6.5: Testing of Fake News Sources

There has always been fake news, but with the advent of social media, posted news does not have to go through any editorial board to be published. Anyone with a computer and an Internet connection can publish what they refer to as the “news,” and that “news” is easily passed along and eventually believed by many.

Facebook contributes to this as their algorithm records what you like or interact with and shows you more content that is related to your interest. If you like a meme showing how foolish a particular candidate supposedly is, then more, similar memes will appear on your Facebook site.

Because of the viral nature of these fake news reports, both Google and Facebook are attempting to reduce their impact by decreasing the amount of revenue these fake news sources can generate.

There are different types of misleading and false news as described below by AJ Willingham, CNN news:

**Fake news** These are the easiest to debunk and often come from known sham sites that are designed to look like real news outlets. They may include misleading photographs and headlines that, at first read, sound like they could be real.

**Misleading news** These are the hardest to debunk, because they often contain a kernel of truth: A fact, event or quote that has been taken out of context. Look for sensational headlines that aren't supported by the information in the article.

**Highly partisan news** A type of misleading news, this may be an interpretation of a real news event where the facts are manipulated to fit an agenda.

**Clickbait** The shocking or teasing headlines of these stories trick you into clicking for more information -- which may or may not live up to what was promised.

**Satire** This one is tough, because satire doesn't pretend to be real and serves a purpose as commentary or
entertainment. But if people are not familiar with a satire site, they can share the news as if it is legitimate.¹

As Willingham described **click-bait**, the purpose of these sites is to get viewers because the owner then makes money with all the accompanying advertisements. The more people who view the site, the more money the owner makes.

And don't forget the problem with other countries posting on the web in order to spread propaganda and create dissension. We need to be on guard as other countries interfere with our internal affairs.

We need to be more skeptical. You may have seen a meme during the 2016 election that had a picture of a young Donald Trump with his alleged quote:

> "If I were to run, I'd run as a Republican. They're the dumbest group of voters in the country. They believe anything on Fox News. I could lie and they'd still eat it up. bet my numbers would be terrific."

People who disliked Trump would re-post this in hopes of getting Republican voters to also dislike him and not vote for him. This quote was allegedly from a People Magazine interview in 1998. But looking through the People Magazine archives this quote is nowhere to be found. This statement was totally made up. Were you fooled by it?

The good news is that there are several, relatively simple steps we can take. The following are questions from both FactCheck.org and CNN you can ask to make sure you are not being manipulated by **Fake News**.

**Does the story, article or meme originate from a strange looking web address?** Check and see if the url has a .co or .su, or is hosted by a free web site like Weebly or Wordpress. It was reported on abcnews.com.co that President Obama had signed an order banning assault weapon sales. Now look at that url again and you will see the .co at the very end. This was a “**Fake News** story.

**Does the article match the Headline?** Often people will just read the headline and repost the article. By reading the article you might see a very different story. I once read a headline stating that Congress was going to impeach President Obama. But the article just said that one member of congress was thinking about filing the articles of impeachment.

**Is the article recent or is it an old one that has been re-purposed.** CNN once reported that “A blog called Viral Liberty recently reported that Ford had moved production of some of their trucks from Mexico to Ohio because of Donald Trump's election win.” Actually, this had been done a year before and had nothing to do with the election.

**Do the supporting videos and photos relate to the article?** You want to verify that the picture actually relates to the article or is it taken out of context. After the 2016 Presidential election, many anti-Trump protests were staged. There was a picture of a person defecating in the street with the caption referring to the classlessness of liberals. It turns out the picture was taken years earlier in an entirely different event. But it was reposted many times.

**Does the article cite primary source?** Check and see the actual source of a news article. Is it just the website who says so? Do they cite any credible sources? One fake news site, Now8News, is one of those fake sites that look real. As I am writing this, one of their lead stories is that Melania Trump is divorcing Donald Trump. Just because a site looks professional, doesn’t make the evidence accurate.

**Can you Trace the Quotes you are reading?** Often you will see a key figure making a quote that just does not sound
believable. Check the quote. Put the quote in Google and see if it comes up somewhere else.

Are there any other news outlets reporting the story? Check to see if there are other, legitimate, news sources reporting the same story. Google the story and select the “News” option. You can see other sources, if there are any, for that story. And make sure they are legitimate. Remember, USAToday.com.co is not a legitimate source with that .co at the end.

Is your own personal bias getting in your way? This is a very big influential factor for the success of Fake News. As stated in FactCheck.org,

“We know this is difficult. Confirmation bias leads people to put more stock in information that confirms their beliefs and discount information that doesn’t. But the next time you’re automatically appalled at some Facebook post concerning, say, a politician you oppose, take a moment to check it out.”

It is human nature. The more you hate a particular politician, let’s say, Hillary Clinton, the more you will want to believe negative stories about her, no matter how outrageous they may be. A critical thinker needs to fight that human urge.

