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News Literacy in the Age of Social Media

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On a Sunday in December 2016, Edgar Welch, a 28-year-old father of two, climbed into his Prius in Salisbury, North Carolina, and drove six hours to a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C. He'd read numerous articles describing the restaurant as harboring a child sex ring. Armed with a semi-automatic assault rifle and a handgun, he stormed into the restaurant, firing his rifle, in an attempt to locate and rescue the children. Instead, all he found was a pizza parlor with ping pong tables and terrified diners. Mr. Welch soon realized he'd been duped by fake articles that had circulated for months on Twitter and Facebook.

Most adults who encountered this story likely shook their heads and thought, "I would have never have fallen for that." We reason that our decades of experience evaluating news content make us well qualified to judge fact from fiction. But the fact is, plenty of adults have been taken in by fake news in recent years. According to a 2016 study by the Pew Research Center, nearly one in four adults (23 percent) report having shared a political news story online that they either knew at the time was made up or later found out was false.[1]

As parents, we may also believe that our children are savvy social media users who are hip to fake news stories. This, too, may be an overconfident assessment. In a survey we conducted in January 2017 of kids aged 10 to 18 years, of those who shared news stories online in the previous six months, 31 percent said they had shared a story that they found out later was wrong or inaccurate.[2] And only 44 percent of kids in our survey said they could tell fake news stories from real ones. In a study by Stanford University's Graduate School of Education, researchers found that 30 percent of high school students believed an article from a fake Fox News social media account was more credible than a similar article from the actual Fox News account.[3]

There is another commonly held assumption that lulls us into thinking that fake news is a problem with an easy solution. We assume schools are addressing these issues, teaching digital citizenship and media literacy. Again, this may be overly optimistic. "Many of the materials on web

credibility were state-of-the-art in 1999," said Joel Breakstone, Director of the Stanford History Education Group.[4] "So much has changed but many schools are stuck in the past."

Our assumptions about our ability to judge news credibility may have held water 10 years ago. Today, however, advances in technology have changed the way information is distributed, fundamentally altering the nature of news content in both good and bad ways. On the plus side of the ledger, it's amazing to see how quickly our children can access information online, getting instant answers that would have taken us weeks or months to gather when we were their age. News now travels at an astonishing velocity, giving us near real-time accounting of events as they unfold. But the ease, speed and manner in which information is disseminated to billions of people on various social media channels come at a steep cost.

We take it for granted that we make all sorts of decisions, large and small, based on information we get from various news media. We stay away from certain foods, donate to select charities, and decide which cars to buy or which books to read based in part on what we watch, hear or read in the media. On a grander scale, American democracy is built on access to accurate information about civic issues and political leaders. An inability to distinguish fact from fiction leads us to make poor decisions with potentially long-term consequences.

What's Changed?

The advertising model of the internet overwhelmingly rewards clicks and shares, creating an economic model that favors sensational headlines and skewed facts. In other words, the market for clickbait continues to thrive on the internet, despite constant efforts by search engines to demote low quality content.

Perhaps equally worrisome is that many legitimate news outlets are publishing "sponsored articles" or "native ads." These can look very similar to editorial content, but are actually paid for and often written by advertisers. The study by the Stanford History Education Group found that 80 percent of middle school students thought that a native ad was an actual news story, even though it was clearly labelled "sponsored content."

At the same time, traditional journalism is under siege economically. While there's unprecedented demand for the news and information they produce, paid subscriptions and print advertising—the bread and butter for most newspapers and magazines—are drying up. There were an estimated 27,300 journalists in the United States in 2016,[5] according to

the NiemanLab, roughly half the 55,000 journalists working in 1996.[6] Many of the jobs that have disappeared were for copy editors responsible for checking facts and ensuring consistency before articles are published.

With traditional media in decline, social media has risen to take its place, albeit with somewhat different goals. Rather than act as a gatekeeper of news, social media platforms allow anyone to be a media publisher and distribute articles that can reach billions of people each month. This has certainly "democratized" the news. But without the reporting, fact checking and editorial vetting, apocryphal stories are able to circulate, accumulating clicks and the associated ad revenue. What was once a tidy, curated stream of news has become a tidal wave of legitimate news mixed with conspiracy theories, partial truths and urban legends.

Facebook, the largest of these platforms, has said that 99 percent of the content on its platform is authentic. But, as Ken Doctor of the NiemanLab noted, with 5 billion pieces of content shared daily on Facebook, that amounts to 50 million pieces of content that's potentially dubious. Shaken by allegations that hoaxes such as the one Edgar Welch fell prey to may have influenced our presidential election, Facebook has announced plans to recruit independent fact-checkers to weed out fake stories that have been flagged by readers, but results have been inconsistent, and the effort remains in its infancy.

