

## The Fake News Epidemic

2016 has been called the year of “post-truth”. Few cultural developments of 2016 have incited as much confusion, anger, fear, or insight into our current culture as the rise and acknowledgment of fake news. Fake news has been attributed to a wide spectrum of sources and motivations—from media efforts to promote attention-getting sensationalism as a way to attract public interest, to politically biased websites, to social media types who try to create their own realities and get others to buy into them.

What is “fake news”?—a catch-all term encompassing propaganda, misinformation, disinformation and hoaxing—impinging on everything from the presidential campaign, to science and medicine, and to celebrity issues. *LA Times*.

Fake news is exactly what it sounds like—these are sources and articles that make inaccurate or intentionally misleading claims under the guise of professional journalism. Fake news by itself wouldn't be too much of a problem (tabloids have existed for decades), but the recent spread has been noteworthy because of the sheer number of sharers and views these stories have attracted. A team of Stanford researchers [recently released a study](#) that revealed a widespread inability among middle-schoolers, high-schoolers, and college students to verify information.

Fake news has become problematic in this information-saturated age for at three reasons:

1. fake news reports have clearly demonstrated the power of social sharing and the speed by which unfounded information and perceptions get circulated around the world. The misinformation takes on a life of its own, even if a retraction or edits are made, millions of new impressions will have formed, the vast majority of which will never know about the retraction or edits.
2. quick judgments often get made by an impatient public simply on the basis of a provocative or sensationalized headline that gets read. Fewer and fewer people take the time to explore or investigate the stories or claims that are made in news media outlets even when they are interested in a headline.
3. nefarious “news” sources have become adept at creating “the illusion of authority” in order to try to persuade readers of their legitimacy. These fake news sources undermine factual and broadly shared information and viewpoints by credible news sources and journalists. For some countries, [like Macedonia](#), this activity has become a profit center.

Even supposedly “objective” fields of study like science and medicine have been impacted by this “post-truth” tendency to sensationalize information. In their article “Fake news invades science and science journalism as well as politics” Ivan Oransky and Adam Marcus provide examples of this encroachment to these more academic fields. Both are journalists and Oransky is also a physician, and together they're the co-founders of the website Retraction Watch, which ranks among our leading correctives to fake news in academia.

Oransky and Marcus cite several dubious findings that were published in scientific journals that purport to engage in peer review, but may not always be as reputable as they seem. These included a conspiracy-mongering claim that the vapor trails behind jet planes contain toxic materials, not merely ice crystals; another hugely questionable study linking vaccines to autism, a long-debunked connection; and a “whopper” asserting that HIV doesn’t cause AIDS. All were eventually retracted by their publishers, but that only raises the question of how they got published to begin with. Scientists need to focus less on pumping out articles and more on producing replicable and robust results. The journalists who cover them, meanwhile, should spend less energy trying to follow the bouncing ball of what the latest data show and devote more time to finding context for those findings.

As Wesley Baines notes in his article in [BeliefNet](#), Fake news is dangerous. But it’s also profitable and plays to a cultural need that many of us have today. As an example, a recent CNN report noted that Russia had retaliated against the Obama expulsion of Russian diplomats from the U.S. by closing an Anglo-American school for children in Russia. Both the Russian Foreign Ministry Office and the school's own Facebook post said that this media report was false. CNN never cited its source for this report. In this case, it’s likely that CNN simply shot out of the starting gate a bit too early, seizing on an unreliable source in an effort to be the first to cover a hot story. The more sinister alternative, though, is that CNN deliberately created a piece of fake news in order to garner clicks, and by extension, profit. Unfortunately, we’ll likely never know which is true.

Regardless of the reason behind its creation, fake news preys on our current culture of outrage. We’re all mad. We’re all ready to fight. Culturally, we’re more divided into warring “tribes” than ever before, and news that confirms that “our side” is the correct side gets clicks.

#### The Social Media Problem-

As amazing as social media is for connecting people and creating relationships and conversations, the immediacy of it has created the biggest problem in the world of media and news; the “Gotta Be First” Syndrome. When a story breaks over the police scanner, or is called-in by a frantic bystander, the news agencies of the world begin the mad scramble to be first in the social stream with the story. It doesn’t matter if the story or info they are providing is true, as long as it’s posted on social before the other guys.

[Fake News: Not Even Santa Can Be Trusted](#) by Sean Smith, Dec. 22, 2016