

Texts, identities and ethics: critical literacy in a post-truth world

Hilary Janks

We hope that you will enjoy our new column, *Critical Perspectives in Policy and Practice* that is jointly edited by Hilary Janks, Barbara Comber and George Hruby. The articles in this column will be circulated amongst us but published in the name of the person or people who wrote the article. At times we will write alone, with other people or with one another. It is our intention to engage with policy and practice from a critical perspective to understand the interests that are being served and the effects this has on social inclusion and exclusion. I begin the series by spelling out the context in which we see ourselves working and its relation to texts, identities and social justice.

## **Introduction**

*“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”*

*“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”*

*“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all”.*  
(Lewis Carroll, p.57)

In this post-truth era of alternative facts, outright lies and bullshit, I sometimes wonder, like Alice, in *Through the Looking Glass*, whether you can make words mean so many different things. As ever we need to be wary of those who want to be the ‘master’ in control of language and meaning.

In the same way as Humpty Dumpty turns Alice's world upside down, so do our masters who spin the truth, tell outright lies or peddle bullshit. Spin gives a positive but deceptive slant to a story.

Lying and bullshit are explained, by Frankfurt the philosopher who wrote the essay *On Bullshit* (2005). In an article for *Time*, 12 May 2016 he explained that,

The liar asserts something which he himself believes to be false. He deliberately misrepresents what he takes to be the truth. The bullshitter, on the other hand, is not constrained by any consideration of what may or may not be true. In making his assertion, he is indifferent to whether what he is says is true or false.  
<http://time.com/4321036/donald-trump-bs/>

In *Truth and Politics*, Hannah Arendt (1967), a political philosopher whose work deals with epistemology, power, democracy and totalitarianism, says that lies work to transform reality, such that 'the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world ... is being destroyed' (p.15). The same could be said of bullshit.

None of this is really new. Arendt recognizes that,

The chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed; it is always in danger of being maneuvered out of the world, not only for a time but, potentially, forever (1967, p.3).

This is why Kellyanne Conway's concept of 'alternative facts' is so dangerous. As counselor to the U.S. President, Conway (2017) defended White House press secretary, Sean Spicer, when he falsely called the crowds at Trump's swearing-in ceremony "the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe" (21 January, 2017). In asserting that he was using 'alternative facts', Conway works to change the record, and in so doing to erase history.

What then is our role as educators in a world where facts are only accepted if they serve the interests of power? I suggest that as literacy educators, we need to work simultaneously on three fronts: texts, identities and ethics. We need to ensure that our students can engage with texts, whether they agree with them or not, so that they understand the text on its own terms. But they also need to be able to read them critically, against the grain, so that they can judge whether the text serves the interests of some at the expense of others. Reading both with and against the text forms the basis for their deciding whether to take up or resist the reading positions offered by the text.

## **Texts**

Texts are constructed by the choices text producers - speakers, writers and designers--make when they compose a text. Text analysis examines *what* content and *what* semiotic forms (words, images, sounds, etc.) have been selected as well as *how* they are organised. These selections combine to construct the re-presentation or version of reality that the text offers.

As a result, no text is neutral – all texts are positioned and they work to position the people who consume them: listeners, readers and viewers. Together with a consideration of the underlying discourses, assumptions, and omissions, such analysis can help the readers to become consciously aware of how the text is working to position them.

We can think of readers who take up the positions on offer, as ideal readers. Critical readers interrogate these positions to see whose interests they serve and who is disadvantaged. In other words they combine text analysis with an analysis of power. Ideal readers read with the text; critical readers read against the text. Both are necessary if we are to enjoy texts and engage with what they offer, without completely subjecting ourselves to them.

Both kinds of reading require critical thinking – an engagement with the claims, logic and arguments of the text, which is different from critique – an analysis of how texts maintain or contest relations of power. Readers have to distinguish facts from opinions, the accuracy of facts and the soundness of opinions, the evidence for claims and the quality of reasoning in the arguments. Facts are assertions of empirical truth, which may be correct or incorrect. They require evidence to substantiate them.

