

Fake news

Recognizing and stemming misinformation

“Fake news,” a form of propaganda, is nothing new, but it is far more widespread today than it used to be. Thanks to the internet and social media, information that decades ago might have been heard or read by relatively few can now reach millions of people around the world in a matter of minutes. Sadly, this is also true for *misinformation*. This has become a growing problem, with serious consequences.

Being able to evaluate the accuracy of what you read or hear, and refraining from spreading false stories, will help you and others avoid the repercussions of fake news.

What is fake news?

Fake news is information that is fabricated (made up) and packaged to appear as fact. Unlike satire or other forms of humor, fake news attempts to deliberately mislead or deceive its audience, often with the goal of financial, political or other type of gain. Fake news often uses attention-grabbing headlines to draw as large an audience as possible.

“Clickbait” refers to articles that carry shocking, teasing or exaggerated headlines designed to entice people to click on them to generate revenue. Not all clickbait articles are fake news, though the content might not match what the headline insinuates. This can be misleading to consumers who don’t read past the story title. Clickbait becomes fake news when it contains fabrications and is presented as legitimate news.

Propaganda and hyperpartisan news is highly biased and designed to promote a particular viewpoint. While not always completely fabricated, these stories often contain inaccurate, distorted or out-of-context information that, at the very least, is misleading and, when presented as fact, can constitute fake news.



Factual misstatements and rumors repeated by public figures that are then reported in otherwise accurate news stories may not, technically, constitute fake news, but they contribute to the spread of misinformation.

Satire uses humor, irony, exaggeration or ridicule to entertain or make a statement. While it doesn’t intend to mislead, it can be mistaken for fact and shared as if it were legitimate news.

Fake news fallout

The potential repercussions of fake news vary and depend on the story, but they can be serious.

For example, in recent years, fake news has led some to believe that President Obama was born outside the U.S., Senator Ted Cruz was bribed to pass legislation putting America’s public lands in the hands of the Koch brothers for mining and other business pursuits, the Affordable Care Act established a “death panel” to determine health care benefits for the sick and elderly, and millions of illegal voters voted in the 2016 presidential election. A fake news story about Hillary Clinton leading a child-trafficking ring headquartered in a Washington, DC, restaurant led a man to fire an assault rifle inside the pizzeria.

Fake news doesn’t only result in political repercussions. In 2013, \$130 billion in stock value vanished, albeit temporarily, when nervous investors sold securities because of a hacker’s false Associated Press (AP) tweet claiming that an “explosion” had injured President Obama.

Fake news can harm individual consumers, too. Stories about “miracle cures,” unproven supplements and drugs, and other bogus and potentially dangerous products lead millions of consumers to waste their money and jeopardize their physical wellbeing.

A March 2017 survey by the American Institute of CPAs (<http://bit.ly/2s2Eu0u>) found that almost three out of five Americans (58%) believe that fake news is a serious threat to their financial decision-making.

Social media and fake news

Two Pew Research Center studies conducted in 2016 reveal that a majority of Americans (62%) now say they get news via social media, and about a quarter (23%) say they have shared fake news stories, either knowingly or unknowingly.

In addition to making it easy to spread unverified stories with just the click of the “share” or “retweet” button, social media allows users to filter out those who don’t have the same worldview as they do. What makes it through to the user’s “feed” is more likely to be trusted without scrutiny and shared without vetting simply because it comes from a “friend.”

Beginning around the end of 2016, Google and Facebook began efforts to prevent fake news from “going viral” (circulated rapidly and widely) by informing users and removing the financial incentive for fake news creators.

As part of its effort (<http://bit.ly/2t1wj92>), Facebook added the ability for users to mark stories as false (<http://bit.ly/2uOz8rc>). These stories must then go through a fact-checking process. If the item is confirmed as fake news, Facebook posts a warning label below the article to discourage users from sharing it.

Similarly, Google’s Fact Check (<http://bit.ly/2tFNz2y>), which appears in the company’s Search and News functions, identifies stories that include information fact-checked by news publishers and fact-checking organizations, allowing users to identify verified stories immediately. (Not all stories will be fact-checked.)

Fake news: Recognizing and stemming misinformation

For a variety of reasons, the efforts have had limited success. Ultimately, informed consumers are the best gatekeepers when it comes to fake news.

Vetting the news

Being able to identify fake news is the first step toward reducing your exposure to it and stopping its spread.

Look for telltale signs that the story might be fake. These include sensational headlines, dubious claims, typos and bad grammar.

Beware of questionable URLs. With the goal of exploiting the trust that legitimate online news outlets have earned, some purveyors of false or questionable information adopt names or identities that resemble those of trusted sources. For example, ABCnews.com.co mimics the URL of ABC News. In addition to sites that end in .co, be cautious of those that end in .su (for the former Soviet Union, and now widely used by cyber criminals) and “lo” (Newslo, for example, mixes bits of fact with satire).

Do your due diligence. Even a simple online search can go far in helping you discern fact from fiction. Verify an item by cross-checking it against what trusted, unbiased news and information sources are saying. If no mainstream news outlets are covering the story, odds are good that it is fake news. (Remember, just because a story mentions political views different



from your own does not make it fake news.) Also check the author and any sources cited. You can often find out if an item is intended to be satire, or if a particular author or source isn't credible—or doesn't even exist.

