Literacy and Pedagogy in an Age of Misinformation and Disinformation
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From Product Review to Lack of Common Ground: How Mis- and Disinformation Shape Our Wired World

An interview with Michael Calore, Senior Editor, *Wired*

Tara Lockhart and Michael Calore

A long-time journalist explores the challenges and techniques to ethical and effective reporting on the "new beat" of technology, including building trust with readers through transparency and representing diverse perspectives, as well as the importance of cultivating an awareness of both the political and financial dimensions of news ownership.

Tara Lockhart: Welcome! Let's start by telling us a bit about your work and how you encounter misinformation and disinformation in your work.

Michael Calore: I am a senior editor at *Wired*; we are a mainstream publication that appears in print and on video channels like YouTube, and we have our own *Wired* channel for Roku TV. I also work on the Web; *Wired* has a giant presence on the Web—it's bigger than the print presence. We are part of Condé Nast, which is a large publishing house based in New York. They run a lot of magazines: men's and women's fashion, travel magazines, food magazines, and some current events magazines. *Wired* is part of a group of magazines that are about news and technology. My job as an editor is basically to get writers onto stories that we think are important: they report them out and file to me, and I work with them to make the story ready to publish on the Internet. Part of that involves fact-checking.

In terms of how we encounter misinformation in our work, let me give a few examples. When you write about a company, and you want to explain what the company does to a mainstream audience, usually what you do when reporting it is to ask the people at the company to describe what they do and how their technology works. They will then offer you an explanation of how their technology works that may or may not be totally accurate. One of the things you have to do, as a reporter who writes about technology, is to be adept enough to know when they are feeding you a line of bullshit or whether they're actually telling you what they do. Sometimes with a lot of stuff in Silicon Valley—

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things like cryptocurrency or quantum computing—the concepts are so esoteric and so new to us as intellectual content that we tend to take what people tell us at face value. Now, that is one part of our job that is particularly difficult because we have to go and *learn* about the things that we're reporting on *as* we're reporting so that when we write the story we're giving people accurate information. Our researchers and our fact-checkers help with that of course.

Another thing to consider is when you call the source to comment on a story, or when somebody comes to you *as* a source *with* a story, you do have to do a little bit of mental calculus to weigh whether or not that person is telling the truth. If it's somebody who comes to you with a story, and they are a whistleblower, they may have a bone to pick with the company or with the people that they're telling you are doing bad things, so you have to weigh that. Or, if you call a source to get a comment on an academic study—perhaps you call another academic to ask for a comment on a study—they may tell you things that surprise you. However, if they're giving you bad information on that call, you wouldn't know because they're an academic and they're an expert. And purportedly experts don't guess about anything; they just know. You do have to weigh that as well. What is a person's motivation for talking to a journalist? That's a question that we have to ask often.

What I've just described is the reporting side. On the product side, my job is to write about consumer products and to edit stories about consumer products, so I see a lot of demos. A company will come here to show their product: they put it on the table, they tell me about how the product works, and I'll ask very specific questions about how the product is working. Often, they won't answer those questions because it's a proprietary secret, and they don't want you or any of their competitors knowing.

Now, it could be that the company is faking the demo and is giving you some sort of smoke and mirrors presentation, so that when you go to write the story, you just write it without asking any hard questions. That's something that is not that prevalent, but we have seen it before in the world of products coverage. For example, this company called 3D Robotics over at Berkeley was found to be faking the capabilities of its new drone in a demo for journalists. In that case, journalists went to the company, they went up on the roof, they watched the drone fly around, the company showed them all the fancy stuff the drone can do, and everybody went home and wrote their story. And later it came out that that company was faking their demos. But like I said, that's pretty rare.

Lockhart: That's so interesting; I would never think about that happening. What tools or critical strategies do you use to try to discern that—to make sure that to the best of your ability you're not writing a review about a demo that's been faked?

Calore: Well, part of it is just that you have to be cut out for the job. I mean part of being a journalist is always being skeptical. There's a reason that journalists get reputations for being bullies because people do not like being asked very pointed questions that insinuate that that person is maybe lying

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or glossing over some greater truth. That is a journalist's job. To ask those pointed questions, to get in there and say, "Now when you say the thing is going from here to here, tell me exactly what you mean." The person who's answering that question is going to get frustrated and wonder, "Do I really have to tell you that? This is the thing I've spent the last three years on: of course it works." Part of the job is just having the intestinal fortitude to question people like that, on the phone or to their face. There are a lot of people in this business who don't have that gene in their body; so they can't really do that, which is not to say that they're not good journalists, but just that there's a certain type of journalism that they are less cut out for.

