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Impersonation Podcast: Understanding Untruth in Uncertain Times

Joseph S. Vuletich

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Impersonation Podcast: Understanding Untruth in Uncertain Times

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Overview

In today's media ecosystem, politicians dismiss unflattering news stories as "hoaxes" and AI-generated deep-fakes concern us because of their increasingly realistic qualities. Scholars teaching information literacy have responded by developing sophisticated methods for sorting fact from fiction, promoting credibility, and dismissing falsehood. Yet falsehood is not homogenous. Exploring its variations can reveal motives besides duplicity, and experimenting with its rhetorical conventions can empower students to consider their participation in the circulation of social values, including how to weigh evidence, who can claim authority, and even what constitutes a "fact."

In this assignment, students work in groups of 2 to create a 5–7-minute podcast in which a "host" and "guest expert" investigate a hoax to understand its rhetorical function(s). Working with the premise that "hoaxes effect or enact...some real result in the world in addition to telling constative untruths...by imitating authentic instances of the host genre" (Fredal 75), students research a scholar that helps them identify genre conventions in their hoax. Then, modeling their dialogue on podcasting interviews, students should "take on the approach" (Harris 74) of the scholar/expert and develop a claim about how the hoax's falsehoods critique or complicate the cultural conventions they imitate. Finally, in separate written reflection (250 words), individual students offer a meta-analysis of their rhetorical choices. By reflecting on why they incorporated specific podcast conventions and how they imitated an expert, students can "examine the multiple modes and media used to deliver credible information" (Woods and Ralston) and, further,

conceptualize credibility and falsehood as contextual and socially mediated.

This assignment is especially well suited to first-year composition courses in which students often contend, sometimes for the first time, with media and information literacy (Artman, Frisicaro-Pawlowskica, & Monge 94). At the same time, it also lends itself to courses on journalism, media circulation, and political analysis. Studying hoaxes qua hoaxes may feel too limited in courses that are broadly concerned with more popular forms of news. Nevertheless, the hoax's ability to emulate other genres makes it an especially salient way to study the genre conventions of many types of composition, ranging from press releases (see Google Nose, https://archive.google/nose/) to academic publishing itself (see Sokal).

Time Commitment

This is the summative assessment of a 4-week unit that includes exposure to other hoaxes, readings on influence and plagiarism, discussion around well-known radio hoaxes and podcasts, and basic training in sound-editing software (e.g. Adobe Audition). For someone interested in applying a similar assignment to a different context, I would recommend a minimum of 2-3 weeks to organize, record, edit, and reflect on this impersonation podcast.

Materials

In addition to the required readings, students need access to recording equipment and sound-editing software (professional mics are great, but a cellphone and savvy sound setup – like a small room with sound-dampening features like carpets and curtains – work fine too!). We used Adobe Audition, but feel free to search the internet for the editing program of your choice.

Assignment Process

- First, students will choose a hoax that they and their partner find sufficiently interesting for a sustained analysis.

- Second, students will organize details from their hoax as material for analysis. Strategies here include compiling a list of the details they find most interesting, strange and compelling and ranking them in order of importance, creating a list of repetitions, strands/patterns, or binaries and answering questions about how and why they're operating in the text. Students' goal should be to generate a list with more details than they think they need and to select those details that best speak to the claim they are making.

- Third, students will identify the host genre of their hoax and research a scholar that addresses the conventions of that genre. Students should imagine themselves embodying this scholar and asking: if they had a chance to look at the hoax that you're looking at, what would they say about it?

- Fourth, students will draft a dialogue between a radio host and the interviewee they plan to playfully impersonate. Here, it helps to remind students that they need to do more than jump straight into their analysis of the hoax – they'll also need to introduce the topic, why they're talking about it, the "guest speaker" they've invited onto the show, and why that speaker is relevant to the hoax they're looking at.

- Fifth, students will record a "draft" podcast. At this point, they do not need to include any sound effects, edit their audio file (e.g. cut out pauses, reduce background noise, etc.), or even have their dialogue finalized. This is more about how it feels getting their voice on "tape" and generating new ideas than it is about creating a polished product. Students may ultimately decide to record even more than twice for this draft but should be reminded that whatever they produce at this point is for feedback, not to be edited for their final

submission. In other words, they will produce at least one more version for their final submission.

▪ Sixth, students will gain preliminary exposure to sound editing software. It is not uncommon or unreasonable for instructors to take a day of class to model sound editing software, demonstrating how to add intro and outro music, dampen background noise, soften sharp sounds, cut out pauses and verbal space-holders, etc. At the discretion of the instructor, students may also want to consider other editing platforms, especially if they are already familiar with different software.

▪ Seventh, students will upload a polished podcast of 5-7 minutes that responds to the assignment prompt while also incorporating elements of intentional sound design. Their final product should demonstrate an awareness of audio/radio/podcasts as a particular medium that directs its audiences' attention in particular ways. Some of these may be demonstrated through editing (e.g. introductory music to set the mood/tone of analysis), but others might simply reflect their familiarity with genre conventions.

▪ Finally, individual students will submit a brief, 250-word written reflection on their choices in the podcast. These choices can include why they chose specific details as evidence, how they structured their analysis and dialogue, or even why they chose a particular hoax in the first place. That said, this is also an excellent opportunity for students to identify and reflect on the specific contributions they made to a group project.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this assignment will:

- Identify the genre conventions present in a hoax and make inferences about what "host genre" is being imitated.

- Research outside scholarly sources that speak to the potential meaning of specific genre conventions in particular contexts.

- Analyze and assess the cultural values implicit in a hoax's host genre through the lens of their research.

- Act out their analysis of media and genre conventions by taking on the roles of cultural critic and podcast host, respectively.

- Direct, produce, mix and edit the sound for a podcast that not only represents their analytical claims, but also playfully recreates the imitative logic of the hoax.

Learning Accommodations

- The goal of this assignment is less to produce a podcast than to engage meaningfully with the interaction between media affordances and genre conventions. Thus, students who are differently abled (especially those who cannot hear) should be encouraged to compose in other media, including videos, websites, or images.

- Students, though encouraged to work in groups due to the dialogic nature of the host-interviewee interaction and the difficulty of composing in an often novel format, may also request permission to work individually with modified assignment parameters.

- Students can negotiate their roles within their groups, providing for a wide array of shared responsibilities, including but not limited to textual analysis, research, scripting a dialogue, recording, and editing.

- Instructors should present directions for this assignment, including each step in the process, in multiple formats, including written instructions, verbal directions, formative feedback as student work in groups, and a-synchronous video and/or audio synopses when possible.

Works Cited

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Further Reading

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Miner, Horace. "Body Ritual among the Nacirema." *American Anthropologist* 58.3 (1956): 503-507.

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