4.8: Fake News Stories and Manipulation of Burdens

On December 4, 2016, 28-year-old Edgar Welch entered the Washington D.C. Comet Ping Pong pizzeria. Armed with an AR-15 he was there to personally investigate the stories he had been reading online that Hillary Clinton and her campaign manager, John Podesta, were sponsoring a child sex trafficking ring operating out of the back of the pizza store.

As he was conducting his search of the store, he fired off multiple rounds from the AR-15 that he brought with him. Fortunately, no one was hurt. After finding no evidence of the child pornography ring, Edgar Welch surrendered to the police. In an interview with the New York Times, Mr. Welch admitted that his “intel” on the child sex ring operation at the pizzeria was not “100 percent.”

The quality of “intel” is a key focus of this book. How did this story rise to the point where someone would react this way? The website PolitiFact, which checks on the accuracy of web content reported that this conspiracy theory started at an online forum called “4chan” and was picked up and spread by Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook. And even though in early November it was reported by the New York Times that none of this story was accurate, people still believed and promoted the story. There are three reasons why this fake news story was effective: Ignoring Burden of Proof, Our Desire to Believe, and the Magic of the Internet.

Fake News Stories Often Ignore Burden of Proof

The first reason this story was effective was the misuse or misunderstandings of the Burden of Proof. Michael Flynn Jr., the son of President Trump's former national security pick, Lt. General Michael Flynn, posted the story. His rationalization for posting this unsubstantiated rumor gives us an important lesson in critical thinking. He presents his challenge as part of a “tweet”
“Until #Pizzagate proven to be false, it’ll remain a story…”

-- Michael G. Flynn December 5, 2016

Remember the rule, “He who asserts must prove.” According to the burdens of argumentation, it is the burden of the person advocating a claim to prove that claim. One way to not be fooled by fake news is to refuse to accept the switching of burdens. The person advocating the claim or “news story” has the obligation to prove it. Until that time, the claim being made should be rejected.

Sharon Kaye, a philosophy professor at John Carroll University looks at the test we have when faced with arguments that seem to have no basis in fact. If we are given obligation of disproving the claim there is a challenge. Debunking these claims is very difficult because you have to prove that something didn’t happen. As she states, “You can’t prove a negative, but you can argue that the burden of proof lies on the other side...if they’re making a claim against common sense or against more plentiful evidence.”

Professor Kaye also states that arguing that a fact is true just because it hasn’t been proved false constitutes poor logic. I used to call this the “Tinker Bell” argument. Since you haven’t proven to me that “Tinker Bell” doesn’t exist, we must therefore accept the fact that she does exist. See how absurd that argument is. And yet it is the strategy that is being used to manipulate us with “Fake News.” Always make the side advocating the claim fulfill their Burden of Proof.

More recently another conspiracy theory emerged that Democratic National Committee staffer Seth Rich had been murdered because of his work on the committee and that he had leaked damaging emails to WikiLeaks or was ready to talk to the FBI. One theorist suggested that Hillary Clinton herself had orchestrated his killing to keep him quiet. As with the “PizzaGate,” no evidence was presented to support this argument. The individuals supporting this conspiracy were not fulfilling their Burden of Proof and instead they were attempting to reverse the burden.

National Public Radio sums the problem up very clearly when they stated:

“As with many other conspiracy theories, like the assertion that a Washington pizza restaurant was at the center of a child sex ring tied to top Democrats, this kind of assertion in part functions by trying to shift the burden of proof. Rather than proving with hard evidence that there was a conspiracy surrounding Rich’s murder (or that the owners of Comet Ping Pong, the pizza restaurant, were harming children), the people making the unproven claims end up pushing the other side to try to disprove it.”

Reference