“That’s Not True!”

Fake News, and How to Talk to Your Children.

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Introduction

"Fake News" is a type of journalism that is written to deliberately misinform readers, usually in an attempt to convince them to support or denounce a cause. Despite the term only becoming popular in the last 18 months, this is not a new phenomenon. Parents who were alive during the Cold War will remember regular pronouncements from the Communist bloc regarding seemingly miraculous economic or political progress, despite the obvious issues those countries were facing. However, with the advent of the digital age, the issue of media literacy – being able to tell what is real and what isn't – has become uniquely challenging.

Every day people are bombarded with a seemingly endless stream of "fake" or "questionable" news. Adults may be able to know that a story from a mysterious website based in Macedonia (which was legitimately the epicenter of a "fake news" storm) claiming that Donald Trump has called for tanks to storm Belfast's streets. However children, particularly young children often lack the critical thinking skills that are needed to sift truth from fiction.

Around a quarter of 8-15 year olds believe that Google authenticates search results, and that if a site is listed in search results that means it is trustworthy (OFCOM, 2017). A study in Australia also noted that fake news has a particularly damaging effect on children, suggesting that violent content pretending to be news can "normalise" such content and behaviours in children.

Therefore, it is essential that children are talked with regarding what is fake and what is real news content. Parents are best placed to do this and there are a number of ways that they can help combat the impact. This report will look at how serious the "Fake News" problem is in Northern Ireland, then it will look at the types of fake news that a child or young person might be exposed to and finally how best to combat them.

How big is our "Fake News" problem?

Firstly, it is important to lay out what this report is defining as "fake news". This is because the term has been coined by a number of groups of people like politicians, journalists and members of the public. It has become a sort of catch-all to undermine any news story or research that doesn't align with their personal viewpoint. Here is an example of what *may* or *may not* be fake news:

> *"MPs refuse to recognise that animals feel pain or emotion in Brexit bill vote"*
> *(Independent, 2017)*

This headline would be particularly shocking for anyone – but the impact on a young person who cares about animal rights might feel genuinely distressed upon reading it. In the article, it suggests that the government has refused to recognise that animals feel pain or emotions and less-than-subtly suggests that when we leave the EU animal rights will suffer.

However, this headline from the Guardian, suggests the exact opposite:

Gove says UK law will specifically recognise animal sentience
(Guardian, 2017)

Even an adult would struggle to keep on top of the "real truth" here, and the constant row of opposing sides accusing each other of being curators of "fake news" only makes this harder for young people. Because of the complex nature of what constitutes "fake news" and what is in reality just stories or ideas we don't agree with, it is almost impossible to quantify exactly how much "fake" news young people and children see.

What we do know is that it is serious enough to be an issue. For example, a video posted regarding the Grenfell Tower disaster which erroneously claimed that 42 people had died in one room was seen by 6.6 million people (BBC, 2017). If your child or young person is a user of social media, then there is a high likelihood of them being exposed (in one way or another) to this type of "fake" news.

Types of Fake News

There are many types of fake news – Politifact, a US-based fact checking website lists three main types:

Parody or Joke sites

Arguably the least harmful of "Fake News" sites, most of these announce fairly prominently that they are not intended to be real stories. The exact purpose varies – for some, it is simply to amuse or entertain an audience. For others, it is intended to annoy or "troll" a certain section of society. Examples are listed below:

"47 Screaming Babies Surround Man In Local Starbucks" - (Waterford Whispers News)

"'What About You, Are You On My Team?' Trump Asks George Washington Portrait" – (The Onion)

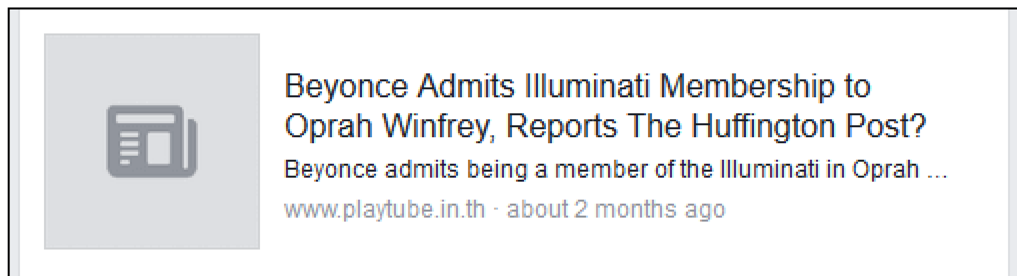
"Putting a car into outer space cheaper than parking it in London, SpaceX confirms" – (Newsthump)

As we can see the humour on these websites and sources is subjective. While adults could identify these stories are satire, children and young people may struggle. Overall, the object of most of these websites is not to mislead or confuse, but to at worst cause some annoyance.

