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Fake Furnishings: Real and Fake Reporting on White House Remodeling

On the surface a fake news article appears quite similar to real one. Its very nature is to deceive the reader as to its credibility in the hopes that people will be fooled and share the article. It is only after closely comparing the fake and real new articles that one can begin to see the differences in each. A good reference frame for comparing two similar articles is by analyzing them both for elements of the rhetorical triangle.

The rhetorical triangle is a useful method for breaking down an argument into different categories, thereby making it easier to see how the argument is structured and presented to the reader. If an argument is weak, after subjecting it to the rhetorical triangle method its shortcomings will be highlighted, where as a strong argument will have its strengths highlighted under this scrutiny.

The Rhetorical Triangle approach involves scrutinizing an argument for elements which fall under its three main tenants: Ethos, logos and pathos. The ethos of an article has to do with the credibility the author. It is the portion of the article which proves to the reader that the author can be trusted. Logos is an argument's appeal to the logic of the reader. This takes the form of clear well-articulated arguments often containing

evidence to support any claims made. The last tenet of the rhetorical triangle is pathos. Pathos is an appeal to emotion. When a writer uses pathos, they are using shared values as a means to connect with you and influence your thought. Do you value a clean environment? If the answer is yes, then someone arguing for stricter pollution laws might use the promise of a cleaner environment to persuade you. This would be an example of pathos in action. Both the real and fake news articles contain elements of the rhetorical triangle. Through comparison of each arguments' ethos, logos and pathos, it becomes apparent which one is a legitimate source and which one is fake.

Firstly, we will examine the *New York Post's* article for elements of the author's ethos. In this article, the writer has endeavored to inform the public about some of the more trivial cosmetic changes occurring in the White House after President Trump has taken office. The audience is able to determine the ethos of the author through the direct way she compares the changes of one president to another without any ruminations about the changes. She says, "Trump brought back an abstract bust of Winston Churchill, which now sits to the right of his desk — a design addition that was praised on Twitter by pro-Brexit politician Nigel Farage. Obama had removed a Churchill bust from the room when he took office." (Gollayan, np) Not once in this paragraph did the author make a comment about her opinion on the matter. The fact that she simply stated the facts implies her motive is to inform readers and not to sway their opinions. In contrast with the way the real news article provides only facts, the fake news article is steeped in the author's own opinion. In discussing a supposed change of a painting in the oval office the author says, "We must admit that it is a rather striking and imposing painting but if it helps him work, so be it." (Focker, np) The author directly states his opinion on the

painting. His opinion has no relevance to the situation in the White House, and so its addition shows that the author is not concerned with being impartial by only providing facts. Examining the motives of an author is important for determining the validity of the article. More often than not, a fake news article attempts to capitalize on the viewership of a certain demographic. For instance, if an article panders to conservatives or liberals it is more likely to get spread around than if it was a neutral story because it fits in with peoples' conformation biases. Therefore, while it is not always an indication of fake news, a news article containing blatant opinion rather than objective fact is a possible candidate for being fake news.

Next we will examine differences in how each article uses the arguments approach to logic in different ways. The logical component of the rhetorical triangle is known as logos. Right away we can see the how the New York Times article employs logic to inform the reader. The author states that Melania is not currently taking part in décor changes which have historically been the job of the first lady. Instead of ruminating on outlandish reasons, Gollayan provides a logical explanation by stating that, "[Melania] will be staying put at Trump Tower in New York for the next several months while their 10-year-old son, Barron, finishes the school year." (Gollayan, np) This reasoning is clear and it keeps the reader from jumping to their own conclusions. In contrast to the way the New York Times article tries to explain events with reason, the fake news article attempts no such logical explanation after it presented a very strange claim. The last paragraph of the fake news article states that, "One member of the White House press corps mentioned seeing the President talking to the painting." (Focker, np) The article does not provide any sort of explanation as to why the president would do something so strange, nor does

the article attempt to use logic to establish the credibility of the witness. The article simply parrots an unsourced claim made by an unnamed person which is characteristic of a fake news article.

Finally we will identify the appeals to the audiences' emotion, otherwise known as pathos. The fake news article readily uses pathos to influence the opinions of the reader. While trying to inform the readers about who the man in President Trump's new painting is, Focker describes the person as "a despotic ruler who didn't do his subjects any favors. He was also known as the 'Scourge of Carpathia,' the 'Sorrow of Moldavia' and a host of other unflattering names like 'Vigo the Cruel,' 'Vigo the Torturer,' 'Vigo the Despised,' and 'Vigo the Unholy.'" (Focker, np) The author is attempting to influence what the reader thinks about the new painting by portraying the man in the painting in a negative light. The author assumes that everyone has a negative perception of despotic rulers and he uses this perception to paint President Trump in a negative light. Unlike the fake news source, the real news article has no appeals to emotion. An appeal to emotion is a technique used to influence the reader's perception; therefore, an article which simply aims to inform readers of facts has no need to change the perceptions of those readers.

While on the surface these two articles seem very similar in terms of content, the truth is that by systematically analyzing each of the three tenets of the rhetorical triangle we can see where fake news and real news differ. The rhetorical triangle helps us see how a real news article has an unbiased author who uses logic and avoids emotion while reporting on facts, as well as how fake news articles have clear bias with regard to both the author and the presentation of the facts.

Works Cited

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