Another part of it is having those types of people around you: for example, having researchers who will question those things in a fact-check process. A lot of times a researcher will ask those questions if the reporter did not ask them, or they'll ask the source that we're reporting on to back up what they said in an interview. You also have smart editors around you, and other reporters—your peers in the office. If you're a freelancer, you work with an editor; if you're a staff writer, you have other people on the team whom you can bounce ideas off of. For example, we have a lot of cross-disciplinary knowledge here at *Wired*. We're often writing about products that have a strong science angle, so when we write about that product, we have the science desk read it to make sure that nothing seems fishy to them. We use a lot of institutional knowledge and institutional checks and balances.

Aside from that, you can also get some sense that maybe a person is not telling the truth based on their pedigree. What else have they done? Have they been involved in products that are kind of shady? Who are the investors: are the investors people who typically do very strong vetting of companies they invest in, or are they a fly-by-night angel investor? You can do some of that digging because that stuff is usually public, or at least found out easily.

Lockhart: I think what you've just been talking about leads into a contextual question: from the world of journalism, how would you describe the fundamental values around truth, facts, and disseminating information?

Calore: There's an old saying, and I can't remember who it is, so you'll have to forgive me, but it's this: any fact worth checking is worth checking twice. Or even the saying "if his mother says she loves him, you have to check." Essentially, the point is that doubling down on your research is the best way to be safe, so that's one standard that we always try to adhere to. We do backreads of each other's work, and we have a team of researchers here who fact-check our biggest stories—they don't fact-check every story, but they always fact-check our biggest stories. We also have in-house lawyers. That's pretty standard across larger newsrooms or journalism brands; you'll find that they'll have researchers and lawyers who will read things. You have to know the difference between what constitutes libel versus what constitutes slander; those are very important things to know.

Beyond that, there are handbooks; we encourage everybody to read them. But mostly the standards

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are enforced by the publication itself and by the people around it, by the lawyers, and by the researchers. What it comes down to is that the reader has to trust you. They have to trust you to not be biased; they have to trust that you're doing accurate reporting and that you're not making things up or making sources up, and that you're not getting facts wrong. That really comes with time and experience. If a journalism institution wins awards—not just the Pulitzer, but the journalism awards from the Society of Professional Journalists—particularly awards for investigative reporting, that raises the credibility of the publication. That makes it something that, in the public's eye, is a more credible institution. And really that's the most important way to ensure that your readers know you can deliver an accurate piece of journalism; it's a way that you can show your bona fides.

That gets us into the topic of bias. A lot of people, as you know, will say that *The New York Times* is biased or Fox News is biased. It's really interesting because there's no distinct measure for bias. The only thing that we have to measure bias is that the perception of bias is just as damaging as actual bias.

That's something that we deal with all the time. In our space, one example is with regard to someone who is very anti-Apple. A lot of people hate Apple, they hate iPhones, they hate that the public loves iPhones and that the iPhone is successful; there may be people who just don't like Apple because they manufacture everything in China. Those views are perfectly fine. However, if such people read a story that we write about Apple, it doesn't really matter whether or not that story has anything wrong with it. From that position they may see it as bad journalism because it's saying something about Apple. If they see something complimentary, they might think that we are a bad outlet because we've written something complimentary.

Lockhart: Yes, I think you're now getting into the ways that we have difficulty changing our minds, and phenomena like confirmation bias. Can you talk a little bit about how our current climate—political and cultural—has heightened those issues or affected your work?

Calore: Sure. I don't report on politics, I don't report on Capitol Hill or the White House. But I do know that for the people here at *Wired* who do, it's extraordinarily difficult for them to write anything and not have it come across as biased towards the left. This is primarily because of the way that facts were disseminated by the Trump administration, the way that facts were bent by the former administration, and the way that they sort of move the ball and hide the ball and then try to distract people. That's tactical, and if you're somebody who works in that environment and sees it happening, it's easy to see it.

