Fake News FAQ

An interview with expert Dr. Jess Berentson-Shaw

In collaboration with netsafe

Dr Jess Berentson-Shaw is the author of the book A Matter of Fact. Talking Truth in a Post Truth World.

What defines fake news?

Fake news or even 'fake media' are popular terms you might hear used to describe two types of false information that are created to mislead people into believing lies or doubting the truth. These two types of false information are called disinformation and misinformation.

Disinformation is false information created with the intention of harming a person, group, organization or even a country.

Misinformation is false information that people didn't create with the intention to hurt others. For example, some health conspiracy theories circulate with good intentions for the wellbeing of others.

There is also a third type of fake news called **mal-information**. This is true information used with ill intent. For example, spreading information about someone's sexual activities when it is of no public interest.

Why is fake news dangerous?

Misinformation and disinformation can divide and harm people, their families, specific groups of people and wider society.

For people, their whānau, families and loved ones, false information, whether spread with ill or good intent, can prevent people from following good advice or taking the right care of themselves or others. For example, this might mean people may not get immunized against serious illnesses, making themselves and others more vulnerable to the illness.

Disinformation and misinformation may also work to convince people to believe or do something harmful. For example, take or use health treatments that aren't proven remedies. These treatments may cost a lot of money and may have little to no effect on the individual, which can, in some cases, cause real harm.

Misinformation and disinformation can also cause people to think incorrect and harmful things about specific groups of society, and encourage people, and those who listen to them, to act in prejudiced and harmful ways, often with hate speech or even violence. This ultimately causes division by making the internet and wider society an unsafe place for people from these groups.

Misinformation and disinformation can also hurt our society on a deeper level. It can cause people to stop trusting important knowledge institutions that we rely on to provide good information, like the media or scientific institutions.

It can also lead to people distrusting others in places like the government, which we need to keep a democratic society working.

The risk is that when people don't trust any information from anyone because there is too much misinformation floating around, they may stop listening to scientists, the media, lose interest in politics and stop voting or engaging with democratic institutions entirely. This can destabilize our communities and interfere with important democratic processes like free and fair elections. At its worst, it can allow people with bad intentions to hold power, while suppressing the voices of people who object.

Who creates fake news & why does it spread?

There are people who intend harm by creating and spreading false information (disinformation) and there also people who create false information without bad intentions (misinformation). Both disinformation and misinformation disseminate because of the concerns and care people have for others, like their children, family members and their community.

Sometimes people have good reasons to not trust official information because of bad experiences they or people they know have had in the past. This often means they trust information from friends and family on Facebook, who themselves might be unaware that the information they are sharing is false.

Sometimes, false information spreads because it's alarming. Humans tend to respond very quickly to information that shocks and their natural response is to share it with others. It's probably a useful evolutionary behavior that helped keep our ancestors safe, however, on social media it's less helpful.

A large part of why false information spreads so far today is the way our social media platforms have been designed. The more a piece of information is shared and spread (its reach), the more money the people who own the social media platform can make. So much of the technology has been built in a way that makes it very easy for people, and even encourages them, to share false and alarming information.

How do I know if the information I'm reading is good information?

Sometimes it's just really hard to know. Some information is clearly true and some is clearly false, but there's also a lot of grey area in between. It's impossible for any one person to hold all the amazing knowledge that has been gathered in the world over centuries from across cultures. Here a few tips for spotting untrustworthy information:

Looking past the person who is providing the information can sometimes help give you a clue. Try and identify whether the person is being funded by an institution who is financially benefiting from the mistruth. If you can't trace something back from a social media post to an original source that's not a good sign.

Read about the information from a few different sources. Look to see if there is any other information available about whether this might be false information. Google, YouTube and other search engines may not give you the most reliable answer to this. It's better to use a trustworthy website.

Ask a person you trust, who works in the area to look at it. This could be a community leader for example.

Knowing whether information is good can be a bit harder, because that's one of the negative effects of too much false information – we don't know who or what to trust.

In New Zealand, we have access to a lot of publicly funded sources of good information on health for example, that are listed on this site.

You can look for a description of who the people are that have written or provided the information, a code of practice or ethics, some transparency about who funds the site and what their motivations are, or an explanation about why they can be trusted.

Ask people from a few different communities, with different knowledge from your own, if there are sources of information they trust is. If something comes up a few times that can be a good indicator of a trustworthy source.

I think I've spotted fake news. What can I do?

If it comes from a media outlet or organization you can contact the organization and let them know.

You can also help people in government and media institutions to fight misinformation and disinformation by letting them know you support laws and policies that help reduce misinformation and disinformation being spread on social media. Talk to your local representative or write a letter to them about your concerns.

If you see false information on social media, **avoid sharing it** – even if you want to tell people it's misinformation. Sharing it even with the intention of letting others know it's false can help it spread further. Instead, if you think they may not have seen it yet, you can let your friends and family know they may see some false information coming into their timelines about an issue.

Let them know that you're aware they're concerned about the topic that the information they're spreading is false and instead give them the true information (or link them to some information you know is trustworthy). If you think someone may not trust that source of information, but will trust you, you can repeat the true information from a good source without linking to it. This is called pre-bunking.

Someone I know has shared fake news. What should I do?

Firstly, recognize that often people do this with good intentions for others, not because they intend harm (though unfortunately, this is not always the case). Let them know you can see they care about the issue. Let them know this is false or incorrect information and you are concerned it is causing harm to people you both care about. Again, show them the true information, include links if you think that is helpful, and even invite them to have a chat about it if that works for you. Ask them to not share the false information or to delete it if they have already shared it.

Leading out these conversations with facts, or telling people they are wrong straight out, won't help them think differently. Instead, start with why you care, or why you think they care. Listening to them before sharing your opinion is a really useful tool in one-on-one conversations about misinformation. If people refuse to discuss it with you or get angry, just say what you need about it being false and why it matters to you and leave it at that. Remember other people who may not comment on social media will be reading your comments and you are talking to them as much as the person sharing the information.

Websites you can trust.

Health and wellbeing

Health Navigator is a trustworthy source of health information for NZ.

This UK based website is a trustworthy and helpful source of information about illness and treatments for all countries: https://patient.info

The Cochrane Library is a highly reliable independent source of research on health treatments, with plain language summaries.

For people who are Māori and Pacific, here are some trustworthy sources of health and wellbeing information:

http://hapai.co.nz

Any Whanau Ora providers (North and South)

https://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/whakamahia/whanau-ora
http://pasifikafutures.co.nz

Immunization

The Immunization advisory center provides NZ will latest research on immunisation:
https://www.immune.org.nz

Anyone in NZ can ring Healthline for free for good trustworthy health information
https://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/services-and-support/health-care-services/healthline

COVID-19

https://covid19.govt.nz

For people who are Maori during COVID-19

http://hapai.co.nz/covid-19-info-hub
https://www.uruta.maori.nz