

Real news reports on fake news as people try to figure out the difference

By The Mercury News

STANFORD, Calif. — Advertisement or news article? Think tank or lobbying group? Verified Facebook page or fake account?

Students from middle school to high school are social media savvy nowadays. Yet they are easily fooled by biased sources, ads that resemble news articles and even fake social media pages, a study by the Stanford History Education Group showed.

The study, released in November, was conducted by the Stanford History Education Group. From January 2015 to June 2016, researchers asked students in 12 states to complete 56 tasks. These tasks measured the students' ability to judge the trustworthiness of online information.

Surprising Results Across The Board

Researchers analyzed 7,804 responses from students across the country. They were surprised by their results.

“We were shocked, to be honest, by how consistently poor these students did,” said Joel Breakstone. He is the director of the Stanford History Education Group. “Across the board, students really struggled. They read for content, and rarely do students consider, ‘Where does this content come from?’”

The new findings come as companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google are trying to figure out how to stop the spread of fake news and false information. The companies are in a bit of a bind. At the same time, they want to avoid suppressing free speech.

Learning To Separate Fact From Fiction

In the wake of Donald Trump’s stunning presidential victory, some are blaming Facebook for not doing enough to combat fake news. Many people believe that fake news stories helped Trump gain support.

Facebook CEO and co-founder Mark Zuckerberg said the company was looking at different ways to fight fake news. Facebook is considering showing warnings on stories flagged as fake or making it easier for people to report these posts.

That might not be enough, though. There is so much information to sort through online, some trustworthy and some clearly not. Experts say that educators and parents will have to play a role in helping students separate fact from fiction.

“The number 1 skill that kids are going to need in this 21st century is media literacy and the power of discernment,” Stephen Balkam said. He is the founder and CEO of the Family Online Safety Institute. More and more, he said, students will have to ask themselves, “What is real and what is not real?”

Helping students develop those skills will likely not be easy. Students are often taught in schools how to understand a written passage. However, they do not often learn about the source of the information presented to them, Breakstone said.

A Tweet Doesn't Make It Real

In one assessment, 225 high school students were shown two Facebook posts about Trump announcing his candidacy for president. They were then asked which one was the more trustworthy source. One post was from Fox News and had a verified check mark next to the name. Another post was from "Fox News The FB Page" and included a screenshot of a tweet from Trump.

Only a quarter of the students recognized that one of the Facebook accounts was verified with a blue check mark. More than 30 percent thought the unverified Facebook page was a more trustworthy source because it included a tweet from Trump.

Better Labels Might Work

Hidden advertisements are another challenge for students. Advertisers have started designing ads that look like news stories and paying websites to run them alongside their articles. People are often fooled by these. More than 80 percent of the middle school students who were shown the homepage of Slate's website thought "sponsored content" was a news story. In fact, it is a way of labeling ads that look like articles.

Better labeling might be a partial solution. The Federal Trade Commission has urged companies to be more clear about the language they use to identify ads. For example, the labels "Paid Advertisement" and "Sponsored Advertising Content" are more likely to be understood than "Sponsored by."

Breakstone noted that the Internet has become a complicated space to navigate. Advertisers and other organizations often try to hide who they are, and some groups and individuals spread news stories that are simply lies. In this environment, Breakstone said, "it is crucial for students to understand what makes a particular piece of information reputable."

Determine Whether The Article Is From A Trustworthy Website

ABC News, the television network, has a website at abcnews.go.com. And ABC News, the fake news site, can be found at abcnews.com.co.

The use of ".co" at the end is a strong clue you are looking at fake news. But there are other signs as well.

Look At The Ads

A flood of pop-up ads or other advertising on a news site indicates you should handle the story with care. Another sign is a bunch of ads or links designed to be clicked. Examples of such suggestive or attention-grabbing headlines might include "You Won't Believe What This Celebrity Looks Like Now" or "Naughty Walmart Shoppers Who have no Shame at All." You generally do not find content like this on real news sites.

Read The Article Closely

Many fake articles have made-up quotes that are hard to read without laughing. About midway through the article on the protest, the founder of **Snopes.com** – a site that disproves fake news on the Internet – is suddenly "quoted" as saying he approves of the article. It also goes on to describe Snopes as "a website known for its biased opinions and inaccurate information they write about stories on the internet." It's like a weird inside joke. In readers' minds, it should raise immediate red flags.

Scrutinize The Sources

Sometimes fake articles are based on merely a tweet. For example, fake news recently spread that suggested anti-Trump protesters were bused to demonstrations. As The New York Times found, this story started with a single, ill-informed tweet by a man with just 40 followers. Another apparently fake story, that Trump fed police officers working

protests in Chicago, also started with a tweet – by a man who was not even there. He was just passing along a claim made by "friends." He also has a locked account, making the "news" highly suspicious.

Few real news stories are based on a single tweet with no additional confirmation. If the article has no links to reliable sources – or no links at all – you are likely reading fake news.

Check The "Contact Us" Page

Some fake news sites do not have any contact information, which easily demonstrates that they are phony. The fake "ABC News" does have a "contact us" page – but it shows a picture of a single-family home in Topeka, Kansas. The real television network is located in New York City, in a 13-story building on 66th Street.

Examine The Byline Of The Reporter And See Whether It Makes Sense

On the fake ABC News site there is an article claiming a protester was paid \$3,500 to protest Donald Trump. It is supposedly written by Jimmy Rustling. "Dr. Jimmy Rustling has won many awards for excellence in writing," the site says, "including fourteen Peabody awards and a handful of Pulitzer Prizes." (Peabody awards and Pulitzer Prizes are the highest honors in journalism and extremely difficult to win.) Doesn't that seem absurd? Or how about that he "spends 12-15 hours each day teaching his adopted 8-year-old Syrian refugee daughter how to read and write"?

All of the details are signs that "Dr. Rustling" is not a real person.

Use Search Engines To Double-Check

A simple Google search often will quickly tell you if the news you are reading is fake. Snopes has compiled a guide to fake news sites, allowing you to check whether the article comes from a fraudster. A website called RealorSatire.com is another way to double-check the truthfulness of an article. It allows you to post the URL of any article and it will quickly tell you if the article comes from a fake or biased news website.

Combating the spread of fake news begins with you, the reader. If it seems too fantastic, it probably is. Please think before you share.