

# Pack 114

Broadcaster-how-to

April 2020

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**BH2 – Fake news: How to identify it and what to do about it**

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***What is fake news?***

Many people like to share stories, pictures, videos, and news stories on social media with friends. You might share something because you find it funny, or because you think it’s an important news story that more people in your social circle should know about.

Sometimes people share stories that they know are untrue. This kind of disinformation\* can be spread in many ways, both online and offline, via new media and older media. Television, print, radio, online news sites—*all* channels of communication can spread fake news.

As a broadcaster, before you share a story or picture or video, do you stop to analyze the details? Do you question the content and wonder whether it’s totally accurate? Not everything we see or read is true.

False stories can circulate very quickly and are a big problem. This has become an unfortunate reality of daily life both online and offline all over the world, as people, companies, and media create stories that are untrue for political or personal gain, or a variety of other reasons. This phenomenon is called “fake news,” and as a broadcaster, it’s extremely important that you know how to detect it, while not contributing to it yourself.

To make things even more complicated, the term “fake news” is also sometimes used to cast doubt on legitimate news from an opposing political standpoint.

The New York Times defines “fake news” as made-up stories with the intention to deceive, often geared toward getting clicks. It’s important to note that fake news is NOT the same thing as incorrect, factually inaccurate news. No broadcaster or journalist is perfect and we can all make mistakes in research and reporting. In contrast, fake news is disinformation that is *deliberately* circulated.

***How can understanding fake news help me serve my listeners better?***

* News is an incredibly important tool for transmitting accurate information on political, social, and scientific issues. When news is delivered accurately and with balance, it gives listeners the opportunity to absorb information and form their own opinions and arguments on a situation or event.
* By broadcasting only accurate, well-researched information, you can gain the public’s trust and your listener’s loyalty.

***How can paying careful attention to fake news help me produce better programs?***

* As a broadcaster, it’s vitally important that you understand how to detect fake news to avoid spreading it through your own programs. By sorting factual, accurate information from information that you know is false, or information that is suspicious and that you can’t verify is true, and by gathering accurate information, you ensure that your programs are accurate, reliable, credible, and trustworthy.

***How do I get started?*** (Learn more about these and other points in the *Details* section below.)

1. How to spot fake news
2. Don’t be part of the problem
3. The importance of truth

**Details**

1. **How to spot fake news**

With a seemingly infinite amount of false information and fake news being shared throughout the world, it is your job as a respected broadcaster to filter the “fake” from the “news” and present the facts to your audience in an accurate and engaging way.

This is how to ask questions about the stories you are presented with:

***Have a critical mind***

One of the main factors that encourages the spread of fake news is the believability of many of the stories. Many contain an element of truth, but often draw completely unwarranted conclusions. Many fake news stories are designed to create shock value\*. This means that you need to keep your emotions in check when you are reading, watching, or listening to them. Try to approach the material critically and always ask yourself:

* Why was this story written?
* Is it trying to persuade me of a certain viewpoint? (Keep in mind that op-eds or opinion pieces\* are common in newspapers, radio, and especially online. For example, a retired politician or a well-known scientist or writer might give their personal view on a subject.) Sometimes, news stories are written in a way that is intended to persuade the listeners or reader of a particular and perhaps political viewpoint—without revealing that the story is just one person’s opinion.
* Is it trying to provoke a specific response from me? For example, a radio or newspaper or online story might list a politician’s successes and strengths without mentioning their failings in an (undisclosed) effort to influence your emotions and sway your vote in a coming election.
* Is it trying to sell me a certain product?
* Is it trying to get me to click through to a website or share the story myself?

If your answer to any of these questions is “yes,” check the story out more deeply before sharing it.

***Check the source***

If you see a story from a source you are unfamiliar with, do some research. Find out: Is it published by a professional news agency or accredited journalist? Is it coming from a random blog site?

Most legitimate news outlets include quotes and attributions from trustworthy sources in order to enhance credibility and include a variety of perspectives in the story. If the story has no sources, chances are that you are either reading an opinion piece or some form of fake news.

If the story is published by a news site you are unfamiliar with, be wary. Check the site’s “about us” page and try to determine whether or not the company holds any extreme viewpoints, or is connected to or sponsored by any organizations or individuals that hold extreme views. Also, have a look at the “contact us” page. It should be clear who owns, funds, and maintains the site. For example, you should question the site’s legitimacy if the email address is a gmail account!

Alarm bells should also ring if the site’s URL\* looks unusual. Generally, URLs with familiar domain names like .com, .org, .ac, .gov, .net, or a country code top level domain (for example, .gh for Ghana and .ml for Mali) are reliable, whereas website URLs with unfamiliar or long domain names may not be. Some fake news sites actually copy legitimate outlets. If the URL, logo, or design looks unusual, it is worth a closer look.

