



Janke, R. W., & Cooper, B. S. (2017). *News literacy: Helping students and teachers decode fake news*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

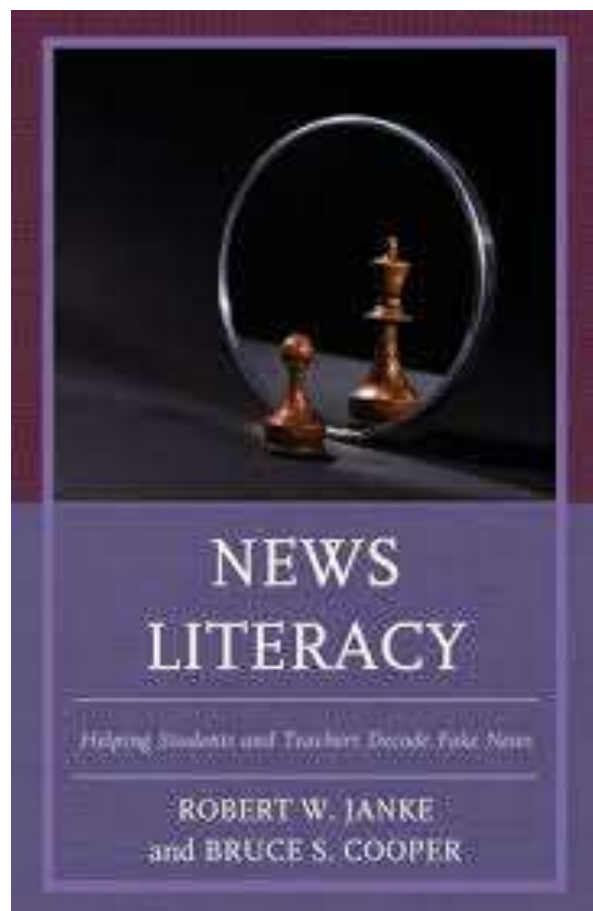
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**Reviewed by Katherine Pivoda
University of Colorado Denver
United States**

On November 7, 2018, CNN's Jim Acosta pressed President Trump to answer questions about the investigation into Russian election tampering. When the exchange got heated, a White House intern tried to retrieve the microphone from the reporter. He didn't let her. The two parties had some type of physical contact. Afterwards, conservative and liberal leaders responded to the incident by hurling the same accusation at one another: fake news. "The Trump Administration will never tolerate a reporter placing his hands on a young woman just trying to do her job," said the White House Press secretary, while President Trump accused the reporter of "fake news" and called him the "enemy of the people." Meanwhile, liberal media outlets said that White House's video of the altercation was fake: the video's speed had been modified to make the physical encounter seem more forceful than it was.

So which side is right? And how do we tell? Just what *is* fake news? In *News Literacy: Helping Students and Teachers Decode Fake News*, Robert Janke and Bruce Cooper provide tools for answering these timely questions at this



muddled, post-truth moment in America. Designing the book as a resource for both teachers and students, the authors' main argument is that students must be equipped with tools to help them analyze and evaluate news and, ideally, begin to distinguish real news from fake. This skillset, according to the authors, is essential for civic literacy and for navigation of the current media landscape in a reasonable and responsible way. Janke and Cooper provide a comprehensive examination of the numerous ways in which news can be false and misleading as well as myriad "look for" lists to assist readers in evaluating the media that they consume.

Both Janke and Cooper have extensive backgrounds in education and policy. Janke, a professor of education at Baldwin Wallace University, has taught in both secondary and higher education more than 50 years. Cooper, professor emeritus at Fordham University, also has a long career in education leadership and policy. *News Literacy* is written in a frank tone that addresses the urgency of the problem while remaining reassuringly grounded and optimistic. This makes the book accessible to a wide audience, and surprisingly enjoyable to read. The book places the urgent need for media literacy within the framework of democratic ideology: each chapter uses quotes from a variety of thinkers (e.g., Horace, Rousseau, Ibsen) to reiterate the import of a functional democracy and the role of the press in that system.