Another thing that's changed is how people are getting their news. Younger audiences in particular are receiving much of their news from social media feeds. In our survey of kids aged 10 to 18 years, 39 percent of them said they preferred getting their news from social media, more than from family, friends, teachers or traditional media. Overall, 62 percent of Americans get news on social media.[7] Feeds are a fast way to catch up on a lot of news, but they're disassociated from the source of the information as well as the context, giving people less information to judge credibility.

Toward a Better Solution

As parents and educators, we have a tendency to shield our children from spurious or harmful content. School computer networks are set up to allow access only to approved websites. At home, parents place parental controls on their kids' computers.

Though well intentioned, this approach may alone be inadequate, if only because it doesn't give kids many chances to practice evaluating the reliability of information they see. "Accessibility to news is something that the average parent isn't thinking a lot about," Jill Murphy, Common

Sense Media's Editor-in-Chief told me in a recent conversation. "Kids are already responding to news the moment it happens. The fact that the news pops up on their phones makes it feel very personal to them, and it all happens at a very rapid pace."

Finally, kids are exposed to news regardless of whether or not they're seeking it out. According to a study by Pew Research, 55 percent of news consumers found news content while in the process of reading or doing something else.[8] While this study only examined adult news consumers, the patterns can also apply to children who are exposed to news, real or fake, as they surf online.

It's entirely possible that technology will enable media platforms to eventually arrive at an optimal solution, or at least a higher bar for information quality. In the meantime, however, the burden of fact-checking falls on individual readers, including kids. In other words, news literacy has become an important skill to add to the larger umbrella of media literacy.

We define news literacy as the application of skills to analyze and evaluate the reliability of news and journalistic information. News literacy shares the same foundation of critical-thinking skills for media and digital literacy, but with the added dimension of discerning fact from opinion, bias or agenda.

This year, Common Sense Media expanded its mission to include news literacy as a distinct component of our research and initiatives to reach educators, parents and kids. We're developing resources to help everyone evaluate content the way professional fact-checkers do their work. In addition to closely examining the piece of content and webpage in question, fact-checkers also are engaged in what Kelly Mendoza, our Senior Director of Learning and Engagement, calls "lateral reading." They're constantly cross-checking with other sources to weigh the veracity of statements, seeking other points of view or interpretations, or chasing down primary sources of data. They research the author's background and read what else that author has written. They do reverse searches on images to see if they can locate the original source. They look to see who funds the website that published the article. They examine the page URL to check its legitimacy.

Teaching our children critical thinking skills is an essential part of parenting. In light of the recent influx of unsubstantiated news stories and hoaxes circulating online and amplified by social media's viral-generating power, these skills are more important than ever. If we can get our kids to pause and think about what they just saw or read, we can help raise a generation of critical thinkers capable of making sound, independent decisions.

Footnotes

1. "Many Americans Believe Fake News is Sowing Confusion," Pew Research Center, December 2016.

2. Common Sense Media, March 2017, "News and America's Kid: How Young People Perceive and are Impacted by the News."

3. Stanford History Education Group, November 2016, "Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning."

4. Stanford Graduate School of Education; News Release, November 22, 2016; "Stanford researchers find students have trouble judging the credibility of information online."

5. Ken Doctor, "Newsonomics: The 2016 Year by the Numbers," NiemanLab, Dec. 19, 2016.

6. Ken Doctor, "Newsonomics: The Halving of America's Daily Newsrooms," NiemanLab, July 28, 2015.

7. "10 Facts About the Changing Digital News Landscape," Pew Research Center, Sept. 14, 2016.

8. Ibid.

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Five Tips for Judging News Reliability

1. Ask critical questions. Encourage kids to ask questions about the information they're receiving. Are there any inconsistencies in the content? Is the argument credible? Whom is the message for? What techniques are being used to make this message credible? What details were left out, and why? Double check citations to see if they exist and if the information in the citation conflicts or agrees with the article.

2. Consider the source. Examine the URL to spot unusual domain names, or domains that ape legitimate news sources, but aren't. In other words, who created the content? Why did they create it? What else is on the site? Check to see how the site makes money, who funds the website and who is on the advisory board. Examine the author's credentials and what else that author has produced.

3. Check your emotions. Fake or biased articles try to get audiences emotionally invested. It can be a subtle effort to encourage positive associations with a product, movement or brand, or it can be blatant manipulation designed to sow distrust, influence votes or stir hatred. Emotions are powerful, and they can prevent people from thinking clearly. Ask yourself how the content made you feel.

4. Have conversations and discuss the news. With so many "gray areas," it's important to have regular conversations with our kids about what information they're getting online and how they're weighing bias, opinion and agenda. They may be children, but they're dealing with information that's often geared toward adults.

5. Cross-check with other news outlets. Are other news outlets reporting the same story? If so, do the facts differ, and why? If the story involves an image, do a reverse image search to see where else the image has appeared and in what context. Dramatic images, displayed out of context, can lead to false conclusions.

Source: Sierra Filucci, "*How to Spot Fake News (and Teach Kids to be Media Savvy)*," Common Sense Media, March 20, 2017.