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Fake News

10 Ways to spot fake news [howstuffworks.com on 2017/02/01]

Back in the old days, when people got their news mainly from papers, magazines, radio and television, it was generally easy to figure out when someone was pulling your leg. Pretty much anything in the National Enquirer was suspect, for example. That tabloid often featured stories with outrageous headlines, such as, "Woman Gives Birth to Alien." We may laugh at such titles, but what's not so funny is that in the last decade or two, with the growth of the Internet and social media, fake news stories and entire fake news sites have proliferated.

Some sites intentionally write false, humorous stories under the satire genre. A prime example is The Onion. Many people realize The Onion is a satirical publication. But if there's any doubt, it's pretty clear if you click on the site's "About Us" tab. The information there says, among other humorous bits, "The Onion now enjoys a daily readership of 4.3 trillion and has grown into the single most powerful and influential organization in human history," and, "The Onion uses invented names in all of its stories, except in cases where public figures are being satirized."

But many other fake news sites intentionally try to pass themselves off as real, either by never disclosing their satirical nature or hiding the disclosure deep within their website. Still others are just peddling false and salacious tales to drive traffic to their site and rake in ad revenue — something easy to do when social media allows the rapid spread of misinformation.

So how can you ensure you're not being bamboozled? We have 10 tips to get you started.

One

Certain sources are known to be unreliable. Two of these are the Daily Mail and The Sun, both U.K. tabloids with large Internet followings. The Daily Mail in particular is regarded as one of Britain's less reputable publications. However, it is also the world's most visited newspaper site.

Complicating matters is that most readers (particularly in the U.S.) can't distinguish between the Daily Mail newspaper, a middlebrow print publication that generally sticks to the facts, albeit with a conservative slant, and the Mail Online, the home of celebrity gossip and lurid (sometimes untrue) human interest stories. These pieces usually only appear online, with lots of photos and a long, click-baity headline. The Daily Mail's website (i.e., Mail Online) has a separate staff from the print publication but includes stories from both arenas on its Web pages [source: Bloomgarde-Smoke]. So while it's true you may be able to read an accurate story, it's best to avoid it entirely to make sure you're not getting snookered.

The Daily Mail and The Sun mix some legit stories with the questionable ones, but there's a whole other world of websites where all the news is fake. These include the Empire News, Empire Sports, Huzlers, National Report, The Daily Current, The Wyoming Institute of Technology and World News Daily Report [sources: Hoax-Slayer, Snopes].

Two

Our list of fake websites was by no means exhaustive, and new ones open up every week. So how can you tell if a site is reliable if it's not on any list of fake websites? One way is to do a quick scan of some of the headlines and first few paragraphs of other stories on the site.

Let's say you're interested in a story with the headline, "President Obama Suffers Heart Attack." That certainly sounds plausible. But if some of the other headlines on the site read "Grandmother Mates with Croc," "9-Year-Old Accidentally Discovers Cure for Cancer" and "Sky Over Oklahoma City Actually Rains Cats and Dogs," you should be wary.

Of course, the other headlines may not be quite that fantastical. Still, if you take a good look at the other stories, you'll get a sense of the seriousness of the publication, which is a good indication of its integrity. Are there a lot of articles about sex or celebrities? Do you see photos of scantily clad women or people with enormous body parts? Are there dubious-sounding stories about women needing to do more housework to avoid obesity, or about how eating a box of chocolates daily will actually lower your cholesterol? If so, beware.

Facebook is another place where dubious stories get shared or promoted. So look twice at the site they came from before hitting the "share" button.

Three

One of the easiest ways to figure out if a news story is legitimate or not is to check it against the stories posted on other reputable sites. Let's stick with the example of President Obama suffering a heart attack. You become alarmed, but realize you're finding out about this upsetting news on a website that you don't recognize. Let's call it BigNews.com. Simply conduct an online search for "President Obama heart attack" and see what comes up. If sites like The New York Times, CBS or CNN are running the same story, it's likely true.

However, make sure to delve a bit deeper. If The New York Times, CBS and CNN all cite BigNews.com as the source for their Obama heart attack story, that puts you right back where you started from. You need to find a reputable source that has done its own reporting on the story to ensure its truth and accuracy.

