

Now there's a game you can play to 'vaccinate' yourself against fake news

February 20 2018, by Jon Roozenbeek And Sander Van Der Linden



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The term "fake news" is everywhere these days. After [gaining steam](#) during the 2016 US election, it's become a [catch-all](#) phrase used by people from across the political spectrum. Yet "fake" stories – or stories that have been entirely made up – [have been around](#) since the dawn of man. And on top of that, stories don't have to be completely fake to be

misleading. Terms such as "propaganda", "disinformation", "misinformation" and "post-truth" are used by many people, as though they mean the same thing.

In practice, most people are concerned about "[disinformation](#)": that is, misinformation coupled with the intent to deceive. Today, it's easier than ever to mislead people. In the online world, posing as a credible [news](#) producer requires a bit of money and dedication – but it's not hard.

Meanwhile, people's trust in the media [is declining](#), and a [majority](#) of Americans say that fake news has left them confused about basic facts. Add to that the growing problem of [computational propaganda](#) – where Twitter bots or other social media tools amplify certain hashtags or messages to influence what's trending – and the current landscape becomes very difficult for people to navigate.

Fighting back

There are many ways companies and governments are trying to combat this growing threat. Google and Facebook are tweaking their algorithms to [stop promoting](#) "fake news". [France](#) is in the process of passing a controversial "fake news law", which limits media activity during election time. And the UK government [has announced](#) it's setting up an "anti-fake news" unit. Yet each of these efforts comes with its own problems.

From our perspective, as researchers studying the fake news phenomenon, we think the best way to fight the bad effects is at the [individual level](#). So, we're experimenting by combining psychology with technology in a new area of research, which some scholars are calling "[technocognition](#)".

So far, one of us found that it's possible to "[inoculate](#)" people against

misinformation by warning and exposing them to a weakened version of the "real" misleading argument, and then revealing to them why it's misleading. In other words, a small dose of fake news can inoculate you against it – just like a real vaccination would protect you against a disease.



US astronaut Alan B. Shepard Jr. on the moon – or is he? Credit:

Tricks of the trade

There are many reasons why people produce disinformation: they can be financial, political, personal and even "just for fun". But the techniques that are being used to mislead people are remarkably similar across the board.

One of the simplest is impersonation: imitating a public figure or [organisation](#) with the intent of misleading the public. They might also create "[emotional content](#)", which deliberately plays on people's basic emotions – such as fear or anger – to get a response. Next, there's "[polarisation](#)" – when fake news merchants stir up existing political tensions, to drive people further apart.

Then there are conspiracies: misleading theories, which often hold a large organisation responsible for some kind of covert agenda – like saying NASA faked the moon landing to win the space race. Then, people whose credibility is under attack will often try to [discredit](#) their opponents by engaging in "[whataboutism](#)" or personal attacks. And lastly we have [trolling](#), which involves disrupting discussions and provoking reactions from people, combining all of the techniques mentioned above.

Good news, bad news

When people use these techniques themselves, it really improves their ability to recognise them in other contexts. So, together with [DROG](#) (a Dutch organisation working against the spread of disinformation), we developed an online game called Bad News ([click here to play it](#)), where players use misleading tactics to build their own fake news empire.

The game is free to play in any browser and on any device and takes about 15 minutes to complete. You start as an anonymous Twitter user who goes professional by starting their own news site, and gradually becomes a fake news tycoon. On the way, you earn badges and learn how the techniques mentioned earlier can be used to suit your purposes.

We figured that once you know how the magic trick works, you won't be fooled by it again. So we put our ideas to the test by doing [a pilot study](#) in a high school in the Netherlands. Some classes were assigned to the treatment group and played our game. Others were assigned to the control group, and didn't play the game.

Although our study was only a starting point, the results so far have been positive: students who played the game thought the fake news articles they read afterwards were less reliable. We hope that our game will play a role in stopping the spread of misleading information: just as misinformation replicates, vaccines [can spread, too](#). The more [people](#) that play the game, the further the vaccine spreads – until one day, we may achieve [societal resistance](#) against [fake news](#).

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Now there's a game you can play to 'vaccinate' yourself against fake news (2018, February 20) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-02-game-vaccinate-fake-news.html>

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