Use online resources to fact check a news story or quote. Watchdog sites such as Snopes.com and FactCheck.org can usually confirm whether a story or quote is real news or not.

Check the date. Many fake news stories were true, or partially true, at one time. FactCheck.org offers the example of post-election stories that quoted from and linked to a CNN article titled "Ford shifts truck production from Mexico to Ohio," implying (and sometimes saying outright) that the company's decision was the result of Trump's efforts as president. But the story is from 2015 (pre-election), and Ford never did abandon its plans for new plants in Mexico, it only transferred some pickup truck assembly work from Mexico to Ohio.

Don't always believe your eyes. Photo editing software makes it easy to manipulate images. Even unedited photos can be misleading when they don't match the content or timeline of the story they go with. Copying the image and pasting it into a tool such as Google Images (<https://images.google.com/>) can help you track down the original photo to determine its source, date of first publication and whether it has been altered. (Click the little camera image to paste in the photo's URL or upload the photo you want to compare.)

Broaden your "feed." Limiting yourself to information sources that closely align with your beliefs and viewpoints can make it more difficult for you to recognize fake news when you see or hear it. On social media, "Unfollowing" can put you into an "echo" chamber, or "filter bubble," where you only see more and more of what you like and become more likely to believe whatever you see. Ask yourself if your own personal bias is causing you to believe fake news.



Use tech tools for avoiding, recognizing and flagging fake news. (See "Social media" and "Resources" sections for more information.)

Psychologists say that repeating rumors—even if you're trying to convince others they are false—may actually reinforce them, so once you've confirmed that an item is inaccurate, just let it die quietly.

Dos and don'ts

Practicing all of these eight dos and don'ts will go a long way toward keeping you from falling for and spreading fake news.

- Do** be aware that not everything you read on the internet is true.
- Do** approach sensational stories with skepticism.
- Do** question whether you're getting the whole story.
- Do** use tools and resources to verify "news," quotes, photos and other content before passing it on.
- Do** teach teens how to read and think critically.
- Don't** trust the headline or a photo to reflect the actual content of the story.

Don't assume that a website's content is truthful and accurate just because it looks slick or polished.

Don't react hastily to what you read.

Resources

These resources offer tips and tools for avoiding, spotting, vetting and stopping fake news.

Here's how to outsmart fake news in your Facebook feed (<http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/18/tech/how-to-spot-fake-misleading-news-trnd/>), an article from CNN, provides a breakdown of the different types of misleading and false news, and a list of 10 questions you should ask to determine if something is fake news.

The Red Flags of Quackery (<http://sci-ence.org/red-flags2/>) is an entertaining illustrated guide to pseudo-science and the bogus claims that lead consumers to spend, collectively, billions of dollars each year on ineffective and even dangerous health treatments and products.

Savvy Info Consumers: Evaluating Information (<http://guides.lib.uw.edu/research/evaluate/>) is the University of Washington's online guide to evaluating internet content.

Ask the Money Doctor (<http://www.360financialliteracy.org/Ask-the-Money-Doctor>), a public service program of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, provides answers to consumers' questions about financial planning issues in order to help them avoid making decisions based on fake news and get-rich-quick schemes.

About Consumer Action

www.consumer-action.org

Through multilingual consumer education materials, community outreach and issue-focused advocacy, Consumer Action empowers underrepresented consumers nationwide to assert their rights and financially prosper.

Consumer advice and assistance: Submit consumer complaints to: <https://complaints.consumer-action.org/forms/english-form> or 415-777-9635. Chinese, English and Spanish spoken

False, Misleading, Clickbait-y, and/or Satirical 'News' Sources (<http://bit.ly/2tYUpOw>) is a list compiled by a Merrimack College educator, which also offers tips for analyzing news sources yourself.

Fact-checking sites:

Snopes (<http://www.snopes.com/>) allows users to verify a particular story by searching for keywords, or to view a rolling list of recently fact-checked stories, and also offers a "Field Guide to Fake News Sites and Hoax Purveyors" (<http://www.snopes.com/2016/01/14/fake-news-sites/>). (Consumer Action has heard from people who say this venerable site is a "liberal conspiracy," but we have evaluated this source and find it to be reliable and unbiased.)

FactCheck.org (<http://www.factcheck.org/>) offers, in addition to its "search" function, an Ask Fact-Check feature (<http://www.factcheck.org/askfactcheck/>) that lets consumers verify a particular story or peruse past questions and answers.

PolitiFact (<http://www.politifact.com/>) is a fact-checking website that rates—from "True" to "Pants on Fire"—the accuracy of claims by elected officials and others on its Truth-O-Meter.

Tech tools:

B.S. Detector (<http://bsdetector.tech/>) is a browser plug-in that searches all links on a given webpage for references to unreliable sources, checking against a manually compiled list of domains and providing a warning when a website is suspect.

FiB (<https://devpost.com/software/fib>) is a browser extension that goes through your Facebook feed in real time as you browse and verifies posts.

The Media Bias/Fact Check (<https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/>) app works by scraping data from Media Bias/Fact Check, a website that checks for bias across all ideological spectrums.

First Draft offers a "quick reference guide" for verifying eyewitness photos (<http://bit.ly/2wlZTTx>) and video (<http://bit.ly/2xh46ME>).

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