Think that's excessive? In January 2014, the Daily Mail ran a photo of smoggy Beijing in the early morning. A giant, rectangular TV screen in the foreground showed a beautiful sunrise. The story

underneath was titled, "China starts televising the sunrise on giant TV screens because Beijing is so clouded in smog." The venerable Time magazine and CBS picked up the story, crediting the Daily Mail as the source. But they soon issued a correction when, after finally doing their own reporting, they discovered it was a fabrication. The TV screen existed, but the sunrise shot was part of a tourism ad [source: Nijhuis].

Four

A fair number of fake news stories hook readers in because they predict a future disaster. Yes, some of them are pretty incredible and seem obviously fake — the date of the world's ending, for example, or the start of World War III. But some seem rather believable.

One such story that has made the rounds numerous times concerns Europe becoming an Islamic continent due to Muslims' high birthrates. Various versions of the story have been printed, with an anonymous YouTube video titled "Muslim Demographics" fanning the flames. In the video, which was uploaded in March 2009 and had 15.5 million hits by Aug. 2015, all sorts of undocumented claims are made, such as the fact that France will become an Islamic republic by 2048 and Germany a majority-Muslim state by 2050. (For the record, Europe is expected to become 10 percent Muslim by 2050 [source: Yuhas]). Other similar stories predict the world's water running out (for crop growth) and America's economy crashing [sources: Wong].

Consider any disaster story carefully, especially if it's paired with a specific date. Such a story may be true, for example, stories about the AIDS epidemic and the Ebola crisis. But more often than not, it's hyperbole or just plain false.

Five

Humans are not only fascinated by potential disasters, but by illnesses, diseases and human-caused conditions (like global warming or pollution). That's why another type of fake news story is so prevalent — the curing of a major illness or disease, or the solution to an important human-race issue, such as the lack of clean drinking water. It's certainly possible — and would be fantastic — if cancer was cured tomorrow. Or Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis or Alzheimer's. Or if we found a means of delivering clean water to everyone in need. But as of 2015, no cure for those serious diseases is on the horizon, and far too many people still need access to clean water [source: Wong].

So if you read an article where some major affliction has been cured, be sceptical. Especially if the cure was discovered by, say, a kid, or involves something either very strange (boiled monkey brains) or far too easy ("Just eat a banana a day to be cancer-free!"). And if an article claims our clean-water woes are over, don't perform cartwheels just yet. Often there are seeds of truth in such stories. Perhaps one small study found promise in a cancer treatment, for example, but the ensuing story blew it all out of proportion. It's not fun to always be suspicious about what you read, but it's generally pretty smart.

Six

Above-board satirical websites like The Onion tell you they're peddling satire. Less-honest sites sometimes issue confusing disclaimers. NewsBuzzDaily, for example, writes on every page that it contains both "real shocking news" and "satire news," then adds, "Please note that articles written on this site are for entertainment and satirical purposes only." So is it all satire or only partial satire? And if partial, which stories are true?

Even worse, though, is The Stately Harold. Readers should suspect the site is fake; it features a simplistic, campy home page (another sign to watch out for) and misspells "Herald" as "Harold." It

defends itself by saying its site carries a disclaimer, and it does. "This is Satire!" is printed at the bottom of every page. But those words lie hidden within a black box on the bottom of the page that contains the copyright. The only way you can see them is if you highlight the copyright with your cursor. Well, who would think to do that?!

What's the lesson here? If you're not sure about a website's legitimacy, search around to see if there's any kind of disclaimer. If you find one, that likely means the site can't be trusted, even if the disclaimer is worded confusingly. Legitimate sites don't need disclaimers.

Seven

The goal of posting fake news stories is to attract readers to your site. One way to do this is to run really compelling stories. We're not talking serious, compelling stories, such as reports on ISIS' latest forays or the current status of war refugees around the globe. We're talking funny-compelling. Bizarre-compelling. The more eyebrow-raising a story is, the more people seem to want to read and share it, and other news outlets to reprint it. Those are the kinds of stories fake sites thrive upon. So your antenna should go up if you read such a piece.

