TANENBAUM
COMBATING RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE

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Combating Extremism

WHAT IS "FAKE NEWS"? DO YOU KNOW?

Are our opinions based in real—and not fake—facts?
Below we share some of the real facts worth knowing…

What is "fake news"?

"Fake news" is information that is presented as credible and factual, but that is not true and is intended to deceive people. It is a deliberate attempt to sway someone's opinion or validate it with disinformation. Simply stated, it is inaccurate, untrue, disinformation repeated by seemingly credible sources you trust including certain news sources or a trusted family member.

"Fake news" is not new—even the mythical age of "objective journalism" had its hiccups. During WWII, the Nazi party propagated fake news propaganda against the Jews; the Communists against the Capitalists, and the U.S. against Japanese-Americans; in the 1950s, Joseph McCarthy was accused of manipulating reporters and blacklisting those who couldn't be manipulated. But, it wasn't until the rise of web-generated content that "fake news" surged as a powerful force again.

According to the journal of Digital Journalism,[i] researchers have come up with six distinct definitions of fake news—news satire, news parody, propaganda, manipulation, sponsored content and fabrications. In February of 2017, Callum Borchers of the Washington Post claimed in his article 'Fake news' has now lost all meaning that following the 2016 election the term "fake news" has been repurposed by politicians to dismiss reporting that they disagree with.[ii]

Is "fake news" real?

Some of it, sometimes. Fake news can include an element of truth, but other facts are either distorted or misrepresented. Critically analyzing content and information has always been essential and checking for factual errors is a good place to start. Ultimately, however, fake news is biased and aims to convince its audience of a specific viewpoint, often political or ideological.

How do I spot "fake news?" And what can I do about it?

Consider the source & vet the publisher's credibility—

- Where is this information coming from? Would the site meet academic citation standards? Always check your sources. Infowars.com has a history of touting conspiracy theories, while The Guardian is known for journalism, having won a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in 2014.

- What is the domain name? If the logo seems "off" or the website has additional letters added at the end such as ".com.co" then you're probably not looking at a credible source. Double-check and make sure .co is not referencing Colombia's internet country code top-level domain.[iii]

- Can you perform reverse image searches for photos or sources? In the era of Photoshop, you can't always believe what you see. (Don't know what a reverse image search is? Check here.

- What is the publication's point of view?

Read beyond the headline—

- Headlines are often designed to be inflammatory clickbait, so what's the whole story? Does the headline match the content of the article? Reading the article is key.

- Does the website carry a disclaimer? Satirical sites like The Onion or parody shows like SNL may contain a disclaimer, while others will not. Is it sponsored content? News organizations, even reputable ones such as The Washington Post increase their revenue running advertisements. Content may read like a regular news article, but cite a disclaimer that it is sponsored content and represents the opinion, interests, goals of the sponsor.[iv]

- Does the headline or story purposely play on your fears and/or anxieties? Is the story so outrageous you're having a hard time believing it? Do some digging—if other credible news outlets are reporting on the same information then it's probably trustworthy.[v]

Investigate the author—

- Is the article clearly attributed to an author? What other pieces has the author written?

- Are they a contributor or are they a paid staff writer? An author's bio can be a telltale sign of a fake story.[vi] Even that the author is fake.

How can I check out "fake news" stories?

There are a lot of organizations working on fact-checking, and dedicated to reviewing content. Some to check out include:

- **Snopes.com**
  Snopes.com has been exposing false viral claims since the mid-1990s, including fabricated messages, distortions containing bits of truth and everything in between.[vii]

- **PolitiFact.com**
  From the beginning, PolitiFact focused on looking at specific statements made by politicians and rating them for accuracy. This site rates statements based on the information known at the time the statement is made.[viii]

- **Google.com/reverse-image-search**
  People take old photos and try to pass them off as current content. Check where that image has appeared before and who has shared it. Make sure the image is original and is used in its original context.[ix]

Why do I sometimes believe "fake news?

There are lots of reasons this happens—to all of us. Sometimes we fail to ask important questions about the content with which we engage. And with the advent of the internet and the rise of social media,[x] discerning whether content is credible or not can be difficult.

Ways to counter this include being careful not to accept information that simply confirms our own beliefs and personal biases. People of all ages, from media-savvy tweens to high-IQ academics, are susceptible to quickly forwarding along and sharing information without first verifying the content is true and the sources are accurate. And when it comes to checking if the info is legitimate, there's no quick fix. Discerning whether information is factual will take some digging.[xi]

The reality is that "fake news" is not a new phenomenon, but with the help of the internet, not only has our access to information increased—so has our ability to create and share information (and misinformation). Fifty years ago, sources of information were much more limited. We got our news from trusted sources, journalists and media outlets that vetted and verified before reporting. In the age of the internet, we now have entirely new ways of publishing, sharing and consuming information, with little to no verification standards. This means that the responsibility for verifying your news is now your burden and not the primary responsibility of the source.

Information overload and increased access to content distribution mean that web-generated news is on the rise. And that means we now must assume responsibility for safeguarding and verifying the truth, the facts and reality.

[i] Digital Journalism, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143?scroll=top&needAccess=true&
[ii] The Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/09/fake-news-has-now-lost-all-meaning/?utm_term=.eeab6e7985f6
[iii] Domain Typer, https://domaintyper.com/domain-names/top-level-domains/ccTLD/co-domain

[iv] The Smithsonian, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/age-old-problem-fake-news-180968945/

[v] First Draft News, https://firstdraftnews.org/the-4-bare-bones-things-every-journalist-needs-to-know-about-verification/

[vi] The News Literacy Project, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7eCB2F89K8

[vii] Snopes.com, https://www.snopes.com/about-snopes/

[viii] PolitiFact, https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2018/feb/12/principles-truth-o-meter-politifacts-methodology-i/

[ix] The News Literacy Project, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7eCB2F89K8

[x] The Smithsonian, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/age-old-problem-fake-news-180968945/

[xi] TIME, http://time.com/5362183/the-real-fake-news-crisis/