



**Interview with Donald Barclay, author
*Fake News, Propaganda, and Plain Old Lies***

**For podcast release
Monday, August 6, 2018**

KENNEALLY: In the golden age of newspapers, there were broadsheets and tabloids. Printing formats came to be identified with the reliability of the published information found on their pages. Broadsheets were boring and gray, but factual. Tabloids were salacious and sensational, yet undependable. In the internet age, such simple rules for determining credibility are as hard to come by as jobs in a newsroom.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Consider the source is good advice and easier said than done. Apps, blogs, and websites proliferate by the thousands today, making the work of discerning credible sources from fake news ever harder. Easily scalable two-newspaper towns have given way to daunting digital mountain ranges of news sources. There is *The Boston Globe*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning publication founded in 1872, and *The Boston Tribune*, called out for fake news and extremism by Politifact and Snopes. The once heroic title of journalist has long lost its luster. Polls regularly lump reporters with insurance salespeople for untrustworthiness. And no surprise, too, bloggers are free to call themselves journalists, and many do, with or without any journalism degrees to back up such claims.

Fake News, Propaganda, and Plain Old Lies, out this summer from Rowman & Littlefield, is a timely guide for professionals and just plain folks who want to sort fact from fiction. Author Donald Barclay is deputy university librarian at the University of California-Merced, the 10th and newest of the University of California campuses, which opened for classes in 2005. He also serves on the UC Libraries direction and oversight committee. Donald Barclay joins me now from his UC-Merced Library office in the San Joaquin Valley. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Don.

BARCLAY: Thank you, Chris. Thanks for having me on your program.

KENNEALLY: We are looking forward to speaking with you about this very timely topic of fake news. *Fake News, Propaganda, and Plain Old Lies* is the title of your new book. It's good, fun reading, but very practical, too. And you know, when it comes to historical and contemporary examples of propaganda and fake news, there



A Copyright Clearance Center Podcast

are plenty of them. There's plenty of blame to go around, as well. And there's a whole timeline of these kinds of stories stretching back for quite a long time. So what's new in 2018?

BARCLAY: Well, I think what we're dealing with is people have used lies and half-lies and half-truths for a long time to get what they want – to mislead people, to get their way, whether it's money, power, whatever. So that's nothing new. What we face in the digital age, and we've been facing for a while, is the sheer amount of information that we have to deal with. As you mentioned, you had to live in a big city to have two newspapers not that long ago. Now, people are overwhelmed with all this information. The cost of transmitting information has dropped to almost nothing.

If you think – in the '80s, if you wanted to share some crackpot theory, and you didn't have access to newspapers and TV, you would have to pay to have a lot of copies made and then distribute those copies on paper. That's a very expensive proposition – very limiting. But now, you can sit at your computer and send out one thing after another after another at an extremely low marginal cost. Most of those things won't get picked up. They won't get people's attention. But if one of them breaks through, you might get a million people to read something you wrote, which is a different thing, but also it's a very tempting thing for someone who wants to get a story out there for whatever reason.

And of course, what we're hearing now – and again, the full story is not out there yet, so there's a lot to be learned, but we're hearing that governments have in a sense weaponized this information and are creating information that seems to be from grassroots sources, but which is actually backed by government agents who are trying to put out a certain point of view, and to an extent, political parties are doing the same thing when they're trying to get their political view out. I think it's a lot easier for people to accept something if they think it's coming from their friend, someone they know, someone like them, someone – ordinary person in their hometown or maybe who shares their profession. That's more acceptable, and we're more likely to believe that kind of information than if we think it's coming from a government agency or it's coming from a political party or it's coming from a corporation, even though maybe those are the people who really created that information that seems to be grassroots but is not.

KENNEALLY: Right. Again, I'm sort of caught in a bit of nostalgia here, Donald Barclay, but at one point, it was not too difficult to tell the advertisement from the editorial. Those lines are blurred, and not just for commercial sake, but for the sake of political causes and all kinds of other, unfortunately nefarious efforts.



A Copyright Clearance Center Podcast

What this comes down to is the term you use – information literacy. We should point out to people that in your role as an academic librarian, work that you've been involved in since 1990, you're about teaching people to think critically, to learn how to evaluate and apply information, and this book of yours is rather like a guidebook or perhaps a textbook on just how to do that. So tell us about the principles of information literacy. This is itself a term that we believe was coined in the early 1970s, but it's a notion that at least goes as far back as Harvard University in the 1820s.

BARCLAY: Yeah, information literacy is one of many literacies you hear about today – mathematical literacy, statistical literacy, media literacy – and actually, information literacy is closely related to media literacy, because of course the media is a big source of our information today. So the basic idea is to think about information as a commodity, but you need to think about how it was created, who created it, and why they created it. Information doesn't just happen. It's not a naturally occurring substance. People have to create it.

So your first question is who created it? Why did they create it? And very often, the answer is, well, they created it to make some money. That's true of the most squeaky-clean, well-established, credible newspaper or news broadcast, because they're in the business of making money, but it's also true of people who are trying to sell a product – which we know about commercial advertising, and most people are aware that, well, you can't take commercial advertisements at face value, because somebody's telling you about this product to make a dollar.

