

The Stakes Are High: Misinformation, Fake News and Threats to Democracy

Healthy skepticism is one thing, but citizens need tools and skills to identify and report disinformation

1. Abstract

Misinformation and fake news, made-up content deceptively presented as real news, have been hot topics since the 2016 Brexit referendum and United States presidential election. Indeed, the terms “misinformation”, “fake news” and “post-truth” were all “Words of the Year” in 2016, 2017 and 2018 on various online dictionaries like Dictionary.com, Collins and Oxford. There’s always been untruths and misinformation for as long as people have communicated. But with the rise of social media, everyone effectively has their own printing press or broadcast station on their computer or smart phone. Purveyors of all sorts of falsehoods and misinformation can make a global impact – and quickly. Often, by the time the untruths are revealed, hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, have consumed lies, but then don’t digest the truth. Sadly, there’s no easy fix but lots of questions. How deeply can the lies destabilize and crack the foundations of democracies? Will the fake news problem get worse as younger generations rely much more heavily on digital media for news than older generations? Or will tech savvy youngsters and detection technology deter the exponential growth of fake news? Canada is certainly not immune, but is our nation somewhat better protected than larger, more economically powerful democracies like the U.S., United Kingdom, Germany and France? What can we, as informed citizens, do to avoid fake news? Does it lead to further left-right polarization of the population by triggering motivated reasoning, the bias toward a decision that conforms to what a person already believes? Is it sowing seeds of distrust in leaders and promoting hatred and recruitment of people to extremists groups? The reality is, fake news is a clear and present danger.

2. Introduction

As citizens in a democracy, we all have responsibility to stay informed about the issues that matter to Canadian society. This is true all the time, but especially when we must make a meaningful choice at the ballot box like the upcoming federal election.

Not long ago, people – that is professional journalists and news editors – were the sole gatekeepers who decided what news audiences saw. But in today’s digital world that job, more often than not, now belongs to computer programs. Social media algorithms work in such a way that we are more likely to see content that is similar to what we already like or agree with. Our social media feeds never give the whole picture and they can be manipulated and infected with untruths. They can trigger motivated reasoning, an unconscious, biased way of processing information that can trap even the smartest people into believing falsehoods that support their ideological and partisan dispositions.¹

There are so many good things about today’s mobile technology – like ordering a car or food with our phones, seeing real-time maps so we don’t get lost, instantly finding out how our friends and favourite sports teams are doing – but fake news is not one of them. If ignored, fake news and its serpentine malevolence can choke democratic society as we become more and more polarized.

"This confusion creates an erosion of trust that is a very real threat to the foundation of our democracy," says Natalie Turvey, President and Executive Director of the Canadian Journalism Foundation. "Manipulation and misinformation sow many seeds; from distrust of leaders and unfounded damages to reputations to promoting hatred and accelerating recruitment to extremist groups."

To her point, Statistics Canada recently reported there was a massive 47-per-cent year-over-year increase in Canadian hate crimes in 2017, the most recent numbers.²

The Canadian Journalism Foundation commissioned Earnscliffe Strategy Group to conduct a substantive online News Consumption Survey of 2,359 respondents proportionally representing all regions of Canada in early April 2019. The typical online poll has a pool of 1,000 to 1,500 people. This larger sample means the numbers are statistically plus or minus 2 percentage points.

While the findings are perhaps jarring – such as 40% of Canadians feel not very confident or not confident at all in their ability to tell the difference between accurate, real news reports and stories containing misinformation and fake news – the silver lining of the study would be Canadians are much more aware of the problem. As the saying goes: The first step in solving a problem is recognizing there is one.

The CJF-Earnscliffe study found marked generational differences in how news is consumed, how younger and older people come across their news, differences in where they get their news and explosive growth in news consumption via smart phones, and how the generations deal with

¹<https://newswise.ca/module/internet/>

² <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-hate-crimes-in-canada-surge-with-most-not-solved/>

fake news when they discover it. (Younger consumers are much more likely to report the bogus content to social media platforms, while older consumers shrug and forget about it, for example.)

