Fake News: How to Detect it

First, what is “Fake News?” “Fake News” is essentially deceptive information, untruths, or misrepresentations of true information – in other words, false information. “Fake News” can be partially false, or fully false. There are many variations of “fake news,” and many forms of it, and we will explore these variations in this class, mostly as it pertains to the Internet and Social Media.

“Fake news” has been around in many different forms throughout our history.

- “Snake Oil Salesmen” of the 1800s would verbally transmit fake news, or deceptive information, as they would peddle products that had no prior verification from reliable sources. (A little-known fact, according to NPR, is that snake oil originally came from China. Chinese Railroad workers came to the U.S. in the 1800s bringing snake oil from certain snakes in China. This type of snake oil actually DOES have some good, healing capabilities, but the term, “snake oil salesmen” took on the more derogatory connotation as time went on as American counterparts tried to mimic and peddle snake oil with mineral oil or even rattlesnake fat, which had far less healing capabilities compared to the Chinese water snake oil. This fraudulent practice seemed to evolve into the derogatory term “snake oil” we now use to equate with fraud, conning, or fake news.
- “Selling you the Brooklyn Bridge,” is another phrase with an historic background that is used in reference to conning or misleading someone. “Fake News.”
- Remember getting chain letters in the mail as a child? These letters would promise you would get something, like little golden books in multiples, if you added your name and address to the bottom of the list, and sent one golden book to the first person on the list then mailed the same letter to X amount of friends. Another example of “fake news.”
- What about tabloid newspapers such as the “National Enquirer” or similar? Yep. “Fake News.”
- Paper “junk” mail is another thing we have all grown accustomed to. Some of it is legitimate, and much of it is a “come on” or con. Again, some of it is “fake news.”
- In our technical world, we have “spam” emails, similar to the paper “junk” mail we have grown accustomed to. We also can “stumble upon” websites that may seem to be legitimate and trustworthy only to find out they are not. Great examples of modern-day “false news.”

I’m sure you can think of other examples. We have actually lived with “fake news” throughout the course of human history; however, it takes on different forms and uses different technology as time goes along.

In addition to all these still-existing “fake news” methods and media described above, we have recent, newly-added social media tools, such as Twitter and Facebook, and, really, anyone can now blast out information of all types, some “fake” and some legitimate, depending upon the source, and how careful the sender is regarding their treatment of information. Speed is the difference here, in our world of today with the Internet, where information can be sent out so quickly we often do not take time to think things through. Slowing down and being careful is a skill we need to re-hone to keep ourselves in the more desired, more truthful and trustworthy realm of news-gathering.

In the 2000-present timeframe, “Fake News” definitely infiltrates our electronic media. In addition to e-mail fraud, we have experienced fake news sites blasting out information, often resulting in confusing readers and making us question the whole notion of trust and truth. Many people now rely on sites like Twitter and Facebook for their news. Paper copies of newspapers have shrunk, and subscriptions to paper copies of such publications have changed. Digital media, rightfully or wrongfully, has become a strong competitor with our traditional news publications that dominated our past. With digital media so quickly accessible, it can also be a haven for “fake” news to infiltrate among real news.

So how can we deal with “Fake News?” Here are some suggestions and objectives...

1. Identify “Fake News” sites
2. Use critical and objective thinking
3. Use some expert guidance, including the use of fact-checking tools, through the often tangled web of information we encounter every day.
4. Use patience and sharp-eyed skills of being open to think like a true journalist would, asking the basic questions of “who, what, when, where, how, and why” when we encounter a website. Slow down.
The steps outlined in the Washington Post video are:

1. Check the URL (Universal Resource Locator) or Web Address. Determine whether the article is from a legitimate website by looking at the URL. (for example, abcnews.com.com is fake and abcnews.go.com is legitimate.)
2. Photos in the article? Check the photo by dragging and dropping it into Google Images to see from whence it came.
3. Identify the original source of the article, and compare with other legitimate sources.
4. Consider using Google Chrome as your browser, and accordingly install a free Chrome Extension or Plug-In (such as FIB) that may help determine the validity of the site. Other browsers probably have similar extensions or add-ins or plug-ins that you can use.

Before sharing a piece of news or an article, focusing on electronic media, take the time to be patient and...