The other side of that is besides making money, people will present information to try to gain control – power in some way, to gain followers, whether those are political followers or Facebook followers, what have you. So you've got to ask yourself, why are they creating it? And just because something's created for money or just because something is created to gain some political clout doesn't make it wrong or a lie, but you have to understand it flavors that information.

You also have to look at things like what do other sources of information have to say about this idea that's being presented here? If I look in a variety of sources across the spectrum, do I find this information corroborated? One of the dangers of the digital age, of course, is that because things can be copied so easy, one person can write something, and other people can pick it up and basically retweet it, repost it, whatever, so you might find a million people saying that X is true, but it might have all come from one source. It's not independent, it's just a repetition. So if you can find something independently corroborated by a variety of sources, of course that's an important thing.



A Copyright Clearance Center Podcast

Of course, you look at things like the reputation of the publisher. We can certainly look at something like *The New York Times*, for example, which is a favorite target of certain people as being fake news, but we can look at *The New York Times*, and anybody can point out examples where *The New York Times* fell short – where they published something that was false, or they published something that was clearly biased in its outlook. But overall, when you look at *The New York Times*, much of what they publish is pretty objective, understanding that nothing's totally objective. It's all created by humans.

And one of the things I think about any good information source, whether it's *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* or *The Wall Street Journal* or NBC News or CNN, is that there are a couple of things that good information sources do. They mark it off very clearly when something's an opinion piece versus something is news. They put a fence between the two. The other thing about credible information sources is when they do make a mistake, they're willing to admit it. They will retract – they will print retractions, they will print corrections. They're very willing to say we were wrong. Unreliable sources almost never do that. So some information source out there that's telling you we're right 100% of the time, or we're right 99% of the time, we never make a mistake – that's a big red flag that you're looking at something that is not true.

KENNEALLY: You know, Donald Barclay, a lot of us – most of us, probably – like to think that we can't be fooled, or it would take a lot to fool us. But in your book, you go into some of the ways that we do get fooled and how easily we can fall for these tricks. There are a number of ways to sort of identify the tricks themselves. Pass off for our listeners some tips here so they don't fall for the next fallacy that comes along.

BARCLAY: OK. Well, one of the things to watch out for, of course, is your own cognitive bias. That's the big one. That is, we all have a cognitive bias. We see the world in a certain way. So if you read something or see something that either makes you really angry because it's so opposite of what you believe, or something that makes you feel really good about yourself – that you were right all along, that you knew what was going on, that appeal to your emotions, especially your emotion of fear – oh, this really scares me – your emotion of anger – oh, this really makes me mad – your emotion of feeling satisfied – oh, this really makes me feel good – that's the time you have to be really careful, because anybody can fall for that.

I could tell you lots of examples where I read something that made me mad or made me happy, and I was so ready to believe it and wanted to believe it, and then took a minute to go, wait a minute, I don't know if this is true or not. I haven't



A Copyright Clearance Center Podcast

checked this out. And one of the things I'm very careful about is that when we hear something from someone we know – a family member, a friend, a colleague – we tend to believe it. That's one of the things that happened with the fake news phenomena on Facebook. People were picking up stuff that was created by governments or political parties or corporations. They're posting it and saying, hey, I believe this is true. And then their friends and family – oh, well, if Uncle John believes this is true, of course I'm going to believe it, too. Uncle John is a good guy. He bought me nice birthday presents when I was growing up.

So we have to be careful that when we tell something – oh, I read this or I heard this, and this is what's happening – we have to be careful that we're not spreading misinformation. Because my children, my wife, my colleagues, my friends – if I tell them something is true and that I really believe it, they're very likely to believe me. What I don't want to do is go around spreading something that I then find out, oh, that wasn't really true. I've misled a lot of people. And maybe they've spread it further.

KENNEALLY: Right. So, Donald Barclay, there's information and there's information. There's information about Selena Gomez. There's information about political candidates. And there's information about scientific research. Many of the listeners to Beyond the Book come from the world of scholarly and scientific publishing, and I am sure they would be surprised and disappointed to learn that fake news is transmitted there, as well. What about that special case of scholarly information? How can we, whether we are professionals or just plain folks, watch for scientific research that may be something we should question?

BARCLAY: Right. Well, that's a good one, and that's become really tricky in the digital age. When I first started teaching people about information as a librarian in 1990, I could say things like go in the library periodical room, and you'll see magazines, and they look like this – they have flashy photos and advertisements. And then there are scholarly journals, and they look like this. They're kind of dull-looking, and they have articles with bibliographies. It was pretty easy to tell.

Well, now we've entered the era of the predatory journal, where you have publishers who create what appear to be scholarly journals and which appear to publish scholarly articles, and they look just like the most credible scholarly journal, whether it's *Nature* or *Scientific American* or the publications of the American Chemical Society. These predatory journals look like that, but their only criteria for publishing is you pay them some money and they publish your article. Distinguishing between predatory journals and non-predatory journals is extremely difficult, partly so because academics – either because they're unaware or because they're trying to game the system – publish articles in these things. So not only do



you have something that looks like a scholarly journal, well, this person who published it is a PhD at such-and-such university. Doesn't it look very scientific? Yeah, it does. So that's a challenge, separating predatory journals from non-predatory.

