How young people are coping with 'fake news'

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How 'literate' are young people when it comes to getting their news on social media?

Niklas McKerrell is a sixth-form student who attended a recent Polis workshop with Facebook looking at 'news literacy'. Here are his views on how his generation is coping with 'fake news' and the struggle to find reliable information online.

Young people have been developing buffers to 'fake news' long before it hit the headlines in the last year. Take 'the dress' in early February 2015- a viral debate over whether a dress designed to fool the eye was blue and black, or white and gold. Or social media popularisation of MTV hit series 'Catfish', where those who find online love are led to meet the real person they have been talking to, highlighting the problems of false identities online. The culture of social media has fostered a mind-set whereby people I know do not digest information at face value, even if we don't call it being 'critical of our sources'.

This doesn't, however, mean we are inoculated from the impact of deliberately misleading content We are just as likely as anyone else to ignore the factual integrity of an article if it aligns with our views. This has been seen to be the bulwark of the 'alt-right', but the fact that the left are also guilty of sharing and spreading hoaxes or biased material shows that it's as much of a way to perpetuate lies and propaganda, as it is an indication of our failures in checking the integrity of the articles we share.

The way that young people consume information is changing, and in many ways this is helping to curb the spread of fake news. BuzzFeed, for example, requires its users to be 'active' consumers. As well as news articles, it uses polls, discussion sections and puzzles to form a reciprocal relationship with its users. It has also recently released its own manual on how to recognise fake news in BuzzFeed's familiar bold and interactive style.

BuzzFeed is designed for the Internet and for many critics it's popularity is symptomatic of the demise of traditional content for 'Facebook-style' news sources. But this is not necessarily the case. For many young consumers, BuzzFeed sits alongside the Guardian app, the FT, Economist Espresso and the BBC on their phones. Of course, for some, Facebook groups such as the 'LadBible' will be their only source of news – providing a more narrow outlook of current affairs. But I think the fact that young people are recognised for their ability to juggle various social

media platforms should mean that their ability to access various news sources should not come as a massive surprise.

'Fake news' clearly presents a problem, primarily because for many young people there is so much ambiguity over exactly what it represents. The fact that the term is used interchangeably by US politicians to describe news they don't like and by companies such as Facebook trying to curb the spread of hoax articles exacerbates this misunderstanding.

Media platforms and news organisations have a responsibility to set out the problem, but intervention should not go beyond this, especially as the role of an arbiter raises its own issues. Similarly, schools have a responsibility to improve and enforce their existing teaching on information literacy, but I don't believe that this should be just about fake news nor should it be about telling young people what is or is not believable. A teacher distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' websites runs the risk of creating a passive online user, when fake news requires an active, critical online user for its problems to be curbed.

This article by Niklas McKerrell.

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*For more information in this field, check out the Department of Media and Communications' **EU Kids Online** project led by Professor Sonia Livingstone. EU Kids Online seeks to enhance knowledge of European children's online opportunities, risks and safety. It uses multiple methods to map children's and parents' experience of the internet, in dialogue with national and European policy stakeholders.*