

Navigating the Labyrinth of Information Fluency in an Era of Fake News

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In this article, Alexa Parker explores the concept of fake news using the ISU Writing Program concepts of genre and CHAT. Using genre analysis and CHAT analysis, Parker creates a snapshot of what Fake News is today as well as what impact it has on the world. Parker also explores how to develop good information-seeking behaviors to combat the spread of misinformation via fake news.

Fake news. We are constantly hearing this term thrown around—by our president, by various media platforms, and in everyday conversation. We know it is a bad thing. I’ve noticed that the term fake news is most often used when someone wants to delegitimize a particular text or piece of information. The more I thought about this topic, the more I realized that we often fail to recognize something as fake news until someone else accuses the news of being fake. And, additionally, fake news is a broad label that tries to fit many different things within it. It can be a term that is used to delegitimize a false story, but it can also be used to delegitimize a factual story. As the term has moved forward, it has become a sort of meme or joke. There are even bitmojis—or personalized emojis—that allow you to put the phrase fake news into a conversation (Figure 1).



Figure 1: My personal fake news bitmoji.

In this article, I will examine fake news through the lens of the ISU Writing Program concepts genre and CHAT. Using genre analysis, we will

discover what fake and real news even are, helping us to see why the fake news has become so integrated in our daily lives. The ISU Writing Program version of **CHAT, or cultural-historical activity theory**, is used to “help us think about and study the complex genres that we encounter in the world” and “focus on any aspect of the myriad elements of textual production” (ISU Writing Program). This will allow us to investigate how fake news is made and where our role lies in the production of it. Writing is complex, even if it is writing about fake news. Without the proper tools—such as genre analysis and CHAT—we would have no way to understand and combat the consequences of it, which can range from mildly annoying to severe. With fake news, sometimes these consequences can be harmless, but other times, the consequences can range from mildly annoying to severe.

Misinformation can spread through one fake news story, such as in the case of Pizzagate. The Pizzagate case was a news story made up by Alt-right communities claiming that Hillary Clinton and her campaign ran a hidden pedophilia trafficking ring out of a pizzeria in D.C. This story took off and became viral globally, resulting in a man named Edgar Welch going to a D.C. pizza place, Comet Ping Pong, and firing shots. This reveals the dire impact fake news stories can have in the world. So, with all of that in mind, what is fake news really, and how can we recognize it without someone telling us first?

Diving In: What Is Fake News? What Can It Tell Us?

According to the Center for Information Technology and Society at the University of California (CITS), “Fake news is a multi-step process that involves making or taking content that others have produced, passing it off as real news, and capitalizing on social media to get as much attention as possible.” But why do creators want this attention? Well, CITS proposes that the attention is sought for two reasons: either the creator wants to spread their ideologies and/or they want people to be led to see more content so that they can obtain advertising revenue (Walthers et al.). And the thing is, this is working. A Pew Research Center study found that “64 percent of U.S. adults say that fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events” (Barthel, Mitchell, and Holcomb). Additionally, they found that 16 percent of U.S. adults said they have shared fake political news inadvertently, while 14 percent say they have shared fake news that they knew was completely made-up (Barthel, Mitchell, and Holcomb). So, what’s going on with this? Why in the world are people simultaneously panicking about the spread of fake news while also admittedly spreading it themselves?

Fake vs. Real: Separating the Two with Genre Analysis

The problem seems to be that people know fake news is a thing, and they are worried about it, but they don't know how to fix it. Additionally, identifying a fake news story isn't something that American media consumers tend to conceptualize as being a problem that they need to fix. In fact, Barthel, Mitchell, and Holcomb state that “45 percent of U.S. adults say government, politicians and elected officials bear a great deal of responsibility for preventing made-up stories from gaining attention, on par with the 43 percent that say this of the public and the 42 percent who say this of social networking sites and search engines” (Figure 2). However, considering that the people consuming fake news stories are also spreading it, the problem might be something that we should consider taking into our own hands.

