibility as both an academic and everyday area of need. Collaborating in small groups, students identified features such as author title, publication name, topic, and language as traditional markers of credibility or trustworthiness in popular media. However, having been primed by the assigned readings, students decided that these traditional markers were insufficient when taken on their own. From there, the class developed the following guiding question: What aspects of writing *would* make a writer or speaker more credible?

In order to begin answering this question, students next examined their own everyday writing practices. Our definition for everyday writing drew from William I. Wolff's catalogue of "what counts as writing" and accounted for practices such as texting, social media use, list making, journaling/blogging, gaming-related discourse (e.g., walkthroughs, in-game chats), as well as other writing projects they worked on for non-academic purposes (e.g., posters for sorority fundraisers or presentations for their church group). Starting during class time but continuing on their own, students collected data of their everyday writing in the form screen grabs with annotations. We took our rationale for using students' everyday writing in the composition classroom from Elisabeth H. Buck, who suggests that social media users regularly make rhetorical choices with regards to audience, exigence, constraints, and form. Students submitted everyday writing data once or twice each week via the course learning management system. In the annotations, students commented on their own credibility as writers and readers, often pointing to how savvy use of language and metadiscursive characters could contribute to an individual's *ethos*. Similarly, students suggested that knowing when to post or share content on certain platforms, demonstrating a grasp of *kairos*, would also mark someone as trustworthy.

After collecting data of their everyday writing, students coded their data according to a framework based on three concepts: the rhetorical situation (as described by Buck), "textisms" (Grace et al), and worknet pedagogy (Mueller). Building on similar theories presented by Marilyn Cooper and Bruno Latour, Derek Mueller's approach calls for readers to identify citation phases, "aspects of sources that . . . may illuminate promising possibilities for further inquiry." Mueller identifies four such phases: semantic (shared "high frequency and load bearing" vocabulary), bibliographic (source references and citations), affinity-based (professional and personal connections, such as collaboration and mentorship), and choric ("serendipitous and coincidental events occurring at or near (in place and time) the source's development"). Applying this concept to their everyday writing practices, students were able to see how the credibility of a writer (themselves) comes not only from the source itself, but from its interconnectedness within and across networks.

For the initial step of the coding process, students coded their everyday writing according to audience, exigence, constraints. For instance, if another user was tagged in the data, then their username was coded as "audience." Next, students identified textisms in their everyday writing, such as their use of internet slang, acronyms and initialisms, emoji and gifs, tagging of other users, and use of other metadiscursive characters (\$, %, *, etc.). Finally, students coded their data (using shapes and highlights) according to each type of worknet they identified, such as highlighting slang terms to

indicate semantic worknets, or annotating the timestamp to indicate that the tweet was posted while the student was stuck at home due to seasonal flooding.

Some data were coded multiple times. For instance, according to Katherine Deluca, across social media, hashtags demonstrate interconnectedness across groups and networks both technically (by auto-generating clickable hyperlinks) and semantically (by utilizing certain terms that could be searched and show shared interest). Similarly, links are used by the writer to provide or share evidence of a claim, often from something considered to be a reputable source on the given topic. Both hashtags and links can be viewed as rhetorical moves employed by the reader to show that the ideas they were sharing are not only their own, but representative of a larger shared belief.

Students then applied this framework to analyze their own academic writing (typically a sample from their previous English 1301 course, but some students used work from their other concurrent classes) for comparable markers of credibility. For example, in the same way that students identified “textisms” in their everyday writing, they recognized the function of “academicisms,” for lack of a better portmanteau, in their writing for their college courses. In these cases, correct use of disciplinary language would mark a writer as knowledgeable on a certain topic, while formal language use could mark them as a serious writer. In both cases, these features of writing situated student writers within larger networks of identification and meaning making. In both everyday and academic writing, a writer becomes credible when they can demonstrate that their ideas build upon and are connected to others’ ideas, which themselves can be similarly vetted (see Table 1).