Has the article been debunked by a reputable fact-checking organization? There are many fact-checking organizations around the world that will help you determine the validity and accuracy of news stories. One excellent website is the “International Fact-Checking Network.” On their website is a list of international fact-checking sites including the most popular ones in the United States:

- Factcheck.org
- PolitiFact
- Snopes
- The Washington Post Fact Checker
- FactCheck Georgia

Is the web host of the article on a list of unreliable news websites? There are a couple of places that have lists of these dubious websites. One is at Snopes and another is a growing document titled “False, Misleading, Clickbait-y, and/or Satirical “news” Sources.” (Zimbars, 2016) This is an extensive and growing document that describes hundreds of fake news sites and how to analyze them. The challenge with these sites is the determination of which ones are based on some factual information and which ones are total fiction made to sound like fact.

AJ Willingham from CNN urges us to “hone your fact-checking skills.” And she cites two experts in the field.

Alexios Mantzarlis trains fact-checkers for a living. He says it's important to have a "healthy amount of skepticism" and to think, really think, before sharing a piece of news.

"If we were a little slower to share and re-tweet content purely based on the headline, we'd go a good way towards combating falsehoods," he told CNN.

Melissa Zimdars, Communication Professor at Merrimack College, points out that even those who spend a lot of time online aren't immune to fake content.
"People think this [thinking] applies only for older people," she told CNN. "I think even early education should be teaching about communication, media and the internet. Growing up with the internet doesn't necessarily mean you are internet savvy."  

Facebook has become a major source of information for many people. Recently Facebook posted a list of strategies a person can use to analyze articles to see if they might be an example of false news.

Facebook states, "We want to stop the spread of false news on Facebook. As we work to limit the spread, here are some tips on what to look out for":

**Be skeptical of headlines.** False news stories often have catchy headlines in all caps with exclamation points. If shocking claims in the headline sound unbelievable, they probably are.

**Look closely at the URL.** A phony or look-alike URL may be a warning sign of false news. Many false news sites mimic authentic news sources by making small changes to the URL. You can go to the site to compare the URL to established sources.

**Investigate the source.** Ensure that the story is written by a source that you trust with a reputation for accuracy. If the story comes from an unfamiliar organization, check their “About” section to learn more.

**Watch for unusual formatting.** Many false news sites have misspellings or awkward layouts. Read carefully if you see these signs.

**Consider the photos.** False news stories often contain manipulated images or videos. Sometimes the photo may be authentic, but taken out of context. You can search for the photo or image to verify where it came from.

**Inspect the dates.** False news stories may contain timelines that make no sense, or event dates that have been altered.

**Check the evidence.** Check the author's sources to confirm that they are accurate. Lack of evidence or reliance on unnamed experts may indicate a false news story.

**Look at other reports.** If no other news source is reporting the same story, it may indicate that the story is false. If the story is reported by multiple sources you trust, it's more likely to be true.

**Is the story a joke?** Sometimes false news stories can be hard to distinguish from humor or satire. Check whether the source is known for parody, and whether the story's details and tone suggest it may be just for fun.

**Some stories are intentionally false.** Think critically about the stories you read, and only share news that you know to be credible. You can actually learn more about what Facebook is doing to reduce the spread of false news by going online and reading, “Working to Stop Misinformation and False News.” Evidence is one part of the advocate's process for proving his or her arguments in support of their stand on a claim.
Reporting a Fake News Story In Facebook

If you see a story in News Feed that you believe is false, you can report it to Facebook.

Click \( \text{\textdagger}\) next to the post you'd like to mark as false

Click Report post

Click It's a false news story

Click Mark this post as false news

News stories that are reported as false by people on Facebook may be reviewed by independent, third-party, fact-checkers. A story may be marked as disputed if these fact-checkers find the story to be false.

Because of the importance of evidence as the supportive underpinning to arguments, it is important that the use of evidence be ethically based. Advocates must be careful in gathering, recording, and using evidence in an effort to sway the hearts and minds of others. This is especially important because the free marketplace of commerce and ideas rests on the foundation of trying to persuade others fairly and honestly.

Persuasion is central to our political campaigns, social compliance, leadership, interpersonal relations, and consumer protections. The fabrication, misrepresentation, and distortion of evidence cannot be tolerated. Advocates, if not already held legally responsible, are certainly ethically responsible for the evidence they use in trying to gain audience adherence for their stand on a claim.

As Patterson and Zarefsky write in CONTEMPORARY DEBATE:

“All evidence originates from observations of perceived reality. Direct observation means experiencing a situation for ourselves, using one or more of our senses to gather the information. It is often unnecessary and, in fact, sometimes impossible to observe all the events and behavior we use as evidence for arguments. In some cases, we report what others said they observed as eyewitnesses. More often, however, we report generalizations others have drawn, because we do not have the time or the expertise to do the sampling ourselves.” (Patterson, 1983)

Finding quality evidence that you can use to support your claim is a crucial step in developing a successful argument. Discovering the weakness in the evidence that others use in their arguments is a great first step in clashing with their positions.

Reference