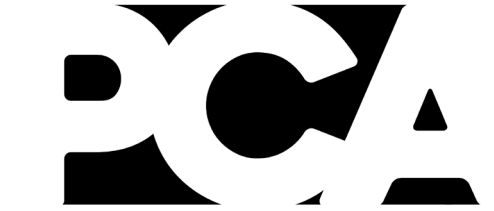
4-15-2022

DIY Disinformation: Using Fake Crafting Videos to Combat Fake News

Elizabeth M. Downey
Mississippi State University, emd93@msstate.edu



NATIONAL CONFERENCE

OF THE
POPULAR CULTURE ASSOCIATION
AMERICAN CULTURE ASSOCIATION

APRIL 13–16, 2022

pcaaca.org

- Vaccine Misinformations Past and Present
  Elizabeth C Zak
- Digital Engagement with Arts and Cultural Programming in Crisis and Trying Times
  Daniel H. Mutibwa
- Narrative Mutation: The Uncertainty of Crisis Triggers Rhetorical Chain Reactions Driven by the Progression of Merging Narratives Out of the Depths of "The Pit"
  Suha Mohammed

Libraries, Archives & Museums Libraries, Archives & Museums Session II: Information Literacy II
Virtual Suite 25
Session chair: Casey Hoeve

- Tag This For Me: How We Organize, Classify, and Communicate With Tags
  Hannah Jane Madonna
- In Their Own Words: How Embedding the Paranormal into a Graduate-Level Information Literacy Course Fostered a Sense of Belonging for a Returning, Non-Traditional Student
  Courtney M Block
- DIY Disinformation: Using Fake Crafting Videos to Combat Fake News
  Elizabeth M. Downey
- Not just toys: Using dolls to teach museum theory and methodology in the classroom
  Dana Sergent Nemeth

Material Culture Material Culture II: Identity, Politics, and Protest
Virtual Suite 26
Session chair: Jennifer Wingate

- Laundry, Domesticity, and the Making of the American Family Ideal
  Kristi Branham
- The domestic display of JFK portraits, photography & civil rights
  Jennifer Wingate
- Imperial Products: Cultural Meanings of American Wicker Furniture
  Kathleen Daly
- Dogtown, SkateBoarder Magazine, and the Limits of Subcultural Textuality
  Simon Vangel

Elizabeth Downey

Popular Culture Association Virtual Conference

April 15, 2022

"DIY Disinformation: Using Fake Crafting Videos to Combat Fake News"

When Ann Reardon started her YouTube cooking channel *How To Cook That* in 2011, she likely was not expecting to become a go-to expert in misinformation and viral videos a decade later. A licensed nutritionist and food scientist from Australia, Reardon gained a large following as she published her instructional videos, focusing on creative cakes, colorful candies, and easy baking tips. By 2018 Reardon was already collaborating with other YouTube creators such as Draw with Jazza and TheOdd1Out. The channel currently has over 850 million views and 4.84 million subscribers.

On December 28th, 2018, Reardon posted a video titled "Is *So Yummy* the Worst Baking Channel on YouTube?" This wasn't the first time she had posted about supposed "viral" cooking hacks, having previously tested both wacky kitchen gadgets and techniques pulled from TikTokers or suggested by users. But the *So Yummy* video was the first time that Reardon and *How to Cook That* directly challenged another YouTube channel regarding their content. The first of *So Yummy*'s videos that Reardon reviews includes an "ice cream frosting" hack; according to the original *So Yummy* video, you should be able to melt strawberry ice cream in a double boiler, add 2 cups of powdered sugar, refrigerate the mixture, and then whip it up to a thick consistency akin to cake frosting. She tries to replicate the frosting but it doesn't work, no matter how long she runs the mixer. What likely happened was they edited two separate clips together; one with the melting and blending of the ice cream, then another of ACTUAL frosting

being whipped. Another *So Yummy* clip demonstrates making your own dried basil by simply chopping up fresh basil and putting it in a microwave. Once again Reardon cannot duplicate it, at least not until she adds one more step that *So Yummy* left out; she takes ACTUAL dried basil, puts it in a cup, sticks it in the microwave (without turning it on) and *then* takes it out again. It's three card monte…but with herbs. In actuality, the moisture content in fresh basil is too high; coupled with the way microwave radiation vibrates the water content to cook, this hack is scientifically impossible (Tang & Resurreccion 3).