For example, if you're a reporter who's reporting on shenanigans in the White House or legislation moving through Congress—and you're there every day, you know these people, and you know how the system operates—it's very easy for you to take a step back and write an explanatory piece about how it operates. Somebody who is completely unfamiliar with what's going on is going to read

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that and see you as somebody who is biased against the administration because you've described unconventional tactics or tactics that are destructive or harmful in some cases. If in your writing you call those tactics out as such and show your sourcing, it's still not going to get past that person. Really what we're fighting against in that regard, in covering politics in particular, is a lack of understanding and a lack of education among most people who don't follow this stuff day to day, which is most Americans, frankly. I think that there is a level of understanding of how government works and how politicians use tactics in order to get their way, but the deeper you go, the fewer people understand it. That's really a difficult learning curve to get past.

As far as other types of reporting that are not politics, particularly with regard to product coverage, we're critics. What we engage in is criticism: there's a new thing in the world, we try it, we play with it, we tell you what we thought of it, and we tell you whether or not it's worth your money—should you buy it or should you not buy it. That means sometimes we're going to be very complimentary about things. If that happens, we almost universally get a raft of comments from readers saying things like, "How much did they pay you for this—you guys never have a bad word to say about this company." We get a lot of stuff like that, which is really difficult for me to deal with. If you look at my side of it, I get to try 800 different versions of the same thing; I feel like I am qualified to tell you which thing is the best. Now, you may not agree with that; but the only way that we can have an objective argument about it is if you also try those 800 things, and then we come up with our own conclusions and we debate it. So those kinds of comments feel really one sided. And that then comes back to the issue of trust. If you're going to do some sort of criticism, you have to publish a lot, you have to try everything, you have to really know your stuff. And you have to show that you know your stuff in order for people to take your opinion seriously.

There's a lot of just dismissing opinions out there. And honestly, I think it's fine.People get very, very emotional about the work that we do, not only in this room, but our readers get very emotional about it. We make people angry, we make people happy—that human element always plays a part in how our stories are perceived and what is perceived as true.

Lockhart: Have you perceived a shift in terms of the amount of distrust or dismissing of opinions or anything like that?

Calore: Yes, I have. Particularly in technology journalism, which is a very, very young beat. The first personal technology journalists were in the late 1970s and early 1980s. There were a lot of people who were really instrumental in shaping what technology journalism looks like: Walt Mossberg, John Markoff, and Steven Levy, who works here and is my colleague. With the advent of the Internet, more publications, including mainstream publications, were able to put a technology reporter on staff, because they had a new outlet where there was a built-in audience: if you are reading news *on* the Internet, you want to read news *about* the Internet. And then there was an explosion in the mid 2000s with blogs and publications like TechCrunch, GigaOM, NewTeeVee, Engadget, and Gizmodo,

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where it became a much more rich, varied, and robust beat.

By comparison, if you were a reporter writing about Microsoft in the late 1980s, you had a couple hundred people that you were competing with for stories; if you are writing on Microsoft in 2010 or 2015, you now had tens of thousands of people competing for stories. With that advance comes people who are much more skilled and people who are much less skilled: people who are more easily manipulated, people who are far less easily manipulated; and people who don't do any reporting at all but just rewrite what they read elsewhere. That's actually been one of the biggest problems: the rewriting of stories going around the Internet. For example, say Publication X has a headline about a new camera, they get picked up on Reddit and Facebook, and their version of the story gets distributed everywhere . . . but they never actually saw the camera, or talked to the people who made the camera, or did any reporting. Maybe if they're nice, they link to another publication that originally reported it; in the blog era, we call that re-blogging. There's a lot of people who learn that as an instinct. And in the current climate, with everybody competing for advertising dollars and competing for audience engagement, you're required as reporters to write more and more stories per day. There are some people working in some tech publications who have quotas to write as many as five, six, seven stories per day. Now, if that's your quota, then you're going to write every story that you can think of. And sometimes that means rewriting the work somebody else did. These are people who are generally honest—they're just trying to inform their audience and just trying to keep their jobs—so most are not doing anything that's unethical. Because they're linking back, they're offering credit, right?

However, that instinct sort of came into vogue ten years ago, and that instinct has remained in the industry. So many people's idea of a news story is going out and rewriting five other news stories and going home. In internet news in particular, there is a demonstrable lack of reporting in a lot of work. There are stories that are one source: just one person is interviewed without another person's account, or any additional voice, maybe a skeptical voice, in that story. We see more and more stories with that style of writing. I think that's a problem. I think that it's hard because I'm in my early 40s, and I started reporting by telephone and by going to see the thing I'm reporting on. Now, you don't have to pick up a telephone at all. You don't have to go see the thing. You can just watch the thing on the Internet, you can read what somebody else wrote, you can write an email or have a text exchange with someone. This often leads to missing a lot of the nuance: you don't get a chance to hear interesting information, you may not get a chance to follow up on the questions that are most important to you or to your readers, and you don't get to do a thorough fact-check with the person. Those are all things that end up harming journalism, and they're all becoming more and more prevalent.

