

# 7 Ways to Spot Fake News

(sources: NPR News, New York Times, FactCheck.org, Snopes.com)



## What is “fake news”?

There are so many things labeled fake news, one can hardly fault people for not knowing exactly what it is.

Generally, fake news consists of stories that “report” on so-called facts and information that have no basis in fact, often with specifically fantastic headlines to encourage sharing on social media. Fake news stories cover the gambit of topics, much like real news — politics, yes, but also health, entertainment, gossip, arts and culture, and the list goes on. One explanation for the rise of fake news might be money. Modern media is based on an advertising model that relies on getting people to click to view content. Fake news can be more sensational than reality and lead to a high number of clicks, meaning that stories that get sufficient views can be very profitable. So it’s really all about money.

Google and Facebook have begun testing out new tools to help users better spot and flag fake news sites. Google is now barring hoax sites from its advertising platform and is testing fact-checking labels in Google News, and Facebook implemented a new system for users and fact checkers to report suspicious stories.

But the most reliable media-literacy tool is your own common sense. Here’s a checklist that can help.

### 1. Look for typos and grammar issues

Journalists are not infallible, but they should be able to string a sentence together. If a piece is full of errors, then it's unlikely to have passed the eyes of an editor. Notice an excessive use of exclamation points, ALL CAPS, and headlines that are sensationalized, like: “My Husband Is a Cannibal”. Frequently sidebar stories on a website have wild headlines like: Ten Secrets Revealed: George Washington Was An Alien from Mars”. This is an attempt to get you to click on the story (and somebody is making money when you do that).

If the headline says “THIS IS NOT A HOAX,” it more than likely is a hoax, so avoid it. By the way, using catchy numbers in the headline (like “7 ways to spot fake news”) is also a hook to get you to click to the page.

### 2. Eliminate the usual suspects

Do you trust the source of the information? It helps to keep a mental checklist of the organizations you trust and check often; the ones you don’t check often but know by reputation (local newspapers or TV stations outside your community or country); the ones you know are parody sites (example: Stephen Colbert on YouTube); partisan or gossip outlets that you don’t trust most of the time; and the sites that you know purport to be real news but aren’t (i.e. known fake-news-for-profit sites). Once you exclude those, you’re left with the outlets you don’t know about and don’t know if you can trust. That’s where the hardest work of verification happens. (Pop Quiz: What did you notice about the sources for this article?)

### 3. Trust, but verify

Even if it looks sort of like a news outlet you trust, you should still check for signs that it might be a hoax. Is it written in a strange way that you wouldn't normally expect from that source? Check the URL (web address) and the design of the website for signs of misleading mimicry; maybe it's a URL that's sort of like the one you know, but with an unusual country code or a typo in it. For example: abcnews.go.com is not the same as abcnews.com.co - (the first one is the real thing). The .co at the end of the address tells you it's from another country.

### 4. The smell test

If you don't know the source, look around for clues to whether it's reliable or not. If it's an e-mail notification, does the sender's address look right? Is it worded strangely? Is it asking you to reply immediately with sensitive information like your Social Security Number or credit card number? (Be cautious when clicking on links you don't trust; it might be a phishing scam to install malware on your computer. Keep your browser up to date.)

### 5. A second opinion

If the source seems like a legitimate news organization, it's time to look around a bit at the rest of the media landscape. Is the information also being reported by news outlets that you do trust? How many, and which ones? Do the details of their report match up with the information you saw originally? Are they citing reputable, named sources? For example, is the story being reported by other known reliable sources that you trust? For instance, the New York Times and CNN typically cover the same material.

### 6. Look for bias.

It's highly unlikely that a website called *Christian News* is going to do a big favorable feature on New York Gay Pride. But then again, you wouldn't expect *Mother Jones* to say anything nice about President Donald J Trump.

### 7. Is it Satire?

There is a thin line between fake news and satire or parody. Popular websites like *The Onion* have established themselves by publishing what ostensibly could be seen as fake news but with either comedic intent or as social commentary (or both).

### July 27<sup>th</sup> Interactive Webcast: Questions for Conversation:

Which of these seven ways to spot fake news do you use the most?

Which of the seven proves most difficult for you?