1. Read the article before sharing, paying attention to signs of “fakeness.” Fake stories are generated by both left-leaning and right-leaning websites.
2. Check the “contact us” page. Are there sufficient ways to contact the organization by phone, e-mail, and do they list a physical address? All three items add to the legitimacy of the site, but may not necessarily be present.
3. Check the byline of the story – who is reporting this?
4. Check for links to legitimate sources. What is the story based on?
5. Look at the ads – are they racy or off-color in terms of what you would expect ads to be for a legitimate source?
6. Use search engines to double-check that other sources of a legitimate nature have picked up on the basics of the story.

If something is too good to be true, it probably is.

More ways to identify a fake news story:

Excellent video, good follow-up to the one above from the Washington Post, and this one is from the Facebook page of Channel4News, another several-step process to make informed choices about websites. Watch this video a couple of times to fully get the most out of it: https://www.facebook.com/Channel4News/videos/10154548775681939/
Re-enforces first video from Washington Post.

Reputable News Sites

Some News Sites (there are more) that are considered to be reputable because they meet the above-mentioned criteria, and their authors follow guidelines including fact-checking and triangulation as part of their paid job:

- Washington Post
- New York Times
- Boston Globe
- BBC
- AP
- Reuters
- CNN
- NPR
- The Guardian
Fake News Identification Guides, Charts, and Databases

- Huffington Post Article posting 9 tips to avoid sharing fake news: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/fake-news-guide-facebook_us_5831c6ae4b058ce7aaba169
  - Good quote from the BBC.com site:
    
    While the internet has enabled the sharing of knowledge in ways that previous generations could only have dreamed of, it has also provided ample proof of the line, often attributed to Winston Churchill, that “A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on”.
    
    So with research suggesting an increasing proportion of US adults are getting their news from social media, it’s likely that more and more of us are seeing - and believing - information that is not just inaccurate, but totally made up.
    
    There are hundreds of fake news websites out there, from those which deliberately imitate real life newspapers, to government propaganda sites, and even those which tread the line between satire and plain misinformation.
- Politifact lists a periodically-updated database of sites deemed to be unreliable, fake, or untrustworthy. Here is their “Fake News Almanac” for reference: https://infogram.com/politifacts_fake_news_almanac
  The database can be downloaded, and includes site name, type of site, and where it is registered (many are in Arizona and Macedonia).

Charts

1. **A chart to use as a reference** showing commonly used news websites from Patent Attorney/Blogger, Vanessa Otero – http://www.allgeneralizationsarefalse.com/?p=65 (story behind the chart) and a link to the updated chart as of 11/8/2017: http://www.allgeneralizationsarefalse.com/

![MediaBiasChart.com](https://media-bias-chart.com)

2. **How to Spot Fake News** chart and article: http://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11174?og=7407
   (from International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions.)
3. From the website, factcheck.org, this Nov. 18, 2016 article titled, How to Spot Fake News, details and defines fake news and how to develop critical thinking skills along with recommended fact-checking tools to detect it. http://www.factcheck.org/2016/11/how-to-spot-fake-news/ -- a summary:

a. Consider the source
d. What’s the support?

b. Read beyond the headline
e. Check the date

c. Check the author
f. Is this some kind of joke?

d. What’s the support?
g. Check your biases

h. Consult the experts

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**HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS**

**CONSIDER THE SOURCE**
Click away from the story to investigate the site, its mission and its contact info.

**READ BEYOND**
Headlines can be outrageous in an effort to get clicks. What’s the whole story?

**CHECK THE AUTHOR**
Do a quick search on the author. Are they credible? Are they real?

**SUPPORTING SOURCES?**
Click on those links. Determine if the info given actually supports the story.

**CHECK THE DATE**
Reposting old news stories doesn’t mean they’re relevant to current events.

**IS IT A JOKE?**
If it is too outlandish, it might be satire. Research the site and author to be sure.

**CHECK YOUR BIASES**
Consider if your own beliefs could affect your judgement.

**ASK THE EXPERTS**
Ask a librarian, or consult a fact-checking site.
4. **Another chart** highlighting ways to detect “fake news” from this great resource at librarygirl.net: [http://www.librarygirl.net/2017/01/fake-news-alternative-facts-and.html](http://www.librarygirl.net/2017/01/fake-news-alternative-facts-and.html)

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**Importance of Libraries and Librarians as resources for the truth**

- Librarians are great resources to use to help find true, factual news, and can help you determine whether a piece of news is “fake” or not. Always feel free to consult a librarian when you have a question about a website or other source being “legitimate” or “fake.”

