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What to do about 'fake news'

A Smarter U episode 6

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Hannah Belayachi: Welcome to A Smarter U, a University of Lynchburg podcast where ideas come together in new ways. I'm your host, Hannah Belayachi, and today we will be discussing a side of media that we always see but never recognize, the bane of president Trump's existence: Fake news. We hear about it all the time, either on social media or from people we talk to surrounding political scandals. But what actually is it? To help us debunk this mystery, we are joined by two university of Lynchburg professors, journalism professor and faculty advisor for the school paper, Dr. Ghislaine Lewis. and philosophy professor, Dr. Devin Brickhouse-Bryson. So we've heard the term a lot in recent years, especially among the Trump campaign, but Dr. Lewis, how do you define fake news?

Dr. Lewis: Fake news would be a story that's untrue. It's a story many times that's purposely made up. It's sometimes outright lies that are purposely spread across the spectrum. Sometimes it's just made up stuff because somebody thinks it's funny and then people start taking it seriously. What it's not is us criticizing somebody. What it's not is stories that defy what we think about ourselves or what we think about a particular topic, which I think is the term popularized by the president. Anything that's negative about him then it must be fake news.

Hannah Belayachi: So how can readers distinguish between real news sources and fake ones? Because some news websites like The Onion are obviously satirical, but some people, like you said, take it for granted. So how do you tell the difference?

Dr. Lewis: Well, I think The Onion obviously advertises itself as a satire. I think it's very important for us to go check our sources. So when you look at a news site or The Onion site, it literally says in the description or in the subheading that it's a satirical site. I think it's always really important to go back to those "About" pages to make sure that the sites that you're on are legitimate sites. You should have "About" pages, you should have descriptions about the journalists and what their their platforms are, the types of stories they cover. And that's how you know you're on a legitimate news website. So definitely look at difference between The New York Times and The Onion. Look at the difference between The Washington Post and The Onion. Look at the difference between the school newspaper and The Onion, right? We have an "About" page. You can find a way

to contact the journalists who are writing the stories. And I think that's always really important.

Hannah Belayachi: So using the methods that you just put forth on how to distinguish real news sources and fake ones, and Dr Brickhouse-Bryson, I'll open this question to you as well, do you think it's the responsibility of the consumer or the media to ensure the information that they're publishing or taking in is correct?

Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson: It's gotta be both, of course, I would think, but I'll let you jump in.

Dr. Lewis: I think. I think it's everybody's responsibility. I think as a good news organization, you always have to fact check your journalists. Just because a journalist comes to you with a story doesn't mean that story is necessarily true, which is why we have massive editorial teams that go back and make sure that the sources you said you've spoken to, you've actually spoken to. Now as a good consumer, the first story that we read is not necessarily the best story to read or the best platform to get your information from. And so it's always important to double check, triple check, and look at a variety of sources on this one topic. I think it's very important for us to be an educated electorate and the only way to educate yourself as an electorate is to read widely.

Hannah Belayachi: You mentioned that journalists should also be fact checking and making sure that the information that they're publishing is accurate. So what are the best practices that journalists use to fact check and make sure that everything is all right?

Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson: I think that's an important point to emphasize that no educated consumer of news should be relying on any one news source, even if it is the greatest news source in the world. Relying on one system of gathering the facts is not going to be a recipe for having an accurate view of the world.

Dr. Lewis: So I think one of the basic things that, that as a journalist you should be doing is make sure that you're talking to multiple sources. Not every source that you talk to is going to make your story. Our rule of thumb is that a good story should have at least three sources. At least two of those three sources should be human beings, which means that we're not just getting our sources based on what some mythical person said on the internet, right? At least two of those sources should be human beings. Now, just because you've spoken to three people or you've spoken to two humans, doesn't mean that they've told you the entirety of that story. The only way to make sure that you're reaching saturation on all the ideas on a particular story is to talk to more than three people. So let's say we're limited on time, but we're able to contact our three sources. You need to find two more people to make sure that what those three people told you is in the ballpark of what the story should be about. Because if we just rely on those three people, we might be missing the integral part of the story.