This White Paper will look at misinformation and the attention economy through the lens of the Earncliffe market data, as well as delving into other fact-based research and expert opinion to identify trends and offer viable solutions to combat the problem.

For example, a vital part of the strategy must involve media literacy training for consumers of news; equipping them with the tools to gauge the legitimacy of news sources, while at the same time acknowledging their own cognitive biases which may trip them into a web of fake news. “There is, without doubt, a need for greater news literacy,” CJF’s Turvey says.

With the coming federal election, the Google News Initiative generously granted the CJF \$1 million to expand its NewsWise program to help all Canadians understand how to identify authentic news from misinformation. Aimed at educating audiences on how to understand and navigate an increasingly complex information environment, this grant will provide Canadian publishers with tools – such as interactive PSAs and other digital content - developed by experts and educators.³ The popular NewsWise website began in 2018; geared to students from Grade 5 to 12.

3. The Fake News Phenomenon

As stated, there have always been untruths and misinformation for as long as people have communicated. But the big difference today comes through technology, especially with the rise of social media. There are many definitions and interpretations of fake news, misinformation and disinformation. For the purposes of this White Paper, fake news is false information that is disseminated or propagated with the deliberate intent to mislead and deceive.

Purveyors’ motivation can be as wide-ranging as political or ideological reasons and helping destabilize democracies, to as specific as driving page views and advertising revenue with titillating click-bait gossip and innuendo. *The Washington Post*, *BuzzFeed*, the *New York Times* and others have reported these fake news purveyors easily earn \$5,000 to \$10,000 or more per month this way.⁴

Two of the most famous examples of concerted and organized disinformation campaigns occurred during the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the U.S. presidential election, each sowing discord and confusion. The overall landscape of misinformation practices

³ <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/google-news-initiative-grants-canadian-journalism-foundation-1-million-to-tackle-fake-news-870263440.html>

⁴ <https://blog.adbeat.com/fake-news/>

is fluid and each fake news campaign is unique. But campaigns occur frequently and deceptively.

The Citizen Lab, part of the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy at the University of Toronto, is unearthing all kinds of geopolitical fake news campaigns. It's most recent involves something called *Endless Mayfly*, an Iran-aligned network of inauthentic websites and online personas used to spread false and divisive information primarily targeting Saudi Arabia, the U.S. and Israel.⁵

Researching the pro-Iranian fake news operation for two years, the Citizen Lab found an elaborate array of look-alike websites and social media to spread bogus articles attacking Iran's enemies. As an example of the fluid nature of misinformation practices, when the phony reports were picked up by mainstream news organizations, the purveyors quickly took down the fake news to make it more difficult to track the deception.

"They deleted their fake stories once they achieved some buzz," Gabrielle Lim, a lead author of the Citizen Lab report, told the *New York Times*. "This made it hard for regular users to figure out what was happening, and hid the original source of the disinformation."⁶

Closer to home, there have been many fake news examples emanating from Canada, including the Quebec mosque shooting in 2017, the North Toronto van attack and Danforth shooting, both occurring in 2018. All three were painted with fake news about jihadist terrorism and none were. Perhaps the worst example of misinformation involved the mosque shooting.

There were a half-dozen casualties and six deaths that night on January 29, 2017. A far-right website put up a video insinuating that another mosque might be linked to the shooting. And amid the chaos immediately following the shooting, several news sites mistakenly reported that one of the suspects was a young Muslim man of Moroccan background named Mohamed Belkhadir, who had been detained by police.

