News—in all its forms—is constructed.

An event or occurrence is observed or researched and then reported to us. Social media and the almost universal adoption of networked smart devices have created a world where anyone with a keyboard and internet access may claim to be a journalist. Old-school gatekeepers of news information are being joined (or replaced) by an army of citizen reporters who are writing, recording, editing, and publishing with varying levels of expertise and ethics. This tech-driven, always-live, on-demand delivery of news is both exhilarating and perilous. Never in human history has so much information been available to so many, so quickly, and with such breadth.

The immediacy and sheer volume of information has had consequences. Simply put, we are overwhelmed.

Everywhere there is a story, show, site, or broadcast vying for attention. And if we’re trying to stay informed—trying to actually pay attention—finding content that is meaningful and relevant is increasingly difficult. We no longer have an issue with access to information; now the issue is recognizing good information.

Content creators are often less concerned with getting their story right than with just getting it out. Too, there are spaces where information is purposefully exaggerated or flat-out false. Call it “truthiness,” “post-truth,” or “fake news”—whatever the moniker, these are lies clad in the sheep’s clothing of truth-based media.

Propagation of fake news is especially insidious in that it mimics traditional media on which we have culturally relied to make democratic decisions. With old radio shows, like Paul Harvey’s, careful listeners could tell when the news ended and the commercial began. Today’s fake sites, stories, and tweets use the vernacular, design, and format of traditional news against us. Frequently it seems impossible to distinguish truth from fabrication. Following are a few tactics to help you cross-examine conflicting news and, in the process, become media savvy.
For a majority of people, fake news is having a significant impact on their ability to understand the news. Fake news is essentially bad information—either made up entirely or crafted around a grain of truth. It can easily deceive when presented in a traditional news-media format and disseminated as current, noteworthy content. The term “fake news” has been used by President Donald Trump and others to discredit a story, source, or organization, even when facts are legitimate.

Fake news can take many forms:

- **Spinning the facts**, such as Kellyanne Conway’s use of the term alternate facts. Good public relations strategy relies on credibility, transparency, and truth. “Spinning the facts” takes credible information and conflates it or presents it through an overtly biased lens to support an agenda.

- **Intentional fake news**, like the deceptive, distorted news stories posted by Russian bloggers during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Fake news can be a form of political propaganda intended to persuade an audience and is easily disguised as coming from a professional news site replete with made-up sources and doctored images.

- **Unintentional fake news**, which can occur when no one has checked for facts and original sourcing before passing along a news-related rumor to friends and family on social media.

- **Tactical accusations of fake news** can be a purposeful redirection of attention by implying that news reports are incorrect or biased—for instance when a celebrity calls into question sourcing or content to discredit unflattering media coverage. Calling credible journalism “fake news” seeks to undermine the authenticity of information.

### WHAT IS (AND ISN’T) FAKE NEWS

64% U.S. ADULTS WHO SAY FABRICATED NEWS CAUSES CONFUSION ABOUT CURRENT EVENTS

(Consulted with Pew Research Center)

In a tumultuous political climate, the need for ethical journalism is critical. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) is a national organization dedicated to high ethical standards of journalism. SPJ “promotes the free flow of information vital to a well-informed citizenry” and advocates for protection of “First Amendment guarantees of freedom of speech and press.” When consuming media content, look for journalists that practice the four principles SPJ declares are foundational to ethical journalism:

- **Seek truth and report it**: Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting, and interpreting information.

- **Minimize harm**: Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues, and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect.

- **Act independently**: The highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public. Journalists should avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.

- **Be accountable and transparent**: Ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one’s work and explaining one’s decisions to the public. (adapted from spj.org)
Smart news consumers question details, evaluate sources, and double-check what is presented as hard facts. Skepticism, reading a wide variety of sources, and using tools to test accountability are wise behaviors for those who aspire to become informed citizens.

- Be wary of superlative adjectives and adverbs (i.e., latest, best, perfect, only, most, worst, least). In the words of Mark Twain, “When you catch an adjective, kill it.”
- Question the quoted so-called authority. Does that person have the knowledge or qualifications to back up statements of fact or opinion?
- Compare different sources reporting on the same information.
- Purposefully seek out opposing viewpoints.
- Recognize the differences between hard news, editorial commentary, advertising, and entertainment.

FACT-CHECKING is an arduous process which, done right, is as painstaking as good reporting. Professional fact-checkers adhere to a code of ethical principles to research and verify stories and sources. In digital news feeds, fact-checking tools sometimes include apps, links, or widgets as a second source for consumers to measure the validity of content. Following are a few sites to help do your own fact-checking.