Reardon's debunking video was a smash, and she was inundated with requests from her YouTube community asking her to debunk other content. When she found more baking and crafting hack videos from these channels (some sent by viewers, others from basic searches), she was shocked to see some of the videos promoted dangerous hacks that could lead to physical harm. A few months later, Reardon posted a follow-up, "Is 5-Minute crafts the WORST channel on YouTube?" One of the 5-Minute Craft videos reviewed included the suggestion to bleach strawberries to make them white. This is obviously a lethal combination that could lead to poisonings. Another hack that was not quite as deadly but still questionable was a recipe for "activated charcoal ice cream." Incidentally, this was the first debunking video where she had her husband Dave (a frequent guest in her videos) taste-test a creation and has been an entertaining recurring bit. Reardon eventually became better known for the popular debunking videos, granting interviews to media outlets and educating online viewers on the manner in which misinformation finds its way into their feeds (Fox). Out of her top 20 YouTube videos based on views alone, seven of them are debunking videos; she has a playlist with a current total of 25. Yet, the debunking videos still aren't as popular as the original fake videos themselves.

In comparison, *So Yummy* has 9.12 million subscribers and over three billion views, roughly twice as many subscribers and over three times as many views that Reardon has on *How To Cook That* (Doll). One could see those numbers and claim Reardon just has "sour grapes" that her channel isn't as popular (though 5 million subscribers is nothing to sneeze at). But this doesn't only affect Reardon's channel. Thousands of other independent cooks and bakers have had channels on YouTube come and go. A few become popular enough to stay, such as *Sorted, Binging With Babish*, and Reardon's channel. But many more drop out, unable to compete with the content farms like *So Yummy, Blossom, 5-Minute Crafts, Tasty*, and more.

These content farms take advantage of both YouTube's algorithms and monetization via YouTube's Partner Program to churn out hundreds of colorful, sped-up, music-backed videos with strategic titles that grab onto the most common search terms (Jennings). Some of these farms even have a darker agenda, as the channel's financial backers pull viewers into suggested videos and communities that are far from bleaching strawberries and faking flan. A subcategory of content farms are "troll farms," one of the most notorious being the "Internet Research Agency," financially backed by the Russian government and a major source of misinformation during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Campaign (Freelon et al. 561).

Research and instruction librarians, particularly those that focus on information literacy and source evaluation, have increasingly been called in the last several years to be soldiers in the war on fake news. Old stand-by tools such as the CRAAP test developed at California State University-Chico are now deployed to detect and debunk planted and viral news stories, propaganda outlets, deep fake videos, and content farms. While librarians can stay current by using the latest headlines, in addition to using current news content as examples for students, they can also use practical content that a patron would come across in everyday searches, even if

all they are searching for is “how to get an ink stain out of a shirt,” or “how to bake bread.” Using three of the frames in the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, we can use videos from *How To Cook That* as well as more legitimate cooking channels to visualize and demonstrate the concepts *Authority is Constructed and Contextual; Information Creation as a Process;* and *Information has Value.*

The first to address is **Information has Value**, since monetization is the single biggest factor playing into the existence of these channels in the first place. The “value” of information means different things to viewers, creators, owners, and outlets. There is information’s inherent value as a means to educate, whether by introducing new ideas, reinterpreting old ones, or teaching a specific skill. There is the value the creator puts into producing content, measured in time, money, research, and emotional and social currency. Information also has value as a tool of influence; “Social Media Influencer” is a profession that didn’t exist a decade ago; now what an influencer chooses to promote can sway how a viewer equips their kitchen, stocks their makeup drawer, or votes. And there is information’s value as a commodity in and of itself. These videos may merely be a means to an end, their only value being in “units sold.”

