

# Fake news: Do your part to see it for what it is

By [Judy Patrick](#) November 6, 2016

When it comes to news, there is the real and the fake.

This election has proven that we all need to do a better job of distinguishing between the two.

Spotting fake news used to be easy.

That was the news about the seven-headed goat or the Midwestern farmer abducted by aliens plastered across the front page of supermarket tabloids.

If you remember, it was pretty easy to determine that that goat photo wasn't close to being real.

Rumors, hoaxes and speculation have also long filtered into our news consumption. So too has political propaganda, innuendo and bias. Stories get spun. People have preconceived notions.

Reputable news organizations work hard to present information objectively and fairly.

The mainstream media isn't trying to slant the news; for journalists, the search for the truth is something of a divine mission.

While we claim pure objectivity, we all fall short sometimes.

This column, for example, is based on my personal beliefs, my 38 years of experience in the news business and what I've observed by reading, watching and listening to news coverage. I tend to trust traditional journalism.

But I'm a wary news consumer nonetheless. I know that even choice of words, especially the use of adjectives and adverbs, can reflect bias.

Notice, for example, what the word "only" can do to the meaning of a sentence: "There were only 2,000 people in the crowd;" "there were 2,000 people in the crowd."

Those problems are nothing, however, compared to the flood of fake news into our lives via social media.

Nearly every political conversation I've had (outside the newsroom) has been dotted with references to news stories that seemed too fantastical to be real. "I saw it on Facebook," I heard time after time.

I would pull out my smartphone, do a little research and discover that most — but not all — stories weren't real.

This isn't just a Facebook problem.

Other social media sites are also littered with stories that deceive people and mangle the truth in ways that would be humorous if I cared less.

Fake stories are especially confounding because, unlike the seven-headed goat, they can be pretty clever.

They look just like a legitimate news site. Their sources seem familiar. And, by gosh, your best friend from high school shared it with you.

Astute consumers of news have always had fairly good critical thinking skills.

But the fake news out there today sometimes demands a new level of vigilance, especially before you hit the share button.

We all need to care about this. And we all, quite frankly, need to let go of the notion that the mainstream media is corrupt.

Certainly criticize when criticism is in order, but don't jettison the entire industry.

And don't just read news stories that validate your existing beliefs. Dip into alternative viewpoints.

We also need to do a better job of teaching news literacy to young people.

There are some programs already in place, including SUNY-Stony Brook's Center for News Literacy and the national News Literacy Project, both of which are working to make young people better news consumers.