One example is the tale of a 13-year-old who swiped his dad's credit card, then purchased a boatload of video games and electronics — plus two \$1,000-per-hour hookers. His reason for securing the latter? He wanted some people to play the video game "Halo" with him and his buddies. The police caught up with the 13-year-old when the prostitutes were still with him, the story said. The women told police they thought something was odd when the boys spurned their normal, um, business arrangement, saying they were midgets from a traveling circus merely seeking companionship.

Plausible? Barely. Yet this story was widely disseminated before it was revealed to be a ruse on the part of an Internet marketer trying to get some quick hits to his site. He left the story up, but added a disclaimer that it was merely satire [source: Media Watch].

Eight

Polls form the basis of many a news article, and very often they're totally legitimate. After all, people are constantly trying to assess everything from our preference for political candidates to whether or not we believe in global warming. The problem with polls is that they can be misleading depending upon how the questions are phrased. Or the poll might be fine, but the results are taken out of context.

For instance, a 2012 Gallup poll got a lot of attention when it showed that 30 percent of millennials were not affiliated with any religion ("The Rise of the 'Nones'" was a typical headline). Some media took it to mean that religion was dying out among the young. Others pointed to the fact that two-thirds of the unaffiliated still believed in God as indication that it was not. Indeed, 5 percent of the "unaffiliated" said they attended church weekly, leading one to think that perhaps they misunderstood the question asked. While this was not fake news, it's an example of how a real poll can be spun in many different directions.

Another way to manipulate polls for use in stories is for a group with a vested interest to poll its readers and announce the results as if they applied to a scientific sample. For example, let's say a pit bull rescue group surveys its fans about the positive attributes of the breed. The fans overwhelmingly reply pit bulls are the gentlest of breeds, and the group then writes a story about how a new poll shows the majority of people love pit bulls and have had positive interactions with them.

The lesson? When reading a story based on a poll, check to see who conducted the poll, the number of people surveyed, how they were selected and how the survey questions were phrased. If you have that info at hand, you should have a good idea as to the reliability of the story.

Nine

One of the easier ways to spot suspect stories is if they're located on a news site with a strange domain name. Sometimes if a story originates on a site ending in ".ru" or ".co", that's a red flag. ".Ru" is used by the Russian federation, while ".co" is used by Colombia; these two extensions are considered suspect. Other untrustworthy sites will try to imitate a reputable, well-known website by incorporating it into its own URL; for example, using NBC as part of its URL: www.nbc-real-news.com. Another trick? Using nearly the same URL as a popular site, omitting a letter or two, or misspelling the name. Very long, complex domain names are another sign something might be amiss.

Remember, too, that anyone can pay for any domain name they'd like. In the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, for example, someone who was ticked at Republican candidate Carly Fiorina snagged the domain name "carlyfiorina.org." The site illustrates, through frowny faces, the 30,000 people she laid off as head of Hewlett-Packard [source: Toussaint]. This isn't a story, of course. But if you read a story on, say, the evils of butter, and it's on a site called "ilovebutter.org," you should suspect something slippery is going on.

Ten

Ever read a story that really made you mad? Or that seemed to tap into your innermost insecurity or fear? Maybe it was about the government secretly spying on you. Don't automatically believe what you just read and pass it on. Many false news stories purposely play on our fears and anxieties, knowing that doing so will make people follow their emotions and not their brains.

One example of such a story concerned a Texas family of five diagnosed with the deadly Ebola virus. Because of the family's diagnosis, the story said, the entire town where they lived was under quarantine. The fake story, published on a site called National Report during the height of the Ebola crisis, took off on Facebook, where hundreds of thousands of people read it, "liked" it and passed it on [source: Dzieza]. Whether these are satirical sites or websites run by people with an ax to grind, if you find yourself getting pretty steamed, take a step back and re-evaluate.

Author's Note: 10 Ways to Spot a Fake News Story

I can appreciate good satire, such as that found in The Onion. But it's a disservice — and sometimes an outright danger — to trick people into believing false information on serious subjects.

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