News Imposter Sites

These "fake news" stories make up the bulk of the fake news on the internet. Often, they are generated with deliberately provocative titles, to encourage click-though and generate money for ads.

This type of fake news will be very familiar to you if you read real news on the internet often. Below the main story, and regularly camouflaged as real "related stories" are a list of seemingly alarming news stories. For example, this "story" alleging the singer Beyoncé "admitting" to being part of a global conspiracy:



There was an explosion of these stories in the wake of the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump. As we can see, they attempt to take on the appearance of legitimate news stories. They often take on almost-plausible names, other times they are a jumble of almost random words. A link was not provided to this particular story, but it and many like it can be found on Facebook or Twitter.

Again, an adult thinking critically would realise that this source was untrustworthy, but a child or young person could easily be tricked. In addition, the most common place to see these aside from as ads are as shared stories on social media. The reactions and seeming endorsement by others (who may be real, or may be bots) add another layer of credibility to these otherwise unlikely stories.

Fake Stories on Real Sources

This third and final type of fake news is perhaps the most insidious of all. These stories are fake, but usually contain a grain of truth in order to trick otherwise reliable news websites to carry them. The purpose of such stories varies – sometimes it is a prank, others seek to influence the debate around an issue but they undermine the trust in all news sources.

An example of this was in 2011, when the BBC news website carried a rather disturbing article claiming that a Jewish rabbinical court in Israel has "condemned a stray dog to death by stoning". Of course, this story was in fact nonsense, but it was posted (and then, quickly redacted and apologised for) on the BBC News Website.

These sorts of stories are the most difficult for parents to safeguard children and young people against. Because one of the most reliable ways to dismantle fake news is by checking reliable news sources. It is also difficult to provide links to examples, as reputable sites often remove fakes stories once the mistake is noticed.

How to Talk to Children & Young People about Fake News

The good news about Fake News is that something can be done about it. The even better news is that the skills needed to combat fake news – critical thinking skills, and open mind and skepticism – are also very important for educational development of young people. This report lists a number of strategies that parents can employ to beat "fake news".

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has a handy 8-step process which is quick, easy to understand and available to help discern fake from real news. The Eight steps are:

1. Consider the source – is it usually reliable? Have you ever heard of them before?
2. Read Beyond – read the whole story, not just the headline
3. Check the author – are they a real person?
4. Look for supporting sources – fake news is less likely to have multiple verifying sources
5. Check the date – maybe it wasn't fake news when it was posted, but now it is?
6. Is it a joke? – Teach children about satire, and why people make jokes like this.
7. Check your own biases.

8. Ask the Experts – a teacher, a fact-checking website or tell children to ask you as a parent!

Parents might want also consider where their children get their news. Social media is the most likely place for fake news to spread, and 54% of 12–15 year olds say that they access news on Facebook and Twitter. Parents could consider speaking to their children and young people about the dangers of relying too heavily on social media.

Additionally, it is important that parents speak to children and young people about what is or is not news. Young people might follow sports news or celebrity gossip, and not necessarily think of it as "news". A 2015 survey in the United States found that young adults generally get harder news from more traditional news sites and "softer" lifestyle news from social networks (Associated Press, 2015). However, these types of news stories are by no means immune to fakery – and thus it is vital that parents engage with children and young people on these as well.

But *how* does a parent have these sorts of conversations? Often they can be anxious about what their child or young person is reading, but are unsure on how to have that conversation.

How to Talk about Fake News

PBS (2017) – the American equivalent of the BBC – has a few helpful tips on how to speak to a child regarding fake news. They suggest:

- Find out what your child already knows – ask them "what have you heard?"
- Explain simply – don't get into a philosophical debate about objective truth with a 10 year old. Explain that sometimes people might lie, and why.
- Listen and acknowledge – children often feel misrepresented or unhappy with the news they read. It is important to listen to what they are feeling, and respond.

Parents can also improve children's media literacy during everyday activities. Common Sense media (2017) a non-profit that focuses on children and media suggests talking through content that children or young people are already consuming. For example, if your child or young person watches a lot of Youtube videos, ask them what they know about who created them, and why. This is a simple and easy way to build up to a conversation about "fake" content.

Ask for Help!

It is also important to remember that as a parent, you are *not* alone in this. In addition to the services offered by Parenting NI, there are a great deal of potential allies and helpers against fake news.

Speak to other parents about media literacy – ask the parents of your children's friends if they have spoken to their children about it.

Speak to teachers – critical thinking skills are taught in schools, and parents and teachers have a common cause in reducing the levels of misinformation children absorb.

Look online! As outlined in this report, there are a plethora of responsible and reliable sources – like the BBC, Ofcom and others – who are there to help. Just make sure to apply the same critical eye to these as you would to news.