



Faking It How You Can Combat The Proliferation Of Fake News

written by:
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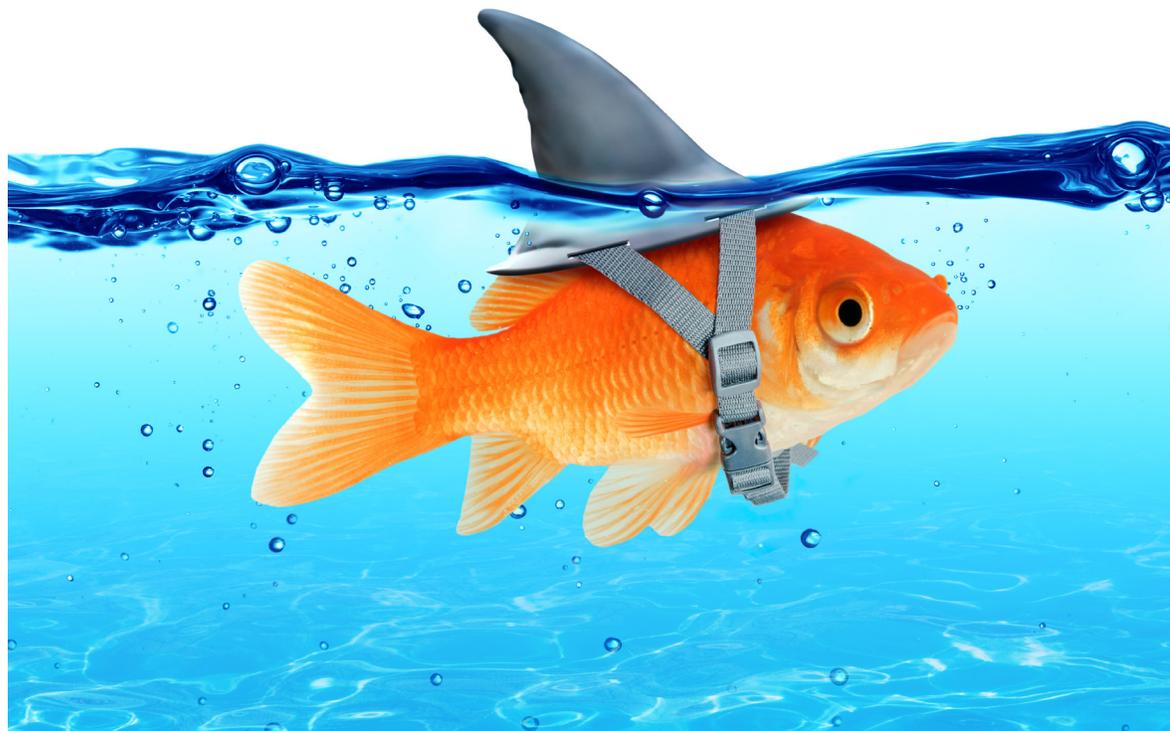
At 23, Cameron Harris wanted to set himself apart. He was looking to start a consulting business during the crazy 2016 political season, but he had bills to pay. As a recent graduate from a college where tuition is over \$45,000 per year, Harris decided he'd write a fake news story and see how much attention—and Google/Facebook ad revenue—it would attract. Harris fabricated a tale about ballot boxes full of fraudulent votes for Hillary Clinton found in an Ohio warehouse. He bolstered his story by creating numerous, official-sounding sites across several social media platforms and enthusiastically shared his fabricated news as if everyone was talking about it. It worked. Astonishingly, his story would be shared 6 million times and he'd make \$22,000 dollars in a few months from the ads placed on his suddenly popular website. Some say the story also may have swayed a teetering presidential election.¹

Click Bait

Fake news stories are designed to get people to click on links. Social media content developers potentially receive revenue every time you and I click on a link or share a story or video. According to a *Washington Post* article,² it's not uncommon for some teenagers to earn \$5,000 per month or more using “fake news sites as a way to make easy money from American gullibility.” Although some social media venues have announced they will begin cracking down on fake news sites and stories, these hosting companies also make big money from these clicks. It's best to assume fake news is here to stay.

Social Media Can Sway Societies

While many are creating fake news as a means to earn easy money, we can't discount that others may be bent on fundamentally changing the very fabric of societies. If we have not yet done so, it's time to come to grips with the power and potential of social media to influence our society and our world. “Social networks are helping to fundamentally rewire human society,” according to Farhad Manjoo with the *New York Times*.³ “They have subsumed and gutted mainstream media. They have



undone traditional political advantages like fund-raising and access to advertising. And they are destabilizing and replacing old-line institutions and established ways of doing things.” Of course, change is not necessarily bad. Social media can be harnessed for good or bad, truth or deception.