How do I recommended we do this? Well, I think we need to first conduct a **genre analysis**, which the ISU Writing Program defines as “looking very closely at a particular genre (multiple samples and variations) and investigating all the different features that might be present (or features that are absent)” as well as “looking underneath the surface features of visual design, sentence-level qualities, and style and tone to uncover how genres

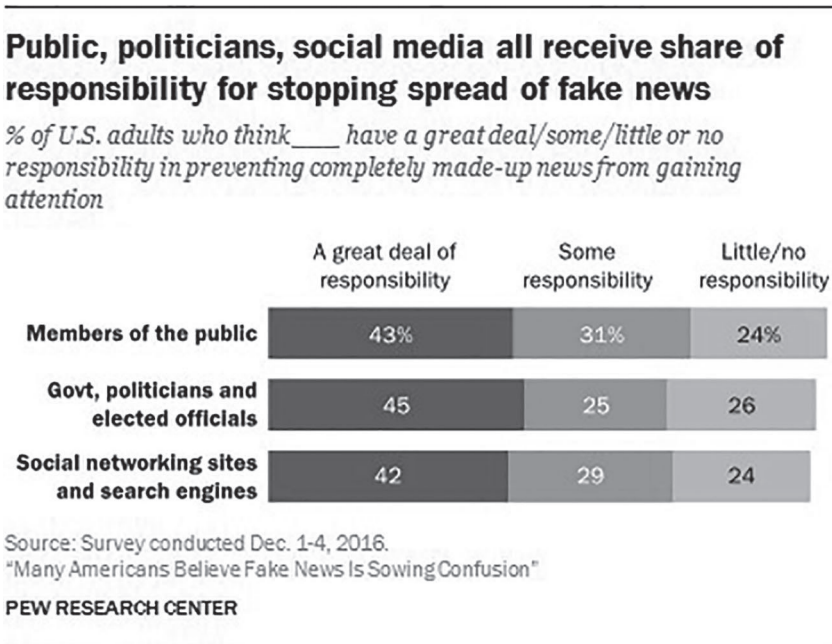


Figure 2: Who's to Blame for Fake News Spreading?

can be subject to (and can enforce) cultural, social, commercial, and political agendas.” Genre analysis provides a snapshot of what a genre looks like at a particular moment in time—as you probably know, as time passes things change, and genre is no exception. When I use genre analysis in this article to examine fake news, I am looking at what the genre of fake news is for me as a writer researcher today—that genre could completely change. Hopefully, though, by investigating all the features of the fake news genre versus the real news genre, we can identify some strategies that help us delineate between the fact and the fiction being circulated in media today.

Wait. . . But They Kind of Look the Same

So, first, we are going to try and identify some of the **genre conventions**, or all the things a writer could discover (and discuss) about a particular genre that makes us recognize it as that genre (ISU Writing Program). After looking around at examples of news sources I deemed factual and

“Real News”	“Fake News”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headline • Date • Logo • Author • Photos 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headline • Date • Logo • Author (not as often) • Photos

Figure 3: Comparative list of conventions.

news sources I deemed fictional, I created a comparative list of conventions (Figure 3). Well, the problem is, the lists are almost identical. Sometimes there are slight differences, but these are not differences that readers can count on. For example, sometimes fake news will not have an author, but other times it does. The author may or may not be made up, but they could still be listed. Plus, legitimate news sources sometimes don’t list an author even if this is a less common occurrence. This is made evident in the Works Cited page of this article, in which multiple of my own sources, which I have deemed trustworthy, did not have authors listed. In a similar vein, both fake news and

legitimate sources will usually have logos, but those logos alone do not tell us if the source is reliable or not. CBS News created a website that focused on this exact topic, which they fittingly called “Don’t Get Fooled by These Fake News Sites.” I have included an image of one of the fake news web pages CBS features, along with an image of real new site (Figures 4 and 5). The fact of the matter is, fake news sites are often good at seeming real—which means we have to do some extra digging.



Figure 4: Fake news website—DC Gazette.

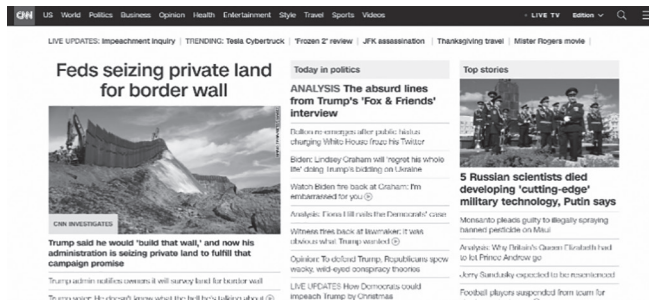


Figure 5: Real news website – CNN.

Where Do We Go from Here? Using CHAT Analysis to Spot the Difference

While genre analysis was extremely helpful for recognizing what a news source is supposed to look like, it wasn't enough on its own for us to unmask the bad guys—or in this case, bad news. Genre conventions don't consider who is reading the text, how the text is going to be produced and distributed, or how people will be interacting with the text. This is where ISU Writing Program's version of CHAT comes in; combined with genre analysis, it can give us the tools to have a nearly complete understanding of a text. Looking at some of the aspects of CHAT, we can spot the differences in the writing of fake news versus real news. This helps us figure out what sources are trustworthy and allows us to examine our own agency in this era of fake news.