Table 1. Framework of Credibility and Trustworthiness in Student Writing

Concept	Everyday writing evidence/ examples	Academic writing evidence/ examples
audience	social media platform (what’s appropriate/ideal of Twitter is different from Facebook), tagging other users, internet slang, hashtags	disciplinary vocabulary, tone and style of writing, intended publication
constraints	character count, privacy settings, data limits, mobile network access	mode (almost always had to be in traditional essay format), students expected to write about content they were learning for the first time
exigence	timestamp, strategic posting to ensure visibility	interest in topic, “filling in the gaps,” instructor’s expectations, assignment due date
textisms	internet slang, acronyms and initialisms, emoji and gifs, tagging of other users, metadiscursive characters (\$, %, *, etc.)	“academicisms,” disciplinary vocabulary and jargon, formal language

semantic	internet slang, hashtags, translanguageing	“academicisms,” disciplinary vocabulary and jargon, formal language, words/phrases used in class by their professor
bibliographic	hyperlinks, tagging other users, profiles	quotes, citations, reference lists
affinity-based	followers/friends/groups, tagging other users, locations, listing workplaces/employers, photos	instructor, program, university, classmates/friends/tutors who provided feedback
choric	timestamp (to determine what else what happening at the same time), locations, photos, post content	local weather, major news events, movies, whatever was going on in the world/the students life while they were writing

In their individual reflective writing, students theorized about how the discrete concepts named in Table 1 work together and inform each other to create networks of information: social, professional, academic. Next, through whole group discussions, the class established that each network can be understood as having its own rhetorical functions. Then, through the process of mapping out their sources and articulating their interconnectedness, students established two positive trends: the emphasis on worknet caused students to more conscientiously articulate in their writing how their own ideas drew from or built on previous scholarship, and in demonstrating how their work was connected to the worknet, students were able to stake a more authoritative claim for their own credibility as writers.

Finally, students reaffirmed that citations and references to other established sources significantly impacted how credible they assessed a source to be. Therefore, they concluded, showing where ideas came from and providing evidence that could be checked, was a distinguishing feature for credible writing. Students read essays by Lauren Duca and Carole Cadwalladr, although neither writing for scholarly publications, which demonstrated work-netted credibility by incorporating links to support the claims made in their articles, some of which were to scholarly sources. Conversely, by applying concepts of Mueller’s worknet phases as a heuristic for analyzing other secondary sources they found online, students were more equipped to identify and critique claims that were not substantially supported, that were self-referential in their citations (that is, groups of sources that only cited each other as evidence), and that relied on tautological arguments—indicators that the arguments presented in those sources were bullshit.

Through systematic analyses of various forms of written discourse, including their own, students were able to develop what Hunter calls a “hybrid literate identity,” a complex identification that positions students as “readers-as-writers” who are better able to cut through some of the bullshit and to critically read and participate in both scholarly and public conversations. Returning to Craig, developing “a critical understanding of the nature of networks” can amplify awareness of “the

rhetorical possibilities of researching, writing, and distributing information online” (37). By learning how information is disseminated and created through different kinds of networks, students can learn to incorporate those rhetorical strategies into their own writing.

Upper-Division Course: Discourse Analysis and Navigating Social Networks of Fake News

García de Müller divided her upper-division discourse analysis course into three units: defining fake news, analyzing fake news, and responding to fake news. Each section centered on ways to use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a mechanism for theorizing fake news, with the goal of analyzing the processes of meaning making in networks of language. Fake news media served as our main network and our artifact for analysis.

In order to facilitate a discussion on fake news and its relation to bias, on the first day of class, García de Müller had students take one test of their choosing from the Harvard Implicit Bias Online Study. Tests on the site ask the participant to view a series of pictures and respond by placing them into a category. For example, the Native American bias test asks participants to say if a picture is a white American or a Native American. The Old versus Young test has participants choose whether a picture is positive or negative. Students took the test of their choice and did not share their results, nor did they reveal which test they took. Instead, the class as a whole discussed what they learned about their own biases and how this information might be helpful when reading news stories. The bias tests were not used as a metric for whether students held biases, but rather as a way to self-reflect and think about how unconscious bias determines how a person understands news stories. Furthermore, through these discussions, the class enacted a process of “reflective awareness of rhetorical vulnerability,” as articulated by David Riche, which can help students develop a sense of “what it means to be affected by the communicative actions of others” (91).

During the first unit, students created definitions of key terms and concepts that explained newsworthiness, news strategies, and news values with the aim of looking for patterns in how news creators construct and spread effective fake news. Using terms culled from Bednarek and Caple, the class decided that audience proximity, timeliness, negativity, and novelty make an event newsworthy, valuable, and consumable. The more features an article had, the more newsworthy it was and therefore the more popular and consumable. The class then looked for usage of these features as newsworthy strategies in articles gathered from the *Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Breitbart*, *Fox News*, and local news stations. They measured popularity and consumption by searching for the article in the Facebook search bar and counting how many times it was shared, reacted to, and commented on. The search was limited to people who had set their privacy settings to public, so although the search was not comprehensive it gave the class a good metric for how popular an article was compared to how many features of newsworthiness it contained. In general, we found that when an article had all four newsworthy features it was popular on social media.

