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Forget the Audience: Reflections on Fake News Poetry Workshops as Radical Digital Media Literacy Given the Fact of Fake News

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After Post-Truth

Interface Politics, 2nd International Conference



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Forget the Audience: Reflections on Fake News Poetry Workshops as Radical Digital Media Literacy Given the Fact of Fake News

Alexandra Juhasz

Abstract

Fake News Poetry Workshops are experiments in radical digital media literacy; they are first and foremost about being together in a shared place, talking and listening as we contemplate and express our own truths about social media and its core falsities. To do this, we use poetry—a historically established method of being heard and making sense. Looking at one workshop and the poems it generated, the author reflects creatively, and with creative things, hoping we might find new forms to be inspired by others, like us or not, so as to thoughtfully communicate from and about our felt truths, vigilant listening, concentrated research, conscientious words, and lived experiences. Instead of more fake news, we seek to pass on some parts of these selves (our words, our stories, our poetry) to others. We will forget the audience and focus on finding truths (from) ourselves.

Keywords

Digital media literacy; fake news; truth; poetry; indexicality.

In 2018, I have held ten Fake News Poetry workshops in various cities and sites in the US, Canada, and the UK. I have been trying to inspire something like 100 poems, while creating, reflecting on, and enjoying a developing process—Radical Digital Media Literacy given the fact of Fake News. Here, I will reflect, less as a scholar and more as a citizen-educator-participant-artist, upon one of those workshops, held with eight women who are members of the Devil’s Dyke Network in Brighton, England: a queer feminist poetry collective that I visited in March 2018. This particular workshop was especially memorable for me, and as such I think will be useful for situating my reflections on the project of radical digital media literacy as a whole. I will also make use some of the poems written there, as well as reflections about the process of fake news poetry workshops written by other participating poets, as a way to distribute the description and analysis of this process, experienced and practiced by many. This piece is adapted from a blog post of the same name published by the poetry blog, “The Operating System.” (Juhasz 2018) On top of poetry writing, my experiment in radical digital media literacy is committed to better machines and means for moving things from place to place, medium to medium, audience to audience, writer to writer, always attending to methods and affects that are too hard to find and enjoy on the corporate internet. (Juhasz, 2018, “Radical Digital Media Literacy in a Post-Truth Anti-Trump Era.”)

Fake News Poetry Workshops are first and foremost about being together in a shared place, talking and listening as we contemplate and express our own truths about social media and its core falsities. To do this, we use poetry—a historically established method of being heard and making sense.

Why *poetry*? one faculty member had asked initially, after listening to Alex propose the project at an early meeting—bristling a bit (or so I thought) at its privileging. To me teaching means making something together in a room, is always situational, sometimes also situationist. I said that I interpreted the exercise broadly as a chance to have a conversation with students about their experiences of language and art-making and their personal and political truths; to hear about their writing and reading practices; and to invite them to make work that related somehow to their socially mediated lives. I imagined that thinking about poetry with them would mean offering ways both open and constrained that they might use to respond in class and later to the issues Alex was raising. (Cohen, 2018)

The poetry is the excuse and an opportunity, a better way to be smart, ethical, true, and heard in this time of fake news and social media. “His behavior on Instagram/ was not far from his/ reality.” Poetry allows us to communicate with and reflect upon each other outside of the structures and vernaculars that, in the name of rationality, proof, truth and power, produce our current chaotic, disturbing, and often fake digital reality. “Could our bodies be recording/ devices that receive + share other’s/truths?”

Forget THE AUDIENCE
 text buzzes & belly-rumbles
 could our bodies be recording
 devices that receive and share other’s
 truths
 His behavior on Instagram
 Was not far from his
 Reality

Did I reach the goal of 100? At some point, I stopped counting. Even though my #100hardtruths project (Juhasz, 2016) had initially aligned with the current administration’s first 100 days and often dealt with centennials, sets of 10x10, etc., I discovered that in the workshops—where we were making good use of my digital media literacy primer—our energy was better focused on creating an atmosphere of authenticity, safety, dialogue, place-making, and meaning-creation, rather than on quantifiable outcomes. “Forget/ THE AUDIENCE.”

The poets focused some of the dialogue around the Get Lit organization’s physical space being a community space, comparing it to digital community space. Notions of authentic relationships and safe spaces came to the forefront of the discussion. In their dialogue, the poets were taking part in active place-making: agreeing, riffing, and questioning internet communities and the digital information age in real time, fully present with one another. This activity primed the meaning-creation of their writing and performance. (Ettress and Rodriguez, 2018)

“Forget the Audience” is one of seven poems created at the Fake News Poetry Workshop held with the Devil’s Dyke Network in Brighton England in March 2018, led by Linda Paoli and Claudia Treacher, with a great deal of pedagogic assistance from Helen Dixon. Each of the ten workshops took up the norms and interests of the teaching poets and their anticipated participants in their particular environments. The Devil’s Dyke workshop was focused on enacting and understanding somatic and cyborg experiences as feminist methods that might bring some clarity to our lived encounters on and off the internet. It was at once sad, inspiring, intense, and empowering.