Lockhart: I want to make some connections between what you've said you encounter in your work, and more broad ideas about literacy and the kinds of literacy that can really serve people in this cultural climate. Whether that's students practicing reading, writing, fact-checking; researching; or just people engaging with information—whether it's a product review, or any kind of information

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they encounter, especially maybe on the Web. What ideas do you have about that? What's needed? What are the challenges?

Calore: I think the biggest challenge, obviously, is that we have been trained to view data streams like Facebook and Twitter as news. When something comes across the transom—you read a tweet, you see a Facebook post—your brain automatically thinks "this is News" and you believe that information. That's a problem. We know that's a problem; it's connected to the whole concept of "fake news." By fake news, I don't mean stories that are made to explain opinions. Instead, I mean stories that are written deliberately to be sensational, usually written by people in other parts of the world and published for an audience that's different from them: stories loaded up with keywords, loaded up with conspiracy theories; stories that are engineered to get people to click on them so that the publication where they appear can earn ad dollars from Google and Facebook. Those stories are only written to get you to look at a story so that they can make a buck. With the advent of that in 2016, it was a real gut check, I think, particularly for the American public because it ended up influencing an election. But it also served as a really important balance to how people were viewing social media at the time.

I don't think things are much better now. People whom we love and admire and respect are still falling for stories that are just generated to make a dollar and have no grounding. I do think that we need to be a lot more literate about our social media. I don't know how we do that. Honestly, I think the hearings that happened in 2018 with Zuckerberg, Jack Dorsey, and Sheryl Sandberg explaining very publicly—with the world's eye trained on them—some of the mechanics of how these things work, how they're combating misinformation, and how important it is for us to evolve and understand what is happening; I think that's a big step. People might now question a little bit more whether they're talking to a bot on Twitter or whether the story they click on Facebook is actually true.

The other thing is that there is such a rapid proliferation of news outlets that a key goal is for us to know who owns each one and who's running each one. Think of the example of news coming across on Facebook that seems like it's a local paper—say it seems like it's originating from Lincoln, Nebraska. But actually, the link in the name has nothing to do with Nebraska; it has to do with Abraham Lincoln. And it's actually being run by somebody in Argentina.

Lockhart: This makes me think about some of the work that we've been researching in my field, network literacy and algorithmic literacy—trying to help people learn about information that is engineered in the ways you're describing and how information circulates in ways that are much different than how we used to think about information circulating (over the phone, or through a printed newspaper, etc.).

My question is, then, how can we start to build that kind of capacity? How can we as individuals learn and be attuned to what technology leaders like Dorsey are talking about in those hearings and be

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thinking more on those multiple levels? Something beyond questions like: is this a website that ends in .edu or .gov? Or what we used to think of as "looking for bias" or finding "an accurate source"? It seems like there are many, many more levels now; different kinds of literacy and thinking seem required.

Calore: I honestly think that we should be using machine intelligence to solve this problem. I mean, yes, it's an imperfect solution, but it could go a long way. You can write computer programs that could look at a bunch of signals in a story that's being shared on a platform: things like the headline, the URL structure, the ad servers that are delivering ads on that page, the links that story points to, the names of the people who are being cited, and whether or not those people have a history in your database. Then you can start to separate things into buckets if you use machine intelligence; this story has problems, this story seems fine. Right now, what we're using is engagement: are people clicking on it? If the answer's yes, then it gets shared. And that definitely has to change.

Lockhart: That's really interesting because if the measure is engagement, then it's susceptible to all those things that come with engagement: confirmation bias, wanting to hear what you already believe, being shaped by whatever circle or bubble that you're in, right? How can we break out of that? Do you know anyone who is starting to do this—using machine intelligence—in terms of assessing veracity, or potentially problematic veracity?

Calore: I know that there are people using machine intelligence for things like enforcing niceness and stepping on trolls; you hear people complaining about their post getting flagged because it had this coordinate or this image in it. In terms of vetting news, we're further behind. One example that Jack Dorsey was talking about recently is called the News Literacy Project (https://newslit.org/), which might be helpful for teachers and your readers.