It is this value model that content farms produce. Consumers of these videos sometimes get stuck on the question of profit motivation; with no overt product placement, sponsorship, or political agenda, then how do they make money? Content farms focus on *volume*, putting out the largest number of videos with the right combination of tags and keywords that can grab onto the most productive algorithm and appear most frequently in searches and in suggested videos. This *Search Engine Optimization*, or SEO, is both an art and a science; embedding common or popular keywords in titles, descriptions and tags, but also in closed captioning, transcripts, and subtitles (Bui). SEO is one component that increases value on these content farm videos; the

other is *monetization*, particularly YouTube's Partner Program. Here's how it works: in order to request entry into the program, a channel has to have garnered 1,000 total subscribers, and a minimum of 4,000 watch hours in a 12-month period. When a channel is part of the YouTube Partner Program, they can fully monetize in three ways: one, they can earn a monthly payout on ad revenues, the ads that pop up while a video plays. Fifty-five percent goes to the channel owners, and the remaining balance is collected by YouTube (Perelli). Second is by subscriptions, as mentioned before. the more subscribers, the more views, the more revenue. Third is through paid memberships. Once in the Partner Program, creators can unlock a premium level, where members pay for the privilege of extra content, Q&As and more (YouTube). Content farms aren't so concerned with paid memberships. Their eye is solely on the number of subscribers and the revenue per mille, RPM for short. So long as the channels follow the Google Terms of Service, and many of these just barely squeak by, they are clear to be monetized.

The next frame is **Authority is Constructed and Contextual.** How does one assign or "construct" authority and expertise in a crafting video? A viewer might believe Ann Reardon because she is an actual food scientist and dietitian; she clearly demonstrates her skills as a baker through her videos, and other news outlets have elevated her as an authority on the topic. But someone else may see the high subscription and view count on *So Yummy* and assume that popularity equals authority. That matters because content farm channels aren't solitary entities; they are but one of dozens owned by the same corporations. Some of these are actually well known; Buzzfeed is technically a content farm, as is First Media, owners of So Yummy and Blossom. While a few like Buzzfeed have expanded into legitimate journalism, most of these media companies are mostly in it for the clicks.

TheSoul Publishing, the owner of 5-Minute Crafts, as well as several other YouTube channels, is among them. Based out of Cyprus and founded by a group of Russian programmers, in August 2021 they reached over 100 billion social media views, combined over YouTube, Facebook, TikTok and Snapchat (Roxborough). They also made headlines in 2020 when a small percentage of their videos leaned into political topics, and news outlets focused on the "Russian" factor. TheSoul Publishing put out an extensive statement acknowledging that some of their videos had "factually incorrect" information and that the videos had been taken down (TheSoul). While some distrust of content farms can be chalked up to xenophobia, the possibly of these channels being leveraged for propaganda purposes still exists. And when they make the amount of money they do for themselves and for their social media hosts, there's not a lot of incentive to take them down (Paul).

A high-profile example of innocuous videos feeding a propaganda machine occurred in December 2021, when the *New York Times* reported that Epoch Media, a far-right media outlet that has published and disseminated stories favorable to QAnon and other conspiracies, also published silly videos of cats and other cute animals on its Facebook channels (Alba). Cat lovers who liked and commented on these videos would then start to see other content from Epoch outlets appear in their recommendations. Similar "engagement bait" ploys have led to conspiracy content, including misinformation on vaccines and other junk science, to ride on the coattails of videos related to healthy eating, wellness, and yes, baking and crafting.

"Contextual" then refers to why someone sought the information out and how they plan to use it. One person may actually be looking for a recipe, but others may be intentionally looking for fake videos to critique or just enjoy the ASMR-like effect of watching just to see what happens. Hopefully no one will eat a bleached strawberry, but seeing the effect the bleach

has on the berry, how it renders the leaves translucent and the skin almost slime-like, is still interesting to watch. Viewing these lifehacks, even if completely useless, still results in a dopamine release and makes the viewer want to watch more (Doll). In short, the construct addresses the "who," while the context addresses the "why" on the part of the creator and the viewer. Reardon wants to teach people how to bake; *So Yummy* just wants its videos to play ad infinitum.