Also, take a look at other stories the site has published. If, for example, you discover that the bulk of their stories have exaggerated headlines, unbelievable content, shocking images, or pictures of naked people, you should be cautious about believing and sharing the story.

***Check who else is reporting the story***

If it’s an international story, always check to see if it has been published by respected news organizations such as the BBC, Al Jazeera, CBC, Reuters, CNN, RFI, AllAfrica.com, etc. If not, it’s likely that all or part of the story might be untrue. Organizations like these check and verify every story before it’s broadcast or published. If they’re not running the story, there’s a chance it could be fake.

For local stories, check whether the story has been picked up by other well-known and well-respected news publishers in your country first.

***Check the evidence***

A credible news story always contains lots of facts, including quotes from experts, surveys, and official statistics. If these are missing or the source is an unnamed “expert” or random “person at the scene,” you should question the story’s accuracy.

Credible journalism is driven by gathering facts, so a lack of research probably means a lack of fact-based information. An absence of quotes from people who are closely involved with the story is often a sign of an “opinion piece,” published as a blog post or a column, which could potentially be fake news. Also, credible news organizations are transparent: If they don’t have all the facts about a story, they admit it by, for example, reporting that they have attempted to contact a source but have received no reply.

Try fact-checking sites like <https://africacheck.org/> and Snopes.com. These sites are dedicated to finding the truth.

***Check who wrote it***

Do a quick search to see if the author has published any other articles. If they haven’t, or the article has a celebrity by-line or the author is unknown, be suspicious!

Sometimes, stories can even spread after being shared by a fake celebrity—through a social media account designed to impersonate a real person.

***Check the date***

At first glance, a news article may look 100% genuine. The source is reliable, the writer is familiar to you, and the article is well-written. However, you still need to be careful … because the story could have been written 10 years ago! Creators of fake news online often take a legitimate but old story and republish it when there is an opportunity to reinforce their extreme views.

For example, a story about an accidental plane crash from 2009 could be republished in 2019 with a caption that suggests it’s a contemporary act of terrorism. The photo could be circulated in order to trick people into thinking that there was a recent act of terror in the US and to advocate for boosting anti-terrorism spending or curbing civil liberties. Similarly, photos can be used to spread disinformation. For example, a photo of a crowd from an older event could be shared and linked to a more recent event in order to boost or diminish the perceived popularity of a march or rally.

***Check the images***

Modern computer-editing software programs like Photoshop make it easy for people to create fake images that look real. Pay attention to warning signs like shadows pointing in the wrong direction, jagged edges around a figure, disparities in colour, or a background that doesn’t quite match the foreground.

Some fake news sites use deliberately disturbing or graphic imagery to hook readers into reading the story. Or, as mentioned above, they take powerful images from an old and true story, then reuse them in a fake story.

If in doubt, try doing a Google search for the images and see if they are connected to other stories.

Videos can also be used as disinformation. [Here’s](https://www.theverge.com/tldr/2018/4/17/17247334/ai-fake-news-video-barack-obama-jordan-peele-buzzfeed) an example of a deepfake\* which illustrates this.

***Check for quality***

If you notice over-the-top punctuation ?!!!!!????!!??!!??! or emojis—proceed with caution. Reputable news sources usually ensure that all copy is checked before publishing or broadcasting. The same goes for videos—pay attention for signs of doctored footage.

***Make sure the headline matches the story***

Headlines for fake news stories may be in all-capitals to grab your attention and provoke an emotional response. But when you read further or click on the link, or watch the video more carefully, you sometimes find that the story isn’t related to the headline at all.

Always read the main body of a story carefully—don’t simply assume that the headline and opening paragraph match. Otherwise, you might take a story completely out of context.

Fake news is often designed to deepen divisions between two or more groups of people with differing backgrounds or different opinions, and incite prejudice and social conflict. If a headline is particularly aggressive and seems designed to provoke anger or fear, there is a big chance that the story is untrue.

***Use common sense***

Ultimately, if a story sounds too over-the-top or unbelievable … it probably is!

Fake news is often designed to influence your opinions, elicit a strong emotion towards something or someone, fuel your fears and biases, and shape your thinking to align with a certain view. Sometimes, you may even want a story to be true, because it validates your own viewpoint or sounds overwhelmingly positive. But remember: just because a story is available on the internet or is broadcast on the radio or TV or shared in newspapers—or even is shared by a trusted friend—doesn’t mean it’s true.

And remember, just because a story fits well with your own perspective on things doesn’t mean it’s true. Those are the stories where you have to be even more vigilant!

