

'Fake News' Is Far More Pervasive Than We Realize

Speaking on Capitol Hill on Thursday, Hillary Clinton warned of "The epidemic of malicious fake news and false propaganda that flooded social media over the past year." Coming from a very different perspective, Milwaukee sheriff David Clarke claimed on Fox News that "fake news" was created by the liberal media, beginning with the "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" propaganda in the police shooting of Michael Brown in 2014. Clarke pointed directly to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in allegedly spreading this "fake news."

In reality, I believe that "fake news" is far more pervasive than we realize, for the following reasons.

1. Headlines themselves are often fake. I used to assume (wrongly so) that a headline was simply a short (even if sensational) summary of an important news item, but in many cases today, headlines now put a slant (often a misleading one) on the news being reported.

To cite a recent (and highly relevant) example, on Thursday, the Drudge Report featured as its main story, "Bitter Hillary Blames 'Fake News'," suggesting that Hillary directly blamed her defeat on "fake news."

The Drudge headline was linked to an article on The Hill titled "Clinton blasts 'epidemic' of fake news," yet nowhere did that article state that a "bitter Hillary" directly blamed fake news for her defeat. Instead, the article quoted her as saying that "it's now clear the so-called fake news can have real-world consequences," also stating that "This isn't about politics or partisanship... Lives are at risk—lives of ordinary people just trying to go about their days, to do their jobs, contribute to their communities."

She was apparently referring to an incident this week in which “a gunman entered a pizzeria in Washington that was at the center of a false viral conspiracy theory that alleged it was home to a pedophilia ring operated by Clinton and her inner circle.”

The Hill article did note that, “Some Democrats have argued the spread of anti-Clinton fake news online contributed to her electoral loss to Donald Trump,” but nowhere did it state that a bitter Hillary blames this for her defeat, which was clearly implied by Drudge. Yet how many millions of Drudge readers even bothered to read the article carefully, let alone listen to the whole speech?

2. News articles themselves often put their own slant on speeches and events. During the Republican primaries, Jeb Bush was giving a talk to a small group of supporters, and after making a point he thought was important, he then suggested with a smile that it would be a good moment for applause. I watched the video and thought it was a cute moment—I looked at it through the perspective of a public speaker myself—and I asked my wife Nancy to watch it as well. She too thought it was cute rather than embarrassing.

But quite a few media outlets reported on poor Jeb’s embarrassing moment, supplying their interpretation of the facts rather than simply reporting the news—really, there was nothing to report—meaning that readers who did not watch the video would likely draw a very different conclusion from those who viewed the video for themselves. This too is “fake news.”

3. We are so used to getting our news through biased media outlets and opinion commentaries that we fail to use a good filter. A few years ago, my radio producer handed me an article during my live daily talk show, documenting how Ann Coulter had made a comment on a major news network that would be considered extreme even for her. It so caught my attention that I talked about it during my next segment, only to find

out that my producer had been duped by a false website (something he is always on the lookout for), and I had not spotted the deception either.

It's one thing, though, to be duped by intentionally fake, satirical news sites, like The Onion, which proudly (and facetiously) calls itself "America's Finest News Source," or the Christian site The Babylon Bee, which bills itself as "Your Trusted Source for Christian News Satire," perhaps to help its all-too-gullible Christian readers.

It's another thing not to realize that the news as reported by Breitbart is often quite different than the news as reported by the Huffington Post (the two websites sometimes appear to be operating in alternative universes) or to fail to remember that many articles on these news sites are often opinion pieces which, by design, offer the commentator's particular bias.

What this means is that we need a "hermeneutic of suspicion" (to use the phrase of a biblical scholar, meaning we ought to read some things with a level of suspicion), doing our best to get our facts in order before repeating them or forming opinions based on them. It also means we should recognize which websites and news sources tend to be most reliable, giving more weight to what they have to say.

Most of all, it means that in this era of sound bites and memes, we need to learn to think again—that's right, we need to learn how to engage our brains in focused thinking and reasoning—rather than merely repeating what our favorite website or commentator or reporter has to say.

I can assure you it's well worth the effort. {eo}