

Fake News and Fact-Checking

Workshop

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Workshop Outline

- 1 Participants' Introduction
- 2 Topic Introduction
- 3 Evaluating News Sources
 - Theory of Information
 - Activity 1
 - A Bit More Theory
 - Activity 2
 - Fake News
 - Activity 3
- 4 Publishing Business Models
 - Money Trail
 - Media
- 5 Detecting fake news
 - Questions and Actions
 - Activity

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If you don't know me...

- I'm **Peter Gallert**, IT lecturer at NUST
- I'm not a Sir
- Background: M.A. in Logic, Theory of Science, Communication Studies and Media Science
- Co-author and course designer of “Information Competence”, a NUST core course
- Wikipedia's ambassador to Namibia

Please introduce yourself!

Activity

- 1 What should we know about you?
- 2 What do you hope to take away from here?

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Fake news: Definitions

- **News** = information that *is consumed* for its novelty and interest
“That’s news to me!”
- For what reasons it *is produced*, is another matter
- **Fake news** = wrong information
Sometimes deliberate, sometimes inadvertent, sometimes due to incompetence
- Different types of fake news:
 - **Hoax**: completely wrong, joke or prank. Example: Orson Welles’ “War of the Worlds”
 - **Deliberate misinformation**: Example: Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction
 - **Junk news**: badly researched and wrongly reported. Example: ‘independent candidate’ Ituna
 - **False connections**: Evaluations and conclusions not supported by the facts. Example: ‘Hanse–Himarwa pockets 500k of S&T’

Reason for publishing

- Every action is motivated by something \Rightarrow What motivates news producers?
- Everything is published for a reason (Peter's Law?)
 - 1 Activism ... mostly bad
 - 2 Altruism ... unlikely
 - 3 Power ... bad
 - 4 Vanity ... bad
 - 5 Money
 - Sales (bad)
 - Salary (good)
- Publish from a desire to share information, or induce knowledge?
 \Rightarrow That's naïve.

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Information competence

- To evaluate an information source you need to know:
 - 1 the type and amount of interpretation in the text ⇒ the **level of abstraction**
 - 2 the type and amount of opinion in the text ⇒ the **level of judgment**
 - 3 the **sources** of the publication
 - 4 the **reason** for publication
- Good sources (scientific papers, newspaper features, certain text books) make these items explicit.
- By *contraposition*: a source that is silent about it is bad.
Examples: *op-ed* newspaper articles, SMS's and most reader's letters, advertorials, short or sloppy articles

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Level of abstraction

1 What is the factual basis of this publication?

- **Data:** Measurements
- **Primary information:** Interpretations of measurements
- **Secondary information:** Evaluation and explanation of interpretations
- **Tertiary information:** Overview of mainstream evaluations and explanations

2 Example (abstractions in italics):

- **Data:** 0.86
- **Primary information:** The driver had *a breath alcohol concentration* of 0.86%.
- **Secondary information:** The accident *was caused by a drunk driver*.
- **Tertiary information:** *Many accidents in Namibia* are caused by driving under the influence of alcohol.

3 Is that basis itself reliable?

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Evaluate sample information

Activity

- 1 Pick an article from your newspaper
- 2 Determine if it is primary, secondary, or tertiary information
- 3 State on what lower-level information it is based
- 4 Report back to the group

Level of judgment

- 1 In which role is the author?
 - Journalist
 - 1 Reporter
 - 2 Commentator
 - 3 Wordsmith
 - Politician
 - Scientist
 - Employee
- 2 Are author and publisher independent?
- 3 Is the publisher known to include controversial opinions?

Sources of the publication

- 1 Who authored it?
 - Knowledgeable in the subject? ⇒ **Reliable?**
 - No vested interests? ⇒ **Independent?**
- 2 Who published it?
 - Reputation for fact-checking? ⇒ **Reliable?**
 - No vested interests? ⇒ **Independent?**
- 3 Still relevant? (Check dates)

Evaluate an information source

Activity

- 1 Pick an article from today's newspaper.
- 2 Is the **author** knowledgeable?
- 3 What are their vested interests?
- 4 Is the **publisher** reliable?
- 5 What are their vested interests?
- 6 Report back to the group

Fake news sources

- Prime people producing fake news:
 - 1 Narcissists
 - 2 Activists and zealots
 - 3 Salespeople
 - 4 Politicians
- Prime media carrying fake news:
 - 1 Social media
 - 2 Tabloid press
 - 3 Government publications
 - 4 Company publications
 - 5 Predatory scientific journals
- People doing it for the money, on media that are sold, are the best we can get!
- Not because they are impartial—but because their vested interest can be researched

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Conspiracy Theories

- **Conspiracy Theories:** “Big fake news” that one person alone cannot uphold
- Current mainstream narrative *versus* alternative explanation
- Or: majority view *versus* minority view
- Examples:
 - Moon landing
 - September 11 LIHOP / MIHOP
 - Operation Gladio
 - Healthy food
- ... until the roles are swapped one day
- Calling something a ‘conspiracy theory’ is a great way to establish one!
- Gladio is a conspiracy theory that swapped. ‘Stay Behind’ operations have now been admitted
- Healthy food to follow soon...

