



# FIVE WAYS TO AVOID FALLING PREY TO FAKE NEWS

Fake News. Facts on the chopping block. People are worried. (Nearly two-thirds of Americans say they're concerned about what's real or fake on the internet.) We worry, and we fear the impact. This makes sense, because fake news is often effective. It works! After the 2016 election, between 50 and 75% of Americans actually believed fake headlines!<sup>ii</sup>

Getting to the facts is getting harder, especially as we're bombarded with larger amounts of information than we know what to do with. The challenge then becomes, as caring and thoughtful consumers of news and social media, why do we sometimes fall prey to fake news? And what can we do about it?

Here are five ways to conquer fake news:

## **I. Sources Matter: Go Straight to the Source**

The algorithms used by social media and news aggregator sites are designed to make sure we see stories tailored to our interests and content (including advertising) curated with our likes in mind. This makes it easier to use social media. But it also makes it harder to identify if a story is real or fake, and who created it.

Instead of following a link from the outlet that shows up on your social media (whether from advertising or a friend), go online and head straight to the source. It's a good way to determine if the information you're consuming is indeed factual. (Also see our *Combating Extremism* resource, [What is "Fake News"? Do You Know?](#))

## **II. Critical Thinking Counts: Consult a Diversity of Sources**

The internet changed the way we get our news. With dramatic growth in the number of news sources and the ways people use them, it's easier than ever to get details on the latest stories as soon as the news breaks from a variety of perspectives. But most of us don't actually see the real variety. Instead, we tend to see and/or read what comes across our screen—the themes and approaches we already like.

9 out of 10 U.S. adults obtain at least some news online,<sup>iii</sup> and mobile devices are becoming an increasingly popular way to access content.<sup>iv</sup> Email newsletters, news apps and mobile news alerts

have likewise gained a strong foothold in how Americans get information.<sup>v</sup> Adults in the U.S. are now equally likely to access news from social media as from news organizations' web sites.<sup>vi</sup>

You can take advantage of the ubiquitousness of online news by consulting reports from multiple perspectives and thus increasing the chances of obtaining well-balanced and accurate information. Consider visiting the sites of news outlets that don't typically reflect your personal beliefs. And remember to approach all sources with healthy skepticism, especially ones with less familiar and established reputations.

### **III. *Group-Think is Influential: Beware of Emotional Reactions***

Emotion influences the choices and decisions we make, acting as the bridge between rational and non-rational decision-making.<sup>vii</sup> Sometimes this is valuable, such as when we understand that bigotry hurts. But sometimes it can cloud our judgment or make us subject to group-think.

In part, that's because groups often ostracize the people who speak up or diverge from the majority opinion. Exclusion activates the same part of the brain that is involved with physical pain, so disagreeing with the group can actually hurt us emotionally.<sup>viii</sup> This phenomenon, when combined with social goals like status and mate selection, interferes with our ability to question the group consensus, even when we believe or know that it's erroneous.

So what can be done to respond to these social pressures and clear the way for more independent, objective thinking? A few ways to get started are below ...

- Recognize that fear heightens our propensity to conform.
- Watch out for click-bait headlines, or for headlines that prey on emotional vulnerabilities or social insecurities.
- Look out for group-think and knee-jerk disrespect for alternative points of view by people in your social circles.
- When you spot these phenomena (but before you respond), pause and ask yourself whether you really agree with the group consensus. Then get the details by seeking other perspectives, asking questions, looking beyond the headlines to see if the whole story matches the headline, and reading at least one other story from a source with a differing point of view.

### **IV. *Shortcuts Matter: Watch Out for Mental Shortcuts & Make Time for Systematic Thinking***

To manage information overload or limited time, we all take mental shortcuts. Technically known as "heuristics," they include:

- depending on the analysis or position of a perceived expert or authority figure;

- deferring to the group consensus;
- relying on one's instincts (i.e., information that feels instinctual).

While these shortcuts often work well, they sometimes get us into trouble—especially when they're used to oversimplify issues that require more in-depth thought to be properly understood.<sup>ix</sup> Allow enough time to systematically analyze what's happening. Consciously analyzing our responses is something we can all practice—especially when we're dealing with complex information.

## **V. Talk with Yourself: Be Your Own Devil's Advocate**

Even when there's sufficient time for and interest in systematic analysis, people lend more credence to information that reinforces what they already believe.<sup>x</sup> Regardless of where you fall on the political spectrum, individuals typically place more weight on evidence that supports their current positions than on evidence that refutes it. People are more likely to question the credentials of scientists or presenters who offer refuting evidence. This phenomenon is known as confirmation bias and happens all the time.

To counteract the confirmation bias trap, try changing your perspective by taking the other side. When you are forced to articulate the counter-argument to a position you hold, you have to step away from what you know or believe to construct opposing arguments. The common colloquial expression, *walk a mile in someone else's shoes*, relies on the same principle. It's just a matter of stepping away from your previously held beliefs long enough to evaluate and analyze the argument impartially.

Not only is this a good way to practice debating skills; it's the only remedy for group-think that's been scientifically shown to work!

## **THE BOTTOM LINE...**

**Fake News is real. So let's commit to thinking for ourselves.** To be cautious of fear-mongering, group-think, and collective decision-making. To acknowledge when ideas, facts and opinions "confirm" what we're inclined to think—thereby admitting our confirmation bias! And yes, to listen to what our friends and family are saying, but then to pause, verify information, and see what the other side thinks.

**AND IF WE DO...we'll be on the side of truth, real facts, and freedom of thought!**

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<sup>i</sup> Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018. <http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/digital-news-report-2018.pdf?x89475> And over one in three Americans say they often see completely made-up political news online. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/04/key-trends-in-social-and-digital-news-media/>

<sup>ii</sup> Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-to-combat-fake-news-and-disinformation/>

<sup>iii</sup> 45 percent of US adults reported that they often get news on a mobile device. Pew Research Center. <http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/digital-news/>

<sup>iv</sup> PEW Research Center. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/04/key-trends-in-social-and-digital-news-media/>

<sup>v</sup> Social media remains a very common pathway to online news, although the proportion of Americans using it for this purpose took a dip this year, from a peak of 51 percent in 2017 to 45 percent in 2018. (Almost all of this decline is attributed to a decrease in the

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discovery, posting, and sharing of news on Facebook.) Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018, <http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/digital-news-report-2018.pdf?x89475> .

<sup>vi</sup> Pew Research Center, <http://www.journalism.org/2017/02/09/how-americans-encounter-recall-and-act-upon-digital-news/>

<sup>vii</sup> Medical Daily, <https://www.medicaldaily.com/science-decision-making-5-surprising-ways-we-make-life-choices-337546>

<sup>viii</sup> Douglas T. Kenrick, Adam B. Cohen, Steven L. Neuberg & Robert B. Cialdini. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-overcome-antiscientific-thinking/>

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.