

The Digital Literacy series: Fake News

Why Do We Fall for Fake News?

| Transcript

Narrator: Fake news appears in many different forms, from obviously ridiculous clickbait headlines to deliberately deceptive articles pretending to be reports about serious issues. When we come across these stories online, it's easy to get sucked in. But why do we fall for inaccurate, sensational, and dangerous news articles? Why do they spread so far and so fast across the world? The major reason that fake news is so popular is because of the way it makes us feel. People have strong emotional responses to these articles, so they drag us in. And we don't use our common sense to judge if the story is true. Instead of reading news articles and looking for facts, it's easy to get distracted by how we feel about stories, both good and bad, when we see attention-grabbing headlines.

Our responses are intensified by the way we interact with news and information. We're all busy and it's easier to get our news in short formats to save time. The news never stops coming in from all around the world. Day and night, our news feeds keep updating. When there is never a break from news stories popping up, it's easy to quickly skim and scroll.

Elizabeth Linder: The tech industry is getting more and more sensitive over the harmful nature of technology, of tech products, to actually increase our blood pressure and increase our anger, and take away from the more thoughtful, more constructive dialogue that, hopefully helps society in the long term.

Narrator: When we're only reading a headline, listening to a sound bite or looking at a tweet, it's hard to get all the different sides to a story. Only the most dramatic and controversial parts of an article make the headlines and this can mean we don't read more deeply to understand the context. And the less we know about a particular issue, the harder it is to pick up inconsistencies, misinformation, and other details that suggest a story isn't correct.

But one of the most common reasons we engage with fake news is because we like facts that back up the opinions and beliefs we already have. This is called confirmation bias and it's a powerful tool in the spread of fake news. When we experience that superior feeling of being proved right about an important topic, we want to share those stories.

Fake news is designed to manipulate our emotions and fears. We are hardwired to focus on negative behaviors, events, and expectations. And when information is endlessly repeated, eventually we believe it. Fake news relies on and also encourages our lazy thinking habits. It's quicker and easier to believe what we read than to put in the time to really question and analyze what we've been told. Let's look at some actual fake news stories and how they sucked people in.

In 2016, the US presidential election was the biggest news story on the planet. There were thousands of articles floating around about the two candidates, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. One particular story blew up on Facebook during the election race: 'Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President'. This news article was read by over a million people on Facebook, but it was written by a fantasy news website called WTOE 5News. So why did this article become so big when a few clicks could easily show people that it wasn't true?

It was the intense emotional impact of the story. Popes never comment on political elections and the news that Pope Francis had broken the rules for Donald Trump served as significant confirmation bias for his supporters. It was also a source of intense outrage for those who did not support him. The Pope holds a powerful spiritual position for Roman Catholics across the world. They value his opinions and guidance. They would want to know who he was endorsing and could follow his example. The combination of powerful figures with the highly controversial idea behind the story encouraged people to read, spread, and share the fake news.

Fake news can also take advantage of people's innate wish for everything to be okay. In 2020, a wave of panic and fear spread across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this stressful time, good news articles began appearing. These were stories about animals flourishing as humans were forced to stay home. One story quickly went viral: "Nature is taking back Venice: dolphins return to canals." This story was spread by tweets containing a video of dolphins frolicking in the clear water. One tweet received over 40,000 likes. However, the story wasn't true and the video was actually shot in a different Italian city three years before the pandemic.

Why did this fake story become such an online sensation? People wanted to find a positive spin on the deeply concerning events of the pandemic, so they were less critical and didn't check the video carefully. If people want to believe fake news is true, they are less interested in checking whether it is. One fake news writer interviewed by the BBC said that the top comment he receives on his articles is, "I hope this is true".

Emotive images and persuasive language in false and misleading articles sometimes encourage us to avoid thinking critically about the news we consume and share. We are also wired to believe fake news. Confirmation bias, our natural fears, our desire for good things to be true, and our tendency towards lazy thinking combine to make many of us very easily duped.