• Harvard's fake news guide: http://guides.library.harvard.edu/fake strongly advocates using library databases as credible sources of information. According to librarians, this is mainly because these databases have been previously screened by professional librarians, and are therefore worthy tools to explore. At Saratoga Springs Public Library, you can find databases on our website at www.sspl.org/research. Check other Academic libraries for “fake news” guides and recommendations as well as library databases.

**If anyone needs a library card, NovelNY (supplies databases for free to NY libraries) has a direct access site for anyone in New York (with or without a library card): http://novelnewyork.org/databases.php It works by checking the location of the computer.**

News Literacy Information from Melissa Zimdars

This resource is from Melissa Zimdars, a well-regarded assistant professor of communication and media at Merrimack College:

• Entire Article including a database of various online websites and their tested integrity (Author’s own compiled resource of hundreds of websites tagged by herself and a librarian):
  https://docs.google.com/document/d/10eA5-mCZLSS4MQY5QGb5ewC3VAL6pLkT53V_81ZytM

• Great Resource on learning news literacy.

  Msnbc.com.co vs msnbc.com for example, of noting the difference by looking at URLs and determining one is not legitimate (.co at the end) and one is.

  Abc.co.com also, is a fake site

  NBCPolitics.org is also, fake whereas NBCNews.com/politics is the true site

• Verification Handbook for verifying digital content for emergency coverage: http://verificationhandbook.com/

• Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics: https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp

• Fake News Writers making money (Washington Post, 11-17-2016):

Examples of Fake News

• Great article from March 2-3 from the Washington Post about how a beauty queen’s photo was “faked” or used by a right-wing media organization as a brand. Without her permission and to her dismay.
  https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/03/02/this-beauty-queen-was-the-face-of-a-fake-news-website-she-says-she-had-no-idea/?utm_term=.35e7d5bd9bf1

• Biker Photo during inauguration: http://www.palmerreport.com/politics/the-bikers-donald-trump-thinks-are-headed-to-his-inauguration-thats-a-photo-from-2013/970/

• A site that tested false news to see if people believed it: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/a-million-trump-supporters-fell-for-this-absurd-fake-news-site_us_58c42653e4b0d1078ca7222e


Trolls

*Huffington Post* Article outlining recent methods of paid trolls and how they helped influence the election:  
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/bernie-sanders-fake-news-russia_us_58c34d97e4b0ed71826cdb36?63g=&section=politics


Dealing with Trolls – one person’s insight and experience (*Washington Post* 1/2/2017):  
https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/theres-no-good-way-to-deal-with-trolls-so-you-might-as-well-tattle-to-their-moms/2017/01/02/90472a24-c7d4-11e6-8bee-54e800ef2a63_story.html?utm_term=.2becb2bc0b24

Online sites that are taking action to fight fake news:

- **Wikipedia** – an intellectual open source information website, says they are fighting fake news with a policy of verifiability.
  - Video (3:45):  https://twitter.com/Wikipedia/status/822941521473323008
  - Wikipedia’s written explanation of their verifiability policy and how it works.  
    https://twitter.com/Wikipedia/status/822941521473323008

- **Facebook**
  - *Facebook and Google* Take Action Against Fake News Sites (Nov. 15, 2016)  

- **Google & Firefox Browsers:**
  - *Google Chrome* and *Mozilla Firefox* have extensions you can add to your browser to help fact-check. These are still new and are being developed, but they work pretty well according to many sources. Visit  https://chrome.google.com/webstore/category/extensions to see the extensions for the *Google Chrome Browser*.  
  - In Chrome, one recommended from the *Washington Post* is called *RealDonaldContext*:  
  - Another in Chrome is *ProjectFib*.  
  - In *Firefox*, visit about:addons and look for *RealDonaldContext* and *FactCheck*

Good Fact-Checkers (there are others, too)

- www.factcheck.org
- www.politifact.com (Pulitzer Prize Winning Site)
- www.snopes.com (Managing Editor is Brooke Binkowski)
- www.hoax-slayer.com
Example of Fact-Checking

- Example of the Washington Post’s fact-checking giving Nancy Pelosi 2 “Pinocchios” for example: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/03/02/pelosi-claim-that-bill-clinton-was-impeached-for-something-so-far-less-than-jeff-sessions/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_factchecker-pelosi-530pm%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.b8dc5f8c1f7d

Define...