Now that the class had a working definition of newsworthiness and a way to measure popularity, unit two consisted of constructing a list of questions to ask while analyzing news artifacts with the goal of defining fake news (see Table 2). The questions were constructed from Pennycook et al’s, Freda’s, and Frankfurt’s work on defining deception, lies, and bullshit. Students were particularly

interested in how reader bias could be targeted through pseudo-profound bullshit and *atruthfulness*. This interest was the key focus when writing questions we could ask ourselves during analysis. After writing these questions with the aim to interrogate media for *atruthfulness*, we looked for common themes and decided to categorize the questions into four topics: reliability, appeals and evidence, perspectives and audience, and language choices.

Table 2. FDA-ANA Questions for Analysis

	Questions to Ask During Analysis				
Reliability	What is the underlying ideology/warrant of the news article? How does it affect/effect my personal belief?	Can I separate fact from opinion easily? Does it have more fact or more opinion?	What happens when I read it with a different type of perspective/different set of eyes?	What information is missing?	Does it tell me what I want to hear without facts?
Appeals and Evidence	How does it appeal to my bias?	How does it not appeal to my bias?	Does it use mostly logic or mostly emotion?	Are there unnecessary negative personal attacks? Can the personal attacks be justified?	How do they cite other articles? Just links? Or quotes? Both?
Perspectives and Audience	Who is their target audience?	How many viewpoints are included?	What is the tone (and body language if its visual) of the speaker/writer?	Does it express concern for the opposing side?	Does it criminalize or demonize another viewpoint without justification? Is it justified?
Language Choices	What parts of the other articles are they not citing?	Does it give different opinions and connections without citations?	What emotional words does the author use and why?	Does it present consequences of believing the article?	Is the language vague?

Through a comparative analysis of articles using the questions from Table 2, the class decided that fake news is discourse coming from one viewpoint without evidence, with only partial evidence, or with evidence that misdirects. Fake news ignores all other viewpoints and centers the speaker or writer as the expert without any justification and usually based solely on the ego of the person or persons speaking. Often, the credibility of the speaker is centered even if speaking in opposition to someone who would normally be considered an expert on that topic. The class considered including the feature that many fake news writers frame articles in a negative way but ultimately determined that was not a universal strategy. The chart below shows the final process decided by students.

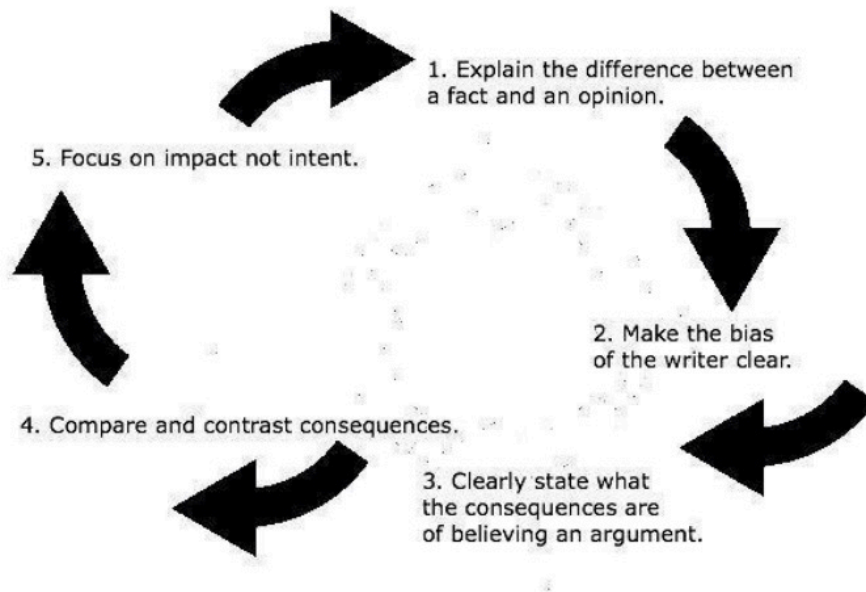


Figure 1. Image of Process for Responding to Fake News.