The workshop opened with exercises that connected us to the physical space of the room and our bodies. We then talked about the devices that constantly disorient and distract us from the present, and the virtual “crowds” that we hoped or feared might be watching—including the men we might want, or hate, or fear—always reminding us that the patriarchy is still alive and well a decade or so after we had imagined and created worlds outside its gaze. “We need new psychotechnologies through which we may be able to reclaim our capacity to pay attention in ways that are not self-destructive,” explained participating poet and technologist, Kyle Booten (2018).

I never noticed the tinnitus in my ears

Always checking

Cohesion

and fragments

together

IMAGES

MIRROR IMAGES

Always there to push me back as

I push in equal measure.

There were eight or so of us, all queer feminists, mostly in our 20s or 30s, primarily British and white, writers and digital citizens all (I am from the US and am in my fifties). We quickly discovered that we all shared a similar experience of our bodies on social media—something akin to being inmates in a vision-prison that we entered willingly and remained within during all waking hours, a place where

we could be “visited” anytime but never seen right, a place where we could never live up to the expectations constantly pressing on us from all sides.

WE FLATTEN. HUMAN TOUCH

Being together,

Feeling, acknowledging

And letting it go.

I REFLECT

SOMETHING

BODIES RECEIVING

Fake News Poetry workshops “push me back as/ I push in equal measure.” We first spend some time getting to know each other. The session usually begins by stating one truth about ourselves and which technologies would be best engaged to “verify” that. At this juncture, I am quick to define technology to include any tool that extends the self to others through place and time: sure, the internet and other digital devices, but also pencils, flesh, and books. People get it: they grasp the formative inter-relations between lived reality, bodies, and our many mechanical and digital devices. We live with and use this combination of technologies as a complex verification (and falsification) machine. As we ruminate and share, we discover commonalities as well as differences. Even as we learn that our perspectives are relative, we strive to remain honest and truth-focused. “IMAGES. MIRROR IMAGES.”

The process was simple. Alex Juhasz took 45 minutes to have an honest dialogue about what fake news was and how it has affected our youth. She shared photos and statements she had collected called #100hardtruths and the poets shared how those statements impacted them. The conversation flowed from Fox News to Instagram. It swung from clickbait to credibility. One of our poets shared a statement that will always stick with me. “It’s possible,” she said, “that we will grow up never truly knowing what’s real.” After that a silence swept over the room. The weight of not only the Internet, but our connection and dependency on it was palpable. Luckily, these poets know how to think for themselves, how to write and feel with critical and constructive eyes. (Kelly Grace-Thomas, 2018)

I have a terrible story about social media

SPIT IT

OUT

lying is easier

on the internet

Does your body

panic?

We all have terrible stories about social media. At Fake News Poetry workshops we have the permission to tell these terrible stories (and good ones, too). Next we spend some time looking at my #100hardtruths-#fakenews online primer. Workshop attendees are asked to find something on the site that feels resonant: an image, some writing, one of the #100hardtruths (over half of which are written by others or refer to others' work). This is to remind us that there is much to find and learn outside of ourselves and on the internet. We can rely on other people's work to nourish, encourage, inspire, and even change us.

The conversations that ensued were by turns uncomfortable and informative: all together, sharing a room that we had not recently inhabited, everyone was prompted to consider how they come to know the "truth" of very local political upheavals and of something as starkly divided as a dispute between management and workers. What channels of communication are in place in our lives that give us information about a labor dispute that is happening at our places of study, work, and living (the campus is all of these things in different ways)? What did people know from being on the picket line, or from official university communications, or from social media, or from conversations with other students? (Sam Solomon, 2018)

Contrived moment
Something weird happened
To TIME
AT THE BACK
OF MY TONGUE
My body is the noise of
Everything I ever liked
Mutating like slime
mould
What if the mirror
Was our own
body?

After my initial framing of the project, and participants' strong expressions about their already highly-developed digital media literacy, the poet steps in. She has planned some ways to encourage the relations between creativity, writing, metaphor, truth, reality, fiction, daily living, and what participants know and have learned, thus far, about fake news. She might ask a question or suggest a prompt for a free-write. She helps us return to the noise of our bodies and clarify that noise through our words. We then move from discussion and feeling to doing—art, poetry—framed by simple and clear structures (our conversation, our experiences, the primer, the prompt) that continue to corral and link our thoughts and reflections.

We opened with a free write asking participants to investigate when they first learned about race generally and then their own race. We asked them to:

—Recall the first time you learned about race? How old were you? Where were you? What did you hear/learn? Draw into senses such as taste, smell, touch, color to describe?

—Remember the first time you remember when you learned of your race. How old were you? Where were you? What did you hear/learn? Draw into senses such as taste, smell, touch, color to describe?

