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“Alternative” Addiction

We’ve all seen it. You are in the checkout line at the grocery store and your eyes skirt the endless rows of tabloids scattered along the wall. You spot the classic made-up headline: “Man bites dog”. Say that’s news—or is it? In another instance, while surfing the internet for a few facts on the increasing wolf population in Idaho, I came across multiple sites with many different opinions on the matter. Eventually, I could identify which sites had swayed information and were more based off of opinion rather than fact; it was unsettling to realize that most people aren’t educated on the characteristics that dictate fake news and real, informative reports.

Newspapers, television, and social media today are littered with articles and claims meant to cause upheaval in people’s views on worldwide issues, such as politics and the environment. Citizens that use these outlets for media and communication every day should be aware of the differences between fact and fiction, learn the importance of fact-checking the beliefs and opinions of others as well as our own, and have evidence-based laws, policies, and beliefs.

The differences between real and fake news that is seen on the media, news, or internet can be hard to catch. As consumers of the internet, many people put their trust in what they read and who provides it to them, but they don’t realize that so many of the sources and information that they receive is unreliable. According to a survey done by the Pew Research Center, “Numerous studies have shown that fake news—often more sensational than genuine information—spreads

faster online because of how social media has prioritized “virality”.¹ In this day and age, the outlets in which information is gathered is more based off of popularity rather than unbiased, truthful facts—creating a society that is influenced by sensationalism and biased reporting. But how does a person know if they have found a credible source online?

Determining the credibility of an online source starts with the emotion and tone of the article. If the headline is absolutely outrageous, it is most likely “clickbait”, which is a lure for readers to click on the website to learn more—but the headline is completely misleading. Next, looking at the source that the information is coming from is a very important precaution. “Some domains such as .com, .org, and .net can be purchased and used by any individual. However, the domain .edu is reserved for colleges and universities, while .gov denotes a government website”.² I use websites with .org in the domain, but only after identifying possible agendas or political biases on the website, if they exist. Looking at the professionalism of the webpage and its content can also be an easy giveaway of an untrustworthy reference. Misspellings, sloppy graphics, or missing information (such as an author or publication date) are all red flags indicating unreliable sources. Even out-of-date information from years ago may be considered “unreliable” because the content, including statistics and polls, may not be relevant today.

According to Grace Fleming from the writing center at Austin Peay State University, blogs, tweets, forums, editorials, and self-published websites are considered unreliable because

¹ Lever, Rob. "Fake News: The Media Industry Strikes Back." Phys.org - News and Articles on Science and Technology. July 13, 2018. Accessed January 23, 2019. <https://phys.org/news/2018-07-fake-news-media-industry.html#jCp>.

² UW Green Bay. "UKnowIT (Self Service)." How Can I Tell If a Website Is Credible? April 2, 2018. Accessed January 23, 2019. <https://uknowit.uwgb.edu/page.php?id=30276>.

they can have hidden agendas.³ However, published books, peer-reviewed journals and articles, and dissertations are considered reputable.

Unreliable sources can also exist on the television that we consume. “[News sources] are reliable, but sometimes the focus is to entertain rather than inform”.⁴ However, some satirical television shows like Saturday Night Live or satirical websites like The Onion can unintentionally spread fake news because viewers can take the comedy as fact. Even if consumers have an inkling that something is just way too outrageous, they may spread it in order to cause a rise out of the people that may see it. In a survey done by the Pew Research Center, “[The researchers] found 23 percent [of US adults] said they had shared a fake news story, with nearly half of those saying they knew it was false at the time”.⁵ By taking the time to fact-check suspicious information, people can avoid spreading false articles or claims.

Why is fact-checking the beliefs and opinions of others—as well as our own—important? Since fake news can cause a lot of people to act irrationally and say things that they aren’t completely sure about, it can affect our communication with each other through the cyber world and through face-to-face communication. Reading the comments on a controversial Facebook post, you will realize that most of the arguments are attacking the person directly, and not the problem itself. People say things to others that they would never dream about saying to the person directly, and those personal attacks damage people’s ability to consider the other side of the argument.

³ Fleming, Grace. "Internet Research Tips." October 8, 2013. Accessed January 23, 2019. http://www.apsu.edu/asc/pdf_files/conducting_research/reliable_unreliable_sources.pdf.

⁴ Fleming, Grace. "Internet Research Tips." October 8, 2013. Accessed January 23, 2019. http://www.apsu.edu/asc/pdf_files/conducting_research/reliable_unreliable_sources.pdf.

⁵ Lever, Rob. "Fake News: The Media Industry Strikes Back." Phys.org - News and Articles on Science and Technology. July 13, 2018. Accessed January 23, 2019. <https://phys.org/news/2018-07-fake-news-media-industry.html#jCp>.

Sadly, “fake news corrupts two vital characteristics upon which our system relies: Citizens who are informed and also able to make value judgments. You cannot act in your own perceived self-interest if you’re relying on misinformation”.⁶ While social media and the internet are outlets to give and receive news, they are also a privilege that can be abused because it damages our ability to have respectful, informative conversations. Fact-checking others respectfully—and also putting our pride aside and fact-checking ourselves—is an essential component of having a mature discussion.

Having evidence-based laws, policies, and beliefs are also paramount for having a productive democracy. “Democracy depends on an informed electorate. The “informed” responsibility lies with both those doing the reporting and those doing the consuming”.⁷ To make an informed decision on a candidate or proposition, voters must be informed with evidence-based information to ensure that they make the right decision. Evidence-based systems use “the best available research and data on program results to inform government budget, policy, and management decisions. It focuses on what works—those programs that rigorous evaluations have shown to achieve positive outcomes”.⁸ Creating laws, policies, and beliefs on matters that are authenticated by studies, reports, and statistics are essential to a government that guides responsible citizens.

⁶ Knox, Olivier. “The Press and Public Trust in an Age of Fake News.” George W. Bush Institute. October 2017. Accessed January 30, 2019.

<https://www.bushcenter.org/catalyst/democracy/knox-willey-press-and-public-trust.html>.

⁷ Willey, Keven. “The Press and Public Trust in an Age of Fake News.” George W. Bush Institute. October 2017. Accessed January 30, 2019.

<https://www.bushcenter.org/catalyst/democracy/knox-willey-press-and-public-trust.html>.

⁸ Pew-MacArthur. “Legislating Evidence-Based Policymaking.” The Pew Charitable Trusts. March 2015. Accessed January 30, 2019.

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/03/legislationresultsfirstbriefmarch2015.pdf>.

According to the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, governments that use evidence-based policymaking can reduce wasteful spending, expand successful programs, and strengthen the accountability of agencies and programs that provide the outcomes of their studies.⁹ You wouldn't jump off of a cliff without knowing that there is a safe landing at the bottom, so why would you blindly put your trust in a law or belief that has no evidence to back it up?

In the age of "alternative facts" and fake news, the significance of fact-checking and evidence-based policymaking is a central priority to an effective government and cohesive society. By creating awareness around the fraudulent information that can be circulating every corner of each newsstand, website, channel, or social media outlet, citizens can become further educated, open-minded, and prepared to distinguish fact from fiction.

⁹ Pew-MacArthur. "Legislating Evidence-Based Policymaking." The Pew Charitable Trusts. March 2015. Accessed January 30, 2019. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/03/legislationresultsfirstbriefmarch2015.pdf>.