

## **Fake News Fooling Millions!**

Fabricated stories on social media are influencing major events like the presidential election. How can we separate fact from fiction?

JANUARY 9, 2017 By Carl Stoffers

Last March, a fake news site called The Boston Tribune went viral with a story that the government was secretly tracking Americans using computer chips in credit cards. In October, another site peddling bogus news, The Free Thought Project, got more than 28,000 people on Facebook to share its claim that U.S. Marines were heading to Europe to battle Russia. And a third site, The Political Insider, had thousands sharing a fabricated report in August that Hillary Clinton was selling weapons to ISIS.

These invented stories are part of a disturbing trend: Fake news sites—many with official-sounding names and professional designs—are flourishing. Once found only in the dark corners of the internet, these sites have begun to play a role in major events, including the recent presidential campaign. In fact, some political analysts say fake news stories spread on social media might have helped tip the election to Donald Trump. Experts are warning that these sites are eroding the public's ability to distinguish between fact and fiction. At the same time, tech companies like Facebook and Google are struggling with how to deal with fake news—an effort that's complicated by free speech concerns.

*"These fake news sites exist to misinform through a whole cycle of misinformation," says Jeremy Littau, a digital media professor at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. "They're trying to get you to believe something that's independent of the truth."*

Part of the problem is that fake news can be hard to identify (see "How to Spot Fake News" below). More than 80 percent of middle school students couldn't distinguish between legitimate news stories and ads disguised as news, according to a recent Stanford University study. In the same study, 40 percent of high school students believed a news story they were shown was real simply because a photo accompanied it—even though no sources were cited in the article.

What's more, although many hoax stories are blatantly untrue—like the one in November about hundreds of paid protesters being bused to an anti-Trump rally in Texas—some contain partial truths or factual distortions, making them even harder to spot.

Because the internet provides anonymity, anyone with a computer and design software can start a news site and pass it off as legitimate: political partisans trying to help or harm a candidate, amateur bloggers, or even someone just trying to make a buck. That's what motivated a 17-year-old in the European nation of Macedonia to create DailyNewsPolitics.com and begin inventing stories about the U.S. election. "I started the site for a easy way to make money," he told BuzzFeed in slightly broken English.

if you get your news from Twitter, beware: False stories are 70 percent more likely than true ones to be shared on the social media platform, according to a recent study. Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology analyzed 126,000 news stories tweeted by 3 million users over a 10-year period. They found that legitimate news stories were rarely retweeted by more than 1,000 people, but the most popular fake news stories were routinely shared up to 100,000 times. Computer bots—automated Twitter accounts programmed to spread false stories—are often blamed for helping fake news go viral, but the M.I.T. researchers used software to weed out bots, and the results were essentially the same. Experts say that's a clear indication that people—and not just computers—are responsible for the rise of fake news. "Fake news is designed to be shocking and to get attention," says Pat Winters Lauro, a media professor at Kean University in New Jersey. "In our polarized society, people want to share stories that validate their opinions, whether it's real news or not."

## **‘Yellow Journalism’**

Fake or highly distorted news is nothing new. The earliest American newspapers were instruments of political parties that often printed lies about the opposition. In the 19th century, sensationalized, exaggerated, and sometimes outright false stories were published to sell newspapers and influence elections, a practice known as “yellow journalism.”

It was only in the 20th century that professional reporting standards of objectivity and accuracy became the norm for newspapers and news programs on radio and TV. That norm began to erode in recent years with the explosion of cable news and the growing popularity of openly partisan content. And social media has made it easier to find an audience for news that’s skewed toward one political viewpoint, isn’t fact-checked, or is simply made up.

*“What has changed is not our penchant for creating this material, but our ease in sharing it,” says Littau. “It’s so much easier to pass this material on, and that means fake news stories have much greater reach than before. That’s what’s new, the ability to quickly infect each other with it.”*

In some cases, fake news fuels what’s known as the “echo chamber”—people with similar beliefs and biases sharing only what fits their vision of the world. Psychologists call this “confirmation bias.”

After the presidential election, many people called for social media platforms and search engines to limit or ban questionable websites. Some tech companies, like Google and Facebook, vowed to prevent these sites from advertising, but so far they’ve stopped short of banning their articles from being seen and shared.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said in November that the company was researching ways to make it easier to detect and report fake news. But he also noted the company’s philosophy of being an open forum: “We believe in giving people a voice, which means erring on the side of letting people share what they want whenever possible.”

The question of whether Facebook, Google, or any other company should decide what’s legitimate news has ignited a debate about free speech and censorship. These companies can legally limit what we see on their platforms because the First Amendment’s free speech protections prohibit only the government from censoring speech. But some media experts warn against putting tech firms in the role of vetting what their users are able to share. “It would be a dangerous precedent if they were deciding what’s journalism,” says Anthony Adornato, a journalism professor at Ithaca College in New York. “I don’t think it’s their job to be the ultimate gatekeepers; the burden should be on well-informed people to make that decision.”

Experts say it will take a concerted effort by the public and the media to fix the problem of misinformation and slow the spread of fake news.

*“Users on social media need to call out people who are sharing this stuff, and journalists need to continue to adhere to professional standards,” Adornato says. “It’s a team effort.”*

## HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS

*Despite the increasing amount of false information online, there are ways to get to the truth and stop the spread of fake news. Here are a few tips.*

**Be skeptical:** Just because you see an article online, don't assume it's factual, even if a friend shared it with you. Avoid sending a potentially fake news story to your friends or reposting it. Sharing bogus stories only widens their audience—and helps them rise even higher in search results

**Verify:** Make sure that what you're reading—and thinking of sharing—was published by a reputable source. Just because a story pops up first on Google doesn't mean it's trustworthy. Look at the descriptions of multiple results before deciding which one to click.

**Look for other clues:** Scrutinizing the sources cited in articles and even the ads on the page can reveal a hidden agenda behind a website. If a story comes from an unfamiliar website, click on the "About" page to learn more. Searching a site's name or its founder's name on the web can help you decide if the site is credible.

**Get help:** Independent verification can often confirm whether something widely shared is true. Nonpartisan fact-checking sites like Factcheck.org and PolitiFact.com point out untruths in the news. Teachers and family can also help.

### How Teenagers get their news