Students found what they determined to be fake news articles on *Breitbart*, *Fox News*, and in the op-ed section of *The New York Times*. We debated whether op-eds should be considered fake news, but the class decided that if an op-ed uses fake evidence to make a point, even if that point is framed as an opinion, then it should be included. Students could not find any examples of fake news in the *Washington Post*. The class then intersected newsworthiness and the definition of fake news by asking: “How do writers make fake news consumable and popular?”

Seeking answers to this question was the focus of unit three, which centered on ways to process, react to, and respond to fake news. First, the class tracked fake news articles on social media and found that fake news that was angled negatively towards an opponent was more likely to be shared, whereas positive fake news was less likely to be popular. By mid-semester, the class had collaboratively put together what we termed Framework Discourse Analysis for Analyzing News Articles (FDA-ANA) (Table 2). Using Gee’s concept of Framework Discourse Analysis (FDA), which focuses on understanding the frameworks of meaning making of persons who oppose your viewpoints, students determined that there are five effective strategies to combat the impact of fake news (see Figure 1): 1) Explain the difference between a fact and an opinion. 2) Make the bias of the writer clear. 3) Clearly state what the consequences are of believing an argument. 4) Compare and contrast consequences. 5) Focus on impact not intent. Students determined that responding to fake news required all five steps and that during a response often had to repeat steps several times. Figure 1 shows this process. We found that although the process might begin with explaining the difference between fact and

opinion and end with focusing on impact rather than intent, most often students would go to any step when needed.

Gee calls for FDA to be used to create “a better understanding of [our] own framework, learn better ways to argue for it and explicate what it means, face new questions, and discover what parts of [someone else’s] framework might not be working well for their own purposes, values, and their own good and the good of others” (365). Gee’s focus on goodwill and collaboration while maintaining truth and self-conviction allowed for a framework that at once condemned fake news but also considered differences of opinion and opportunities for epistemological intersections. In class and in online spaces, students practiced the FDA-ANA process of identifying, analyzing, and then responding to fake news. During these practice sessions, students would find an article, determine it was fake news using the above matrix, and then give presentations on how to respond to it. Many times, students took these responses to online spaces like their personal Facebook pages and the comment sections of articles. Students reported that when using our action plan by engaging online with folks who believed the fake news, they experienced less contentious arguments. Students did not believe they changed anyone’s mind, but they did have civil conversations. Although this is anecdotal evidence, students had positive online interactions with people they were diametrically opposed to, and therefore, further research needs to be done to test the effectiveness of this strategy.

Closing Thoughts

Recent trends in political discourse, news media, and social media show a disturbing shift away from the thoughtful evaluation of sources for their accuracy and credibility. These trends, and their potential deleterious impacts on college level writers, are the crisis. Even if one does not see the election of Donald Trump to be the complete and unmitigated disaster that it is, the increasing influence of willful misinformation—both in public and academic sectors—undoubtedly requires careful and deliberate responses from instructors of rhetoric and composition.

Ever since the 2016 US presidential election, teachers of rhetoric and composition have felt compelled to respond to this crisis of deliberation and credibility in both their public and academic lives. However, in order to respect those who have suffered materially from the current political conditions, we’re choosing not to frame our responses as potential silver linings but as opportunities to learn and improve, particularly in those areas where our pedagogies may have been counterproductive to objectives of social justice (Steudeman, “Rethinking”). When in a moment of crisis, as many of us found ourselves after the election, it is important to reconsider our practices and link our scholarship to our teaching (Barouch and Ommen; Gentile). Positioned as responses to a critical moment of political and cultural exigence, the courses and built theories we have described in this chapter seek to meet these calls. Based on our experiences with these two courses, we close by offering what we think are significant findings and what we think other writing instructors interested in teaching courses on credibility and fake news should consider.

By using the same theoretical framework of fake news, grounded in the rhetoric of bullshit in our separate courses, we found some common concepts and themes emerged. One was the idea

of grounding the work in the students' lived experiences. In García de Müller's class, students investigated political topics of personal interest, while Monty's students identified rhetorical writing strategies already present in their everyday writing practices. Grounding in these ways allowed students to enter into the course topics and discussions from familiar positions, which in turn allowed them to see how their work in the class would have direct impacts on their lives as students and as public citizens.