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Examples from Namibia

- 1 Herero and Namaqua genocide
 - Wasn't really a genocide
 - Numbers of death Herero and Nama exaggerated
 - Namibians started the armed conflict
 - von Trotha wasn't authorised by Germany
- 2 Lubango Dungeons
 - Never existed
 - Only criminals and spies were incarcerated
 - The end (independence) justified the means

Conspiracies

Activity

- 1 Discuss your favorite conspiracy theory
- 2 What side are you on?
- 3 Report back one case from the group

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Money trail: Practice

- **Journalist, editor, presenter** ⇒ salary
- or: **Journalist** ⇒ commission, bribe, perks
- **Owner** ⇒ profit)
- **Scientist** ⇒ salary, but also research funds, travelling perks, status
- **Blogger? YouTuber? Influencer?** ⇒ commission, salary, ad contract, sponsored posts
- **Web site owner** ⇒ subscription fee, ad clicks
- **Wikipedia** ⇒ readers' donations

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Money trail: Theory

- 1 **Who earns money?** directly, or indirectly
- 2 **How is money earned?**

Why is that important? Because nobody will endanger their income!

- **Impossible:**

- *The Namibian* reporting on Tangeni Amupadhi taking a bribe
 - *Informanté* praising achievements of UNAM
 - *UNAM* reporting student figures that are too low
 - *NABTA* reporting taxi figures that are too high
 - *Wikipedia* making software changes that alienates its readers
 - *Peter* suggesting fundamental changes to the tertiary education sector
- Soliciting such information likely creates fake news

Mass Media

- Classic mass media have **editorial content** and **advertisements**
- Editorial content: to *circulate* the mass medium
 - content (movies, news, features)
 - official announcements
 - opinion pieces
- Advertisements: to *finance* the mass medium
 - classifieds
 - advertisements
 - advertorials
 - product placement
- Cover prices and subscription fees only make a small contribution
- Often a reliable source, because the publisher risks its reputation (by extension, media circulation and finance)

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Books and journals

- Do not contain advertisement
- Are financed by their cover price?
 - Only bestsellers make money
 - Shelf warmers are financed by more successful publications
 - Although the Internet business has changed that somewhat (print-on-demand)
 - Desperate authors resort to self-publishing
- Academic publications do not reach high circulations
 - Are very expensive, or state-funded, sometimes both
 - Often the author pays (e.g. for PhD publications)
 - Often the author's institution pays (e.g. for journal submissions)
 - Sometimes hidden in related expenses (e.g. conference fee)
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- Inexpensive to produce
- May contain advertisements
 - Payment is only effected if customer clicks the banner
 - Often the content itself is an advertorial!
- May be artificially pushed high up into search engine results
 - By paying the search engine operators
 - By *Search Engine Optimisation*
- Often an unreliable source: low inclusion barriers, little control
- Exceptions:
 - Online versions of print media (newspapers, Google Books)
 - Academic collections (Google Scholar, JSTOR, CORBA)
 - *Some* academic online media (case-by-case)
 - To a certain extent: Wikipedia (depends on topic and article quality)
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Some Helpful Questions

- 1 Is it from a reliable source?
- 2 Is the author knowledgeable in the subject?
- 3 What is the motivation for writing / publishing it?
- 4 Could your own beliefs impact your impartiality? (Confirmation bias)
- 5 Could it be a joke? (Practise this on April 1!)
- 6 Do the reported facts support the statement?
- 7 Has the story been repeated elsewhere?
- 8 Is the date correct?

Some Helpful Actions

- 1 Re-read carefully: Is it consistent?
- 2 Find out who the author is.
- 3 Determine where it came from, and read close to the source.
- 4 Get evaluation from the other side, e.g. CNN *and* Al Jazeera, RT *and* Washington Post
- 5 Research the money trail: Who profits from publishing the story, who profits from your reading it?
- 6 Check if it is listed on [snopes.com](https://www.snopes.com)

Fake news detection

Activity

- 1 Pick a newspaper
- 2 Browse for red flags
- 3 Identify a fake news item
- 4 Report back

End of Workshop

Any questions?

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