

Google Editor Delivers Lecture on “Fake News and the Cloud”

For some, the term “fake news” is nothing more than a convenient insult to dismiss coverage one disagrees with. But partisanship should not blind us to the very real proliferation of false stories that has recently plagued online media platforms, as evidenced especially during our last presidential elections. According to Quentin Hardy, Head Editor at Google Cloud and former Deputy Technology Editor at *The New York Times*, the threat posed by fake news is not only disturbing, but deeply intertwined with decades-old social trends (or “vectors”) that must be understood if we hope to alleviate the problem in the future.

Hardy presented this thesis in a recent lecture, “Fake News and the Cloud,” during Purdue University's two-day Dawn or Doom conference (Sept. 26-27). Now in its fourth year, the 2017 conference hosted nearly 40 experts whose talks addressed “the potential risks and rewards posed by rapid, disruptive and seemingly continuous technological change.” As one of five featured speakers, Hardy delivered his talk at 3:30 on September 26 to a near-capacity audience at Purdue's Fowler Hall.

According to Hardy, the appeal of fake news is not difficult to understand: it's sensational and exciting, and it plays to pre-existing biases in a world in which the sheer bulk of information is increasingly difficult to process. Readers don't want to change their minds – as Hardy puts it, “you only believe it if you believed it in the first place” – and social media creates a perfect context for stories to bypass readers' critical filters and feed into their confirmation bias. People tend to trust their friends more than politicians or traditional news sources, and “social media gets you deep inside that circle of trust,” leading to rampant acceptance of stories that have absolutely no grounding in reality. In this way, fake news acts as a “salve” to soothe the psychological distress caused by “the cataract of urgency” of our modern, high-paced news world.

Nor is it difficult to understand the motivation of those who produce fake news. In some cases, stories may be fabricated simply to get clicks and make money. Hardy evokes the image of “guys from Budapest” laughing at the absurd stories they produce for simple profit. But the more nefarious fake news stories aren't written for profit. Rather, they function as propaganda – and in particular as part of Russia's ongoing war against our democratic institutions. This war has been waged not only in the context of the United States, Hardy points out, but in elections throughout the world, such as in the Philippines, where Duterte's recent electoral victory was a clear blow to traditional democratic values. When trust in democratic institutions has been eroded, people turn to authoritarianism, so the insidious objective of fake news is often simply to discredit democracy and create cynicism.

Hardy situates the current surge of fake news within a historical pattern, in which communication technology interacts with political events to create social change. The invention of the printing press, for example, occurred at about the same time as the fall of the city of Constantinople, and the interaction of these events within a larger social milieu was a major catalyst for the Protestant Reformation.

Just as Gutenberg's machine factored in social trends in the sixteenth century, Zuckerberg's social media platform has harnessed intellectual and business "vectors" already underway before the Internet was even conceived. One vector was intellectual. Referencing C. P. Snow's 1959 book, *The Two Cultures*, Hardy noted that there has been a divide between the sciences and the humanities, and this division has led to increasing distrust of expertise and a widespread "crisis of certainty." When even the authorities talk past each other, people feel justified in building their own systems of knowledge. Fast forward to the present, and the Internet exists as "a machine that validates the situational nature of our knowledge," with searches tailor-made to suit our preferences. The current situation favors atomic individualism and destroys any idealistic view of knowledge or universality.

Besides this intellectual vector, there has also been a business vector pointing towards fake news. Most obvious is the explosion of cable news and specialized interest groups, but even our most basic consumer choices have led to social and material segregation. Consider three bags of groceries: one from Whole Foods, one from Safeway, and one from Wal-Mart. The contents of these bags represent not only our consumption but our values, and this has led to a loss of common experience. This is also seen in the decline of print journalism. Successful news organizations of the past were based on three qualities – immediacy, authority, and the ability to contextualize – and they served as "gatekeepers of information over the axis of time and space." But the Internet demolished the old news model, with the result that new organizations now cater (with diminishing standards of accuracy) to particular consumer interests rather than a broad public.

Although the lecture was pessimistic in tone, Hardy was neither nostalgic about the past nor without hope for the future. In fact, when an audience member raised the question, "Have we [as educators] failed?", Hardy objected to the note of defeatism, listing off examples of social and intellectual progress, including the recent Cassini-Huygens mission, the spread of communication technology to previously isolated areas around the globe, and the increasing intolerance for casualties (as compared to Vietnam) evident in our current wars. At the same time, Hardy does not view the problem of fake news as insoluble. "History is written in the rear-view mirror," he noted, but that does not mean that we are powerless in the present. If we value factual reporting and clearly expressed ideas, and if we tolerate opposing views rather than segregate ourselves from them, then we have the power to consciously create new vectors that lead to a healthier future – if not free from fake news, then at least less vulnerable to its dangers.