Rise Up Informed Electorate!

With all that in mind, it’s vital for us to resolve to be discerning and informed citizens, understanding that there are those who make a game—and small fortunes—out of misleading us. This is not surprising in a society where, according to the *Washington Times*,⁴ average college students (and if we are honest, many among us) were able to identify the Kardashians but not Ronald Reagan or former Vice President Joe Biden. How much more do we all need to be familiar with and understand our own U.S. Constitution and its priceless concepts? Thomas Jefferson, drafter of the Declaration of Independence, said, “If a nation

expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

So What Do We Do?

We all—I’m talking to myself, too—need to resolve to: dig deeper; read credible sources, important articles and good books; and replace some of the time spent on sillier pursuits with meaningful ones. In much the same way as we all work toward a balanced diet (with fewer empty calories and more foods that nourish and strengthen us), we need to resolve to spend more time each day on activities that will make us deeper and more thoughtful people and thus more knowledgeable and valuable citizens of our communities and this great country.

- **Know A Credible Source When You See One.** This is much like the analogy regarding the best way to recognize counterfeit money: Study the real thing! Regularly reading credible news sources can help us all recognize when stories are less than credible or altogether fake. In

general, go back to original documents or “primary sources” whenever possible. Read peer-reviewed articles and polls from established organizations first; then seek others’ interpretations. Quite often, we can’t see the bias in stories because we have not seen the original documents for ourselves.

- **Know Where To Look In The Original Documents.** There’s nothing wrong with seeking out the perspective of people you trust to help interpret the events of our day. But occasionally, dig out the original documents behind a big story and scan or read them for yourself. Some gigantic documents may seem overwhelming at first, but often the main point is written clearly and in everyday language if you know where to find it. In research articles, simply look for the “Findings” section. For government reports, look for “Recommendations” or something similar. These sections are usually toward the beginning and/or end of the file. Unfortunately,



finding the actual documents can often be a challenge. It's interesting that even the most credible news sites usually don't provide links to these resources. I suppose they want us to just take their word for it!

- **Read many sources.** Even seasoned journalists fall for fake news occasionally, but you're less likely to be duped if you include a wide range of mainstream sources in your news mix. If you make a habit of scanning different news sites (from far right, to far left, and a few in between), you'll begin to understand the story from all sides. There is nothing wrong with reading "far out" bloggers and websites, but be sure you're balancing those with differing perspectives. When we dare to read and listen to people who disagree with us, we understand their perspective better and are more prepared to make reasonable arguments. For an interesting take on what's happening in our country, read or listen to foreign news occasionally.
- **Study the U.S. Constitution.** How long has it been since you've read over America's founding documents? They are as brilliant today as the day they were written!

If you'd like to do more than read the U.S. Constitution, you could take a free online course that Hillsdale College requires of all of its students. It's a 10-week course entitled, "Constitution 101: The Meaning and History of the Constitution."⁵ It might be a great family endeavor!

- **Be a Student of History.** Reading history these days can be a lot of fun if you can find books that take accuracy seriously. There are quite a few historically-based novels available, which rely on diaries, letters, newspaper articles and other firsthand sources. They aim to create a compelling story around historical figures that help you understand their character, motivation and flaws. Right now, I'm reading *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. For an interesting look at Thomas Jefferson through the eyes of his daughter, you might enjoy *America's First Daughter*. And for a surprisingly inspiring book about James Garfield, I can highly recommend

Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine and the Murder of a President.

Two words of caution: 1) Remember these novels take liberties with dialogue and events, and 2) Watch out for romance novels masquerading as historical novels. That can be an eye-opening experience!

- **Cling to Biblical Principles** As Christians, we understand that the guiding principles contained in the Bible are as relevant to our lives today as ever. Measuring everything we read and hear against the wisdom found in the Word of God is the most important way we can keep from getting off center in what we believe to be true. One final note: As Christians, we have always been called to be counter-cultural and discerning. This should be nothing new for us. In Acts 17, the Bereans had the honor of being taught by the Apostle Paul himself. And yet, they took everything Paul said and went back to the Scriptures every day to make sure what he said was true! In the same way, let us be intentional about learning more and growing deeper so that we may be knowledgeable resources in our families, communities and nation. 🏠

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Endnotes

1. www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/us/fake-news-hillary-clinton-cameron-harris.html?_r=0
2. www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/11/18/this-is-how-the-internets-fake-news-writers-make-money/?utm_term=.fa37b14d2e24
3. www.nytimes.com/2016/11/17/technology/social-medias-globe-shaking-power.html
4. www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/feb/18/george-mason-students-cant-identify-ronald-reagan/
5. <http://lp.hillsdale.edu/constitution-101-signup/>



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