Belkhadir, who was questioned by police, was a witness who was helping victims. When that was clarified, reputable news organizations righted the wrong, but it was too late to stop the fake news seeping well beyond Canada's borders. *Fox News* tweeted about a shooter of "Moroccan origin" and the tweet remained up long after other news sources confirmed Alexandre Bissonnette, a white supremacist, was the only suspect. *Infowars in America* used the misinformation to hammer away at the dangers posed by immigrants and multiculturalism. Others tweeted things about how Prime Minister Justin Trudeau pandered to refugees and terrorists. It was ugly and in the end, the lone shooter Bissonnette was sentenced to a minimum of 40 years in prison.

⁵ <https://citizenlab.ca/2019/05/burned-after-reading-endless-mayflies-ephemeral-disinformation-campaign/>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/14/world/middleeast/iran-fake-news-report.html>

“Through your hatred and racism, you have destroyed the lives of dozens and dozens of people, and have irretrievably ruined yours and those of your family members,” Superior Court Justice François Huot told Bissonnette at sentencing in February 2019. The judge said Bissonnette was “motivated by a visceral hatred toward Muslim immigrants.”⁷

Beyond the deaths and injuries, perhaps the saddest part of the story was the fake news and its impact on the minds of those who read and heard it, but missed the truth. Jonathan Swift, the 18th century Irish satirist and author of *Gulliver’s Travels*, once wrote: “Falsehood flies, and the truth comes limping after it.” And such is the case with fake news in general, and the Quebec mosque shooting in particular.

The initial *Fox News* tweet about the shooter being of “Moroccan origin” was retweeted more than 900 times but when Fox finally tweeted the correct information it was retweeted only 72 times.⁸ A major study by *Science* magazine in 2018 discovered a false story today reaches “1,500 people six times quicker, on average, than a true story does.” After analyzing 126,000 stories on Twitter, *Science* found: “Fake news and false rumors reach more people, penetrate deeper into the social network, and spread much faster than accurate stories.”⁹

That, in part, is why The Canadian Journalism Foundation commissioned Earncliffe to study how Canadians consume news, especially as related to fake news. There have been a number of studies, some Canadian, showing consumers of news might not be as well-equipped to separate quality information from false information as they think. When tested, the results show people are often overly confident trying to discern real and reputable news from fake news.

One of the most startling experiments comes from Stanford University in California. In 2017, researchers purposely *did not* want a random sample. They wanted smart people with degrees of expertise and online proficiency. The study sample consisted of 10 historians, 10 fact checkers and 25 students. Each participant engaged in a variety of online searches while researchers observed and recorded what they did on-screen.

In one test, participants were asked to assess the reliability of information from the websites of two different groups: the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the largest professional organization of pediatricians in the world, and the American College of Pediatricians (ACPed), a much smaller advocacy group that characterizes homosexuality as a harmful lifestyle choice and is against same-sex couples adopting children.

⁷ <https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/quebec-mosque-shooter-alexandre-bissonnette-sentenced-to-40-years>

⁸ <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2018/12/14/opinion/oh-canada-dont-be-smug-fake-news-real-and-present-threat>

⁹ <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146>

Fact checkers easily identified the ACPeds' biased position. Historians largely expressed the belief that both pediatricians' sites were reliable sources of information. And students overwhelmingly judged ACPeds' site the more reliable one.

"It was extremely easy to see what [ACPeds] stood for," Professor Sam Wineburg, co-author of the study, said in a news story on the Stanford website. All participants were highly educated and web savvy.¹⁰

Perhaps the most startling data from the CJF-Earnscliffe study may actually be good news. We're referring to the fact that 40% of Canadians now feel not very confident or not confident at all in their ability to tell the difference between accurate, real news reports and stories containing misinformation and fake news.

"For people to acknowledge that at times they can be fooled is perhaps very good news," says Craig Silverman, Toronto-based *BuzzFeed* media editor who has become an international expert on the topic of fake news and has spoken on the issue across North America, Europe, Australia and Asia.

