



Digital Applemen: Staying Safe & Responsible Online

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Student Voice

The Fake News Blues by Emma Pratt, Senior, Cider Press

Over the past few months, the matter of fake news has become a rather hot topic. Stories and discussions of fake news have traveled all over the Internet and throughout some of the major mainstream news networks, often creating some confusion as to what's real and what's not.

Fake news is far from a new concept. It's been around for about as long as actual news. From fake reports of slave uprisings and crime in the 1800s, to Nazi propaganda depicting the Jewish people as being ritualistic blood-drinkers, the history of fake news is often very long, painful, and down-right ugly.

Increasingly, social media websites such as Facebook have seemed all too eager to spread these fake, totally unbelievable news stories around for the uninformed public to eat up. The story "Obama Signs Executive Order Banning the Pledge of Allegiance in Schools Nationwide" is just one example, earning over 2 million Facebook shares and taking the spot of the most popular fake news story of the past year, according to BuzzFeed. Another example is the false claim that Pope Francis was endorsing the Trump campaign. Facebook has even recently been sued over the issue of fake news by a Syrian refugee who was falsely accused of being a terrorist after posting a selfie! This has led the social networking site to create some new features to help the public eliminate these fake news stories easier.

Many are left questioning the purpose for the vast amount of fake news circulating around the web. "Fake news is a story that's false, usually invented for traffic and ad revenue, or to advance a political agenda- or both," techcrunch.com explains.

While the main thing that is to be gained from publishing such a story is profit, it may be a bit of a surprise to discover who is originally creating these fake news stories. The town of Veles in Macedonia was linked to at least 100 pro-Trump websites, most which were full of fake news. An anonymous man who prefers to be called Boris took much of the credit for the pro-Trump fake news.

"Between August and November, Boris earned nearly \$16,000 off his pro-Trump websites," according to wired.com. Not too shabby in a town where the average monthly salary isn't even \$400.

Though fake news stories can often seem silly, they can occasionally lead to actual danger when they are taken seriously. A ridiculous rumor turned dangerous when a man showed up at a D.C. restaurant with a rifle because of a fake story involving Hillary Clinton, which became known as the Pizzagate rumor.

“The story of Pizzagate is about what is fake and what is real. It’s a tale of a scandal that never was, and of a fear that has spread through channels that did not even exist until recently,” a Washington Post article details.

There are more and more arguments over the misuse of the term “fake news”, with complaints of its overuse, especially as we shift to a more partisan America, alongside complaints of certain news networks as being overly biased. President Donald Trump has been especially open about his hatred of certain news outlets, such as CNN and the New York Times, citing them as being supposed sources of fake news and creating a precedent of “listen to me, not the media,” according to many news anchors.

Some people feel very strongly about legitimate new stories being dubbed fake news, a phenomenon that has been occurring more and more frequently. “Comment trolls: Just because you disagree with a post doesn’t make it “fake news”,” Anna Escher comments via Twitter regarding the overuse of the term.

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, most Americans got their news from the same source- the television. Currently, more and more people are going online to check out what’s happening in the world. The evolution of the Internet has obviously changed quite a bit, and it is up to the public to be careful what they read and to make their own individually informed decisions about what is real and what’s not. If something sounds too crazy or unbelievable to be true, then it most likely isn’t. It’s important to find a source of news that you can trust, especially in the changing times.

Because of wide variety of sites on the Internet it is wise to take everything you read with a grain of salt. There are some incredible resources online, but there are also false, overly biased, or satirical pages that are not suitable for general information or academic research. Here are a few things you can be aware of to help you decide if a site is suitable for use in a school project or for general informational purposes:

1. **URLs:** The site address itself can tell you a lot about the purposes of a site. Pages that use .gov or .edu addresses are educational, reliable, and acceptable for academic use. Pages with .com and .org addresses may still be high quality resources, but they should face more scrutiny than other pages as they are more likely to express a bias or contain less vetted information.
2. **Appearance/Design:** If a web page is overly simple, contains colored fonts or animations, or contains large quantities of ads, that page is probably not reliable for information without fact-checking from a more reputable site. This type of page is rarely a high-quality resource for academic purposes.
3. **Author:** A reliable source of news or information will cite sources and list an author or at least a backing organization. Many reliable sources will briefly describe the author’s background and what qualifies him or her to share information on that topic. If an author or backing organization cannot easily be identified, then the site is likely not reliable for personal information or academic purposes.
4. **Content:** When reading content be wary of grammar and spelling errors- these indicate that material has not been through a thorough editing process. Also, consider what the author’s purpose is; is the author attempting to persuade or inform you? Being aware of the purpose of a page can help you identify bias in any piece.

The Internet is a tremendous source of information on any topic. It offers us the ability to learn and explore at our convenience. Because anyone can have a webpage we can learn from people all over the world. Unfortunately, universal access to creation of materials also means that the Internet contains lots of false information. With a little practice though, you can identify quality sources.