Lies are useful to text analysts because they offer information about what the speaker/writer wants to hide or deny, thus revealing the underlying interests that need protection. Bullshit is useful because it allows us to examine the speaker/writer's 'phony' reality (Frankfurt, 2005, p.15) and the interests it serves. An analysis of the interests at work in both lies and bullshit, enables a consideration of they overlap with relations of power.

### **The positions and purposes of texts: a comparison**

In order to disprove Kellyanne Conway's proposition that truth claims can be countered with 'alternative facts', CNN ran the advertisement, *This is an apple* ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxxuIPcQ9\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxxuIPcQ9_I)) as part of its 'Facts First' advertising campaign.

Liz Wheeler, the host of One America's News Network's, (OANN) 'The Tipping Point' offered several conservative redesigns of this advertisement (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2salh3ssMw&t=39s>). One of her redesigns, *This is a boy*, appears alongside the CNN advertisement in Figure 1. Both advertisements show the chosen image, with the text as a voice over. Wheeler deliberately models her 'alternative'

advertisements on the CNN advertisement, but both their content and their semiotic choices serve very different purposes.

Insert:

Figure 1: Juxtaposition of CNN and OANN advertisements

The CNN advertisement sets out to protect ‘truth’, arguing that some facts are empirically true. In doing so, it also works to defend itself from accusations that it sells ‘fake news’.

However, in forgetting that the apple is not in fact an apple, but an image - a representation of an apple, CNN opens the way for OANN to claim that a representation of a boy is a boy, when it could be an image of girl who looks like a boy, or is dressed like a boy, but is not one. The selection of the image of a smartly dressed, clean-cut, blue eyed, middle-class, white boy as the norm for boys is also motivated.

More important, however is the contrasting purpose of the OANN advertisement. In addition, to contesting CNN’s claims to the truthfulness of facts, it denies the right of people to identify as transgender. By rejecting the variability of human bodies, the lived experience of these bodies, and the science of biology, this discourse renders transgender people unnatural and Other, while simultaneously nullifying their existence. OANN has deliberately chosen content that is socially contested in order to promote a right wing conservative agenda.

All of Wheeler’s alternative advertisements work in the same way. *This is a baby* (not a foetus) is anti-abortion; *This is a firearm* (not a killer) rejects gun control; *This is Obamacare* supports the Republican agenda to repeal this bill; *This is President Trump’s Executive Order on Immigration* (not a Moslem ban) supports Trump’s immigration policy; *This is socialism* presents socialism as an untenable political system, thereby obliquely supporting capitalism.

By way of contrast CNN, uses an uncontentious example – an apple. But texts are never neutral and the CNN advertisement is no exception. It constructs those who deny the truth of facts as emotional and irrational. Uncontrolled emotion is suggested by the choice of the word ‘scream’, while ‘over and over and over again’ presents people who promote ‘alternative facts’ and false beliefs as dogged. The repetition of ‘banana, banana, banana’ serves as an in text echo of this insistent repetition. By choosing ‘They might even write ... in all caps’, the advertisement refers directly to Trump’s style of tweeting. Here the positioning of the advertisement against Trump and his supporters becomes clear.

### **Fake news**

For Foucault (1970), discourses are ‘regimes of truth’ and texts are instantiations of discourse/s. Discourse is an abstract concept that allows us to see patterns in texts. These patterns help us to recognize texts as particular ways of speaking and writing within different discourse communities. Since Trump first used the term ‘fake news’ as a way of asserting that the media cannot be trusted, its use has increased 365% according to the Collins Dictionary, which named it their 2017 word of the year (*The Independent*, 2017). Collins defines fake news as ‘false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting’. What Collins fails to recognize is that ‘fake news’ is used differently by different discourse communities.

Politifact, a non-partisan political fact-checking organization, claims that when

Politifact checks fake news, we are calling out fabricated content that intentionally masquerades as news coverage of actual events. When President Donald Trump talks about fake news, he means something else entirely. Instead of fabricated content, Trump uses the term to describe news coverage that is unsympathetic to his

administration and his performance, even when the news reports are accurate. (Politifact, 2017)

Collins Dictionary gives only the media definition, not the meaning of this term as an accusation that the news is fake.

