Teaching Humorous Accounts of Fake News – And Why They're Not So Funny
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Using news stories that go viral on the web as a focus, I teach community college students in New York City to assess the credibility of information, by analyzing authorship, responsible organizations, and academic credentials. My experiments pre-date the 2016 election, with its fake news mills, bots, and false Facebook identities. Four years earlier, I observed that it wasn't effective to merely tell students that they must use credible sources in their college writing. They also needed to understand and identify the characteristics of factual reporting and scholarly writing. Our students, coming from a segregated and unequal education system, are frequently not trained in high school to use libraries. Instead, they search haphazardly, using Google or YouTube. They have difficulty analyzing the credibility of online sources and are not familiar with long-form investigative writing, newspapers of record, or the scholarly books and articles that are needed to complete their research papers. To address this, I began collecting funny-but-sad news reports to encourage students to read critically.

During and after the 2016 US presidential campaign, the information ecosystem was further complicated by the verifiable disruption of credible reporting by political entities and a resulting attitude of "fake news" cynicism. I created a short slide show to jumpstart a discussion among my students, asking them to analyze the language of headlines and articles and discover the ethical underpinnings of good journalism and peer-reviewed academic writing. Post-election, I discovered that students were wearied by the lack of civil public discourse on television and online, and open to finding richer, more nuanced research for their writing. I found that pairing humor with academic materials was a good strategy for deepening the students' engagement and understanding. However, as political efforts to spread disinformation and distrust of experts were widely reported in 2017 and 2018, the focus of the class became more serious, as threat to democracy of the "post-truth" environment became more apparent. This paper builds on and cites the work of scholars who study online technology's role in changing the way we read in an increasingly complicated information environment and a political climate that distrusts fact-based information. The presentation is illustrated by various news examples that I have used in my classes. Readers with questions or suggestions are invited to email the author at her lglisson@bmcc.cuny.edu address.