Finally recognize **Information Creation as a Process.** Questioning how these videos are produced can be beneficial and clearly show differences between videos from content farms and legitimate channels. For example, one can look at how videos are produced for the channel *Binging With Babish.* The founder of the channel Andrew Rea is the titular Babish; he cooks (or in some cases has to create) foods that are featured in television shows and movies. Sometimes it's a common dish such as the arepas con queso found in Disney's *Encanto* (Rea, "Arepas Con Queso"). Other times the so-called recipe itself is nonsense, like Chef's Chocolate Salty Balls from *South Park*, and Rea then has to conceptualize a workable version (Rea, "South Park Special"). Rea does research, tests out recipes, and sometimes asks for input from other cooks more familiar with a culture's foodways.

Rea shows his mistakes and messiness; this offers the viewer transparency in the cooking process, as well as the production process. However, he also occasionally speeds up the footage like one would see in a content farm video. Is this visual trickery? Not if the fast-forwarding is just to keep the content moving; Rea is clear that in real life he would be stirring, poaching, or basting a lot longer than in the video. No one wants to stare into an oven for a half hour. In the case of the content farm video, the speed is to deceive the viewer into thinking the hack *won't* take as long…even when they speed up, they stop after just a few stirs, not nearly long enough to

properly blend something. The speed is also to rush a viewer into autoplaying the next video, and the next, until they are in a loop of autoplays.

Editing is also contextual depending on creator motivation. Rea may show the changing out of accessories on his stand mixer, but if a pasta extruder is being stubborn to take off, he may edit part of that out for time. In a content farm video, the edit is there to conceal. A hack for "two-ingredient pancakes" that is supposedly nothing but mashed banana and egg may suddenly have milk and flour that wasn't shown. In one of the *SoYummy* videos critiqued by Ann Reardon, an "easy caramel" recipe claims you can microwave a Pyrex cup of sweetened condensed milk for ten minutes uninterrupted; the result pulled from the oven is a smooth dulce de leche sauce. The original video skips the part where the uncooked milk is swapped out for already-prepared caramel. In real life, the result is a burnt mess. According to Reardon, it can be done, with one modification; it just involves stopping the oven every 15 seconds and stirring (Reardon "Debunking").

DIY Debunking: Combatting Disinformation Online

Fitting these "fake bake" videos and the ones that expose them into the framework is just one side of teaching the evaluative process. As consumers of information media there is also a responsibility to *combat* misinformation spread once it is recognized. The single most important thing one can do to slow this down is to *starve the algorithm*; deprive it of engagement. YouTube counts all types of engagement in analytics. It does not recognize that a comment is negative, it doesn't care if someone clicks "dislike," and critiquing it and calling the channel to task doesn't matter. *Someone still pressed "play."* The one click that actually has the desired effect is the "Report" button located in the three dots in the lower right corner next to "save.".

Instruct students to report videos that are spreading misinformation as “spam or misleading,” or in the case of some of these crafting hacks, “harmful or dangerous acts.”

The next step students can take to combat misinformation videos is to curate their YouTube experience just as they would their other social media feeds. The easiest thing to do is to *turn off autoplay*. Autoplay is like using a refillable food tower when a pet is supposed to be on a diet. If the objective is to starve the algorithm, then don’t give it an unlimited supply of food. If your students truly want to learn a new skill, baking or otherwise, then they can follow and subscribe to legitimate creators. It will support those creators and keep them on the platform, and it will shape their own algorithm so that suggested videos are more in line with valid and genuine content.

Finally, teaching this content does come with its own set of ethical issues--if we are playing these videos in class, or asking students to view them, then aren’t *we* feeding the beast? It’s difficult to justify, especially if we teach this semester after semester. Some solutions may be morally shaky; downloading the videos and playing them back on our institutions’ learning management systems may keep the channel views down, but even as civil disobedience it would still be a copyright violation. Another solution may be to use the actual debunking videos from *How To Cook That* or other indie creator channels, so that they get the views instead. Then, there is always letting these channels be, but being critical and contextual about it. Going into these videos with the knowledge that you aren’t really going to learn how to actually do anything, but roll your eyes and have a good laugh at the content, may be a way to at least preserve your sanity. Just remember that not everyone is in on the bit.

