Harvard-Educated Historian: Harvard Just Labeled Me 'Fake News'

Tom Woods is a historian and political commentator. A *New York Times* Best Selling author, he received his BA from Harvard and his PhD from Columbia.

I'd never heard of Woods until yesterday, when a libertarian friend forwarded to me a letter Woods sent to his readers. It began [like this](#):

> *Harvard University has released a guide to so-called fake news. That guide links to a lengthy list of offending websites, which includes TomWoods.com.*
>
> *Now granted, next to my entry is the word "Unknown," which means they haven't yet investigated my work to see if it truly qualifies. I made the list, they say, because some people have classified my site that way.*
>
> *Well, that sounds fair!*

As of Friday, Harvard's newly-created fake news guide [was still](#) linking to the list, even though some [commentators](#), including [the *New York Post*'s editorial board](#), had exposed its many flaws.

Where did the list come from? It was created months ago by Merrimack College's Melissa Zimdars, an assistant professor of communication and media.

Woods is one of nearly a thousand names that appear on Zimdars' "fake news" list. Many of the names likely are familiar to readers: the Weekly Standard, the Washington Examiner, Gateway Pundit, the Drudge Report, National Review,

The Blaze, Breitbart, Lifezette, Powerline Blog, the Daily Signal, Wikileaks, Zero Hedge, and many others. (Intellectual Takeout is not.)

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It's difficult to say precisely what criteria Zimdars used to characterize these media outlets as "fake." The one consistent element is that most of the names readers will recognize publish media that is of a libertarian or conservative perspective. Beyond that, Zimdars' criteria is rather nebulous.

For example, one indicator she says she looks for is the presence of "sensational or provocative language– aka clickbait." But "clickbait" is merely a *tactic*, one used by pretty much all media at one time or another. It's also worth pointing out that BuzzFeed, a site that basically [invented clickbait](), appears nowhere on Zimdars' list. Nor do left-of-center media brands such as Mother Jones, the Nation, Slate, Vox, or Salon.

Zimdars herself appears confused on what exactly she means by "fake news." She added this addendum to her document:

> *Some people are asking which news sources I trust, and all I can say is that I read/watch/listen very widely, from mainstream, corporate owned sources (The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, The Wall Street Journal, Forbes) as well as The Atlantic, National Public Radio, and various local and alternative sources with different political perspectives…*

Okay. Those are all fine media sources. Then she goes on:

> *The problem: Even typically reliable sources, whether mainstream or alternative, corporate or nonprofit, rely on*

*particular media frames to report stories and select stories based on different notions of newsworthiness. **The best thing to do in our contemporary media environment is to read/watch/listen widely and often, and to be critical of the sources we share and engage with on social media.***

This is fine advice, but it's advice Zimdars undermines with her blacklist of nearly all right-of-center media sites, many of which she admits she has not reviewed but still includes on a list of "fake news" sites.

At the bottom of her document Zimdars also features a disclaimer saying "all of the contents in this document **reflect the opinion of the author**."

Did you catch that last part? Zimdars admits her list is pretty much based on her *opinion*.

So let's get this straight. Harvard University, arguably the most prestigious academic institution in the United States, is essentially linking to a "fake news" blacklist that is based on one woman's *opinion* of journalism, someone who has [never worked professionally as a journalist](#) and who seems confused on what precisely fake news is.

Fake News exists. [Craig Silverman of BuzzFeed](#) and others have done great work detailing how small operations in [Macedonia](#), Kosovo, [Costa Rica,](#) [Germany](#), and beyond have beat Facebook's algorithm to spread [actual fake news](#) that generates hundreds of millions of clicks (and tens of millions of dollars). Hollywood studios are even getting in on the action, [using fake news](#) to promote films.

Someone should gently explain to Zimdars and the folks at Harvard the difference between fake news and media published through a partisan or ideological lens. Their confusion on this point is fueling Americans' troubling tendency to label any news with which we disagree as "fake news."

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