So, let's start with **production**: the part of CHAT that deals with the means through which a text is produced (ISU Writing Program). This can include both the tools (e.g., using a computer vs. a cell phone) and the practices (e.g., typing on keyboard vs. touchscreen) that go into creating a text. We are in luck, because CITS has created a step-by-step guide for how a fake news website is created (Walthers et al.). The first two tools they identify is the need for a domain name for the website and the host of the

website itself—which, they say, can be relatively inexpensive. Second, after obtaining those two tools, the creators of fake news must find content for the site. According to CITS, fake news website owners often steal their content from satire websites such as The Onion or Clickhole (Walthers et. al). While those original websites had the intention of using their websites for humor and commentary, these fake news websites take the satire and try to pass it off as fact.

This idea takes us into **representation**—or, how people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it, as well as all the activities and materials that help shape how people do this. The intent of a fake news source versus a real news source is totally different; one author is trying to spread true information, while the other is not. Fake news creators do not do everything different from real news creators, though. For example, because they want to get as many views and clicks as possible, they will dig through headlines that have been successful in the past (Figure 6). CITS states, “The headline is most important. Catchy and explosive headlines can make people click on a fake news story without even looking at who shared it or where it originated” (Walthers et al.). Real news sites do the same thing, though; they try to come up with catchy headlines, and they also want as many people as possible to click their story in order to gain advertising revenue. It’s common sense: journalists would like to help their companies earn money so that they can continue to keep their wages.

So, if the goal of creating fake news and real news is to get people to click on the story and spread the information, what comes next? Well, I



Figure 6: An eye-catching newspaper headline.

Image source: https://carpedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Maxim_32-360x240.jpg.

would say that this part of the goal has everything to do with the reception part of CHAT. **Reception** deals with how a text is taken up and used by others (ISU Writing Program). In our case, what happens when someone clicks on and reads the fake news source and the real news source? Well, in one scenario, people fall for the fake news and perceive it as real news. In the 2019 study “Who Falls for Fake News? The Roles of Bullshit Receptivity, Overclaiming, Familiarity, and Analytic Thinking,” Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand found that people who were instinctively open-minded tended to be more accepting of weak claims lacking in support and thus accepted fake news as real. This also correlated with familiarity factors; for example, if a person was more familiar with a headline, they were more likely to rate it as accurate (Pennycook and Rand 29).

This connects back to the production and representation processes of CHAT in the creation of fake news; the creators of fake news would use other sources already created, such as satirical news sites, in order to create familiarity and trust. Interestingly, reception probably doesn’t differ much between real news sources and fake news sources. The familiarity created is because the two sources look similar, which we can see from the examination of the genre conventions. Additionally, the spread of fake news is done because the people reading it believe it is real news, and thus they treat it the same way as real news. Sure, sometimes people will figure out a fake news source isn’t real and not share it or declare that it is fake to others, but when they do fall for it, they react the exact same way they would with real news.

But how are the people sharing and accessing these news sources in the first place? Well, according to CITS, “The most common route to fake news websites was through Facebook” (Walthers et al.). And this probably makes sense to anyone who uses Facebook out there. Facebook often has articles on your News Feed, and of course, people often share articles that they think are worth reading on Facebook. I have done it plenty of times, and I am sure many of those who are reading this have as well. According to its Help Center, Facebook often features articles on your News Feed when a friend commented on it. Facebook explains, “Posts that you see first are influenced by your connections and activity on Facebook. The number of comments, likes and reactions a post receives and what kind of story it is (example: photo, video, status update) can also make it more likely to appear higher up in your News Feed” (Facebook Help Center). They then list the three things that make a post appear on your News Feed first:

- A friend or family member commenting on or liking another friend’s photo or status update.
- A person reacting to a post from a publisher that a friend has shared.

- Multiple people replying to each other's comments on a video they watched or an article they read in the News Feed. (Facebook Help Center)

To refer back to our real-world example of the Pizzagate case, that story had been re-tweeted by people internationally—as well as plenty of bots—in order to get the story across social media as much as possible and therefore gain more attention (Walthers et al.). Thus, I argue that social media sites, especially sites like Facebook, are strongly intertwined with the spread of fake news.

So where can this fit into our CHAT analysis? Well, I would argue that we could discuss **socialization**, or the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute, and use texts (ISU Writing Program). When we use Facebook or Twitter to access news sources, fake or real, we are interacting with and using the institution of social media (and, more broadly, the Internet) to distribute and use the text. Additionally, because social media platforms are often where these news sources are shared, it could be said that they help in the production of fake news and even real news. This is because part of the production process, as we discussed earlier, involves accessing other news sources (such as satirical news sources) to come up with content for a fake news article. Similarly, for a real news source, it would likely be the case that they would take inspiration from other sources shared on social media during their own production process.

