

# PD EDITORIAL:

## How to spot fake news when you see it

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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What is “fake news?” We all seem to have different definitions of what it is, but most of us seem to agree that it’s a problem. According to a recent poll, 64 percent of adults say fake news causes confusion about current issues and events.

Meanwhile, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center, only 39 percent of American adults say they feel “very confident” that they can recognize news that is made up. A Stanford study released last year found that more than 80 percent of teens had a hard time judging the credibility of news stories. Meanwhile, fake Facebook pages and ads created through Russian accounts are now part of Congressional investigations into efforts to manipulate the 2016 presidential election.

These are some of the issues that a panel of professionals in media, politics and law addressed at a sold-out public forum at Sonoma State University on Tuesday titled “Fake News and the First Amendment.” (A video of the forum is available on [pressdemocrat.com](http://pressdemocrat.com))

The panel, cosponsored by The Press Democrat, looked at the efforts underway — through legislation, publicity, technology, etc. — to stem the tide of fake news and the challenges those efforts are encountering. Search engines such as Google and Bing are now flagging users when bogus stories appear. Questionable stories sometimes will come with a notation that a fact-checking site such as Snopes.com have found the story to be “false.” Facebook also has begun alerting readers when a story includes facts that have been disputed.

But readers can’t count on these sites to alert them every time. What follows are some of the suggestions offered during the panel discussion on how consumers can identify fake news on social media and what sites they can turn to for checking the accuracy of information they encounter.

First, check the source of the story. If it’s a website or “news organization” that you’ve never heard of, that’s probably a red flag. Just because it looks like a credible media site doesn’t mean it is. Authors of fake news often create websites that look like traditional media pages with banners such as “the American News Journal” to pass themselves off as authentic. Also, look at the URLs. If it looks unusual or ends with com.co or com.lo, it’s probably fake.

Be wary of shocking headlines that come with no source. Be guided by the old adage, “If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.” Be skeptical, even if you would like something to be true. Don’t share it or even like it until you have checked it out and established whether it is

accurate. Remember, people often base their decisions on whether something is credible on how many times it is shared or liked. But many times, with the use of computer-driven “bots,” these likes, shares and tweets may be as bogus as the stories themselves.

Cross check the facts by going to a fact-checking website. Our favorite is Snopes.com. But other good ones include FactCheck.org or PolitiFact.com, which offers a helpful “Truth-O-Meter” for a range of statements from political leaders to bloggers. The site rates these as either “True,” “Mostly True,” “Half True,” “False,” or “Pants on Fire.”

Look for basic information about the site and/or the author. Does the site have an archive? Does it have a place for corrections, and does it acknowledge its mistakes? Does it come with spelling and grammar errors? Finally, judge for yourself whether the objective of the site is to share accurate information or to promote a certain political ideology?

Reverse Google search an image that appear with the story. If it appears repeatedly, particularly with equally dubious stories, it’s probably fake. You can do a reverse search by simply dragging an image from your computer into the Google search box.

Finally, as recent coverage about fake Facebook and Twitter accounts have demonstrated, be as wary about who is sharing the news story as the story itself. That person may have had his or account hijacked — or that individual may be fake as well.

Have any other suggestions? Sending us your ideas at [letters@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:letters@pressdemocrat.com)