Silverman broke the story in 2016 of Macedonian teenagers discovering that tricking American Facebook users into clicking and sharing pro-Trump hoaxes could be outrageously profitable. Silverman's pre-election piece had then-President Barack Obama talking obsessively about the fake-news racket and its impact on the election, the *New Yorker* reported.¹¹

"When you ask, most people say they're good at spotting fake news," Silverman said in an interview. "But when you test them they're actually far worse than they think. It's encouraging people are now acknowledging they have a weakness and it's encouraging that we are getting more and more awareness on the issue."

Since 2004, Silverman has been reporting on rumors and disinformation. Ten years ago, with the rise of social media he began studying fake news on those platforms. When you have Obama – and even Pope Francis – talking about the work he's done, that lifts Silverman into an elite position on the topic of fake news.

He warns that the 2019 federal election has the potential to be interfered with by foreign states like Russia, China and Saudi Arabia due to geopolitical tussles with Canada over the last few years.

"Any kind of chaos, any kind of undermining of Western nations, any way to make democracies look bad, to undermine people's faith in democratic systems is a win for them," Silverman says.

Indeed, Ottawa's cross-party National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP) has also identified Russia, China, and a "handful" of other countries as running

¹⁰ <https://news.stanford.edu/2017/10/24/fact-checkers-outperform-historians-evaluating-online-information/>

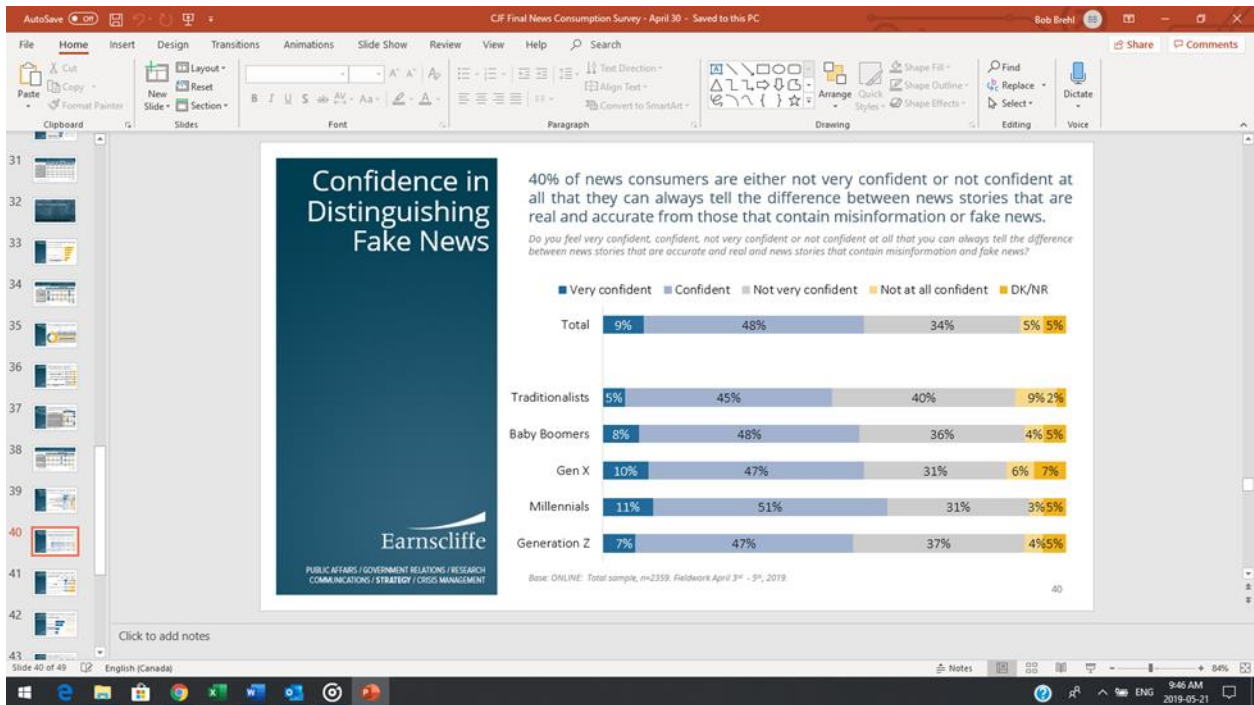
¹¹ <https://nowtoronto.com/news/craig-silverman-exposed-the-fake-news-racket/>

