

Fake News *Fever*

The Search for *Truth in News*

Controversies, hoaxes, urban legends, gossip, outrageous (and usually *untrue*) **stories** – sure, they can be interesting, perhaps even entertaining at times, but they can also be **dangerous** and lead to **serious consequences**, especially when **blindly believed** or **acted upon without further investigation**.

Discerning fact from fiction is a bit more involving these days, given how technology enables people to spread and react to such information instantaneously. As some media sources attempt to be more entertaining, focusing on opinions and sensationalism rather than **objective journalistic research** and reporting, any truth to be found can remain hidden. Mix in a little **social media** – some shares and "likes" – and things can suddenly "**go viral**," spreading quickly on and beyond the World Wide Web, even if such assertions are incorrect or completely baseless.

"**Fake news**" **stories** are not exclusive to the Internet or election cycles. In fact, untrue news has proliferated since the invention of the printing press, and was there, long before that, traveling mainly by word of mouth or radio. One famous example is **Orson Welles' 1938 "War of the Worlds" broadcast**, which provoked nationwide panic over the possibility of an alien invasion. Throughout history, fake news stories were often used as propaganda, advancing certain interests and agendas, shaping public opinions, and perpetuating misperceptions deliberately, as this blog post (www.thrall.org/e?134) from *Scientific American* and this article (www.thrall.org/e?135) from *Columbia Journalism Review* explain.

Combating **lies**, detecting **bias**, discovering **larger truths**, and raising **awareness** (in ourselves and others) of potential **disinformation** has always presented challenges, particularly where answers are not as obvious or clearly defined as we might prefer. We must keep these things in mind as we approach a central question here: **how can we know if something is fake?**

Which leads to another question: **where can we turn in our search for truth?** If it were simply a matter of finding **reliable information sources**, we could simply consult such sources. But **there are no perfect and infallible sources**. Experts can misspeak or make mistakes. Respected sources can publish incorrect statements or retract stories entirely.

With regards to online news, **the Web is essentially an ever-expanding mass of information put there by anyone from anywhere**, professional or otherwise. Old information and perceptions can persist. More current and complete information could be buried in millions of **search results** no human has the time to inspect. Knowledge and understandings develop and spread imperfectly. **Accepted "facts" can change over time** as *new* information comes to light. Then, **there are always those who deliberately attempt to distort or obliterate truth**.

We must often go *beyond* simple skepticism, question apparent authority, and begin to inquire more deeply. Thankfully, you are not entirely left on your own in these matters! Some notable "**fact-checkers**," such as **FactCheck.org** and **PolitiFact.com**, are tracking and evaluating certain news items. Other news agencies and organizations, such as National Public Radio (**NPR.org**), are making efforts to educate the public on the phenomenon of fake news (e.g. "Fake Or Real? How to Self-Check the News and Get the Facts" – www.thrall.org/e?136).

Thrall is also here to help! In addition to our **Critical Thinking Skills** website (www.thrall.org/think), where you can begin to learn some of the questions you should be asking (e.g. via our printable **Web Checklist**), we also offer lists of websites you visit to verify or deconstruct various assertions, hoaxes, popular misconceptions, and trending news topics.

Our online **Ready Reference** guide (www.thrall.org/readyref), contains links to potentially helpful websites as well as items within the library system catalog under the following subject areas:

Fact Checkers

Issues & Viewpoints

Media Watchdogs & News Analysis

Urban Legends

Members of Thrall / RCLS libraries can also use our **Opposing Viewpoints database** (www.thrall.org/ovp) to explore various issues and become informed on established or challenged perspectives.

Beyond that, the totality of **our library's collections**, traditional and electronic **informational services**, and our **dedicated librarians** are available to you all year long. Also, as part of a **larger collective of libraries** (RCLS), we can help you locate materials on nearly any topic imaginable – however fanciful *or* true – across *many different libraries*.

Please remember this: in your lifelong search for truth and understanding, you have a **permanent ally and friend** here at the public library, the **only nonprofit institution in this world devoted, every single day by its very mission, to serve everyone by preserving and providing free and comprehensive access to the spectrum of human knowledge**.