Teaching Students in a "Fake News" Era
by Peter Eubanks

Harold Macmillan, former Prime Minister of Great Britain and Chancellor of Oxford University from 1960 to 1986, once shared with a graduating class some wisdom imparted to him by a former professor: "If you work hard and intelligently you should be able to detect when a man [or woman] is talking rot, and that, in my view, is the main, if not the sole purpose, of education" (described in Barrow 2010).

In an age where information of all kinds is available at our fingertips and "fake news" has entered the American lexicon, it is becoming increasingly important for instructors to equip their students with the tools necessary to discern between reliable and unreliable sources, between what is "rot" and what is legitimate and valid. Democracy requires civil and informed discourse, and institutions of higher education—especially public colleges and universities such as JMU, whose mission includes helping students to become "educated and enlightened citizens"—have an important role to play in fostering the kind of educated discourse that is vital to the health of a democracy.

But what can we as educators do to encourage our students to become informed citizens, able to detect whether the information they encounter is reliable? Below are five ways to help students recognize their responsibilities as citizens, discern between what is real and what is "fake" in the information they encounter, and practice civic engagement as they participate in civil and informed discourse.

1. **Foster digital or information literacy**. Our library staff and liaisons can be particularly helpful in this regard and are available to work with your classes on this very topic. Instructors can have students research a topic and then describe their sources. Are these sources from a well-established university press or publishing house? Is the information they present peer reviewed? Does the author or the information venue exhibit an agenda or a particular ideology or point of view? In areas where sources may have only one or a very limited number of authors, do(es) the author(s) have the requisite education and background to reliably provide the information contained in the source? Do the sources merely present facts, or do they also analyze or synthesize them for the reader? What motivations may accompany the creation of these information sources?

2. **Model judicious use of legitimate sources**. As we present information to our students, we can lead by example in offering only the best information that peer review, legitimate scholarship, and high scholarly standards have to offer. It may also be helpful for the instructor to state explicitly what those standards are. As students "get a taste" of what "real" sources of information look like, they rather come to resemble those FBI agents who must discern between real and counterfeit currency. As John MacArthur explains in his book

Reckless Faith (1994), FBI agents train not by studying the various ways in which bills are counterfeited; rather, they spend the bulk of their time closely observing real currency, so that the counterfeit forms become readily discernible.

3. **Encourage critical thinking activities**. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's provocative book, *Academically Adrift* (2011), demonstrates that a significant proportion of college students are not developing critical thinking skills during their first two undergraduate years. As instructors, we can try to reverse this trend and help our students to develop the skills so vital for the health of our democracy. Rather than engaging in an "information dump" and then assessing how well students have retained the facts presented to them, we can engage students by having them analyze, evaluate, and respond critically to source materials. The hard work of engaging critically with the information we present provides a solid introduction to the hard work of democracy.

4. **Get students to read**. No matter our academic discipline, we can provide books, articles, and other "texts" (broadly conceived: images, social media, etc.) for students to read, study, and discuss. As Stephen L. Carter of Yale Law School has put it (2009), we should emphasize "the importance of reading books that are difficult. Long books. Hard books. Books with which we have to struggle. The hard work of serious reading mirrors the hard work of serious governing—and, in a democracy, governing is a responsibility all citizens share." While not every academic field may lend itself equally to assigning students long books to read, instructors from across the disciplines can nevertheless assign their students "texts" with which they have to struggle and the analysis of which "mirrors the hard work of serious governing." Indeed, the National Endowment for the Arts has issued an important report entitled "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America," which finds strong links between reading and civic behavior. The more a person reads, the more likely she is to be involved in the civic life of our democracy.

5. **Encourage Visual Literacy.** Help students not only to read "texts" in the traditional sense, but also engage with a variety of communicative media (see here for helpful definitions of "visual literacy," a term first coined in 1969). Have students learn how to "read" and interpret images, film scenes, paintings, architecture, YouTube clips, and so forth. As they do so, they will become more able to respond actively and critically to the barrage of images that flood us all daily as a part of life in a technological age. Innovation Services can be of particular help here, as they offer instruction in how to help students to create and complete digital assignments of their own.

And, in early March, Dr. Abraham Goldberg, Executive Director of the JMU Center for Civic Engagement, will be leading a CFI workshop on fostering civil discourse around controversial issues in the classroom.

About the author: Dr. Peter Eubanks is Associate Professor of French and a Teaching Faculty Associate with the Center for Faculty Innovation. He can be reached at eubankpj@jmu.edu.