

Do we need to be concerned about fake news?

By Ellen Schusterer, MS

Think fake news is just about politics? Think again. Fake news also includes inaccurate health news and viral Facebook posts.

Fake news and nutrition/health - the connection

With the introduction of the Internet, false health information, myths and urban legends were often distributed via email. Fast forward to 2016. A recent study found that 12% of Facebook posts about the Zika virus were misleading. Whether or not the originators of the posts intended them to be misleading, these posts have the potential to go viral. Although the authors of the study note that the majority of posts were accurate, inaccurate posts were more likely to be viewed, commented upon and shared. And the researchers noted that the accurate posts didn't go as viral as the inaccurate ones. Read more at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/most-popular-facebook-social-media-health-posts-may-be-least-accurate/>

How easy is it to set up a fake news site and make a story go viral? A Men's Health writer set up a fake food safety fake news website and shared a fake food news story from the site on Facebook, Twitter and Google+ - it took only a few days for thousands to visit his site and over 400 people to share his fake Facebook post. If anyone had followed up and searched the names of the fake organizations in the news story they would have found NO RESULTS when they searched online for them - a big red flag. Read all about it at <http://www.menshealth.com/guy-wisdom/recognizing-online-hoaxes>

In some cases, Facebook pages with misleading content draw 'clicks' and page owners get paid for the 'clicks.' The article at <http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/23/503146770/npr-finds-the-head-of-a-covert-fake-news-operation-in-the-suburbs> is chilling. It describes a fake news site they uncovered and the interview with the person behind the site. Although his sites are politically-oriented, the interview is a window into how fake news sites proliferate. He shares how much money can be made with these fake news sites - thousands! - and notes that Google is trying to crack down on the sites.

What can we do and what should we suggest others do to protect themselves from falling for fake news, misinformation or urban legends?

**If the site has an ending like [.com.co](http://www.com.co) you may be on a site that spreads fake news.

**Go to the "About Us" part of the website or similar section that gives you information about the organization, who manages the site, its mission, etc.

**If a study is cited, search to see if you can find the original source in a reputable journal or even if the study exists. Or search online for experts cited in the story and/or the organizations they represent.

**snopes.com is a website that fact checks urban legends, claims and URLs - enter a keyword or URL (Read about Facebook's efforts to address fake news with the help of snopes.com and others at <http://www.snopes.com/2016/12/15/snopes-com-facebook-fake-news-initiative/>)

**The article at <http://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2016-11-14/avoid-these-fake-news-sites-at-all-costs> has a list of questionable websites, mostly political but one, Natural News, an alternative health website has made some nutrition claims addressed at snopes.com

**factcheck.org is a website that checks to see news shared by politicians is fact-based. Some of the news is nutrition-related. There's a SciCHECK section of the website to check on science in the news.

**Professor Zimdars, assistant professor, communication and media, Merrimack College, North Andover, MA has developed some suggestions for her students to help them analyze news stories. Her tips are at https://docs.google.com/document/d/10eA5-mCZLSS4MQY5QGb5ewC3VAL6pLkT53V_81ZyitM/edit

**A website evaluator - <http://webeval.easybib.com/> is an online resource that anyone can use to self-evaluate if a site is credible. You enter a URL and then answer a series of questions about the website.

**Chrome Facebook has developed B.S. Detector, an extension that has a red warning when you're about to click on a questionable, "satirical" or fake news link. No tool is foolproof so you may want to familiarize yourself with questionable sites referred to at <http://lifehacker.com/b-s-detector-lets-you-know-when-youre-reading-a-fake-n-1789084038>

There is likely to be more about fake news in the months ahead. Perhaps the best advice is from Dan Gillmor, Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Arizona State University, when interviewed during a KCRW To the Point radio show about fake news - "the more you want to believe something, the more skeptical you need to be."