

What is fake news and is it important?

by John Prentice

Fake news has been around for hundreds of years, yet it is only recently that the term has come into common use. Do you ever wonder why? A recent report by UKPoll has said there are 'serious concerns; about the effect of fake news on our 'shared values and democratic institutions'¹. That sounds quite serious. So let's look at what fake news really means.

Types of fake news

The first type of fake 'news' is usually non-deliberate. It's 'news' published in print, on the TV or the Internet, which is not completely accurate. For example, a newspaper might report that a local shop owner has been charged with drink-driving, whereas it was, in fact, another person of the same name. Mistake. The second type is where writers exaggerate to make a point or push only one side of an argument. This type of news is not necessarily untrue but it is likely to be inaccurate. It's often biased, like when a TV channel headlines only parts of a politician's speech out of context.

Then there's the kind where people tell lies on purpose. Often the entire story is false. People do this for a number of reasons. For example, they may want people to buy a certain product. They may want you to think or vote in a particular way. Or they may just be making what they see as a joke.

But all these kinds of fake news have been around for a long time. So why has the idea of fake news burst so suddenly into the headlines?

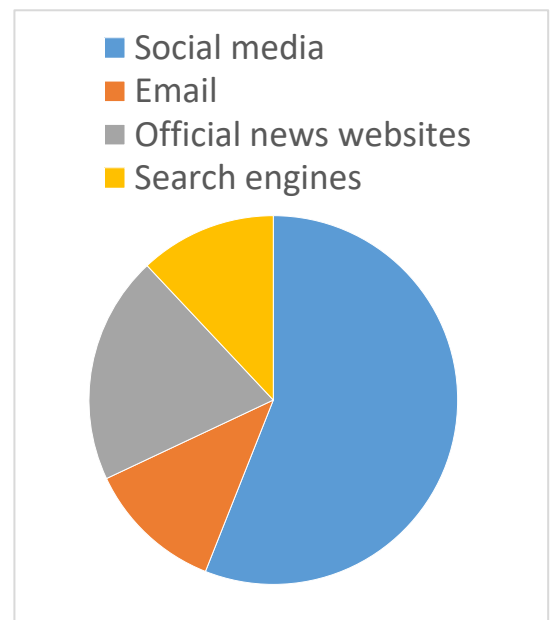
It's the Internet of course

Most of us now have access to the Internet and we can be swamped with fake news, particularly when we use social media. The leader of UKPoll says: "There's almost more fake news out there than there is real news". We might share a friend's post about an actor's bad manners, without knowing it is untrue. You may click on a link to a website which exists solely to publish fake news without realising that's its purpose, because it looks so real.

So does fake news really matter?

The answer to that question has to be 'yes it does'. It matters greatly because what we read or hear or see has an effect on our attitudes and how we behave with other people. And I would like my views to be based on fact not fiction.

¹ UKPoll Fake News Report, 24th July, 2019.



Discussion topic – How do you recognise fake news?

Suetoo
It's dead easy to tell whether news is fake; when I'm on a fake website my computer crashes! But seriously, the social media platforms allow people to share their opinions and keep up-to-date with popular topics.

LaptopLarry
It's difficult to recognise fake news because the people that spread it are very clever. I think the best way is to ask yourself about the source of the information. If you can't find the source, immediately distrust it. If you can find it then check it out using a trusted search engine.

Webus.com
I think this fake news problem is so big, so complicated and so out of control that it's impossible to stop. Perhaps we just need to embrace it.

Northerncaller
If you've clicked onto a strange website then ask yourself this; does it look genuine or does it look like a 'copycat' website? What about the web address; does it end in something strange like .com.co.

Wolfman
This is what fake news does for free speech.



Wildgirl53
So those Presidents didn't share confidential information? Well, I just loved reading about it. Ha, ha! I'm fed up with the proper stuff. It's boring. No one can stop it anyway so why don't we just give it a hug and go with it?

GaryH
Don't you think fake news is a terrible problem? You can't tell whether something is genuine or not. You have to find the source, although this is difficult. The problem is anyone can post on social media and the social media businesses ought to check whether it's genuine or fake.

Snowman10
The major problem with addressing the question you're asking is that 'fake news' is almost always found on social media platforms and these companies should be inspecting it! Those running social media should be able to recognise when someone is using propaganda to force their opinions on others by spreading rumours or tricking people, and trash it.