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Reflection 1

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Reflection 1: The Legend of Fake News

It is uncanny how applicable the conversations throughout the 1989 PBS documentary “Illusions of News” are to current discussions of politics, news, and information access. Although the rate of information access and the medium for delivering information has changed to reflect globalization and the creation of new technologies, the observations surrounding the shift of political information towards entertainment has remained central to many media enterprises. With the increased reliance on social media as a news source, there is an immediate need for accurate, fact-checked reporting done by reputable organizations and individuals. Although it is also important for individuals to have information literacy and critical thinking skills in order to sort through the overwhelming amount of material available, it is also vital that individuals in a position of power become trustworthy sources of information themselves.

In the beginning of “Illusions of News,” Michael Deaver comments that “the eye wins every time” when comparing the consumption of visual media to the news story accompanying it (Films Media Group, 1989, 7:18). This was true of the news cycle in 1989, it continues to be true now, and I can only imagine that there will be no drastic changes to media consumption in the near future. Headlines tend to be secondary to the accompanying images, as visuals become the primary form of communication. Running any form of digital communication or social media site, you learn that the posts with the most engagement are images accompanied by brief texts with relevant tags. In certain cases, including lengthy commentary can even be detrimental to community engagement. Because of this, to maintain engagement—and profit—many news sites opt for quick headlines with engaging visuals, sometimes at the detriment of the story. Bill Kovach explained how form is dictating how we consume news stories (Films Media Group, 1989, 46:56). With so many people relying on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok for breaking news and political updates, form is encouraging quicker and shorter news updates that are available instantaneously everywhere around the world.

There is more information than ever readily available to the average consumer and that can be overwhelming to navigate, particularly with the rise of inaccurate and untrustworthy reporting and posting. As the division between politics and entertainment becomes less and less clear, the stories that are the most outrageous will be the ones shared and reposted, often without necessarily being accurate. Information is more readily available, yes, but it is also easier than ever to create fake stories and share them. Politicians, political parties, and lobbying groups can use that to their advantage, either creating a positive spin for their own benefit or a negative story for the detriment of their opponents. Todd Gitlin stated that media outlets often let “the politicians determine what the story is” (Films Media Group, 1989, 19:15). With the increased access to technology, the politicians don’t even need to use a media outlet as a go-between anymore. They can speak directly to consumers and constituents, which places more importance on what they say, how they say it, and how it is interpreted.

While consumers should be critical of political information they view, it is also important for those involved in politics to be trustworthy sources themselves. It is unreasonable for the responsibility to be entirely on consumers in this situation. Political information will never be neutral and there will never be a media source that is entirely without bias or some level of inaccurate reporting. However, if political leaders can start to hold themselves accountable as sources of truth and trust, maybe the form of information will become less about the headline or the images and more about accurate, honest reporting. If those with the most power can encourage the shift, maybe there will be an increase of bipartisan community fact-checking and information literacy.

Reference

Films Media Group. (1989). *Illusions of news. Films on Demand*. Retrieved March 5, 2022, from <https://digital.films.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=102578&xtid=4934>.