Hannah Belayachi: So to talk more about the creation of fake news and why it's a big part of the explanation as to why supporters of political figures are quick to blame it, as seen by Donald Trump and his campaign whenever so-called fake news does come up, I'd like to ask Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson whether or not it can be conspiracy theory, but just first to ensure clarity. What are conspiracy theories and what precisely makes believing in one unjustified?

Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson: It's not that I think necessarily that we should think that fake news and conspiracy theories are the same exact thing, but I do think it's instructive to think about conspiracy theories and fake news alongside each other. My diagnosis is that they sort of have a similar route. What is a conspiracy theory? Maybe a rough and ready definition would be something like, a theory of some phenomenon, a system of explaining some phenomenon which relies on just increasingly complex, increasingly ad hoc hypotheses. You know, we're presented with some countervailing body of data, you know, I understand the world is this way, but here's a piece of data that seems to conflict with that. Well, rather than giving up my theory or amending my theory in some significant way, I accommodate that new data with this, you know, this ever-increasing strange hypotheses about how the world works.

Many of us are familiar with the flat earth conspiracy theory, of course. Not something that people have really believed in the past, but a conspiracy theory that has taken a hold these days among some quarters. It's not that they can't accommodate the data. Indeed, the sort of frustrating, even more disturbing phenomenon is that they tried to accommodate the data. So we're not going to solve that just by, you know, giving them more pieces of data. We need to have a more fundamental conversation about the right ways to think about explaining the world. The fundamental way to combat conspiracy theories, it seems to me, is to prepare your own mind for the ability to question what you think, you know, rather than holding onto one's beliefs in the face of a contrary evidence.

We need to all be prepared to confront the reality that you could be wrong. You know, if I have this belief, this systematic explanation of the way the world is, but I get evidence that is in tension with that or pushes me or challenges me in some way, I need to be prepared to revise the way I understand the world and conspiracy theories, by their very nature, don't do that. Fake news I think exhibits some similar properties. You know, suppose you are entrenched in a particular political position and you read a news story that seems to present facts contrary to that position. Rather than confronting the reality that you could be mistaken, that your entrenched political view could be misleading or incomplete or just false, you accommodate the data by saying, "Well, no, that person's just biased and therefore everything they're saying is false," or even worse, "it's a grand conspiracy and they're plotting with the whoever to manufacture this story," or just, "they're outright lying; I just don't believe them because they're outright lying." So it's this resistance to evidence that goes contrary to what you already believe. That I think is a deep root of both

conspiracy theory thinking and the fake news phenomenon. Does that make sense?

Hannah Belayachi: I understand in the sense where, conspiracy theorists like they have the data, so to speak, to back up their claim. But for fake news, people tend to take it and what you're saying is that they don't have the idea that it could be wrong and they just take it to heart and they don't fact check. They don't take the journalistic measures that informed citizens should.

Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson: Right. So if I encounter a new source that's threatening my view in some way, I can just dismiss that view as though I'm dismissing a new body of data, but hold on to my theory of the world.

Hannah Belayachi: Exactly. So we see this a lot, I'm going to bring this up again, but with the president, when he talks about fake news, Dr. Lewis, you mentioned earlier, whenever the media is criticizing his campaign, he calls it fake news, and people on both sides of the political aisle, they see the other side's media sources as untrustworthy. So what does this mean about the relationship between the press, politicians, and the public?

