High school students are unequipped to spot 'fake news'

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Despite mounting attention to the threat of "fake news" on the internet and efforts nationwide to improve digital media literacy, high school students still have difficulty discerning fact from fiction online, according to new research from scholars at Stanford Graduate School of Education.

The report, released today by the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG), provides sobering evidence that prospective young voters lack the skills to judge the reliability of information online, the researchers said.

More than 96 percent of high school students surveyed failed to consider that ties to the fossil fuel industry might affect the credibility of a website about climate change, while more than half believed a grainy video on Facebook that claimed to show ballot stuffing (which was actually shot in Russia) constituted "strong evidence" of voter fraud in the United States.

"If the results can be summarized in a single word, I would say they're troubling," said Professor Sam Wineburg, founder of SHEG, who co-authored the report with SHEG director Joel Breakstone, Ph.D., and director of assessment Mark Smith, Ph.D. "The 2020 presidential election is just a year away, and many current high school students will be first-time voters. Our findings show that they are unprepared to assess the information they encounter."

Many efforts, little progress

The report, Students' Civic Online Reasoning: A National Portrait, follows up on a landmark 2016 study from SHEG showing how young people were easily duped by information on the internet.

After the release of that study, and with widespread concerns about the impact of "fake news" on the 2016 presidential election, policymakers and educators nationwide pursued a variety of initiatives to address the issue, including state and federal legislation allocating resources for media literacy instruction.

The new report from SHEG suggests these efforts have failed to move

the needle. Between June 2018 and May 2019, researchers administered six tasks to 3,446 students to gauge their ability to evaluate digital sources on the internet. The students were recruited from 16 school districts in 14 states, representing a diverse selection of the country's public schools that matched the demographic profile of high school students across the United States.

One task provided students with a link to the website of an organization claiming to "disseminate factual reports and sound commentary" on the effects of carbon dioxide on the environment. Asked whether the website was a reliable source of information, students were reminded that they were allowed to search online to answer that question. A basic internet search reveals that the organization behind the site was funded by fossil fuel companies—but more than 96 percent of students failed to consider these ties in answering the question.

Another task sought to gauge students' ability to evaluate the credibility of a grainy video posted on Facebook that showed clips of poll workers surreptitiously stuffing ballots into bins. Captions in the video tell viewers that the clips depict 2016 Democratic primary elections in three U.S. states, though the clips actually show voter fraud in Russia. Asked whether the video provided "strong evidence" of voter fraud during the 2016 Democratic primaries, 52 percent of the students said yes.

"By accepting these websites and videos at face value, students are making it too easy for bad actors to undermine faith in the democratic process," said Wineburg, the Margaret Jacks Professor of Education. "Thriving democracies need citizens who can evaluate and access reliable information."

A call for a new approach

The researchers concluded that current approaches to digital literacy

instruction are inadequate, particularly a "checklist" method that asks students to consider certain criteria as they look at an individual website. This approach can mislead students, the researchers said, by focusing their attention on a single site instead of teaching them how to consult the broader web to establish a site's trustworthiness.

The report calls for a greater investment in more rigorously evaluated curriculum materials that can be distributed widely at no cost.

"Educational systems move slowly, but technology doesn't," said Breakstone. "We need to act urgently to ensure our students' ability to engage in civic life."

More information: Students' Civic Online Reasoning: sheg.stanford.edu/students-civic-online-reasoning

Provided by Stanford University

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