

Experts: Media literacy combats ‘fake news’

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For generations, people have warned each other not to believe everything they read or hear. In the internet age, that advice is more pertinent than ever.

Following the Nov. 8 presidential elections, a spotlight has been placed on what is called fake news: satirical, misleading and untrue stories published by seemingly legitimate news outlets.

Earlier this month, BuzzFeed News released the findings of a study that looked at news posts on Facebook over the last three months of the presidential campaign. Of the top 20 most widely circulated articles, 17 were misleading or lies.

Based on what users liked, shared or read, the study showed, for example, around 960,000 people believed it when they read “Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump.” Roughly 789,000 saw “WikiLeaks CONFIRMS Hillary Sold Weapons to ISIS” and thought it was true. Neither of those things happened.

It raises serious concerns about people making important decisions based on misleading or false information and what, if anything, can be done to discern fact from fiction.

Assessing a story’s credibility

At a time when information is disseminated so quickly the truth has a hard time keeping up, journalists must vet sources and verify information. But faux news isn’t produced by journalists, so some of that responsibility lies with the news consumer.

Here are some tips news readers and watchers can use to make sure they get the most accurate information possible.

- **Get past the headline:** It is not uncommon for people to glean all they would care to know on any given topic from headlines or the first paragraph. Read more than what’s in the big print.
- **Who wrote this?:** On most websites, readers can access a reporter’s biography or past stories by clicking on the name in the byline. Taking a quick look at a writer’s past work — or lack thereof — can be a tip off.
- **Says who?:** Fake news stories can also lead to fake news sources, so it is important to make sure those sources are reliable, too. Stories without sources should be read with a leery eye. People should also be skeptical of exaggerated or hyperbolic quotes and pictures that are old or seem edited.
- **Beware of bias:** Life experiences shape world views and fake news often plays to the feelings people have. Be wary of stories that tap into those feelings with strong language or that present only one point of view.
- **Double-check other media:** If a breaking news story is as big as the headline would suggest, more than one outlet will cover it. Check other well-established news providers. Not only does this help verify the authenticity, it’s a fast way to get even more reliable information.
- **Fact-checkers do exist:** Websites like Snopes.com and FactCheck.org are long-established, reliable ways to check accuracy.

Roy Gutterman, an associate professor with an extensive background in communications law and ethics at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, said he finds the increased consump-

tion of fake news disturbing.

“I think this is extremely troubling,” Gutterman said. “News is objective or fair. It’s not based on outright falsehoods. This stuff that they’re calling fake news now doesn’t fit any of the criteria

for ... news — it’s based on outright lies.”

He thinks the problem is that too many people want only information that fits their view of the world, regardless of accuracy. It is the role of the news media to call out lies.

“I think too many people want to hear the information they want to hear, regardless of the validity,” he said. “Sometimes the mainstream press has to vet these stories and expose the lies to the public. That’s part of what journalism is all about.”

Ultimately, though, the news consumers get to decide what to do with the information they receive and, as such, should do their own fact-checking, Gutterman said.

The act of verifying the accuracy of news is referred to as media literacy and something Tessa Jolls, president of the California-based Center for Media Literacy, says both children and adults should develop.

Jolls said all news should initially be viewed as fake news; people should always question the authenticity of a report — no matter how reputable the news outlet.

She added while media literacy is something that can be taught, one never truly masters the technique. Media literacy is a skill



Bob Ellis/photo illustration

A fake website designed to appear as an ABC News story claims President Obama has banned the National Anthem at all sporting events in a photo taken Wednesday.

that needs to be learned early and applied regularly, which is why it is important for children, teachers and parents to learn about it.

“(There are) all kinds of agencies who want to inform and persuade us but we hardly invest anything in media literacy education,” she said. “Every citizen needs to be equipped. We have generations of people out there who are unprepared. I think it’s all hands on deck.”

Jolls said in the end, the best

defense against being misled by fake news is a healthy skepticism and the realization media consumption is a complex, ever-changing system.

“Wedon’t have the answers, what we have are the questions,” Jolls said. “If we’re going to have the questions, we need to understand how the system works. We need to learn how to engage with media in a healthy way ... and also take into account our relationship with others.”