influence campaigns on Canadian soil. In April, Canada’s electronic spy agency, the Communications Security Establishment, said it is “very likely” hostile nations will attempt to interfere in this October’s election.¹²

“This is an issue that has become a global concern and (the CJF-Earnscliffe study) speaks to the fact that people are thinking about it and worried about it,” Silverman says. “We need to start filling the gap and equipping people with some of the skills and tools needed so they don’t feel helpless that everything out there is fake because that’s dangerous in a really chaotic ecosystem of information.”

4. The News Consumption Survey Findings – Key Takeaways

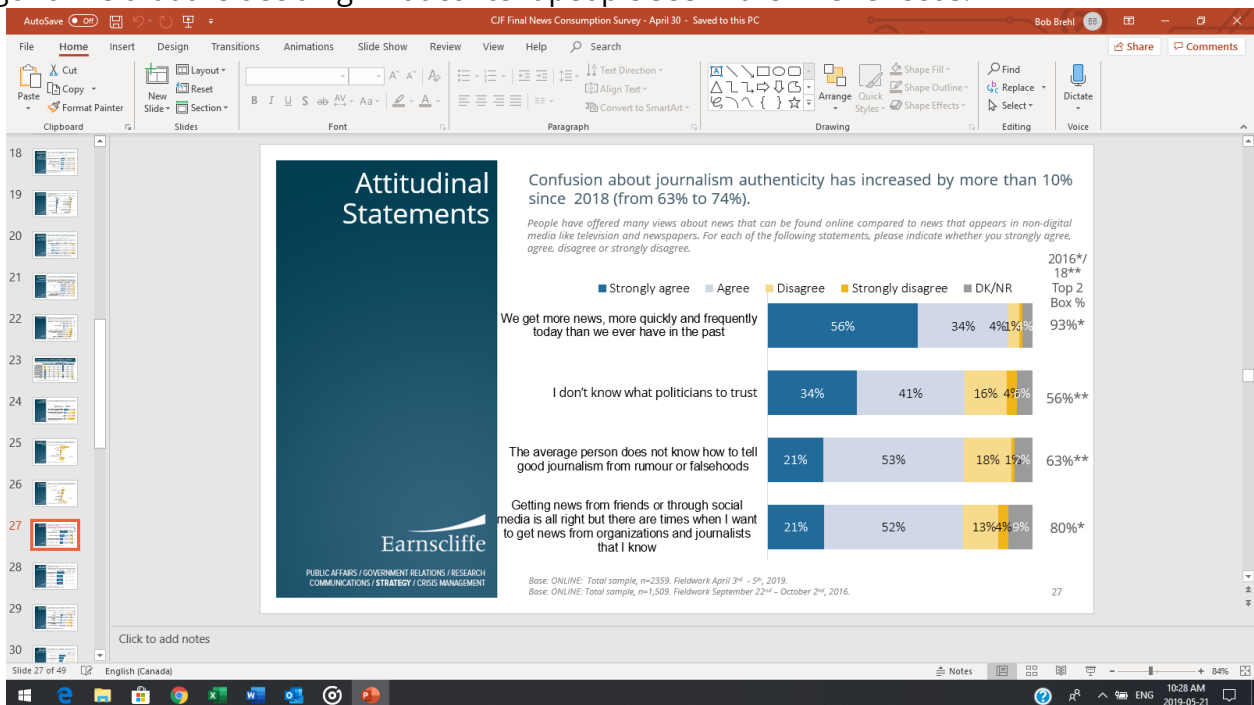
- Four in ten consumers (40%) feel either “not very confident” or “not confident at all” in their ability to always tell the difference between accurate and real news stories and news stories containing misinformation and fake news. Echoing Silverman, Earnscliffe Principal Allan Gregg said: “While the findings are perhaps jarring, the silver lining of the study would be it’s not as bad as you might think,” especially with more and more people seeing the issue as a threat and experts studying it in greater depth. “But, on the other hand, we’ve seen a significant jump in two years in doubt of authenticity.”



