

Merrimack professor offers tips for fighting “fake news”

By Sam Feeley

DANVERS – In an era of unprecedented distrust in the press, Russian bots influencing elections on social media, fake news sites and distorted facts, some have gone so far as to describe the current state of affairs in journalism and politics as a “post-truth” era.

Enter Melissa Zimdars, an assistant professor of communication at Merrimack College.

Zimdars recently held the seminar, “Fake News: Journalism & Disinformation in the Digital Age” at the Peabody Institute Library Danvers. During her hour-long presentation, she explored topics such as decontextualized media, media literacy, the pressures news outlets face today and solutions to combat the misinformation epidemic.

Zimdars began her presentation with a decontextualized photo shared by right-wing troll Milo Yiannopolous of a commemorative issue of Newsweek, featuring a picture of Hillary Clinton and the headline “Madam President.” Yiannopolous criticized the “hubris” of the media and said it was “another reason to vote for Donald Trump.”

What he failed to show, she noted, was that Newsweek also produced a similar commemorative issue proclaiming “President Trump” ahead of the election.

She compared this to the National Football League producing “Super Bowl Champions” merchandise for both participating teams before the game, because in both an election and a Super Bowl, these products need to be available as soon as the results are in.

Zimdars also offered tips for identifying fake news sites.

One of the easiest ways to detect fake news, Zimdars said, was in the website’s URL. Often, these sites have URLs such as abcnews.com.co. While it looks like an official URL, .co is the top-level domain for Colombia.

“Colombian journalists were especially upset,” Zimdars said.

She also recommended analyzing the site’s aesthetics, grammar, spelling, owners and sensationalism, among other factors. She has built a database of more than 1,000 sites and information on these and other metrics, which led to the creation of browser plugins that can alert viewers when a site with questionable content or motives comes up.

Soon after the database became widespread, right-wing outlets on that list — such as Breitbart, Infowars and 70news — called Zimdars a “super snowflake,” “communist infiltrator” and “truth czar” — as opposed to defending their own reporting. She said she and her colleagues at Merrimack were flooded with vitriolic calls and emails.

“If a media literacy resource itself can be so grossly misinterpreted, then media literacy is necessary, but insufficient, at addressing the problem of fake news,” Zimdars said. “Finding and labeling fake news becomes like a game of Whac-a-Mole.”

That begs the question: Who determines what is and isn't fake news?

With more than half the population saying they don't trust "the media," whom can we rely on for objective news and analysis?

In other words, Zimdars said, "Who watches the watchers?"

Zimdars' tips for combatting the 'fake news' problem:

- **Systemic fact-checking and labeling, and crowdsourcing "news trust."** There are two issues present with leaving the fight against fake news to the people: One, by the time a source can be appropriately flagged and labeled, it could be two or three days, "which, on the Internet, is a lifetime," according to Zimdars; and two, if anyone can flag anything, it leaves open the possibility of people flagging legitimate news stories because they are critical of their party, candidate or worldview.
- **Filtering and "private prior restraint."** Facebook, Twitter and Google already filter content all the time, but Facebook's inconsistencies with censorship have been long documented, allowing racist and neo-Nazi pages to continue operating while legitimate news pages like TeleSUR, a vocal critic of capitalism and U.S. imperialism, get shut down.
- **Government regulations.** While government regulations on speech is a touchy subject in America, France and Germany have considered laws that would fine Google and Facebook for not filtering known purveyors of propaganda and false information.
- **Advertisers as de facto regulators.** Ultimately, all media sources rely on the almighty dollar. If companies pull their ads from TV stations, newspapers or websites over questionable content, that will deprive those outlets of the resources to continue producing that content and force them to reconsider their positions.
- **More (and better) speech.** The idea is that if there are more voices in a debate, the truth will always win. But that is hard to do when hate groups and Russian bots spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in micro-targeted advertising on Facebook to flood people's feeds with misinformation.
- **Addressing community alienation and distrust in institutions.** Finally, Zimdars said while many people do not trust college professors or journalists, they do trust librarians, and libraries are thriving today because of that.

"Millennials are killing Applebee's and saving libraries," Zimdars joked.