1. **Don’t be part of the problem**

It’s always a good idea to take the time to check the authenticity of a story and cross-check the facts. Remember that the fake news you spread could result in serious harm to individuals, to the natural environment. It can also harm your credibility and the credibility of the radio station you work for. You simply do not want to spread rumours and be partly responsible for making people believe something that isn’t true.

When it comes to reporting news, always be accurate and ethical. (See Farm Radio’s FAIR Standards [here](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/104-post-harvest-cow-pea/f-r-journalism-standards-farmer-programs/).) Try to adhere to the following guidelines:

* Seek the truth and report it fairly and accurately.
* Be accountable and transparent by, for example, admitting and apologizing for errors, publishing follow-up stories that address poor reporting, and clearly stating the ownership and political affiliation of the station, paper, or owner. See [here](https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/26/world/from-the-editors-the-times-and-iraq.html) for an apology from the New York Times, and [here](https://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1505149/apology-readers) for an apology from the Daily Nation (Uganda).
* Minimize harm and treat all people with equal respect.
* Do not distort or exaggerate the facts or the context.
* Always compare multiple sources and do not trust sources that are anonymous.

***Speak up!***

Media creators and consumers are responsible for addressing fake news. If you see fake news or questionable content, take whatever steps are available to you. This might mean simply not airing or otherwise spreading the story. In some circumstances, you might even reach out to the person who shared it and start a conversation about why you think the content doesn’t seem credible. These kinds of actions can help others avoid falling into the fake news trap.

1. **The importance of truth**

At a young age, we are taught that telling the truth is important. Truth is a particularly important concept for broadcasters and journalists. In fact, professional journalist associations have established ethical guidelines that journalists can follow in order to adhere to the truth. These guidelines will enable you to gain trust and respect from your audience.

While everyone should be entitled to their opinion and free to contribute to public debate, it is extremely important that journalists and broadcasters are skilled at differentiating between fake news and information that is legitimately newsworthy. It is also important that journalists and broadcasters make sound decisions about how much air time they give to different opinions and different groups. For example, while it is true that everyone has the right to their own opinion, with respect to scientific issues such as climate change, the opinions of legitimate climate scientists hold more weight than those of non-scientists, and your broadcasts should reflect that. This is critical because journalists and broadcasters can contribute to spreading false arguments and opinions that may harm human health and the natural environment.

The public depends on broadcasters like you for accurate information about what’s going on in your village, town, city, or region. So it’s your responsibility to take the time to gather the facts before you report on a story. Otherwise, your listeners could turn to a more unreliable source with far less local knowledge, and that may result in them being misinformed.

Loss of trust in the media can undermine public debate’s potential to drive actions in the public interest. Knowing how to spot fake news and what to do about it requires vigilance, but it’s worth it. As a broadcaster, honesty and accuracy are the tools of your trade.

**Where else can I learn about fake news?**

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*Audio*

Africa Check. *Audio and podcasts* (from African radio stations and mostly on COVID-19). https://africacheck.org/spot-check/audio-and-podcasts/

**Definitions**

*Blogger*: Someone who writes a [blog](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/blog) online (a [regular](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/regular) [record](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/record) of someone's [ideas](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/idea), [opinions](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/opinion), or [experiences](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/experience) that is posted to the [internet](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/internet) for other [people](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/people) to [read](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/read))

*Bot:* Autonomous program on a network (especially the Internet) that can interact with computer systems or users.

*Clickbait:* (on the Internet) Content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page.

*Deepfake:* Deepfakes (from "deep learning" and "fake") are media are synthetic media in which a person in an existing image or video is replaced with someone else's likeness.

*Disinformation:* False information deliberately and often covertly spread (for example, planting of rumours) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.

*GIF*: Images that have been encoded using the graphics interchange format where they have multiple frames encoded into a single image file and a web browser or other software will play those images back automatically in animated sequence.

*Going viral*: When an article, video, or image spreads quickly and widely on the internet through social media or email.

*Infographics:* A visual image such as a chart or diagram used to represent information or data.

*Meme:* An element of a culture or system of behaviour that may be considered to be passed from one individual to another by non-genetic means, especially imitation.

*Opinion piece*: An article in which the writer expresses their personal opinion about a particular issue or item of news, typically one which is controversial or provocative.

*Photoshop*: Editing software that enables the digital altering of images. Produced by the Adobe Corporation.

*Shock value:* When an image, text, article, or video provokes reactions such as sharp disgust, shock, anger, fear, or similar emotions.

*URL*: Uniform Resource Locator – better known as a web site address that specifies its location on a computer network.

*Yellow journalism:* Journalism that is based upon sensationalism and crude exaggeration.

For example, equating murder and dismemberment with smoking pot is the worst kind of yellow journalism.

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