Today's Fake News – How to Spot it?

Fake news or disinformation, as described by UNESCO, *refers to deliberate attempts to confuse or manipulate people through delivering dishonest information to them*. Richard Gray warns us that fake news is among the biggest challenges of the 21st Century.

Among the massive amounts of information that we come across daily, there are a number of false messages, mainly created to disorientate us and influence our opinion. With social media platforms dominating the information world, there is wide concern that fake news spread more easily, tending to be more novel than the real news.

It is hard even for science-literate people to identify online fraud. Therefore, it is crucial to have the ability to distinguish between fake news and reality, but also between opinions and facts. Fake news might appear as challenging to tackle, but being smart and skeptical when reading stories will help resolve much of the uncertainty.

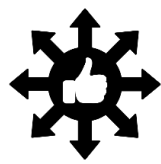This is a guide on how to detect fake news and other online fraud:

1. Read beyond the headline

Eye-popping headlines usually act as a trap since people can be quick to share stories based on the headline only without evaluating the whole story for its quality and truthfulness. Make sure to always read the whole story!

High-credibility sources have high proofreading and grammatical standards, so if you come across stories that use CAPITAL LETTERS, odd punctuation or have spelling mistakes, then start being skeptical.

In some cases, fake news authors use headlines based on real events in order to mislead their audience with the main body stating something completely different and being far from anything truthful.

2. Check for trustworthy sources

If you are unsure whether a news source is legitimate, the first step is to check the domain name - odd ones are rarely trustworthy. For example, websites that end in "com.co" are usually fake versions of real news. Also, be aware that 'blogger' or '.wordpress' is often referred to a personal blog. It does not necessarily mean that it is fake, but it is rather a personal viewpoint and not a news source.

Double-check with google search - there should typically be more than one source reporting on a topic. Try with the story itself, a quote or a figure. Finally, be more suspicious and always read the 'About Us' section on a website and check whether there is trustworthy background online. A website lacking the 'About Us' or 'Contact' section is most likely not a valid source of information.

3. Check the date

It is quite common that fake news is not complete fiction. In some cases, real news can be distorted and reused. Always crosscheck the publication date of the article with the story that is presented to determine if it is old news or perhaps fake news.

You should also consider the age of the article. An old story, whether it is real or fake, can be completely outdated or may highlight an issue that has already been resolved.

4. Check the author

Do some research on the author of the story. When it comes to academic writing, it is fairly easy to detect the quality and whether it is fake, by simply checking the author's affiliation and also by checking Google Scholar to familiarize yourself with the author's relevant work.

Things might become more complicated when reading stories on a website, as there might not be any clear person behind those stories. However as Gretchen Trkay points out, you can check how often the website is updated and who is hosting it. In order to prevent being misled, you should always read multiple sources of information to get several viewpoints and media frames.

Always be extra careful if you read a story without any author accreditation!

5. Consider your emotions and biases

In order to grab our attention, fake news often appeals to our emotions, making us feel scared, happy, or angry. As David Shariatmadari explains, fake news can often be detected by looking specifically at the language of the story. Look out for stories that play heavily on emotions, contain exaggerating vocabulary, or use the second-person pronoun 'you'.

After checking the language of a story, also consider your own beliefs. As Pew Research Center points out, we are more likely to trust content that confirms our opinions! Therefore, it is crucial that we think critically when reading stories as we tend to dismiss facts that oppose our beliefs.

6. Look out for questionable quotes and photos

It is extremely easy to use quotes or photos from other events in order to create a believable fake news story. Check out this article and see an example of how a hoax photo was circulated on Facebook accusing Australian climate strike protesters of leaving a lot of rubbish behind.
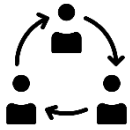
7. Check whether it is satire

Within the fake-news prism, we can also find the 'legitimate fake news', widely known as satire. While satire and fake news have completely different intentions, there are times where satire is misunderstood and condemned as fake news. Other times, satire is read as real news and not perceived as a joke. Both situations are problematic.

If the story you are reading sounds too outrageous, have in mind that it might serve satirical purposes. Make your research on the site to crosscheck if it is a trusted source and to find out whether it is real news, satire or simply fraud. Examples of satirical websites are The Onion and The Poke.

8. Think twice before you share

Within our own social network, we are all potential influencers. The best way to fight online misinformation is to share responsibly. The only way to control the spread of fake news is to only post or share facts that we know are valid and true. After carefully assessing the legitimacy of a news story, it is our individual responsibility to choose whether to share or not and stop the spread of fake news. Also keep in mind that a story that is popular among your network does not necessarily mean that it has truthful and reliable content.

9. Verify stories on fact-checking websites

It is always a good idea to check on fact-checking websites whether the story you just read is fraud. A recent list of fact-checking websites is available online. For other websites, you can also do some research to find out whether they are legitimate.