

The Digital Literacy Series: Fake News

Can You Avoid Falling for Fake News?

| Transcript

Narrator: One of the most important things we need to learn about fake news is how to not get sucked in by it. We need to know the signs that an article isn't legitimate news, and the best ways to check up on the facts. When we can detect fake news and talk to our friends and family about how to pick it up, we help to stop fake stories from spreading.

The fastest way to tell if something isn't real on a website is to do a visual check of the site and its web address. When you arrive, take a look around. Are any words misspelled, or is the grammar obviously wrong? Are sections of the text all in capitals? Are there advertising banners, pop-up ads, and links to clickbait articles? When there is lots of advertising, it usually means that the owner of the website is more interested in making money than reporting real news.

Other visual clues to check for are low-resolution images or a website layout that feels badly designed and has broken links. Established media organizations hire designers and coders to keep their websites looking professional and operating smoothly. Double-check the date of the article and the name of the journalist. Who does the journalist work for? What is their background and credentials? Are they closely linked to the political organization or product that they are writing about?

Look at details like the website address for unusual spellings and domain extensions such as .co. Often, fake news sites choose names that seem authentic but have the wrong ending or are misspelled. But sites with addresses that include .gov, .edu, or .org will generally contain more credible content.

After the visual analysis of the website, you can start to look more closely at the article itself. A quick Google search will let you know if this story has been written about by other news sites. They might have a different spin on the same issue, or an article debunking the story as fake news. It is best to go to the largest and most recognizable news websites to check if they are also covering the story.

It is also easy to do a reverse Google image search to find out where the photos in the article have come from. To make fake news stories seem real, images are often used out of context. They can be from another time, or cropped or manipulated to support the fake story.

You can also search to find out if quotes and events mentioned in the article are real, and if multiple different people heard and saw them. It can be great to watch videos and listen to interviews to hear all the sentences around a quote, as full sentences can easily be trimmed down to change the meaning of the words.

Many of these ways of checking for fake news on websites also apply to articles you see on common social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. The problem is that it can be even harder to analyze and interrogate these articles to see if what you are reading is fake news, because sometimes there is even less information about who is writing the content, their message, and why the article was created.

When reading articles on social media, think about if, for instance, the article is a first-hand account of an event. Or, is it a third- or even fourth-hand account of the event, and it's seen through the eyes of someone remote from the incident? Also keep thinking about what the message of the news article is. What idea or opinion is the article trying to persuade you to believe? And can you figure out if there is bias in the message? Is there another viewpoint that the article totally ignores? Finally, question why what you are reading was created. Is the author being paid for that terrible online review of a restaurant or a car? Will the positive article about the successful businessperson lead to more work for the writer?

Remember, there are lots of fact-checker sites run by legitimate news organizations that work to expose fake news. These are trusted websites that use professional journalists to check sources, quotes, and images, and they can let you know if a story isn't real.

The final way not to get sucked in by fake news is to make the effort to think carefully and examine why the article was written. Is that highly emotive and persuasive language trying to sell me something, the sensational headlines make me hate or like someone or some group, or perhaps persuade me to agree with an idea or policy? Having informed opinions and choices is not only a way to keep you healthy and safe, it's also how we keep our democratic institutions and our communities strong.

So next time you're online and you see a news article that doesn't feel quite right, you know what to do using these tools: a visual check of the content, an analysis of the article's origins, and thinking about the motivations of the creator. You can make sure that the tricks don't work on you and you'll also be stopping the spread of fake news.