References

Alba, Davey. "How Cute-Cat Posts Help Spread Falsehoods Online." *New York Times*, 3 Dec. 2021, p. B1(L). Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A684634089/OVIC?u=mag_u_msu&sid=bookmark-OVIC&xid=48b650de. Accessed 6 Mar. 2022.

Association of College and Research Libraries. *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.* 2015, https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

Bui, Quynh. "Content Farms and YouTube Algorithms: Match Made in Heaven or Partners in Crime?" *Medium Magazine*, 6 May 2020, https://mediummagazine.nl/content-farms-and-youtube-algorithms-match-made-in-heaven-or-partners-in-crime/.

Doll, Jen. "The Mysterious Company Behind Those Baffling 5-Minute Craft Videos." *Medium*, 10 March 2021, https://marker.medium.com/inside-the-mysterious-company-behind-those-baffling-5-minute-crafts-videos-29655bdef029.

Fox, Chris. "The fake 'kitchen hacks' with billions of views." *BBC News*, 15 Feb 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/technology-51504484.

Freelon, Deen, et al. "Black Trolls Matter: Racial and Ideological Asymmetries in Social Media Disinformation." *Social Science Computer Review*, vol. 40, no. 3, June 2022, pp. 560–78. EBSCOhost, https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439320914853.

Jennings, Rebecca. "YouTube is full of cringey, clickbait DIY channels. They're even weirder than you think." *Vox*, 12 Nov. 2018, https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/11/12/18065662/troom-troom-5-minute-crafts-youtube-diy-prank.

Paul, Kari. "'Game of Whac-a-Mole': why Russian disinformation is still running amok on social media." *The Guardian*, 16 Mar. 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2022/mar/15/russia-disinformation-social-media-ukraine.

Perelli, Amanda. "How much money YouTubers make, according to dozens of creators." *Business Insider*, 1 March 2022, https://www.businessinsider.com/how-much-money-youtube-creators-influencers-earn-real-examples-2021-6.

Rea, Andrew. "Binging with Babish: Arepas con Queso from *Encanto*." *Babish Culinary Universe*, 11 Jan. 2022, https://youtu.be/aRWUMlLMF1c.

Rea, Andrew. "Binging with Babish: South Park Special." *Babish Culinary Universe*, 19 Apr. 2017, https://youtu.be/KxPgrGdSHh8.

Reardon, Ann. "Debunking Fake Cooking Videos 2020 | How To Cook That Ann Reardon." *YouTube*, 7 Feb. 2020, https://youtu.be/2eINllOc0hc.

Reardon, Ann. "Is 5-Minute Crafts the WORST channel on YouTube?" *YouTube*, 3 May 2019, https://youtu.be/ApO4c2AkLqw.

Reardon, Ann. "Is So Yummy the WORST baking channel on YouTube?" *YouTube*, 28 Dec. 2018, https://youtu.be/6abePkXncCM.

Roxborough, Scott. "How a Start-Up in Cyprus Became the Next Big Thing in Online Content." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 20 Aug. 2021, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/digital/how-thesoul-publishing-became-the-next-big-thing-in-online-content-1235000467

Tang, J. and F.P. Resurreccion, "1 - Electromagnetic basis of microwave heating." In *Development of Packaging and Products for Use in Microwave Ovens*, edited by Matthew W. Lorence and Peter S. Pesheck, Woodhead Publishing, 2009, pp. 3-38e, https://doi.org/10.1533/9781845696573.1.3.

TheSoul Publishing. “A Message from TheSoul Publishing.” *TheSoul Publishing*, 25 Dec. 2019, https://www.thesoul-publishing.com/post/a-message-from-thesoul-publishing.

YouTube. “Channel memberships eligibility, policies, & guidelines.” *YouTube Help*, https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/7636690?hl=en.