Part 1 places the issue of fake news in critical context and addresses major hurdles to the fake news problem, doing the important work of justifying the rest of the book. In later sections, Janke and Cooper describe precisely how fake news persuades and influences its readers. They include some useful educational strategies and suggestions for in-class assignments and discussions about fake news. However, the most valuable sections of *News Literacy* provide guidelines for consuming media, major differences between accurate and

fake news, and practical strategies for readers and researchers. These sections include what the authors term "look for" checklists, lists of collective attributes that can help indicate the reliability of a particular news story. The authors provide checklists for source evaluation, including helpful "look fors" like "Sponsorship of news and reports are identified to indicate any potential conflict of interest that could influence the information" (p. 31). Janke and Cooper also include helpful checklists for research instrument reliability, which include criteria such as "Incomplete or no description is provided for the directions given and procedures for how an experimental research study, survey, or examination of documents were conducted . . ." (p. 58). They provide quantitative data checklists, with items like "Statistical correlation is reported as 'proof' of causation" (p. 80). These checklists, accompanied by real-world examples, provide educators and their students with tangible tools to use when evaluating news articles. The lists are thorough and considered, and will easily translate to classroom use.

Examples of how fake news operates in the real world illustrate the checklist items. In their discussion of accurate terminology, for instance, they explain that a key indicator of fake news is euphemistic language "used to create a false and positive image of a potentially negative event or policy" (p. 42). To support this claim, they cite Newt Gingrich's 1994 memo to the GOP Action Committee detailing euphemisms to replace potentially negative terminology (pro-choice instead of anti-abortion, for instance). They also warn students to watch for *ad hominem* attacks, like Donald Trump calling Hillary Clinton "crooked Hillary," while she called his supporters "deplorable" (p. 41). The detailed support for each "look for" element is useful for students and teachers alike, as it illustrates some concepts that may be difficult to understand.

Each chapter in *News Literacy* includes two in-class exercises designed to help students begin thinking critically about the types of information surrounding them. These exercises can help students begin to apply the critical thinking skillsets promoted by the book. While occasionally difficult to apply in the classroom – many exercises have students find various types of fake news – these exercises can function as useful take-home assessments, ensuring students can apply the ideas they have been reading about. Janke and Cooper also provided two detailed lesson plans for teaching students how to identify and analyze fake news. These plans, like the examples given with the checklists, demonstrate real-world application of the book’s main ideas.

A final strength of *News Literacy* is its advocacy for what Janke and Cooper term “civilytics,” a skillset that includes “media literacy,” “data literacy,” and “critical thinking skills” (p. 139). The authors recommend implementing instruction in civilytics within teacher training classrooms, to ensure future educators understand the significance of these skills as well as a pragmatic grasp of how to apply them. They also suggest adding civilytics to the K-20 curriculum to help students digest and react to news in a responsible way. Finally, the book calls for wide reaching social policy changes, including the training of judges in

news literacy (p. 141), imposing political campaign contribution limits (p. 141), and reestablishing the Fairness Doctrine, which requires media outlets to present both perspectives on controversial issues (p. 142). Their final call to action is a plea to the leaders of our society, who “need to lead by example in objectively pursuing truthful information and rejecting fake news” (p. 144). Although *News Literacy* contains some tools for more mindful and critical media consumption, Janke and Cooper recognize that simply equipping students to discern fake news from real is not enough. “Sadly,” they continue, “this recommendation may be the most difficult to accomplish” (p. 144).

News Literacy: Helping Students and Teachers Decode Fake News is an effective and exigent first step in establishing a pedagogical practice centered on civilytics. The accessible tone of this book will be helpful to teachers from a wide range of backgrounds who teach a wide range of subjects. Not only does the book establish its own exigency, it provides practical tools to help accomplish its goals. The concrete examples throughout the book help to demonstrate the urgent need for students to begin recognizing fake news. This volume is a must-read for any educator concerned about the proliferation of fake news and the ways in which it penetrates and manipulates our democracy.


References

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About the Reviewer

Katherine Pivoda is a full-time composition instructor and PhD student at the University of Colorado Denver. Her work focuses on composition and pedagogy in digital spaces.

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