Another common theme was the focus on credibility as a rhetorical strategy in conversation with the rhetoric of bullshit. By framing fake news as an ideology rather than a form or function, both courses centered on an interrogation of *ethos* in a much more complicated way than connecting *ethos* to expertise and professional position. In Monty's first-year writing course, students had discussions about what happens when a position previously seen as expert, such as the presidency, can no longer be defined in that way. This conversation in turn led to analyzing what *ethos* was and how to incorporate it in ways beyond positionality. García de Müller's course had a similar theme; however, students considered *ethos* as embedded in linguistic frameworks. The *ethos*, or in this case truthfulness, of a news organization was determined by how that organization framed their articles.

Just because the 2016 US presidential election is a settled matter (at least in terms of its outcome), it does not mean that issues of credibility and evidence are any less exigent for college writing instructors intent on helping students become critical and literate readers and writers. In fact, we both are teaching these courses again. As we do, we offer three potential modifications we seek to implement, which could also serve as scaffolding points for other instructors.

First would be to address the politics of the course head on. Looking back, García de Müller did a much better job of this than Monty did, at least in terms of opening class dialogues that were explicitly political in nature. This may partially be because as García de Müller's upper-division students were comparatively more involved with the political climate and conversations taking place around them. At the same time, Monty's students seemed less lodged into their pre-existing ideologies as our first-year writing students tended to be open to conflicting viewpoints. In either context, forefronting a rhetoric course as a political space can ideally lead to more honest and equitable conversations throughout the term.

Second, García de Müller's course, although focused on politics, did not necessarily focus on explicit work on social justice and civic engagement; however, these themes emerged organically, with many students saying how they would implement the FDA-ANA after the course finished. In fact, in many of the final presentations, students laid out their plan of action post-course; however, this may have been a result of the kind of student who wanted to take the course. In future courses, it will be important to use the fake news framework as a means to investigate themes of social justice.

Third would be addressing the issue of volume. Students in Monty's first-year writing class seemed somewhat preoccupied with how many sources were needed, both for forming a credible argument as well as for meeting assignment requirements. There was a sentiment that more is better. However, as is often demonstrated in popular media, privileging quantity can be another kind of bullshit, a way to overwhelm the audience and distract from the argument itself. Because there is no specific number of references that definitively marks a source as credible, teaching students to be

discerning evaluators of *how much* can be as important as *what kind*. As a starting point, we would once again recommend creating a working definition of fake news grounded in theory and moving away from the binary or pro/con positionings found in some classrooms in favor of triangulated sourcing for arguments.

During the 2016 US presidential campaign season, a clichéd line developed that Trump's supporters take him "seriously but not literally," whereas those resisting his bullshit mistakenly did the opposite. This recalls Harry G. Frankfurt, who asserts that bullshit relies "upon a general recognition that what he expresses or says is not to be understood as being what he means wholeheartedly or believes unequivocally to be true" (9). In other words, by Frankfurt's definition at least, Trump's own supporters know that their hero is a bullshitter and treasure this as a means of power and control.

Unfortunately, fake news, including that propagated by Trump, has plenty of support and "evidence" in online spaces, which further complicates the work of writing instructors. Fake news—like credible argument—relies on the rhetorical notion that networks create, or at least contribute to, credibility. In short, because something is online and available, widely shared, and supports an opinion, it is trustworthy. This seemingly innocuous, but ultimately, dangerous reasoning has become a go-to strategy for the so-called alt-right.³ Historically, when employed by governments, this approach has been known as propaganda. Now, the existence of propaganda does not discredit the rhetorical functions network, but, as demonstrated above, theoretically it does place it as something outside of rhetoric. If rhetoric is interested in response, then fake news—both the news item itself and its invocation as a slur—must be understood as *arhetorical*. When the tag of "fake news" is invoked and applied to discredit something the speaker wants their audience to believe, it is synonymous with bullshit. It is then incumbent upon teachers of writing, literacy, research, and rhetoric, to develop the tools and pedagogies for helping students to become critical readers, evaluators, and responders to discourses bent on deception and manipulation.

Notes

1. Lauri Goodling defines trolling as directed, instigatory interruptions of “opposition’s social media ‘conversations’ to correct or clarify or counter points.”
2. Reporting on the actual impact that fake news had on the 2016 US presidential election varies (Gentzkow; Meyers; Parkinson).
3. Southern Poverty Law Center defines the alt-right “a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that ‘white identity’ is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to undermine white people and ‘their’ civilization” (Southern).

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