

Google is Free and Easy To Use

If I had a dollar for every time someone on my Facebook timeline shared a story that was easily debunked with a simple Google search, I would no longer need to continue my education at Furman University. In fact, if I continued to receive a dollar for every time this happened, I'd never need to work a day in my life, so rampant are the false articles in permutating my feed. The viral spread of fake news is not just annoying, nor is it simply a joke. It can be dangerous.

The spread of fake news is aggressive, like a contagion, only worse. People *want* these articles. Whether positive or negative, some part of people wants these to be true for the validation, shock value, or sympathy that the perceived story may bring. By seeing a headline, they assume it's true and share it, further validating its claim to friends, without a single verification. This willingness to spread makes it the most contagious thing plaguing our first-world existence. Like any contagion, it can be treated. Like any contagion, treating it is difficult.

The first problem lies in the definition of fake news itself. As the term is thrown around so frequently today, some people come to label everything they see as fake news, while others insist that everything they see must be true, because "fake news" is a buzzword. It's on the Internet, why would it be false? Both groups present a problem because neither deigns to think critically. One writes off everything as false, and therefore never believes a thing they see on the web. The other is ready to believe anything that appears in bold. Such polarizing thinking makes it a challenge to reason with them.

The second problem lies in the verification. Even those who begin to think critically can be thwarted. A fake news article can have all the looks, language, and apparent legitimacy of a real article. A single glance oftentimes won't cut it for distinguishing the real from the fake, but how far should one be reasonably expected to go to validate a claim? For larger hoaxes, a simple Google search will lead to a number of sources debunking the article, but small-time offences are more difficult to track. Especially

if the fake article sounds somewhat reasonable, someone may fall into the trap of believing it, even after doing a little bit of research. It can appear completely innocent at times, like a virus that incubates for some time before showing symptoms.

This virus has two sources: bots and people. Neither are particularly easy to deal with. The advancement of bot technology has led us to a world where humans have about a fifty-fifty chance of guessing a well-made bot's identity. As their language becomes more varied, falling into complex templates of various online demeanors, it's obvious that bots are sophisticated enough, now, to fool humans, and therefore, possibly, the programs they create. Bots can create content and spread it at a pace that humans are incapable of. Thankfully, we do have some protection against bots, even if the programs grow smarter and more capable of bypassing these security measures every day. Captchas and special verifications can aid in halting the spread of these bots,

These bots aren't coming up with the malicious intent on their own, however, and this is why fake news is dangerous. There is, behind the code, a person who wishes to mislead someone for one reason or another, and this misleading information can be harmful. Not only that, but all of the anti-bot security measures in the world won't hold up to a real-life person who just wants to wreak havoc. Technological measures aside, fake news can and will always be spread. This is why education and preventative measures on the general populace's side will always be the best defense. All-out education isn't so simple, nor is it a complete solution, as education quality is as varied as socioeconomic backgrounds in America. Rather, education on critical thinking, and encouraging thoughtful reading, is the best option to combat fake news. This is 2018, a lot of people have access to Google. It's time they start using it for more than sports scores and scandals.

Fake news exists because there is an audience for it. By encouraging education and critical thinking, we can halt its spread without technological interference. Like a vaccine, knowledge can prevent us from becoming infected and spreading the falsehoods to others, and then, like any old

disease, it will fade into the background. However, we must be vigilant, because it will never completely go away.