

Hello everyone and welcome back to *This is Berthoud*. I am Amie, your local librarian, and this is the podcast where I get to talk about all the things that you are talking about so that together we have something new to think about. Disclaimers first, I'm a librarian, not a lawyer or a doctor or an accountant, so you'll get advice about finding and processing information on this show but no legal or medical advice or tax advice, or anything like that.

Let's get going. Today we're going to talk about fake news. Now, I can already hear some of you, even though you're not in the room with me. "Oh, Amie, I don't need to talk about fake news because I know how to tell real news from fake news and I never spread fake news." Well, let's just say that I'm on social media with a bunch of you and I've heard the conversations that happen in the produce aisle at Hays, and I can tell you that Berthoud is just as susceptible to the influence of fake news as any other community is.

Why is that? First of all, it's because we're all biased. People object to hearing that, because the word "bias" has taken on a negative connotation recently. How often have you heard someone say, "Well, that's a biased opinion," and the other person fires back with, "I'm not biased!" In reality we're all biased. After all, a bias is simply a way of viewing the world, and since none of us have lived the exact same life as any other person, we all have completely unique ways of viewing the world. That's right, each one of you is completely special, just like everyone else. Part of the problem is that we equate being biased with being prejudiced, and that isn't necessarily the case. It can be, but it doesn't have to be. How you arrive at your conclusions and form your biases is a discussion for a different day, but for today you should know that if we can't admit that we are biased then there's no hope for us in our battle against fake news.

There are two kinds of biases in particular that make us susceptible to believing and spreading fake news, and those are implicit bias and confirmation bias. *Psychology Today* did an article, it's called "Fake News: Why We Fall For It," and in that article they define implicit bias this way: "(quote) Implicit bias refers to the idea that as humans we have a tendency to group people into categories. We are inclined to trust people we consider a member of our own group more than those of a different group. (end quote)" Now most of the time this is a very helpful bias that we have. If I'm wondering about how a change in a policy might affect the way we offer services here at the library, putting my trust in a group of people who are also leaders in public libraries is a useful strategy. People find common ground and trust each other. It is important to know that the same individuals that we might trust in some circumstances could fall into that "other" group in a different set of circumstances. If we go back to my example, I may trust library leaders when it comes to running the library, but it doesn't necessarily mean that I trust them in matters of politics or religion or knowing which professional baseball team is the greatest. (Chicago Cubs, always.) So thinking through which people you have a tendency to trust, and what things you are willing to take their advice about, is helpful. That will help you understand your personal implicit bias.

So that's implicit bias; the other sort of red-flag bias when it comes to fake news is confirmation bias. That *Psychology Today* article says this about confirmation bias: "(quote) Confirmation bias refers to our tendency to seek out information that confirms what we already know or believe to be true. We are likely to believe "facts" that conform to our beliefs. More startling, we may actually turn a blind eye to facts that contradict our beliefs. (end quote)" Did you catch that? Our brains like to form an opinion and then go look for confirmation, rather than look for information and then form an opinion. And if true facts turn up that contradict what we already want to think about a topic, we ignore those facts.

And of course, just to complicate things further, these two kinds of biases work together. If someone that we are inclined to trust tells us something that is untrue, we are likely to believe them, particularly if that untrue thing confirms something we already want to think. If someone we're not inclined to trust tells us a true thing, we're likely to dismiss it, especially if that true thing contradicts our opinion. All of this creates an amazing environment for the spread of fake news. We want to blame Russia or the media, but reality is we're fighting our own psychological wiring more than anything else.

Now let me be clear, most fake news is not an outright lie. Except for topics which are extraordinarily divisive, most of us are capable of spotting the outright lie. If you're not sure why extraordinarily divisive topics make us more susceptible to believing outright lies, understand that our tendency to mentally group people into trustworthy and untrustworthy categories is amplified when the divisions are obvious, and we're that much more likely to believe something untrue from those that we trust under those circumstances.

But most fake news is far more subtle than an outright lie. So one of the first things you need to do to identify fake news is consider the different biases of your news sources. Understand that we take in our news from a wide variety of sources-- sure, newspapers and TV news anchors are sort of traditional sources, but social media and casual conversations over bunches of bananas at Hays are also sources of news for us.

TV news channels, radio DJs, websites and community members all have their own biases and leanings, and understanding what those are or may be is the first step to understanding how trustworthy their information is. See how your own biases do or do not align with those of your news source, and consider how implicit bias or confirmation bias may affect your willingness to hear and analyze what your source has to say.