¹² <https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/canada-investigating-foreign-interference-espionage>

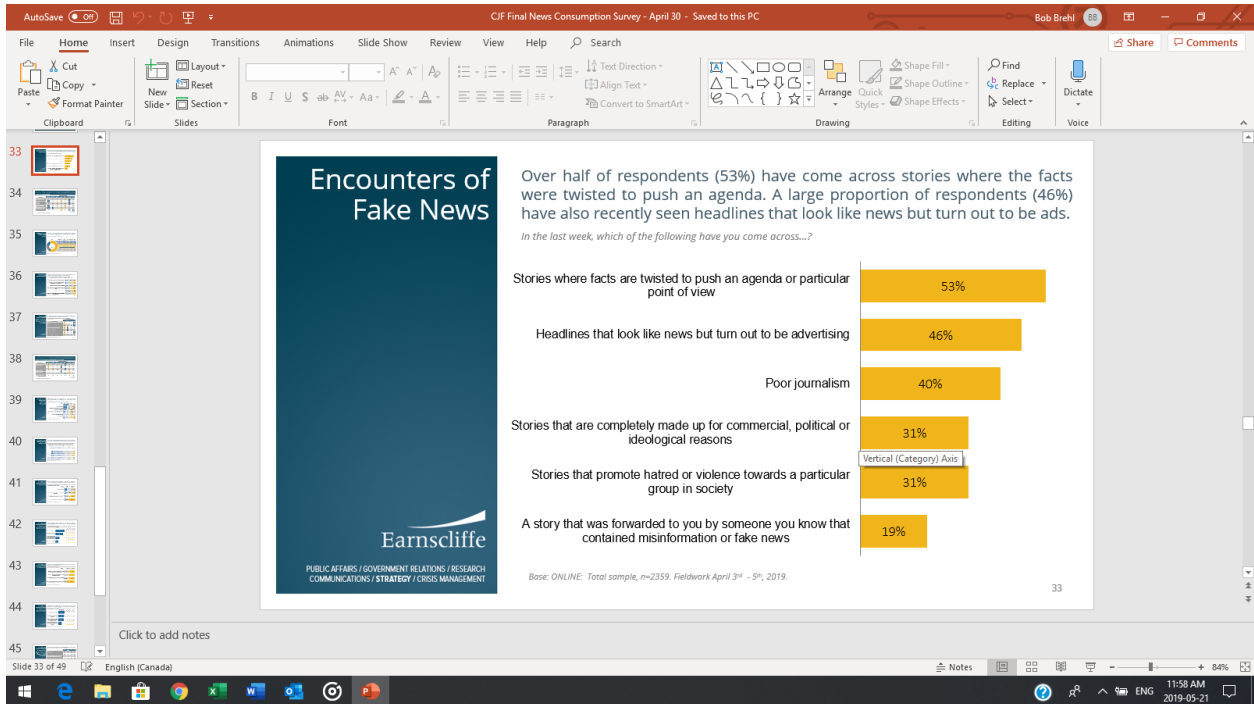
- Respondents were much more trusting of traditional news sources such as television (70%), radio (68%), and newspapers and magazines (64%); including the digital versions of traditional media (65%). On the other side of the spectrum, only 16% were trusting of social media (16%) news sources.
- Confusion about authenticity and trust has increased markedly over the last few years. Compared to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, there has been an 8 to 19 percentage point increase of people who agreed that:
 - “The average person does not know how to tell good journalism from rumour and falsehood” (from 63% to 74%);
 - “It’s becoming harder to tell if a piece of news was produced by a respected media organization” (from 59% to 67%);
 - “I don’t know what politicians to trust” (from 56% to 75%); and,
 - “I don’t know what companies or brands to trust” (from 42% to 55%).

