

Students in a study have a hard time telling fake news from real news

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STANFORD, Calif. — Is it an advertisement or a news article? Think tank or lobbying group? Verified Facebook page or fake account?

According to a new study, students are easily fooled by fake news stories.

The study was conducted by the Stanford History Education Group. From January 2015 to June 2016, researchers measured students' ability to judge the trustworthiness of online information. They were surprised by the results.

“We were shocked, to be honest, by how consistently poor these students did,” Joel Breakstone said. He runs the Stanford History Education Group.

“Across the board, students really struggled.” He added, “Rarely do students consider, ‘Where does this content come from?’”

The new findings come as companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google are trying to figure out how to stop the spread of fake news. At the same time, they do not want to control free speech.

Facebook is considering showing warnings on stories flagged as fake. It might also make it easier for people to report these posts.

That might not be enough, though. Experts say that teachers and parents will have to help students separate fact from fiction.

Stephen Balkam is the founder and CEO of the Family Online Safety Institute. He thinks that future students need to develop a good eye when it comes to fake news. More and more, he said, students will have to ask themselves, “What is real and what is not real?”

Helping students develop those skills will likely not be easy. Students are often taught in schools how to understand a written passage. However, they do not learn about sources of information as often, Breakstone said.

Indeed, the new study suggests that students do not always pay close attention to the sources of what they read. In fact, 225 high school students were shown two Facebook posts about Donald Trump. They were then asked which was the more trustworthy source. One post was from Fox News and had a check mark next to the name. This is a symbol that means a source is real. Another post was from “Fox News The FB Page.”

Only one-quarter of the students noticed that one of the accounts had a blue check mark. Many thought the other Facebook page was more trustworthy.

Hidden ads are another challenge for students. Advertisers have started designing ads that look like news stories. They pay websites to run these ads alongside articles.

Students are often fooled. Most middle school students who were shown the homepage of Slate's website thought "sponsored content" was a news story. In fact, "sponsored content" is a way of labeling ads that look like articles.

Better labeling might help. The Federal Trade Commission in 2015 urged companies to be more clear about the language they use to label ads. The labels "Paid Advertisement" and "Sponsored Advertising Content" are more likely to be understood than "Sponsored by," for example.

Between hidden ads and made-up stories, students have a lot to look out for. The experts agree it's important for students to learn how to determine whether a source is trustworthy.