

Asking users to tag fake news isn't going to work if they don't know what it is

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Credit: The Conversation

Fake news is still very much the subject of the news at the moment. There is a growing realisation that there is very little that can be done to stop it.

Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg believes that ordinary Facebook users can simply [flag](#) sites, and links to stories, as "fake". However, a study to be published this week from researchers at Stanford [highlights](#) how ill-equipped young people, including students at Stanford, are at being able to decide what is, and what isn't, reliable on the Internet.

The researchers analysed 7,804 responses of US students at middle school through to university who were asked to assess the reliability of online information. The researchers found large numbers of students who were unable to recognise clear bias in sites and nor could they identify articles that contained unsupported content. Students were also unable to tell the difference between an ad and a real article.

In one particular experiment, 25 Stanford students were asked to rate the trustworthiness of sites belonging to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) and the [site](#) of the [American College of Pediatricians](#). The American College of Pediatricians is a splinter group from the main American Academy of Pediatrics that espouses the potential harms of same sex parenting and are antiabortion. The Stanford students rated the site of the American College of Pediatricians as being more trustworthy. Clearly, they had missed the founding ideals of the group or at least they did not consider this a reason to mistrust them.

The Stanford study (which has not appeared online yet) highlights the fact that there is definitely a problem with the digital media literacy

skills of students. Generally, these young people were not able to recognise the reliability of information found online. This won't come as a great surprise to anyone who has been involved with teaching at the university level. Independent analytic and research skills are something that is often the focus of teaching higher degree students let alone high school [students](#).

Being able to judge the merits of a particular news story takes a range of skills including the ability to follow references, to look for a number of different sources that support, or undermine the story, and being able to know which sources to trust more than others. Subject matter is also important. It is very difficult to make a judgement on a subject you know nothing about. Finally, there are the beliefs and biases of the person reading the article.

Sam Wineburg, one of the Stanford researchers involved with the study has [said](#) that there are a set of skills that people need to be able to judge the reliability of a site or article. They include assessing the reputation of the site by looking at what other sites have to say, not accepting what the site itself says in its "about" section, and not judging the site by its position in the list of search results in Google.

Whilst this may get people part way to being able to form a more reasonable opinion on the trustworthiness, it relies on a great deal of motivation and time that most people may not have. Ultimately, the decision to trust a site and rate its credibility relies on knowledge of the subject matter and the ability to rate trust, reliability and truth based on a balance of probability, not absolutes.

One of the key concepts to keep in mind however is that companies like Facebook and Google are now part of the problem and not necessarily part of the solution. If we are to treat content with skepticism, then we should treat the platforms that have enabled [fake news](#) to proliferate to

such a degree with even more mistrust. Facebook and Google have too much vested in the promotion of sharing blindly to really address the issue of what their software end up disseminating and promoting.

The difficulty that people have with working out the trustworthiness of news is part of the same challenge people have with dealing with judging whether emails are real or just attempts at phishing. The skills of cybersecurity and digital media literacy are part of a range of digital skills that some argue should be [taught](#) at school. Given how seriously misinformation can end up affecting our lives, this is going to be an essential part of future generations' education.

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