

The fact checker's guide for detecting fake news

By Glenn Kessler, Washington Post on 12.01.16

Word Count **732**



Students surf the Web during a media lesson at their school Photo: Matt Cardy/Getty Images

Anyone active on social media has probably done this at least once: shared something based on the headline without actually reading the link.

Let's face it, you've probably done this many times. According to a study released in June by computer scientists at Columbia University and the French National Institute, 59 percent of links shared on social media have never actually been clicked.

So the first thing you can do to combat the rise of "fake news" is to actually read articles before sharing them. And when you read them, pay attention to the following signs that the article may be fake. There are fake news stories generated by both left-leaning and right-leaning websites, and the same rules apply to both.

Determine Whether The Article Is From A Legitimate Website

There's ABC News, the television network, with the Web address of abcnews.go.com. And there's ABC News, the fake news website, with the Web address of abcnews.com.co.

The use of ".co" at the end is a strong clue you are looking at a fake news website. But there are other signs as well.

Check The "Contact Us" Page

Some fake news sites don't have any contact information, which easily demonstrates it's phony. The fake "ABC News" does have a "contact us" page – but it shows a picture of a single-family home in Topeka, Kansas. The real television network is based in New York City, housed in a 13-story building on 66th Street.

Examine The Byline Of The Reporter And See Whether It Makes Sense

On the fake ABC News site there is an article claiming a protester was paid \$3,500 to protest Trump. It's supposedly written by Jimmy Rustling. "Dr. Jimmy Rustling has won many awards for excellence in writing including fourteen Peabody awards and a handful of Pulitzer Prizes," the byline claims. If that doesn't seem absurd, then how about the fact that he claims to have a Russian mail-order bride of almost two months and "also spends 12-15 hours each day teaching their adopted 8-year-old Syrian refugee daughter how to read and write."

All of the details are signs that "Dr. Rustling" is not a real person.

Read The Article Closely

Many fake articles have made-up quotes that do not pass the laugh test. About midway through the article on the protest, the founder of Snopes.com – which debunks fakes news on the Internet – is suddenly "quoted," saying he approves of the article. It also goes on to describe Snopes as "a website known for its biased opinions and inaccurate information they write about stories on the internet." It's like a weird inside joke, and in the readers' minds it should raise immediate red flags.

Scrutinize The Sources

Sometimes fake articles are based on merely a tweet. The New York Times documented how the fake news that anti-Trump protesters were bused in started with a single, ill-informed tweet by a man with just 40 followers. Another apparently fake story, that Trump fed police officers working protests in Chicago, also started with a tweet – by a man who wasn't even there but was passing along a claim made by "friends." The tweeter also has a locked account, making the "news" highly dubious. Few real news stories are based on a single tweet, with no additional confirmation.

If the article has no links to legitimate sources – or links at all – that's another telltale sign that you are reading fake news.

Look At The Ads

A profusion of pop-up ads or other advertising indicates you should handle the story with care. Another sign is a bunch of sexy ads or links, designed to be clicked – "Celebs who did [REDACTED]" or "Naughty Walmart Shoppers Who have no Shame at All" – which you generally do not find on legitimate news sites.

Use Search Engines To Double-Check

A simple Google search often will quickly tell you if the news you are reading is fake. Our friends at Snopes have also compiled a Field Guide to Fake News Sites, allowing you to check whether the article comes from a fraudster. There is also a website called RealorSatire.com that allows you to post the URL of any article and it will quickly tell you if the article comes from a fake or biased news website.

Combating the spread of fake news begins with you, the reader. If it seems too fantastic, it probably is. Please think before you share.

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following sentences is MOST appropriate to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) There are fake news stories generated by both left-leaning and right-leaning websites, and the same rules apply to both.
 - (B) The fake "ABC News" does have a "contact us" page – but it shows a picture of a single-family home in Topeka, Kansas.
 - (C) The tweeter also has a locked account, making the "news" highly dubious.
 - (D) A profusion of pop-up ads or other advertising indicates you should handle the story with care.

- 2 Read this sentence from the section "Read The Article Closely."

It also goes on to describe Snopes as "a website known for its biased opinions and inaccurate information they write about stories on the internet."

Does this particular sentence support the MAIN idea of the article? Why or why not?

- (A) Yes, because it describes a website that readers should avoid because it is known for fake news.
 - (B) Yes, because it explains how absurd quotes can lead to red flags.
 - (C) No, because it does not accurately describe what Snopes.com is actually used for.
 - (D) No, because it does not explain a tip that readers can use to combat fake news.
- 3 According to the article, each of the following indicates a fake news article EXCEPT:
- (A) reporters with unbelievable biographies
 - (B) absence of legitimate sources
 - (C) inclusion of humor and biased opinions
 - (D) a lack of contact information

- 4 The author develops the idea that readers are responsible for preventing the spread of fake news in each of the following ways EXCEPT:
- (A) explaining how readers can report and remove fake news articles
 - (B) listing actions readers can take to identify unreliable articles
 - (C) providing examples of flaws that can be found in fake news articles
 - (D) sharing reliable websites where readers can check the validity of news articles