Dr. Lewis: I think it's a very fractured relationship right now. I think it's a fragile relationship, but I think it's a relationship that can be fixed, right? I think the journalists on their part, they see themselves going out and doing the best that they can possibly do given the climate. Right? They're not able to report on some of the things happening as openly as they hope to be because so many people are afraid, right? The politicians, everybody seems to have coalesced around party ideology at the moment instead of what's in the best interest of the community. Right? And as a public, I think we're tired. I think we're extremely tired. There's so many conversations that start with, "I don't know how you can inhale that much news because I am just avoiding anything newsy at the moment," but I think we've got to realize that in order to be an active citizen and in order to participate in our democracy, we've got to be able to trust that the news that we're getting from whichever side we're getting it from is being done in our best interest.

Dr. Lewis: Right? When journalists go out and they do all the hard work that they do, it's not because they want to do it, it's because they want to make sure that when people are asked to participate or they're asked to make decisions, that they're able to make those decisions to the best of their ability. Right? And for politicians, they should want the same thing as well. Right? They should want an electorate who's informed, who is tuned in or plugged in and ready to hold them accountable. Right? We just can't brush everything under the rug and hope for the best. That's not how we move forward.

Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson: Yeah, I guess the flip side of what I was saying before about conspiracy theory and this interpretation of fake news being a resistance to sort of challenging data. The other side of that coin would be that it's then incumbent upon us to seek to challenge our own beliefs, incumbent upon us to not get bogged down,

not get tired, in the face of this phenomenon. But to seek, to find the truth, to seek to check that our beliefs are as true as possible. So that means that has a positive and a sort of negative, implication that we have to try it and read as much news as we can. I think try and be as informed as possible, but also reflect on our own biases, our own things that we may be overlooking.

Challenge our own belief systems, as much as possible. I don't think we should be, be too high horsey about it and say, well, you know, those conspiracy people, they don't challenge their beliefs. Well, if the lesson of conspiracy theories and fake news is that we must all work to ensure that our beliefs are as accurate as possible and that can be very difficult to do, then it's incumbent upon us to take that work seriously and think about the justification for our beliefs. You know, we all have beliefs about the way the world is, beliefs about science, beliefs about what politically should be the case, that is beliefs about justice or something like that. It's incumbent upon us to check those beliefs, to seek out what our justification for those beliefs is.

Hannah Belayachi: I agree. And I feel like nowadays with such polarized ideologies, when it comes to the political spectrum, like supporters of either the Republican or the Democratic party, if their favorite candidate is attacked, they're so quick to villainize the media and they don't take that extra measure to make sure, like, "Wait, let me go check for the facts. Let me make sure that what I'm being told is the full story." And I feel like part of that is just their bias that their party is right. Like you were mentioning earlier. Have we seen similar moments before in either in the United States or elsewhere when politicians saw the press as adversaries and public trust in both eroded?

Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson: That's obviously a question. Mainly for the historians, We'd have to ask them principally. I think, Nixon of course had an notoriously contentious relationship with the press. So I don't think it's completely alien. My amateur historian's view, and I'll stress that you know, we should ask the historians, but my amateur's view is that it does seem to be worse in a certain sense. So although again, it's worth reflecting that, you know, we've had contentious relationships with the press forever.

Dr. Lewis: I think you've got to remember that the mandate of journalism is to hold people in power accountable and to give voice to the voiceless. When you're trying to hold people accountable, there's always going to be some level of tension. Obviously in my young lifetime, we haven't seen tension to this level here in the States outside of Nixon. But I think when you look at lots of other countries around the world where there isn't as much press freedom as outlined in the Constitution, then you find that there's always a lot of tension between the media and those in power. But in those cases, people get thrown in jail, right? Hopefully we never get to that level here. I think the erosion that we're seeing is a little disheartening. Especially if you're somebody who believes in the Constitution and you believe in the role of the press and you believe in the separation of powers, then it can be uncomfortable. But I think there are lots of ways for us to come back from this.

Hannah Belayachi: So Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson, you mentioned how, whenever people consume media so to speak, and it is fake news, they just take that belief to heart. But how would a philosopher, such as yourself, recommend that we examine and challenge our beliefs and the media that we consume?

Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson: I was using the language before, and this is slightly technical language from philosophy, but it's perfectly an ordinary idea. I said we should check to make sure that our beliefs are justified. This is a basic notion in epistemology, which is the study of what knowledge is. We want to make sure our beliefs are justified, which means that they have the right kinds of evidence, the right kinds of support. Of course, there's some question in philosophy about what exactly does make a belief justified, but we know that, you know, at least rough and ready, that a belief is justified to the degree that evidence supports it. A belief is justified to the degree that it fits within a theory that explains the data well without recourse to too many ad hoc hypotheses and so on.

Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson: A belief is justified if you don't have an expertise in the subject, and an expert who does tells you, you know, I've studied this, and this is the way it is. For instance, we have beliefs about history, we have beliefs about science, but of course, we can't all be historians. We can't all be scientists. We can't all develop the specialization to get advanced knowledge in those fields. So at a certain point it's just a fact of human knowledge, of fact, of justification that we do have to rely on experts, and this is, I think maybe another route that there's other sort of sociological pressure that. Some people have an adverse view of experts. But when you reflect on the necessity of expertise for the building of knowledge, you know, we're finite creatures.

Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson: No one of us can build the knowledge that we can build together as a species. We, of course have built a staggering body of knowledge about the world, but that's something only something we can do collectively. So it's just a basic feature of the justification of our beliefs that we have to rely on other people's knowledge in the formation of our own beliefs. And that's kind of scary. Like who counts as the expert? Obviously experts can be wrong. It's not like experts have magic to always have correct beliefs. They too can be wrong. So if the scientists tell us, you know, black holes behave thusly, but they turn out to be wrong. Well, our beliefs about the way black holes work, they may have been justified, but because the scientists told us so, but you know, if it turns out it's wrong.

Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson: So in other words, there's always a danger that even if our beliefs are justified, they could, they could still be wrong. So we have to be constantly checking and rechecking, asking the experts "Okay. Now what's your best understanding of the world? What's your best understanding of the history? What's your best understanding of the climate? What's your best understanding of...", You know, pick your phenomenon. We'll have to be paying attention if we want to have justified, accurate beliefs about the world as much as possible. We'll have to be paying attention to what the experts are saying, and I don't mean experts, you

know, just people who care about an issue and, and devote their time and energy to and their expertise to thinking about an issue. Does that make sense?

Hannah Belayachi: That makes sense completely because that's part of the reason why, when experiments occur, like they get done over the years to make sure that what they have is right so that they can move forward if they want to add on to the experiment. There was an experiment, essentially just to see how drugs affect the body and everything. And there was a rat placed in an empty cage with drugged water and regular water. And he almost nine times out of 10 preferred the drug water. But, later on when the experiment was revisited, they realized that the rat was just by himself in that park. And so they essentially built a rat heaven, so to speak. So there were other rats in the park with him, tubes, and an abundance of food and everything.

Hannah Belayachi: And in that park, the rat always preferred the regular water, like the drugged water wasn't as appealing anymore. So I feel like it is important to go back and make sure that exactly, because something can always be missing. And I feel like that's part of what Dr. Lewis is trying to make with journalists checking their sources, making sure that they've gotten every piece of the story to make sure that the media is informed as possible. So now I'd like to talk about a little bit about the perception gap because what I feel like part of the divide between fake news and politicians, the press and that whole relationship deals with it. So according to the Huffington Post, a perception gap occurs when the intention set forth and communicated is misunderstood by your audience. So in a study conducted by More in Common on the perception gap, it was found that consumption of most forms of media including talk radio, newspapers, social media, and local news, is associated with a wider perception gap. So, essentially if you listen to more radio, you read more newspapers, you become more polarized in your belief.

Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson: I'll have the cliché cautionary note that the, of course correlations and not the same as causation. I did find that story interesting. It wasn't completely clear to me; we hadn't necessarily established a causal relationship between, I mean, I'm no expert of course, so we should look at the studies more carefully. But it wasn't immediately clear to me that the studies were sufficient to establish that there was a causal relationship between consuming more news and a widening perception gaps. So that's just one note of caution.

Dr. Lewis: I think, you can be reading more news, but are you reading more of the same news? Am I diversifying the types of news, or the types of talk radio, or the types of things that I'm inhaling on social media? Or am I just using things that support my bias? Right? I think people want to feel that their beliefs are validated. And so yes, if I'm liberal, I'm going to read more liberal news. But as an informed person in the electorate, it's important to know how everybody's thinking and not just how you feel, right? Because yes, Tom, Dick and Harry might validate you, but there's Susan and Gary over here whose ideas are equally as valid. And so it helps for us to understand the entire pie and not to just focus on the things that validate our ideas. I think I looked at the study and I

was slightly confused. Honestly. I think we'd have to go back and look at the methods of the study before we can see whether we agree or disagree with how they came up with their conclusions.

Hannah Belayachi: I agree. Because there's another finding listed right under there that says that college education results in a distorted view of Republicans among liberals. And as a college student, I found that surprising because the whole point of, I feel like public education just education in general is to help the individual gain the ability to form their own opinions. It doesn't say whether it was the college was the cause as you mentioned, that precautionary warning, but as a college student, it's just very concerning that like what is going on on campus or how are the ideas mixing in a way where Republicans have such a negative reputation. So how do you feel like the purpose of education plays a role in forming the ideologies of young students, of young voters?

Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson: Well, there's a principle and philosophy called the principle of charity. This is an important principle that you learn as you're trying to think through difficult texts about fundamental questions. The principle of charity being that in order to engage with some position, in order to understand an opposing viewpoint, you first must do everything that you can to reconstruct your opponent's position. Understand the ins and outs completely of your opponent's position. Maybe even try to improve on your opponent's position. You know, if you see some kind of weakness in your opponent's position, maybe see if you can patch it while maintaining the spirit of your opponent's position. Even build up your opponent's position. Then and only then can you proceed to think, now, what are my criticisms? What are the problems that I see with this view such that I think my view is superior. You know, maybe you're comparing two views about morality. You think this is morally required, the other person thinks it's not, or whatever. The first step is to reconstruct their view as carefully and as charitably as possible with as much kindness as possible. And then you can proceed to the criticism. And of course the criticism is an important stage. Is this political view the right way to understand things or is that political view? That's an important question. We're trying to figure out how we should vote, what we should do, what is justice, so we're not just thinking about each other's views and going nowhere. We want to figure out what way we should go, what's justice, or whatever our question is. So we must get to the criticism stage. We're going to have disputes and we're going to have to exchange arguments about what is and isn't the right way to understand the world. But before you can do that, before you can really engage with a position, you have to be sure, doubly sure, that you fully understand and charitably can reconstruct the opposing position. Because if you don't, there's a great danger of just ships passing in the night if I think that you believe X, but X is just some sort of warped crazy view of what you actually think, you know, that you don't really think X and then I attack, attack, attack X. Well I haven't done anything. You don't believe X, you believe some more sophisticated version that I was missing. I didn't understand, so I have to be sure that I understand your view fully before I can make critical contact with it. And it seems to me that the perception gap is just an instance of sort of uncharitable thinking writ large that we assume that our political or our

intellectual or otherwise opponents, we assume that our opponents have these simple, childish, absurd or even repugnant views and attack those things. While it's easy to attack repugnant views, that's not the point. You have to be sure you understand what their view is and then you can not attack but, but reasonably criticize. If you don't understand their view, you can't even get into the space of reasonably criticizing it. You're just doing this is the fallacy of the straw man and you're just setting up a straw man, a little straw scarecrow and pushing it over and saying that that you've won, when you really need to set your opponent up as a fully reasonable person, or at least try to imagine that they're a fully reasonable person, and then see if your position can beat, can critically, reasonably overcome theirs. So it seems to me like a basic lesson, a basic tenant of becoming an educated person is just training yourself to think in that way. Training yourself to understand that the world is complicated and that there are other views other than your own and that your views can be challenged. But that as part of trying to work through it, you have to try to understand other potential views on the subject, understand them as carefully as possible, and then see what the light of reason shows about whether your view or their view is superior. Does that make sense?

