

Editors' Introduction to Issue 5.2

The impetus for this special issue, entitled “Literacy, Democracy, and Fake News,” was the outsized influence misinformation played in the 2016 US presidential election. As teachers and scholars of literacies, the editorial team—like many in the US and around the world—wondered how obvious lies, such as the “Pizzagate” conspiracy theory that Hillary Clinton was running a pedophilia ring out of a pizza parlor, could be believed, and acted on, by so many people. Of course, the term used to describe these lies, propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation in November 2016—“fake news”—was quickly co-opted by Donald Trump and used indiscriminately by his administration to describe any news or reporting that they deemed unfavorable. One year later, we know even more clearly that Americans are divided by their literacy habits and activities—that the spaces we go to find information, the ways we consume information, and our vulnerabilities to manipulative amplification of disinformation map onto our existing epistemologies and ideological affiliations. In recognizing this, we are once again reminded that literacies are always ideological: literacy practices and activities are conduits for the reproduction of cultural values and conventions.

By way of introducing and framing the four essays that follow, Tom Miller and Adele Leon note that the institutional locations, engagements, and collaborations of rhetoricians and compositionists make us well-positioned to intervene in the “populist authoritarianism of our times” (11). They argue that research in social psychology promises to illuminate networked literacies in ways that not only help us motivate our students to slow down but are also paradigmatic; in this moment they see an analog to the eighteenth century, when “works such as Campbell’s *Philosophy of Rhetoric* instituted an epistemological framework that shifted our discipline’s standpoint from the speaker at the podium to the reader before the page. We are experiencing a comparable historical transition” (21). Finally, Miller and Leon suggest, our ability to listen to those with whom we disagree may be a vital practice in shaping and re-shaping our collective future.

Exploring both college students’ information literacy and the sophisticated literate practices of Macedonian teenagers engaged in circulating fake news before the 2016 US presidential election, Jacob W. Craig opens this issue by arguing that technological discourse must shift to networked understandings if we are to effectively understand and engage both academic contributions and democratic participation. “Navigating a Varied Landscape: Literacy and the Credibility of Networked Information” suggests what such an approach would look like via a case study method of understanding networks. By investigating how economic, critical, and technological forces intersect, Craig details the Macedonian writers’ use of network affordances for profit, resulting in the production and circulation of misinformation, and compares this to the literacies employed by college level writers. The article concludes with pedagogical applications of a networked approach to research and writing.

Timothy Laquintano and Annette Vee’s “How Automated Writing Systems Affect the Circulation of Political Information Online” pulls back the curtain on how the ubiquitous activities of robot writers, or bots, in online spaces drive the circulation of certain political messages and distort readers’ sense of how many other humans are authentically engaging in political advocacy. Laquintano and

Vee argue that literacy educators need to grapple with a shift from “an editorial model of information consumption and production” to an “algorithmic model” (47) in which automated software and bots amplify certain messages and even “mimic human profiles in an attempt to convince humans the bots are just more users among many” (52). Laquintano and Vee demonstrate how this “calculated online writing ecology” amplified misinformation during the 2016 presidential election (53). The authors call on teachers and scholars in writing studies to face the challenge of teaching and researching the literacies emerging in this evolving ecosystem.

In “Globalist Scumbags’: Composition’s Global Turn in a Time of Fake News, Globalist Conspiracy, and Nationalist Literacy,” Christopher Minnix maps out how conservative policy organizations and the populist rhetorical strategy of simplification reduce a diverse array of “global turn” programs to an anti-intellectual and anti-American enemy opposed to the traditional goals of higher education. Tracing the history of “global turn” initiatives from international efforts to protect national interests to contemporary service learning and civic engagement efforts, Minnix demonstrates the complexity of what constitutes the “global turn,” a complexity that itself provides fodder for conspiracy theory on the right. Minnix concludes this analysis by proposing how those working at the global turn can strategize a response.

David Riche’s “Toward a Theory and Pedagogy of Rhetorical Vulnerability” draws on research from rhetorical theory, political theory, legal studies, and philosophy to theorize a pedagogy of rhetorical vulnerability. Such a pedagogy, according to Riche, means “acknowledg[ing] the fundamental role that vulnerability plays in all of our rhetorical interactions” since “writing means attempting to affect others in some way” and “involves taking risks” (91). Focusing on examples of public trolling on Twitter and fake news stories, including the Pizzagate controversy, Riche examines how discussing fake news and trolling rhetoric with students can help them understand “something fundamental about how we experience rhetoric” (93). According to Riche, it’s no longer sufficient to teach students how to critically evaluate sources; instead, “we must also help our students come into a fuller awareness of what trolling rhetors have long recognized: that we are rhetorically vulnerable beings, that we can never not be rhetorically vulnerable and responsive, and that our rhetorical vulnerability can be managed and exploited for better and, unfortunately, for worse” (96).

In his symposium piece, Ben Wetherbee responds to Brenda Glascott’s “Constricting Keywords: Rhetoric and Literacy in our History Writing,” published in our 2013 inaugural issue. Wetherbee questions Glascott’s positioning of rhetoric and literacy as opposing terms, arguing instead that rhetoric and literacy are “two fields within a continuum” that complement one another (107). Tracing what he calls the “‘greatest hits list’ of rhetorical theory,” from Cicero to Burke to Michael Billig, Wetherbee shows how rhetoric, similar to literacy studies, engages with questions “about how identity and competence form through literate practice” (107). He suggests that more scholarship might cite work in both literacy studies and rhetoric, an invitation taken up by the authors included in this special issue.

Finally, Tabettha Adkins provides a timely review of Katrina M. Powell’s 2015 monograph *Identity and Power in Narratives of Displacement*, which uses five separate case studies—“those displaced for ‘public use’ space, survivors of Hurricane Katrina, Sudanese Refugees, displaced peoples of Sri

Lanka, and residents of Virginia’s care centers for patients with intellectual disabilities”—to identify, describe, and ultimately problematize how “narratives of identity serve both to create displaced people and to justify their displacement to the general public” (113).

Taken together, these contributions press us to confront how anti-democratic literacies manipulate how we are thinking of ourselves as members of a democracy and nation. Our authors emphasize the importance of understanding literacy as networked—at least as well as those who exploit vulnerabilities in the network for profit or cyberwar—yet the border crossings of those networks create, at this point, unresolvable tensions.

The fundamental ideological nature of literacy explored in this issue undergirds both New Literacy Studies and the theories that shape the mission of this journal. In this special issue about literacies and democracy, we acknowledge our debt to the pioneer Brian V. Street, who died in June 2017. We are grateful for Professor Street’s scholarship, which so influentially shaped our field, as well as thankful for his service and sage advice on the *LiCS* editorial board. This issue is dedicated to the memory of Brian V. Street.

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