

Detecting Reality in the Digital World

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Beginning with Aesop's fabled shepherd boy who cried wolf and the ominous warnings of Chicken Little claiming, "The sky is falling," stories showing the consequences of believing in unsubstantiated facts abound. With a laptop on every desk and a smartphone in every pocket, students have immediate access to visual, audio, and print information. The current estimate is that the average student spends nine hours a day with a device. With so many opportunities to be exposed to credible and incredible information, it is important to help students become astute consumers of material they encounter online.

An even more provocative observation is that more than half of American adults get their news from social media. As adept as many high school students are at interacting with social media in their daily lives, they may not be as sophisticated at discerning fact from fiction when they encounter information online. Because people make decisions based on information they receive and what they believe to be true, knowing whether something is fact or fiction has serious consequences.

"Why are we so bad at making judgments about what to trust on the Web, and how can we get better at it?" These are two questions Stanford psychologist Sam Wineburg and colleagues asked in a study for the Stanford History Education Group. According to this study, two-thirds of Americans get their news from social media. As many as 24 percent of adults claim to get most of their news from Facebook. When print newspapers separate news from commentary by clearly labeling Opinion Pages, Editorials, or News, it becomes easier to know when to trust a fact or when to be skeptical of one writer's individual point of view. With social media, all content appears to have equal value. Harvard researcher Claire Wardle suggests that the same packaging of information on social media creates a situation in

which birthday greetings, posts from publishers, and random rants take on similar importance.

While it has become a popularized term, *fake news* is not a new phenomenon. It has been called *propaganda*, *disinformation*, *doublespeak*—but it's not news (Nebraska Press Women). Several factors have allowed it to expand exponentially. Because everyone with a smartphone holds the Internet in their hand, abundant sources of information and misinformation are easily and instantly accessible. Social media has had the effect of making everyone a reporter and publisher of "news" without the necessity of the oversight of an editor, copy editor, or fact checker. A 2016 Pew poll found that nearly a quarter of Americans said they had shared a made-up news story (Barthel et al.). Perhaps they did this knowingly, but perhaps not.

Wineburg et al.'s study suggests that the key question to encourage students to ask is, "Who is behind this information?" But finding the answer to this question may require students to engage in some detective work. Some "fake news" creators have become exceptionally sophisticated at producing content that appears to be valid. Some websites clearly portray themselves as being satiric, but others use identifiers close to but not identical to authentic sources. Students are not the only ones who have difficulty discerning the authenticity of information they encounter. In one research experiment, a tenured history professor had difficulty deciding whether to believe something on the Internet because the site had an .org suffix, and it included a list of academic-appearing citations (Steinmetz).

Encouraging students to use common sense and to trust their initial reaction as to the validity of information can be a first step in helping them determine its authenticity. In "A Finder's Guide to Facts," Steve Inskeep of National Public Radio suggests asking two questions: "Is this story so outrageous you can't believe

it? and Is this story so outrageous you *do* believe it?" To answer these questions, the detective work begins.

Students can do lateral research, searching to corroborate the same story on as many other sites as possible, to compare details. Then they can ask additional questions to analyze the story. Can they trace the story by looking at its publication date? Has the author posted other stories? Can they employ fact-checking tools? Snopes.com, FactCheck.com, *Washington Post*, and others can be useful, but not foolproof. Not all fact-checking sites verify the same information, but they can be a place to start.

Students can also check the About Us section of the website. Does it have believable contact information? Sorting through who is behind the information is a critical step. Is the purpose to discredit or promote a particular belief? Is it for financial gain? Is it to satirize a current event?

Web searches of quotes and images are other ways to verify the authenticity and context of sources. Altering photos to promote a particular point of view is a technique that can be convincing. Too many people believe an image is real just because it has been posted on the Internet. Students can learn to reverse search an image by uploading it to a site such as Tin Eye or Google to find its original publication context and date (Seife 202).

Recently, a photo circulated about a helicopter crash in Afghanistan as if it were a current news event. When called out on the authenticity of the story, the person who posted it readily admitted that they were just asked to pass on a story from several years ago. This can become confusing "news" to say the least.

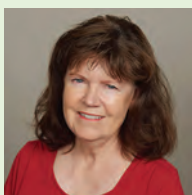
In addition to becoming savvy website users and critical readers, students can help protect other people from being consumers of unverified information by helping to stop its spread. No matter how intriguing the story seems, not mindlessly passing on

a photo, article, or post just because they are asked to share it is one strategy students can use. Using the delete key is another. If the site has a feedback tool, students can report inaccuracies or misinformation.

The Nebraska Press Women have created a program titled "Who Can You Believe: How to Avoid Being Deceived by 'Fake News,'" a PowerPoint-ready presentation that can be downloaded from their website. It includes many of the points outlined in this article as well as additional strategies and a presenter's guide. The organization encourages sharing the PowerPoint with a variety of audiences. Students are not alone in needing to learn how to discern fact from fiction. When students have strategies they can use to become Web detectives, they will better be able to determine the validity of information they encounter online. **EJ**

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