

These news stories, like those on this issue's cover, all appeared online recently.

**INDIA: BABY BORN WITH TWO MINDS IN SAME BODY**

**McDonald's Kills Off Ronald McDonald After Scary Clown Epidemic**

**Disney Pulls New Star Wars Movie From Theaters Due To Lack Of Interest**

**China Issues Terrifying Warning To America, Prepares For War!**

# FAKE NEWS! FOOLING MILLIONS!

**Fabricated stories on social media are influencing major events like the presidential election. How can we separate fact from fiction?**

BY CARL STOFFERS

Last March, a fake news site called The Boston Tribune went viral with a story that the government was secretly tracking Americans using computer chips in credit cards. In October, another site peddling bogus news, The Free Thought Project, got more than 28,000 people on Facebook to share its claim that U.S. Marines were heading to Europe.

Political insider, had thousands sharing a fabricated report in August that Hillary Clinton was selling weapons to ISIS. These invented stories are part of a disturbing trend: Fake news sites—many with official-sounding names and professional designs—are flourishing. Once found only in the dark corners of the Internet, these sites have begun to play a role in major events, including the recent presidential campaign. In fact, some political analysts say fake news stories spread on social media might have helped tip the election to Donald Trump.

Experts are warning that these sites are eroding the public's ability to distinguish between fact and fiction. At the same time, tech companies like Facebook and Google are struggling with

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how to deal with fake news—an effort that's complicated by free speech concerns.

"These fake news sites exist to misinform through a whole cycle of misinformation," says Jeremy Littau, a digital media professor at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. "They're trying to get you to believe something that's independent of the truth."

Part of the problem is that fake news can be hard to identify (see "How to Spot Fake News"). More than 80 percent of middle school students couldn't distinguish between legitimate news stories and ads disguised as news, according to a recent Stanford University study. In the same study, 40 percent of high school students believed a news story they were shown was real simply because a photo accompanied it—even though no sources were cited in the article.

What's more, although many hoax stories are blatantly untrue—like the one in November about hundreds of paid protesters being bused to an anti-Trump rally in Texas—some contain partial truths or factual distortions, making them even harder to spot. Because the Internet provides anonymity, anyone with a computer and design software can start a news site and pass it off as legitimate; political partisans trying to help or harm a candidate, amateur bloggers, or even someone just trying to make a buck. That's what motivated a 17-year-old in the European nation of Macedonia to create DailyNewsPolitics.com and begin inventing stories about the U.S. election. "I started the site for a easy way to make money," he told BuzzFeed in slightly broken English.

### 'Yellow Journalism'

Fake or highly distorted news is nothing new. The earliest American newspapers were instruments of political parties that often printed lies about the opposition. In the 19th century, sensationalized,

## HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS

Despite the increasing amount of false information online, there are ways to get to the truth and stop the spread of fake news. Here are a few tips.

- 1. Be skeptical:** Just because you see an article online, don't assume it's factual, even if a friend shared it with you.
- 2. Verify:** Make sure that what you're reading—and thinking of sharing—was published by a reputable source.
- 3. Look for other clues:** Scrutinizing the sources cited in articles and even the ads on the page can reveal a hidden agenda behind a website.
- 4. Get help:** Independent verification can often confirm whether something widely shared is true. Nonpartisan fact-checking sites like Factcheck.org and Politifact.com point out untruths in the news. Teachers and family can also help.

exaggerated, and sometimes outright false stories were published to sell newspapers and influence elections, a practice known as "yellow journalism."

It was only in the 20th century that professional reporting standards of objectivity and accuracy became the norm for newspapers and news programs on radio and TV. That norm began to erode in recent years with the explosion of cable news and the growing popularity of openly partisan content. And social media has made it easier to find an audience for news that's skewed toward one political viewpoint, isn't fact-checked, or is simply made up.

"What has changed is not our penchant for creating this material, but our ease in sharing it," says Littau. "It's so much easier to pass this material on, and that means fake news stories have much greater reach than before. That's what's new, the ability to quickly infect each other with it." In some cases, fake news fuels what's known as the "echo chamber"—people with similar beliefs and biases sharing only what fits their vision of the world. Psychologists call this "confirmation bias." After the presidential election, many

people called for social media platforms and search engines to limit or ban questionable websites. Some tech companies, like Google and Facebook, vowed to prevent these sites from advertising, but so far they've stopped short of banning their articles from being seen and shared.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said in November that the company was researching ways to make it easier to detect and report fake news. But he also noted the company's philosophy of being an open forum. "We believe in giving people a voice, which means erring on the side of letting people share what they want whenever possible."

The question of whether Facebook, Google, or any other company should decide what's legitimate news has ignited a debate about free speech and censorship. These companies can legally limit what we see on their platforms because the First Amendment's free speech protections prohibit only the government from censoring speech. But some media experts warn against putting tech firms in the role of vetting what their users are able to share.

"It would be a dangerous precedent if they were deciding what's journalism," says Anthony Adornato, a political professor at Ithaca College in New York. "I don't think it's their job to be the ultimate gatekeepers; the burden should be on well-informed people to make that decision."

Experts say it will take a concerted effort by the public and the media to fix the problem of misinformation and slow the spread of fake news. "Users on social media need to call out people who are sharing this stuff, and journalists need to continue to adhere to professional standards," Adornato says. "It's a team effort."

**CENTRAL IDEAS & KEY DETAILS**

For use with "Fake News Fooling Millions!" on p. 6 of the magazine

# Organizing Ideas

Tracking central ideas and key details can help you navigate the complexity of a nonfiction text. After reading "Fake News Fooling Millions!" fill in the blank sections below to provide a full picture of the information presented in the article.

\_\_\_\_\_

**Why fake news is a problem for the public:**

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Examples of people who create fake news:**

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Why fake news easily spreads in today's world:**

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_

**ON YOUR OWN:** The last section of this article focuses on tech companies like Google and Facebook and their role in limiting the visibility of fake news sites as well as policing the spread of fake news stories from these sites. Based on the information provided in the article, should social media and search engine companies be responsible for limiting access to fake news sites and stories? Cite examples from the text to support your claim.

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