Did CHAT Tell Us That We Are the Problem?

After looking at CHAT, it becomes clear that every aspect is intertwined with one another. What I mean by this is that each part of CHAT overlaps: the tools used to create the fake news will affect how it is taken up by the audience, past audience reactions to news and fake news will alter how new fake articles are created, etc. You may be thinking, *That's cool, but what does that have to do with me?* Well, these news sources continue to spread largely because of the interactions between readers and fake news. We aren't ignoring it; we are accessing it, sharing it, and—ultimately—falling for it. Fortunately, there are many articles and guides out there about how to avoid falling for fake news, so let's dive into one of those.

The Ela Area Public Library (in Lake Zurich, Illinois) published “Avoiding Fake News and Scams,” a guide that outlines the steps readers need to take when reading a news source before blindly trusting it (Figure 7). Having read through the guide, I would like to touch on some of the steps I found to be the most helpful.



Figure 7: Image from the ELA Area Public Library guide to “Avoiding Fake News and Scams”

First, they state it is important to check the byline to see if there are any listed authors. The absence of an author could be a red flag. They also dive into the conventions that appear in different subgenres as news. They write, “Opinion pieces tend to be marked with bylines like ‘contributor’, ‘op-ed’. Press releases may say ‘FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE’ or mention the name of the PR firm releasing it such as PRNewswire” (Ela Area Public Library 1). Similarly, they also state the conventions of URLs that tend to be followed by fake news sources. They tell users to beware of web addresses that end in “lo.com,” “.com.co,” and “.ru” (3). Additionally, they tell readers to watch out for misspellings, similar spellings, typos, and visual fakes that impersonate real websites’ URLs (Ela Area Public Library 3). Looking for these things is a quick and easy way to find (or not find) a red flag in a news source.

Second, they discuss how readers need to evaluate the tone for objectivity. When reading a news source, we need to try and understand the goal of the author. Are they trying to push a certain agenda? Is their language purposefully inflammatory in order to get reactions out of readers and cause them to share the story? Consider once more the case of Pizzagate; according to the Center for Information Technology and Society (CITS), that story had been created by alt-right groups to delegitimize the presidential campaign

of Hillary Clinton by claiming she had been involved in a trafficking ring. Clearly, an agenda was being pushed using a circumstance that would be inflammatory, causing an emotional and angry response in its readers. However, news sources that are based on facts can also use inflammatory language and lack objectiveness. Thus, I would add a caveat to this “fake” versus “real” distinction, and I propose that maybe there is some grey area for us to consider when consuming news articles (or any articles, really): we need consider not only whether something is “fake” or “real” but also whether and how it is trying to sway us in a certain direction.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Clearly, we need to figure out how to stop spreading false information. Adopting some helpful **information-seeking behaviors**, or all the things that people do when they are trying to find out about stuff they want to know (such as finding information, evaluating information, and documenting and citing resources), would be helpful. These behaviors should include some of the ones from the article by the Ela Area Public Library, in which a healthy dose of skepticism should be adopted when looking at a source.

However, the next steps do not end there. We also need to be highly aware of the effect of our actions—specifically when sharing news in a public forum such as social media. Sharing a link to an article is no small act; it continues spreading far beyond our friends list. We already know that the fabricated Pizzagate story had catastrophic effects, leading to shots being fired in the D.C. pizzeria. To give another example, CITS also discusses a study done by Kate Starbird, who collected tweets related to conspiracy theories that mass shootings aren’t real. Amid the 99,474 tweets she collected, she found references to 117 websites—80 of which were fake news websites (Walthers et al.). Clearly, the effects of fake news spreading across social media can have truly terrible consequences. Tragedies can be delegitimized for thousands upon thousands of people, and some tragedies can be encouraged to occur.

We need to be conscious not only of whether the news we are sharing is fake, but also what it is trying to make us think and how our use of that source will affect the world around us. I have no easy answer to the maze that is **information fluency** (the ability to critically think while engaging with, creating and utilizing information and technology regardless of format or platform) in an era of fake news, but I do have some suggestions. We need to be aware of the conventions of the news genres we are looking for. Sometimes simple things such as a URL can tell us whether something is off.

Also, we need to think about everything that went into creating that news source. Why and how was the text created? What are the goals? Is this clearly researched, or does it seem like it was just copied from somewhere else with very little thought put into it? Finally, we need to consider the tone of the information and how it is going to affect the ways in which we, and others, understand the content—and the world.

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