- Clickbait (According to Wikipedia, “a pejorative term describing web content that is aimed at generating online advertising revenue, especially at the expense of quality or accuracy, relying on sensationalist headlines to attract click-throughs and to encourage forwarding of the material over online social networks.”)

- Concept of Trust

- Crowdsourcing According to Merriam-Webster, “the practice of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people and especially from the online community rather than from traditional employees or suppliers”

- Domain Names (According to Merriam-Webster, “a sequence of usually alphanumeric characters (as Merriam-Webster.com) that specifies a group of online resources (as of a particular company or person) and that forms part of the corresponding Internet addresses.”)

- DOX According to Merriam-Webster, “slang: to publicly identify or publish private information about (someone) especially as a form of punishment or revenge”

- Fake News (malicious fabrication) vs Bad News (Lazy, sloppy news) – Fake News is a subset of Bad News.

- Filter bubbles (Definition)

- Gaslit (According to urbandictionary.com: “freaked out, scared, unnerved by abnormal events of unknown origin.”)

- Hacking (According to thefreedictionary.com) a) To alter a computer program: hacked her text editor to read HTML. b.) To gain access to (a computer file or network) illegally or without authorization: hacked the firm’s personnel database.

- Hoaxer (According to Oxforddictionaries.com, “a person who tricks or deceives someone by means of a hoax.”

- Internet Trolls (Definition), according to Lifewire.com, while Mashable.com explains how Google and Twitter are combatting Internet Trolls with interesting tools and techniques: http://mashable.com/2017/02/23/google-jigsaw-moderation-tool/#ZfIGCYBnokqB

- Journalist (Definition)

- Click-throughs, Likes, & Shares (think of sites like Facebook that utilize LIKES and SHARES for various posts you, your friends, or advertisers place. According to marketingterms.com, clickthrough is “The process of clicking through an online advertisement to the advertiser’s destination.”

- Paid Ad Placement

- Rooting a Device (According to LifeHacker.com, Rooting means you have root access to your device—that is, it can run the sudo command, and has enhanced privileges allowing it to run apps like Wireless Tether or SetCPU. You can root either by installing the Superuser application or by flashing a custom ROM that includes root access.

- Satirists According to The American Heritage New Dictionary, “people who create a work of literature that mocks social conventions, another work of art, or anything its author thinks ridiculous. Gulliver’s Travels, by

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- **Sock or Sock Puppet Account** (using a false identity to deceive)
- **Spam and Spam Bombing** *(Definition)*
- **Tags** According to webopedia.com, “(n) A [command](http://webopedia.com/define/command) inserted in a document that specifies how the document, or a portion of the document, should be [formatted](http://webopedia.com/define/formatted). Tags are used by all format specifications that store documents as text files. This includes [SGML](http://webopedia.com/define/sgml) and [HTML](http://webopedia.com/define/html).”
- **Triangulation** (Checking your information with at least 2 other sources)
- **Wikileaks** *(Definition)*

**Popular websites that make use of satire, which could be confused as being fake news**

  - Sites such as “The Onion,” The New Yorker column by [Andy Borowitz](http://webopedia.com/define/andrew_cycles), and others.

*Cyberpower not taken as seriously as it needed to be taken by the U.S. Government until now – phone calls of course, can also be “fake”*


**Baiting Tactics can also be used to confuse journalists.**

Those interested in promoting fake news can do so by “baiting” legitimate journalists in the hopes that flying with a fake story, and not checking it thoroughly, can result in discrediting the news organization that flew with the “fake” news.

- July 6, 2017 Latest on Fake News – Rachel Maddow Show -- forgery of a document -- about a half hour video
- July 6, 2017 -- Facebook Announces partnership with FactCheck.org to allow users to report news they suspect is fake:
- June 6, 2017 -- Google offering to help kids regarding hacking, phishing, and trolling:
- December 6, 2016 -- NPR’s Suggestions for Self-Fact-Checking
- December 22, 2016 -- The Classroom Where Fake News Fails from NPR – Excellent Read – ties into the articles I recently obtained from the Albany State Librarian
- November 23, 2016 -- NPR -- We Tracked Down a Fake-News Creator in the Suburbs. Here's What We Learned

*Thanks to the many librarians and also to those knowledgeable in the field of online security who helped with suggestions and contributing knowledge in the compilation of this “Fake News: How to Detect it” handout. Compiled by and Researched by Kathy Handy for Saratoga Springs Public Library 1/5/2018.*