Hannah Belayachi: Yeah, that completely makes sense. I feel like that ties back to Dr. Lewis about what she was mentioning when, how people are listening to the same news sources and that they really have a responsibility as a member of the electorate to inform themselves on all points of view.

Dr. Brickhouse-Bryson: What might a reasonable person on the other side or a reasonable person on the other side think and how might I respond to that person? Yeah.

Hannah Belayachi: So Dr. Lewis, what should future journalists think about relating to the issue of fake news? So what should they think about in related to the issue of fake news in the sense of how can they avoid writing it because sometimes it just sort of happens like they don't have all the facts or there will be like a little bit of bias in there like just starting out. How can they prevent their own political bias if they are writing for one of those polarized media sources from presenting all the facts to their readers?

Dr. Lewis: Well, I am a big proponent of third person objective. We are going to try to keep ourselves out of the news as much as possible because it's got nothing to do with you, right? We're trying to tell other people's stories and so since you're telling other people's stories, I shouldn't be a part of it. How I feel should not come into the way I cover something regardless of if I work for a polarized network or not. Right? Because your job as a journalist is to go out and, to the best of your ability, get the facts and on paper. All we're doing is writing those facts down and then disseminating them to the public and then the public gets a chance to make a decision, right? We're not talking heads. A good journalist is not what you see on TV every night, except if you're watching local news, right? Many of the national networks, what they are are talking heads. A lot of these people never went to journalism school, right? People just like to talk and there are people who like to listen to them, right? A good journalist is going out there,

they're getting the facts, and then they're presenting those facts to their audience. And then the audience gets to decide. I should not be deciding for my audience. And I think that's part of the problem.

Hannah Belayachi: So if that's the case, how can people protect themselves from falling into this sort of perception gap, like those talking heads present. And how can the media do a better job of playing a role of protecting that perception gap from happening?

Dr. Lewis: Well, I think what we've got to remember is that the foundation of all great news coverage comes from print, right? We're so focused on what's happening online, but the talking heads, the people online, a lot of those people form their opinions and disseminate those opinions based on what's happening in print, where all the real journalists work. Right? I think it's important for us to not only think about what we're getting online, but to actually sometimes from time to time, pick up a physical paper, pick up your local paper, pick up a copy of whatever your favorite paper is to New York Times, Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, which is a great paper, right? Pick up a physical copy of a magazine, TIME magazine, Newsweek, the New Yorker, right? Pick up one of those things and read the work of some of the great journalists out there. I think it's always important for us to make sure that we're inhaling both sides of the argument that we're just not playing into our confirmation biases. I think it's also important to remember that there are a whole host of people out there whose daily job it is, or whose mission it is, who have this great idealized view that the work that they're doing is going to make a difference, right? We're holding people accountable and we're giving voice to the voiceless. And I think sometimes we have to trust them, right? We have to be able to disseminate between fake news and real news. I think it's important that we keep ourselves as informed as possible. And if we think that we're keeping ourselves as informed as possible, then we shouldn't be falling into the perception gap and we should be able to go out and make good informed choices.

Hannah Belayachi: All right, well that's all the time we have for today. Dr. Lewis, Dr. Brickhouse Bryson, thank you for joining in the discussion and to all our listeners. We're glad you came. Is there a Lynchburg professor or alum you'd like to hear on the podcast this season or a topic you'd like us to tackle? Email ucm@lynchburg.edu to let us know. Until next time!