## **Identity**

Our identities are formed by the communities we inhabit and the discourses we use. Gee (1991) defines discourses as ways of ‘speaking/writing/[designing]-doing-being-believing-valuing combinations’. The hyphens are important because they bind literacy (speaking/writing/[designing]) to social practices (doing) and identity (being-valuing-believing).

This definition is important because it maintains that semiotic modes (speaking and writing) cannot be separated from who speakers and writers *are* (their ways of doing, being, believing and valuing). Second, it suggests that the discourses we inhabit affect what we do (what texts we choose to read) and how our beliefs and values affect what positions we take up in the texts we encounter. Foucault (1970) recognized that ‘discourse is the power which is to be seized’ because it produces all of us as particular kinds of human subjects. It forms our identities, affecting what we do, what we believe, and what we value.

In choosing ‘post-truth’ as the word of the year in 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary defined it as an adjective

relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion or personal belief (2017).

Emotion and belief are more important than objective facts and people are only interested in whether the communicator is on their side or not (Evans, 2017). Identity becomes the basis for how people respond to texts.

## **Ethics**

It is important that readers are able to read with a text and against a text. If we simply jump to critique without trying to engage with the text on its own terms, how can we be sure that we know what the text is saying? How can we ever learn from a text that we do not agree with or understand positions different from our own?

Similarly, if we never interrogate texts we allow them to position us below the level of consciousness. We never consider whether the text is producing greater equity or injustices. We never confront the social effects of power, the construction of difference that sets us against one another, nor question the norms that govern our lives. We do not have to worry about who is exempt from the rule of law and who goes straight to prison. We never have to examine our own privileges or wonder about the lives of people excluded from opportunity and access to running water, health care and education.

In the end deciding whether or not to take up the positions that the text offers is a moral decision that has more to do with an ethics of care for self and others, than with text analysis.

In the course of discussions of immigration Donald Trump reportedly called Africa a ‘shithole country’. According to Trump, we Africans, are not desirable as immigrants, no doubt because we are all stereotypically black, poor and uneducated, with nothing to offer the U.S. I am proud to come from a shithole country – South Africa – that is working to recover



from colonial pillage and the material and psychological effects of apartheid; that welcomed my family as migrants fleeing persecution and genocide in Eastern Europe; and that gave the world Mandela.

What I am less proud of, are continuing racism, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia, the failure of our now-ousted president to submit his tax returns, the lack of commitment to providing quality education and health care for all, the large divide between rich and poor, nepotism, the obstruction of justice, and the ongoing lies and denial of culpability in the face of evidence of wide-spread corruption and theft of taxpayers' money. Unfortunately, South Africa does not have a monopoly on these shithole practices, all of which are immoral and unethical.

### **The way forward**

As educators it is our job to give students the skills they need to engage meaningfully with texts. They need to be taught to reason, they need to have sophisticated literacy skills to engage with and to interrogate texts. We need to acknowledge the different identity positions of our students and work with them to consider ethical ways of being.

It is our job as educators to ask hard questions about morality and to have discussions about whether, words, texts, discourses, policies and practices help or hurt people. We have to build community and respect for one another, first in our classrooms and then more widely. We have to engage our students in righting what is wrong – in transformative redesign. In polarized societies this is difficult work.

We can take perhaps take comfort from the knowledge that Arendt says

Facts assert themselves by being stubborn. ... In their stubbornness facts are superior to power; they are less transitory than power formations, which arise when men [and women] get together for a purpose but disappear as soon as the purpose is achieved or lost. (p.16).

A case in point is that facts about political corruption in South Africa asserted themselves and contributed to President Jacob Zuma's fall from power in 2018.

We can also perhaps take symbolic comfort from the fact that Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty who took upon himself the power to make words mean what he wanted them to mean, in his first incarnation in a traditional nursery rhyme, 'took a great fall and couldn't be put back together again'

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