- **FactCheck.org**
- **PolitiFact.com**
- **PunditFact.com**
- **ShareTheFacts.org**
- **ReportersLab.org**
- **Snopes.com**
- **Washingtonpost.com/factchecker**

A nonpartisan, nonprofit project of The Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, FactCheck monitors accuracy in political reporting, debunks viral rumors, maintains an archive of helpful articles, and offers space to “Ask FactCheck.” Here’s their solid advice on “How to Spot Fake News” (Eugene Kiely and Lori Robertson, Nov. 18, 2016): Consider the source. Read beyond the headline. Check the author. What’s the support? Check the date. Ask: Is this some kind of joke? Check your biases.

PolitiFact uses a six-point Truth-O-Meter scale, from “True” to “Pants on Fire,” to rate the veracity of claims made by candidates, political parties, elected officials, and activists. PunditFact checks the accuracy of information presented in talk shows, blogs, and political analysis. APP: Settle It!, from PolitiFact, can resolve dinner table arguments, check facts in campaign ads, and test your knowledge of the Truth-O-Meter service.

Share The Facts, developed by Duke University Reporters’ Lab and Jigsaw (Alphabet’s technology incubator), is a widget (like Twitter or Facebook icons) that can be attached to fact-checked online publications. It helps readers quickly identify fact-checked content and share it across multiple platforms. The Reporters’ Lab maintains a database of fact-checking sites for public access. PLUG-IN: FactPopUp, a web browser plug-in from PolitiFact, keeps you informed with pop-up notifications whenever there’s a new fact check.

Snopes began as an urban-legend-checking forum in 1994 and has evolved to a reliable “touchstone of rumor research” with a clearly defined methodology and transparent rating system, from “True” to “False” (and shades in between) and variables for “Unproven” or “Outdated” information.

“The Fact Checker” webpage and Sunday column of The Washington Post is written and managed by award-winning journalist Glenn Kessler, who helped initiate fact-checking of candidates’ campaign claims in the 1992 and 1996 elections. The “Pinocchio Test” is its standard: One Pinocchio for “selective” telling of the truth to Four Pinocchios for falsehoods that are downright “whoppers.” APP: GlennKessler aggregates fact-checked claims in the news. Play a built-in game to test your fact-checking knowledge or watch video interviews with crack fact-checker Glenn Kessler.
Christopher Keller is Professor of Journalism and Chair of the Communications Department at Cameron University. Since 2000, he has taught courses in media literacy, newswriting, social media technology, and communication. He served for over a decade as the faculty adviser to CU’s student newspaper, The Cameron Collegian.

THOUGH MANY people are confident they have the media skills to identify fake news when they see it, Pew Research respondents recognize that they are sometimes fooled by and pass along misinformation. A fake news media environment will not improve unless we educate ourselves and demand change. Dr. W. James Potter at UC Santa Barbara has written about social effects of media and the importance of media literacy. Potter recommends developing a set of skills for reading, watching, and interacting with mass media:

- Have a specific goal in mind when you access media. You control the information.
- Be aware of your personal patterns, when and where you encounter media products, and do think of them as products. You decide who, what, where, when, why, and how you consume information.
- Acquire a broad base of knowledge. Read more varied content.
- Investigate sources that journalists cite, question everything, and seek out new sources of information.
- Think about how your personal ideology colors—and perhaps limits—the information you consume.
- Analyze fact-based content and discuss it with others.

(adapted from Media Literacy, Sage Publishing, 2016)

BEWARE: BIAS AND THE BANDWAGON

Media information can affect your values, behavior, and attitudes, directly impacting democratic decision-making. Awareness can help you understand how your own cognitive biases influence the ways you seek and consume news.

- **Confirmation Bias** refers to our tendency to remember details or infer meaning that matches what we already believe or know about a topic. If we want something to be true, we interpret media information as confirmation of that view. Or, worse, we seek only information with which we can agree. Certain news agencies build or maintain these biases with politically-charged commentary and slanted interpretation of the facts.

- **Early Information Bias** makes us prone to believe or remember the first reports of news information we see or hear. Even when faced with contradictory or modified information, the original report often holds sway.

- **The Bandwagon Effect**, doing something because everyone else is doing it, is also at play in reporting the news: “If everyone else is reporting a new Kardashian hairstyle, we better publicize it too.”

When asked what elements have “a large impact” on their trust in a news story, U.S. adults report:

- **The sources a news story cites** impacts their trust (51%)
- **The publisher of a news story** affects their trust (48%)
- **Gut instinct** impacts their trust in a news story (30%)

(pewresearch.org)