Lockhart: From your perspective, what's exciting about using machine intelligence, or why does that feel like the right path to pursue and put more energy into; what role does journalism have to play?

Calore: I think it's both exciting to me, and a potential problem, to consider removing humans from the equation when deciding whether or not something is true. However, I do think it would make a very good primary screening tool. There are things that can appear hidden to the reader of a news story, maybe a false news story; there are elements that would probably stay hidden to the reader that a machine would instead pick up. For example, machines can match the fact that a story has the same sourcing that is used in an article in X publication; we know a lot about that publication and that its reporting or sourcing is usually false so we should be more skeptical with this story.

Machine intelligence can thus do a lot of that quick background work that you need to complete in order to check if something's factual or check its "truthiness." I'm excited about that. It would make it a little bit easier for humans to go in and decide what is right or wrong. I think this is especially

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important when you've got a giant platform that reaches a billion people and things get shared and can very, very quickly get spread before somebody is able to look at it and see if it's actually true or not. An example of using humans to do this work is when Facebook had trending topics; they hired a bunch of journalists to go through all the news being shared on Facebook to find things that were the good versions of those topics and post them up. What happened is they ended up picking a lot of liberal publications and not a lot of conservative publications. Facebook got in trouble for that, which caused them to go "hands off" on news, and that then opened the door for fake news to come to Facebook. That's something that I think Silicon Valley is very eager not to see repeated; I think the platforms are a little hesitant to go too deep into that sort of system.

Also, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act talks about platforms not being held liable or responsible for the things that people post on them. If a platform is going to claim immunity to hate speech, then they also can't do a hardcore vetting of things that are published on their platform in light of that section. That's a weird riddle. I think that the laws will eventually be rewritten to allow this or platforms will be able to come up with a system that works where they can still claim protections for things like hate speech, but they can also claim that they're doing due diligence to the accuracy of the things that are being shared as "news."

Lockhart: It sounds like we're going through a crucible kind of process, a fine-tuning process to figure out what's going to work. But I like the idea of primary screening, especially to make networked information more immediately visible for consumers.

Calore: Yes, I'm thinking too about including diverse perspectives, as well as negotiating with people who believe that they are being silenced, or that they're being misrepresented by the media when in fact they're not. Ultimately, so much of this goes back to trust. It's important for publications to have an ongoing dialogue with their readership. I think *Wired* does a really good job at this; *The New York Times* does a really good job with this as well. People may not agree with everything that they do, but if they publish a story that feels wrong—not inaccurate per se, but it's not representing the full story, or there are people and motivations being left out that a reporter just didn't catch—the publication is very forthcoming. They will often say, "Our readers have pointed this out, we recognize that we made a mistake, and we're going to do our best to include everybody else's voice the next time we talk about this; and also, we're going to talk about it more right now so we can include those voices." A lot of publications will do that, and I think that's crucial for building trust with your readers, especially when re-establishing trust after people have been maligned, even if you're somebody who read that story and didn't really see anything wrong with it.

Lockhart: Right, it might open up your own perspective a little bit more. You might think, "Oh, that didn't occur to me, but I guess maybe I *should* think about this being a narrower kind of story." I was thinking about that earlier on when you were talking about product reviews and the person who doesn't necessarily trust that your opinion hasn't been paid for. It made me think about the

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importance of making your process and methods and criteria all present so someone can see the work that went into it and know what is shaping it.

Calore: Yes, if you read *The Wirecutter*, that's what they do. Even their section headers are named things like "how we picked" and "why you should trust us." I think that transparency is really important. I had a conversation with Jacqui Cheng, the outgoing editor-in-chief of *The Wirecutter,* a couple of years ago and I asked her, "Why is it so important for you to show your work?" She said that she couldn't imagine trusting a product reviews website where that wasn't done. And I think that's something that people are demanding more, and because there are sites like *Wirecutter* who are leading the way, it will happen more and more.

By way of conclusion then, I think when we're talking about literacy and skills that readers need to have, evolutions like these go a long way towards making better practices reality. People now know what they should be looking for when they're reading a review, or what types of questions they should be asking when they're looking into a writer and whether they can trust that writer. That awareness—demanding content that shows the work, asking for what they need as readers in order to be able to trust reporting—is key, and something we all have a responsibility to build on.