



FAKE NEWS FOOLING MILLIONS!

Fabricated stories on social media are influencing major events like the presidential election. How can we separate fact from fiction?

BY CARL STOFFERS

Last March, a fake news site called The Boston Tribune went viral with a story that the government was secretly tracking Americans using computer chips in credit cards. In October, another site peddling bogus news, The Free Thought Project, got more than 28,000 people on Facebook to share its claim that U.S. Marines were heading to Europe.

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Political Insider, had thousands sharing presidential campaign. In fact, some role in major events, including the recent political analysts say fake news stories spread on social media might have helped tip the election to Donald Trump. Experts are warning that these sites are eroding the public's ability to distinguish between fact and fiction. At the same time, tech companies like Facebook and Google are struggling with internet, these sites have begun to play a

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how to deal with fake news—an effort that's complicated by free speech concerns.

"These fake news sites exist to misinform through a whole cycle of misinformation," says Jeremy Littau, a digital media professor at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. "They're trying to get you to believe something that's independent of the truth."

Part of the problem is that fake news can be hard to identify (see "How to Spot Fake News"). More than 80 percent of middle school students couldn't distinguish between legitimate news stories and ads disguised as news, according to a recent Stanford University study. In the same study, 40 percent of high school students believed a news story they were shown was real simply because a photo accompanied it—even though no sources were cited in the article.

What's more, although many hoax stories are blatantly untrue—like the one in November about hundreds of Trump rally in Texas—some contain partial truths or factual distortions, making them even harder to spot.

Because the internet provides anonymity, anyone with a computer and design software can start a news site and pass it off as legitimate: political partisans trying to help or harm a candidate, amateur bloggers, or even someone just trying to make a buck. That's what motivated a 17-year-old in the European nation of Macedonia to create DailyNewsPolitics.com and begin inventing stories about the U.S. election. "I started the site for a easy way to make money," he told BuzzFeed in

slightly broken English. "Yellow Journalism" stories have much greater reach than before. That's what's new, the ability to quickly infect each other with it.

In some cases, fake news fuels what's known as the "echo chamber"—people with similar beliefs and biases sharing only what fits their vision of the world. Psychologists call this "confirmation bias." After the presidential election, many

HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS

Despite the increasing amount of false information online, there are ways to get to the truth and stop the spread of fake news. Here are a few tips.

- 1. Be skeptical:** Just because you see an article online, don't assume it's factual, even if a friend shared it with you.
- 2. Verify:** Make sure that what you're reading—and thinking of sharing—was published by a reputable source.
- 3. Look for other clues:** Scrutinizing the sources cited in articles and even the ads on the page can reveal a hidden agenda behind a website.
- 4. Get help:** Independent verification can often confirm whether something widely shared is true. Nonpartisan fact-checking sites like Factcheck.org and PolitiFact.com point out untruths in the news. Teachers and family can also help.

people called for social media platforms and search engines to limit or ban questionable websites. Some tech companies, like Google and Facebook, vowed to prevent these sites from advertising, but so far they've stopped short of banning their articles from being seen and shared.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said in November that the company was researching ways to make it easier to detect and report fake news. But he also noted the company's philosophy of being an open forum: "We believe in giving people a voice, which means erring on the side of letting people share what they want whenever possible."

The question of whether Facebook, Google, or any other company should decide what's legitimate news has ignited a debate about free speech and censorship. These companies can legally limit what we see on their platforms because the First Amendment's free speech protections prohibit only the government from censoring speech. But some media experts warn against putting tech firms and the growing popularity of openly partisan content. And social media has made it easier to find an audience for news that's skewed toward one political viewpoint, isn't fact-checked, or is simply made up.

"What has changed is not our penchant for creating this material, but our ease in sharing it," says Littau. "It's so much easier to pass this material on, and that means fake news stories have much greater reach than before. That's what's new, the ability to quickly infect each other with it."

Experts say it will take a concerted effort by the public and the media to fix the problem of misinformation and slow the spread of fake news. "Users on social media need to call out people who are sharing this stuff, and journalists need to continue to adhere to professional standards," Adornato says. "It's a team effort."

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informed people to make that decision." Experts say it will take a concerted effort by the public and the media to fix the problem of misinformation and slow the spread of fake news. "Users on social media need to call out people who are sharing this stuff, and journalists need to continue to adhere to professional standards," Adornato says. "It's a team effort."