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Fake News: Teaching Skeptics, Not Cynics

Darcy Pattison

In 2010 I went to Nantucket Island planning to write about Tony Sarg, the puppeteer who designed the first Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloons as upside-down marionettes, and who was a long-time resident of Nantucket. Instead of preparing to write a biography, my research focused on a publicity stunt that Tony Sarg pulled in 1937. In the last few years, as the term "fake news" has become common, I realized it was time for *The Nantucket Sea Monster: A Fake News Story*.

In August 1937 the Nantucket newspaper the *Inquirer and Mirror* reported eyewitness sightings of sea monsters off Nantucket Island. The truth? Tony Sarg had floated one of his huge balloons, a 135-foot sea monster that would fly in the 1937 parade, onto a Nantucket beach. It's a story that can be seen as great entertainment or as a great breach of trust committed by the free press.

As part of the research, I studied the newspaper accounts of the story. Fortunately, the *Inquirer and Mirror* archive is available online as a searchable database at <http://bit.ly/Nantucket-Newspaper>. In addition to searching for articles on the story itself, I searched the archives for other mentions of each person involved in the hoax.

The March 13, 1937, issue reported the formation of the Nantucket Publicity Committee. The Publicity Committee was tasked with creating a town booklet and advertising the booklet across the nation, including a small ad in *National Geographic*—an ad that produced thirty requests per day. While the committee's official duties related to tourism, most men on the committee were also involved in the sea monster hoax, a circumstance that put a different spin on the story. When I uncovered this

contextual information, I realized students needed to understand the timeline, which is included in my book's back matter.

More Than Just a Hoax

The sea monster publicity stunt was more than just a hoax because of the cooperation of news media. Off-island newspapers, newsreel organizations, and the editor of the *Inquirer and Mirror* all cooperated in deliberately spreading the fake news about the event. In August 1937 the *Inquirer and Mirror* reported: "In the last analysis, through press, radio and newsreels, 'Nantucket' will be placed before 100,000,000 people" ("About the Sea Monster" 1937). They felt that no one was harmed, and Nantucket had received a great boon of publicity and economic benefit. Besides it was great entertainment.

An Old, Old Story

Is fake news just a problem of our times? No, it happened in 1937, and even going back to the time of Thomas Jefferson, who penned these conflicting quotes:

"Where the press is free, and every man able to read, all is safe." (Jefferson to Yancey 1816)

"Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper." (Jefferson to Norvell 1807)

The problem of fake news is inherent in the issues surrounding the First Amendment right to a free press. If the press is free, it can investigate and report on governmental and other wrong-doings. However, it can also print whatever it likes, true or not.

I think it's crucial to help kids understand the necessity of the flip side of the free press. In a democracy, a free press keeps politicians honest (or at least more honest), and yet that protection from corruption comes at the price of a different kind of corruption. Therefore, students must learn to evaluate media reports and form an opinion about information's validity and sources' possible biases.

Media Literacy Education

To understand how this story can be presented to kids, it's helpful to look at the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) Core Principles of Media Literacy Education (MLE), available at <https://namle.net/publications/core-principles>. While the core principles discuss the value of media literacy education, I find it more interesting to look at the MLE Implications for Practice that focus on students and the skills they need. The principles and their implications remind us that a story



such as *The Nantucket Sea Monster* is not about teaching students what to think, rather it's about "teaching how to arrive at informed choices that are consistent with their own values" (NAMLE 2007, 5).

How do students initially react to the story of *The Nantucket Sea Monster*? For some students, it's just a fun story. In other words, it's an introduction to the issues of free press, but they don't

yet have enough sophistication to understand it. That's fine because we often introduce topics knowing that students' understanding will develop as they mature.

Some students are outraged. They want to go into Sherlock Holmes mode and make statements such as, "They should have known it was a fake footprint because they would've seen shovel marks in the sand." These

students are just starting to wrestle with ideas of truth and falsehood; in other words, they are on their way to learning to evaluate evidence, a valuable skill.

Other kids fail to understand the depth of the lies involved in such a hoax. For example, the story quoted eyewitnesses who said that the sea monster's head floated fifteen feet above the water. The student might ask, "How'd they get that balloon to float fifteen feet above the water?"

This student fails to understand the mechanisms of the hoax. Of course, there were no eyewitnesses

and, therefore, no eyewitness reports. For these students, it's almost a loss of innocence, which is a delicate teaching moment.

Here's the NAMLE Core Principle Implication for Practice 4.2. "MLE is designed to create citizens who are skeptical, not cynical."

Our goal is to help students understand the events, to question evidence, to ask questions that reveal the deeper issues, and to become skeptical of reports in the newspaper, without becoming cynics. At that loss-of-innocence moment, we must be sensitive to help the learner avoid becoming a cynic.

Storyteller, writing teacher, Queen of Revisions, and founder of Mims House <mimshouse.com> publisher, Darcy Pattison has been published in nine languages. Her books, published with Harcourt, Philomel/Penguin, HarperCollins, Arbordale, and Mims House, have received recognition for excellence with starred reviews in Kirkus, Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, and Publishers Weekly. Three nonfiction nature books have been honored as National Science Teachers Association Outstanding Science Trade Books. The Journey of Oliver K. Woodman (Harcourt 2003) was named an Irma Simonton Black and James H. Black Award for Excellence in Children's Literature Honor Book and has been published in a Houghton Mifflin textbook. The Nantucket Sea Monster: A Fake News Story is a Junior Library Guild selection and a 2018 National Council of Teachers of English Notable Children's Book in Language Arts. She's the 2007 recipient of the Arkansas Governor's Arts Award for Individual Artist for her work in children's literature.



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