

Fact or fiction?

FBI Agent
Suspected in
Hillary Email Leaks
Found Dead

Obama
to Receive
Second Nobel
Peace Prize

Donald
Trump Dead
from Fatal
Heart Attack!

Pope Francis
Endorses
Donald Trump for
President

Pope Francis
Endorses
Bernie Sanders
for President

Distinguishing real news from fake news

A guide for students and teachers from the editors of *CQ Researcher*

The internet is rife with fake news, some preposterous on its face and some wrapped in a deceptive cloak of credibility. It has wormed its way into the national discourse through bogus “news” outlets and through social media. Reputable fact-checking sites have helped put the lie to many of these stories, but fake news persists in ways that can make it challenging for students to separate fact from fiction – and for teachers to help students understand the difference.

The dangers of fake news

Fake news is different from satire, which uses humor, sarcasm, irony, exaggeration or some other approach to make its point. And unlike legitimate news that may contain unintentional errors made under deadline pressure or some other valid circumstance, fake news reflects a deliberate, cynical attempt to deceive. It traffics in hoaxes, disinformation and propaganda, and its effects can lead to serious consequences, as when a North Carolina man, on a mission to “self-investigate” a bogus claim spread through fake news, **fired an assault rifle** inside a Washington, D.C., pizza restaurant.

Use reliable sources

A time-tested way to avoid fake news is to rely on mainstream news organizations that employ professional journalists and operate under strict ethical guidelines. The mainstream media include such outlets as The New York Times, The Washington Post, NPR, CBS News and Politico. When in doubt about a news source’s trustworthiness, consult your librarian.

Fact-checkers

You can also try to check the veracity of news stories through reputable fact-checking websites, such as **PolitiFact**, a project of the Tampa Bay Times; **FactCheck.org**, a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center; **Snopes.com**, an independent site that checks the truthfulness of internet rumors and other misinformation; and **The Washington Post’s Fact Checker**, which focuses on political news.



Checklist

Following is a short checklist of other tips, developed by the editors of *CQ Researcher*, to help students and teachers avoid the pitfalls posed by the rise of fake news.

- Consider the source of the information.** Is it legitimate and trustworthy? Does it have high standards for accuracy, balance and fairness? Are the articles bylined – and if so, what do searches on the authors’ names tell you about their qualifications and trustworthiness? When you read an article, ask yourself: Why should I believe it?
- Be wary of bloggers who lack expertise** on a subject or who don’t follow conventional editorial standards. Check blog posts against coverage of the same topic in the mainstream media.
- Are the people being quoted in a news story qualified to speak on the subject?** Do a quick online search to check their qualifications and background. In a story on a controversial subject, a lack of quotes from qualified sources can signal that the article lacks balance, depth, context and authority – and that it might simply reflect the writer’s opinion.
- Be skeptical of “news” shared on social media.** Rumors disguised as facts often take on a life of their own. Use common sense. Does the information seem logical when viewed impartially and critically? Can the facts be verified?
- Use Google as a starting point, not an ending point, in your research.** And remember, the first hits in an internet search aren’t always the most reliable.
- Watch for bias among media personalities,** whether liberal or conservative, especially on cable news shows. Are they fair and impartial or are they promoting their own views or those of a political party, pressure group or other entity?
- Follow the money.** Studies, think tank reports and opinion articles may be funded by corporations, foundations or advocacy groups with ideological agendas. Ask yourself: How might funding have influenced the content?
- Be wary of articles labeled “sponsored content.”** Such content typically means a company, organization or perhaps even a government entity paid for it.
- Look out for strange or unfamiliar URLs** or domain names, such as those that end in .com.co or lo. They can be the first clues that a site may be trafficking in fake news. Check the site’s “About” section – if it has one. Often, you’ll find clues to whether the site is legitimate and whether it follows acceptable editorial standards. Some bogus publications have fake mailing addresses, a clear sign of their intent to deceive.
- When in doubt, don’t.** Don’t use information in an assignment, broadcast it on social media or tweet it in a way that implies it’s true if you suspect it is not. Nothing kills fake news faster than healthy skepticism and a commitment to quality research.

CQ Researcher, founded in 1923, is an award-winning, single-topic newsmagazine published by SAGE Publishing. Each in-depth, scrupulously balanced weekly report is written by an experienced journalist and professionally fact-checked.