Democracy & Education

The Conundrum of (Mis)Information Literacy.

A Book Review of *Unpacking Fake News:*
### *An Educator's Guide to Navigating the Media with Students*

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I SIT DOWN TO write this review in the aftermath of the violent insurrection that was undertaken by a mob of Donald Trump's supporters in the U.S. Capitol complex on January 6, 2021. Reading and rereading this book in this uniquely dangerous moment was a surreal experience because, even though it was published less than two years ago, it felt simultaneously cutting-edge and outdated, prescient and not-enough in its efforts to prepare educators to support students in processing the roots, characteristics, and consequences of misinformation in a polarized political landscape. When he penned the introduction, editor Wayne Journell indicated that the "guardrails [of democracy] are still holding" (p. 7); now, they are not.

This is not a criticism of the book, of course—the pace with which the media is changing and democratic precedents are collapsing is beyond what any text could keep up with. To the contrary, the contributors to this edited volume make crucial contributions to the fields of civics and media literacy education by insisting that classroom considerations of fake news (defined largely as deliberately curated misinformation rather than biased news content or facts with which one disagrees) avoid simplistic true/false or fact/opinion binaries and instead delve into the complex historical, cultural, and psychological elements that shape news creation, dissemination, and consumption. Teachers can find within its pages concise and accessible analyses of the concepts and trends that are animating much of recent civics scholarship—from motivated reasoning and online news evaluation to participatory politics and meme culture—
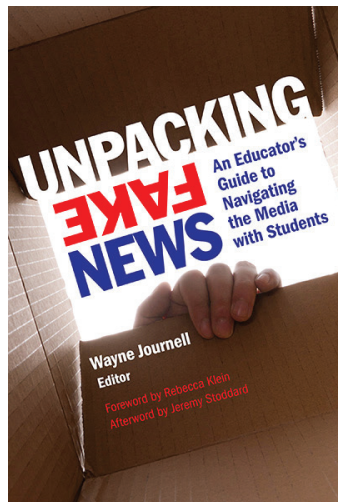
accompanied by applicability to day-to-day curriculum and pedagogy.

At the same time, the attempted coup does bring into striking relief some of the thorny questions that chapter authors raise but do not fully answer. These questions relate to the issues of power, race, and perceived ownership of this country that undergird how fake news works, and they speak to the kinds of tough conversations that teachers and researchers will need to have if we in the education field hope to seriously address its mortal threat to democracy.

The early chapters of the book set up these provocative questions. In the introduction, Journell argues that analyses of fake news need to move beyond "a media literacy standpoint" to engage with "systemic issues" that seed its influence (p. 8). H. James Garrett then begins to lead readers toward these systemic issues in the first chapter by detailing the psychosocial foundations of

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misinformation; he concludes that any pedagogical attempts to address this media ecosystem must begin by acknowledging "our emotional attachments and psychical investments in particular stories about the world" (p. 27).

And in the very next chapter, Ashley Woodson, LaGarrett King, and Esther Kim lay bare the role that power, control, and racist oppression has historically played and continues to play in the American psyche and in the narratives spun by fake news. They detail how misinformation often serves to uphold the interests of white people and delegitimize the concerns of Black citizens, ending their analyses with the searing line, "We can call ourselves one nation, but let us keep it real: *Us* is the moral community with which you identify, and *them* is just about everyone else" (p. 38).

These words resonate in my mind as I recall the images of white supremacist iconography on the clothing of those who stormed the Capitol. The early chapters of this book demonstrate powerfully that any conversation about media is insufficient without broader dialogue about the identities, beliefs, and political aims of the people wielding and consuming it. When the research (described in these pages) shows us that individuals often persist in believing information demonstrated to contain falsehoods when that information supports their deeply held ideological perspectives, then it seems our focus as educators needs to be on how to talk with students about the ideologies that they and others hold and the implications of those perspectives for shared democratic life, specifically in terms of social power and control.

Yet the remaining chapters move in a different direction, addressing these issues mostly implicitly and instead recentering research and classroom activities that shift the focus back toward robust interrogation of the media itself. These are strong chapters that offer useful protocols and lessons for helping students analyze the information they find on their social media feeds (Chapter 3) and in political memes (Chapter 7), evaluate online news sources (Chapters 4 and 6), and critically consume media in the early grades (Chapter 8). In each of them, however, the vitriol and chaos and violence in U.S. civic and political life is a bit removed from the picture, as is discussion of how students might feel and what they might believe or say out loud about the media they evaluate in class. Is this related to the discomfort many teachers feel about wading directly into politically sensitive waters? Or broader philosophical debates about objectivity in the classroom?

These are questions that will surely concern teachers and teacher educators reading this text, and the consequences of under-addressing them are strikingly communicated in the chapter written by Avner Segall and colleagues detailing research about student discussions in a high school social studies class about immigration policy. The authors explain how even when students were provided with carefully curated packets of

evidence that had been vetted for credibility prior to classroom discussions, they quickly invoked misinformation they had heard or discounted evidence they did not agree with as fake news. The teacher in the study was described as taking a "hands-off approach," mostly "staying out of the way" after reviewing the evidence packet and occasionally playing "the role of devil's advocate" (p. 79).

I felt discomfort reading the excerpted transcripts and analysis of the classroom talk, which focused on the discourse moves that a white male student made to dominate the conversation with misinformation that fit his worldview. I worried about the extent to which other students in the class felt intellectually safe. I wondered about the responsibility of the teacher. The authors addressed the complexity of the situation but acknowledged that they had little guidance to offer; they mused that any teacher correcting a student's belief in misinformation amounted to "wad[ing] into dangerous territory" and asked, "How can teachers be assured that they are not injecting their own motivated reasoning and biased information into students' discussions?" (p. 88). I am concerned about leaving this question to dangle because it gives the impression that all that exists in society are sides to be taken and that teachers can (or perhaps should?) remove themselves from any responsibility to seek truth alongside their students or defend democratic values.

Educators reading this chapter—and indeed the entire book—are thus left with a conundrum. If they take up its charge to move beyond simple media literacy techniques and explore the deeper systemic issues that undergird misinformation in their classrooms, they will likely be faced with sensitive and difficult conversations like the one described here. Yet how they might facilitate these conversations—and what their roles as individuals with their own civic and political identities should be in those conversations—is difficult to address. And so the compromise seems to be an attempt to grapple with the media in all of its nuance but to tread lightly (or not at all) around what they and their students believe.

Considering the challenges that this country now faces, I suggest that our field is compelled to consider the extent to which we are satisfied with this compromise. This book is an extremely valuable tool in these considerations not only because of the research and resources that it provides to offer context to the myriad psychological, cultural, and political issues surrounding fake news but also because of the questions it raises that have not yet been answered by any of us.

Reference

Journell, W. (Ed.). (2019). *Unpacking fake news: An educator's guide to navigating the media with students*. Teachers College Press.