—Recall the first time you saw your racial group represented in the media?
What was this representation? Where were you? What do you remember?
Describe beginning with I see... (Chet'la Sebree and Margaret Rhee, 2018)

It is not immaterialised it is lost.

ALL I WANT

TO BE

I DO NOT NEED 1000

FOLLOWERS I JUST

NEED MY MOM

Loss when it is not

there, loss when

it is there.

The irony in having

A body now

During some sessions, people write a poem. Or they are invited to write a poem later, which they may or may not do. The project is buy-in at every step. Do it or don't, share as you are comfortable.

For the Devil's Dyke Workshop, we wrote fleeting thoughts about our conversation, bodily feelings, and feelings about our bodies, onto slips of paper. "the irony in having/A body now." We lay these slips down in clusters, willy-nilly. We read our scatterings out loud. These bundles of meaning well-represented what we had been saying to each other, what we had heard, what had been felt in the room—powerfully, sadly, honestly, and with clear focus. But this was nothing like a one-to-one record, nothing like a photo; rather, our poems cut to loss, and want, and to an immaterial that can never be indexical.

The participants selected texts and images and separated them from their everyday contexts/functions, writing them into the poems. In so doing, they practiced abstraction—a practice which, following the logic of Evidentiary Realism, serves as a means of understanding the limitation of one's own vision of reality. (Orr Menirom, 2018)

We were moved and inspired, at least in that moment. We chose not to tweet or hashtag about it. We found that our audience wasn't needed. Or, better said, we had become each other's momentary witness and muse, and that seemed more than enough. It felt empowering to forget the audience, or acknowledge a more true if temporary one. We had created truths that encompassed some of our experiences and thoughts, ones we had built together there and then about fake news—truths about media that we could never discover solely on social media.

The impulse of the project is to shift platforms from digital news circulation and refusal and rebuttal to poetic forms as a way to explore truths and lies. What is fake? This is the question that I think most grabbed our group: it seems none, or very few, of us were willing to give over to the binary of fake/truth, but shared an understanding that these ways of shaping the world are themselves up for grabs; and aren't truth claims dangerous, the bedrock of colonialism and imperial occupation, and the justification for injustice? Indeed what is justice, even? We seek it, we talk about it together, at every turn we cultivate our understandings, learn new ways that justice escapes us, that we do harm. (T.L Cowan, 2018)

NOT FLAT ENOUGH

it has to be

autonomous

me as productivity machine

programmed by my phone

input+data+body = product(ivity)

The space between

Liberation and entrapment

Fake News Poetry workshops are one-offs. I spend hours in advance working with a co-teacher to co-create a curriculum; we decide on methods to engage and stimulate the intimate group; I fly or ride somewhere and try to turn on my energy, as do my collaborators and participants. We are charged with purpose; we fall in love; we make art. The poems remain. We all go home. Then, there's a post on the internet. Does anyone read it? Does that "audience" matter in any way? The Devil's Dyke participants met me once: a middle-aged white woman from NYC who landed in their town and worked and learned with them for a few hours. I do not really know how hard they work at other things, how busy they are, how shy

they might be, how far away I feel in New York. I do know that that evening with them changed me, and that some of them were changed by it, too.

“Loss when it is not/ there, Loss when/ it is there.” This radical digital media literacy is our best efforts to use technologies, including ourselves, to see and be seen, hear and be heard, know and be known, think and make sense. For the rest of 2018, and in 2019, I intend to keep this project going. I’ve seen it work—and want to see what else it can do for others. It is my sense from the workshops and from the poems that record them that we need to engage outside the sick and endangering structures and vernaculars that are born from corporate media ownership and the nations, citizens, or computers that abuse them to fuel the internet falsity under critique—principles like “growth by any means necessary.” So, the project will stay as small as I can manage, with collaboration of course.

the process is the outcome

#s do not matter

experience does

scale is not a driver.

virality is virility (Juhasz, 2017)

(Alexandra Juhasz, handwritten notes from her notebook)

For 2018–2019, I will be changing things up a bit, leading **Fake News Poetry-Video** Workshops with participating poets, video and sounds artists, and communities. We will talk about fake news and internet truths together, we will learn from the many ideas and questions in my primer, and then we will learn from the poems already written by others last year, artifacts of others’ attempts to speak their truths as art. A new sort of flow between people and their ideas and images will be generated, but not a cruel or careless one (like a like or a re-tweet). From truth to truth, poem to video, person to person, we will honor one another and one another’s art by making something real again and yet again. We will continue to create new formats for networking, listening, writing, reading and performing—about and outside the platforms provided by America’s behemoth corporations. Our art-making may be disjointed (in time and space, as a poem moves from one place to the next); meanings may jitter or slide but not based on intentional deceptions; our efforts at media literacy will keep us attentive. We will be inspired by others, like us or not, to thoughtfully make more art that derives from our felt truths, vigilant listening, concentrated re-

search, conscientious words, and lived experiences. We will pass on some parts of these selves (our words, our stories, our poetry) to others. We will forget the audience and focus on finding truths (from) ourselves.

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