OAKRIDGER

Fake news: How to spot it and avoid spreading it

Kara Coleman

February 5, 2017

The term "fake news" has been thrown around a lot recently, yet people continue sharing fake news stories on social media and passing them off as true. With the constant bombardment of information available online, how can you tell whether a story is true and avoid spreading fake news yourself?

"Obviously, it's in the news now, but this is something we have emphasized since the beginning," said Lacey Benns-Owens, lead faculty for communications and associate professor of communications at Columbia State Community College. "We want to make sure our students are aware of media literacy and the importance of being informed, taking a critical look at the news and information they're ingesting."

A story that makes rounds on social media every so often is about a celebrity whose car breaks down in a small town. The story will quote the celebrity as saying how nice and helpful the people in the small town were and that he or she would consider retiring in that town. The next time a story like this cycles through your news feed, stop to think before sharing the link.

How likely is it that Tom Hanks, Adam Levine, Ryan Gosling, Bill Murray and Jennifer Aniston all got flat tires while traveling through random small towns? A quick Google search for "celebrity car trouble" will bring up links to several of these stories. The story is essentially the same, only replacing the names of a town and state, local eatery and celebrity in each one.

If that doesn't make you suspicious, look at the website's URL. What is the news source sharing the story? If it's not a mainstream source you're familiar with, like *USA Today*, NPR or CNN, or even a local media outlet in your area, it might be fake news.

Essentially, Benns-Owens tells her students, determining whether a story is true often entails investigating the source itself.

With the past election cycle, politics has been a hot-button issue as of late. Sometimes, people who are passionate about a certain issue will read a story as true and share it in the heat of the moment without doing research.

"There are several different news organizations, and I use the term lightly, that put out information, and it sounds legitimate," Benns-Owens said. "You have something like the Cato Institute or the Brookings Institution, but those are conservative or liberal think tanks. So check and see if the article is coming from a news outlet or a biased think tank. Check and see if these are opinion pieces or straight news."

It's also important to check the date stamp before sharing an article. If you're about to click "share" on a piece that you believe is timely, but see it was originally published in 2013, the information might not be pertinent anymore.

What do you do if you see people on your Facebook news feed sharing stories that are probably false?

"The general rule is, if you read something and it seems outrageous or unbelievable, it probably is," said Benns-Owens, who is in her 16th year teaching at Columbia State. "Usually, I will suggest they find an unbiased source that relates to that same story, that provides the actual, true facts, and then share that. But do so with a statement that says, 'Perhaps you're not getting the whole story. Here's the actual information.' It's not a way to attack, but to inform."

To be an informed citizen, Benns-Owens said, it is one's responsibility to do the work.

She said she often shares a quote with her students by Linda Ellerbee, best known as the host and producer of Nickelodeon's "Nick News."

"Media literacy is not just important, it's absolutely critical," Ellerbee said. "It's going to make the difference between whether kids are a tool of the mass media or whether the mass media is a tool for kids to use."