But even in the legitimate scientific world, we know that people make mistakes, that people sometimes lie, people fudge information, and we can find lots of examples of that in history – past history and current history. The thing that's really powerful about scholarly publishing is that it does tend to be self-correcting – that people may get away with something for a while, with spreading false information or fudging their numbers or whatever, but because their articles are read by their knowledgeable peers, they tend to get called out in the end.

A famous example was there was an article published by a medical doctor that found a link between vaccines and autism. Well, his research was bad. Other people in the field called out his article. It was retracted. The scientific world moved on. Unfortunately, a lot of people still point to that article and say, see, this scientist says there's a link. Well, nobody else except that one scientist says there's a link. But the scientific world itself corrected itself. That's one of the great things about scholarly learning and scholarly publishing is that it's an ongoing process.

I think one of the mistakes that non-scientific people can make, non-scholarly people sometimes make, is it's really fairly easy, especially in the social science world, to point to a journal article that's a legitimate journal article and has good research and go, see, this one scholar says X, so it must be true. But we know that in the scholarly world, oftentimes what is the truth, or at least closer to the truth than a non-truth, is based on the work of a lot of people and looking at a lot of articles. So one single study that says, I don't know, that police are more likely to shoot black people than white people, and this is a scholarly study and we've proved it – well, that's one study. You got to look at a lot of studies and a lot of research over a lot of time to say, yeah, there's a trend here that's really been proven through a scholarly process or to say, no, it hasn't been proven. But one study, one experiment, doesn't make for the truth. You kind of have to look at the long picture there.

KENNEALLY: Absolutely. Just as one swallow does not make a spring, we need much more than just one source or one publication before we could say something with certainty. Donald Barclay, let's go out on just your sense of the scene there at a university campus. You've been teaching information literacy for over 25 years. How difficult is the situation today with the generation coming on campus?



A Copyright Clearance Center Podcast

BARCLAY: I think it's a challenge. It's a challenge for the young. It's a challenge for the old. One of the good things, if there's anything good out of all the furor that broke about fake news in 2016, is that I think in the academy, in the academic world, a lot of people are paying attention to the idea of we need to teach students how to understand what's good information. I don't even like to use the term good and bad information – more credible information from less credible information. So there's a lot of interest in that. You're starting to see some faculty on campuses starting to teach this more.

It used to be sort of, when I was coming up in the profession, in the academic world, that information literacy was something librarians do. Maybe they get an hour with a student once to talk about information literacy, maybe with a lot of other things thrown in, and that was it, or that was a lot of it. But now you're seeing more faculty going, you know, it's our job to educate these students. We can't rely on other people to do it. We can't expect them to just know what's good information and bad information. And certain fields – like historians have always put a lot of emphasis on figuring out what's good historical information versus bad historical information. But I think you're starting to see that spread into a lot more fields, where faculty who might not have thought much about their students' ability to evaluate information are thinking about it a lot more. So that's a good thing.

And fake news, misinformation, evaluating information is what's called a wicked problem. That's not a value judgment on it. It means it's a difficult problem to solve. So it's a problem that's always going to be with us. There's not one easy solution that's just going to cure it right now, and we'll never have to deal with it again.

But I think part of the solution is as a culture, as a country, we need to start teaching students to think about information credibility at a really early age – I'm talking grade school – and keep working with them on that all the way through. You can start pretty early with kids. Kids who are old enough to understand how playground rumors work, how somebody tells a lie on the playground, and then suddenly people believe it – that's not much different than what's happening with fake news. So we've got examples where we can work with students early on to get them to thinking about – what do I believe? What do I not believe? What information is more credible, less credible? What are the signs that something is more credible or less credible?

Even things like – people love a piece of information that just blows their mind, because it contradicts everything you've ever read, just iconoclastic, changes the world. Well, we love those because it's a great story. It's what we see in Hollywood movies – the mad scientist discovers this one thing, and it changes the



world. But the fact is anything that seems to break all the rules and change everything is probably not credible and deserves a lot more scrutiny than something that says, yeah, this is what we've known all along, and we're sort of maybe changing it a little bit with this new discovery.

KENNEALLY: You know, Donald Barclay, I didn't go to journalism school myself, but some friends did. And they told me the first day, the first assignment, is your mother says she loves you. Check it out. (laughter) In other words, just go and check out everything, because you never know.

We have been speaking today with Donald Barclay, who is the author of a new book from Rowman & Littlefield, *Fake News, Propaganda, and Plain Old Lies*. It's really a handbook, a textbook, for information literacy. We appreciate you joining us on Beyond the Book, Donald Barclay.

BARCLAY: Thank you, Chris. Thanks for having me.

KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center, a global leader in content management, discovery, and document delivery solutions. Through its relationships with those who use and create content, CCC and its subsidiaries RightsDirect and Ixxus drive market-based solutions that accelerate knowledge, power publishing, and advance copyright.

Beyond the Book co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Join us again soon on Beyond the Book.

END OF FILE