If you are hearing news from a person, an individual that you know and hang around with, find out what that person's source is. Chances are, the more times a piece of news has been passed around, the more distorted it has become. The simple strategy of not passing on a story until you've gotten down to the source of it can be helpful. "I wasn't there, but I heard..." or, "Someone said..." are the kinds of phrases that should make you pause and do some digging of your own before you pass on that little tidbit. Like it or not, what comes after the phrase, "Well, someone said..." is typically gossip, not news. Verify before you share.

But what if your news source isn't another person, but an actual source of news. Again, the first thing to remember is that TV news anchors and radio personalities and editors also have biases, and it's important to know what those are. If you think that a particular source of news doesn't seem biased at all, please remember implicit and confirmation bias. It may be that there doesn't seem to be a bias there because what they're sharing so closely matches what you already believe.

When it comes to legitimate news sources, most of the bias and most of the fake news plays out in what gets included and what gets left out of stories. Now it's easy to find out what is included, right? You read or listen to or view the story and take note of what is said. Finding out what isn't included takes a little bit more work but isn't actually all that difficult either. Find another news source, preferably one that has different leanings than the one where you originally saw the story, and see what take others have on what went down. Different news agencies will include different details, so that can help you corroborate (that's a difficult word for me to say) corroborate and fill in the holes in a story. If you can't find any other source covering the event that you're researching, you may have found a completely fake story, but that's pretty rare. It's

more likely you'll find multiple other sources with a different perspective. It's also a good idea if someone is quoted to see if you can find a transcript or a video of the entire interview. It's surprisingly easy to pick and choose different sentences and sound bites from an interview that can completely change the tone of the whole thing. The same thing goes if a news story references a report-- go read the report. That will help you get the facts of the report rather than another human being's take on that report.

I can also give you some strategies for spotting fake news that require a little bit less analysis. First, be sure the news is coming from the source that you think it is. That sounds obvious, but especially in our online world, people have built some extremely sophisticated and convincing spoofs of legitimate news websites, so confirm your source every time. Foxnews.com is the official website/ of Fox News; foxnews.news.com is not, so pay attention. Be aware that reporters and photographers and videographers all want credit for their work, so if you're reading a story without an author listed, or there's a picture or a video accompanying what you're seeing and no reference to who took that picture or video, proceed with caution. Make sure that any accompanying pictures or videos relate to the story and are actually new-- sometimes you'll see pictures from previous events or clips from prior interviews connected with new stories, and that's often used as a way to spin things. Some of you may have seen that this spring when a news story about Covid-19 and how it's affecting ER service in the United States included a clip that some people recognized from an earlier story about ERs in Italy. People were paying attention, and that did not go over well. Identify the author and search for other articles that are written by that individual. Watch for anonymous sources in a story. Sometimes those make sense, especially in whistleblower situations, but too many anonymous sources quoted on a particular topic should make you think a bit. Check the date and time on a story-- sometimes news agencies will recycle old stories without new content. Check the "about us" section of a website or a news source, looking for things like policy statements, and if you can't find that, skim through a few other stories from a source to see if you can gauge their biases or their attention to details. Finally, simply run the story through a fact-checking website. Sometimes we don't like the results that we get-- we find out somebody actually said the thing that we were hoping that they didn't, or results that we wanted to see didn't happen-- but it's a simple and easy way to make sure you aren't contributing to the spread of misinformation. We like factcheck.org, snopes.com, and politifact.com here at the library.

The best advice I can give: if you're not sure, don't share. Make a rule for yourself that you won't participate in gossip, you won't hit "share" on social media until you've confirmed what you've seen, whatever you need to do to be sure that you're thinking critically and not blindly swallowing and regurgitating whatever stories come your way. That sounds gross. Um, I guess in some ways it is gross, so I stand by my statement. If you're not sure and you're having trouble navigating the intricacies of a particular story, give us a call here at the library. Analyzing and sharing accurate information is a good part of what we do here. You can always call us at 970-532-2757, or if you want to send me an email you can shoot one off to podcast.bclld@gmail.com. Once again, thanks everyone for listening, and I'm happy to say This is Berthoud.

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Psychology Today, "Fake News: Why We Fall For It,"
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/contemporary-psychoanalysis-in-action/201612/fake-news-why-we-fall-it>, accessed 6/9/2020