

Fake news – The responsibility of university students and staff

Fake news has been around for longer than the coronavirus but it is taking a particularly dangerous form right now. In an era of anti-intellectualism, where evidence-based knowledge and scientists are set aside in favour of click-bait¹ and celebrities, those in higher education need to step up and make a difference.

“Oh, but it’s just a bit of fun!”

Fake news spreads disinformation that can actually stop valuable knowledge being taken seriously. It is also often motivated by only subtly-disguised xenophobia, racism and sexism. Those who work and study in universities have a responsibility to challenge and curtail this dangerous phenomenon.

“It’s my freedom of speech to post what I want to.”

It is true that the university needs to be a strong safeguard of society’s freedom of speech. We should be willing to defend people’s rights to express views we firmly disagree with. This also calls for us to challenge governments who use our fear of the virus to curtail the rights of individuals and organisations to criticise and challenge those in power.

Any person who publishes any statement, through any medium, including social media, with the intention to deceive any other person about (a) COVID-19; (b) COVID-19 infection status of any person; or (c) any measure taken by the Government to address COVID-19, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine or imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months, or both such fine and imprisonment.

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The Coronavirus fake news law in South Africa needs to be monitored by those researchers working in fields such as Human Rights Law to make sure that the State does not overreach its mandate. But we can note that it is quite circumscribed at present and only pertains to *intentional deception*. Ignorantly spreading fake news cannot be punished.

Ignorantly spreading fake news may not be against the law, but it is at odds with the culture of criticality that should be embodied in a university. The 1997 White Paper on Higher Education made clear that one role of universities in the new democracy

¹ A false advertisement to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page.

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was to nurture a 'critical citizenry'. We need to be that critical citizenry now and slow the spread of virtual viruses just as we distance ourselves to slow real ones.

“Why is fake news dangerous?”

We live in an information overloaded world. Posts get spread because they seem interesting rather than because they seem truthful. Posts with shock value or which reinforce prejudices spread like a virus across the internet. These posts escalate fear. They make governmental regulations harder to adhere to. They make the views of a few seem like the opinions and judgements of the majority such as through hashtags. We have seen social media used on an international level to incite propaganda and hatred.

“Why do people make fake news?”

A great many fake news sites make money through selling advertising on their click-bait stories. Some people make up fake news stories to stir fears and anxieties or to feel important. Fake news also allows individuals and organisations to push agendas of division and hatred.

“Why do people spread fake news?”

We live in an era where the views of celebrities outweigh the views of researchers so it is hard for people to figure out what is fact and what is fiction. Most people pass along fake news stories because they are feeling anxious and scared.

“What is the responsibility of higher education students and staff?”

As a community, we need to take our critical skills and apply these in our online spaces.

“How can we identify fake news?”

Practice intellectual distancing alongside social distancing. There are lots of practical steps you can take to pause and check if something is real before you retweet.

- Does the post seem exaggerated? Beware of click bait.
- Who wrote the piece? Google some of the key names in the story. Who is being cited in the story? Google their names too.
- Where was it published? Does this story pop up elsewhere or is it only being carried by a dodgy outlet? Web addresses such as .com.co should serve to raise questions.
- Consider the language being used in the story. Does it seem aligned to the outlet?

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- Do a reverse image search² on Google to check the authenticity of any graphics.
- How old is the story? Lots of stories emerge every few years and are shared as if they are recent events.
- Use Snopes, AfricaCheck and Hoaxslayer or other verification sites to check up on stories that seem odd.
- Whose interests are being served? Is the argument being posted only mentioning one side of a debate and what are the effects of that?

If the story comes to you from someone's best friend's sister's uncle's colleague who used to work in government... see if you can trace the validity down before rushing to forward it on WhatsApp.

“That all seems like too much work. Better just to pass along in case it's true, right?”

No. Passing along stories without checking their validity is not only intellectually lazy, it makes you part of the problem. If you can't do some of the checking suggested above, just don't forward or retweet it.

“I posted a story and now see it is fake. What should I do?”

It is very easy to pass along fake news. Much of it hooks into our own fears and prejudices and some of it looks so sophisticated it seems real. If you get caught like this, do not feel bad. But *do* immediately delete the Tweet or FB status or whatever. If you feel strongly enough to use this as an opportunity to educate others, put up a new post explaining how you were tricked and why it was important to delete the story – and do not provide a link to the story.

“My friend keeps posting fake news. What can I do?”

Bear in mind that all of us can get caught by a fake news story so go for kindness rather than points scoring. Perhaps private message them and ask them to take down the post and explain the dangers, while acknowledging it could happen to any of us. Or post a link below theirs explaining why it is fake news. Most people are unaware of the dangers of fake news and they make these errors out of ignorance rather than intention.

² How to reverse search an image: Open images.google.com Click the camera icon to start a reverse image search. Select the "Upload an image" tab. Select "Choose File" to browse your files and pick an image to search. Or drag and drop an image file into the browser window.

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