Even professional reporters and editors have been taken in by fake news. “Traditional media has fallen for online hoaxes,” Silverman says. “It’s a media environment that has been rewarding extreme rhetoric, extreme action, extreme photos, extreme ideas because that is what gets people’s attention. Attention is the currency that sends the signals to the algorithms that are deciding what content people see in their news feeds.”

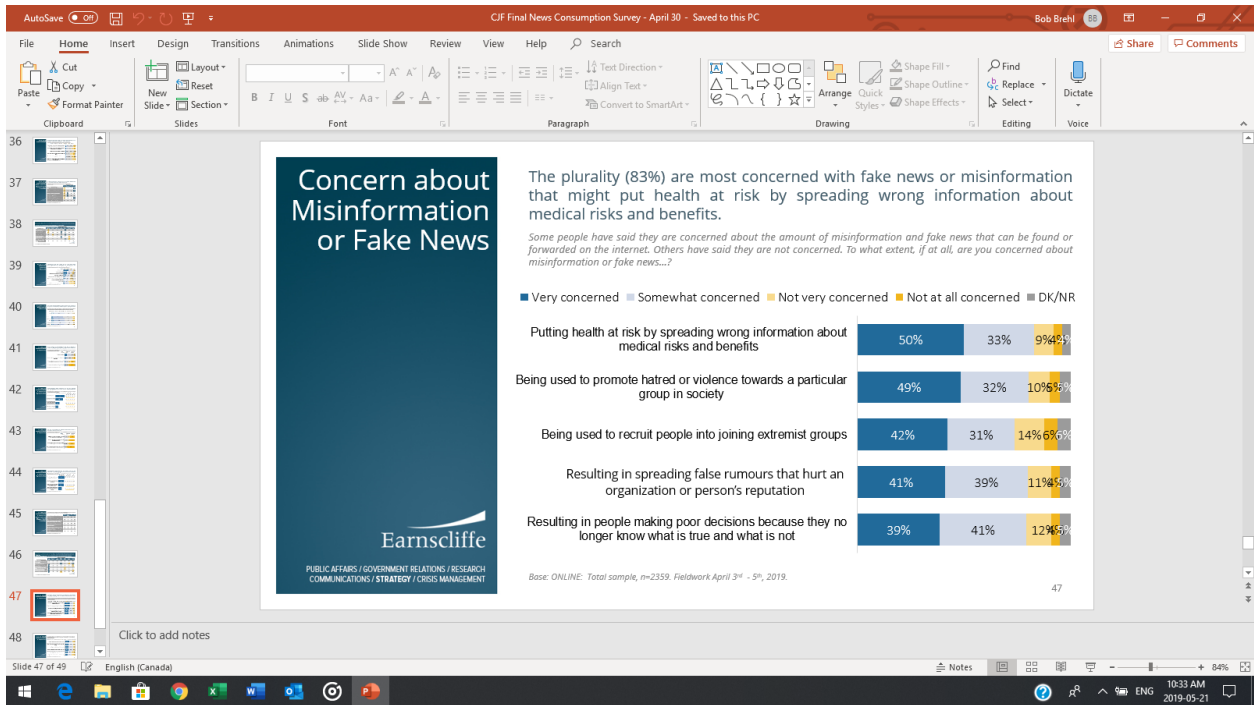


- Slightly over half of the population report they have come across news stories “where facts are twisted to push an agenda or particular point of view”; however, only 1 in 5 believe that

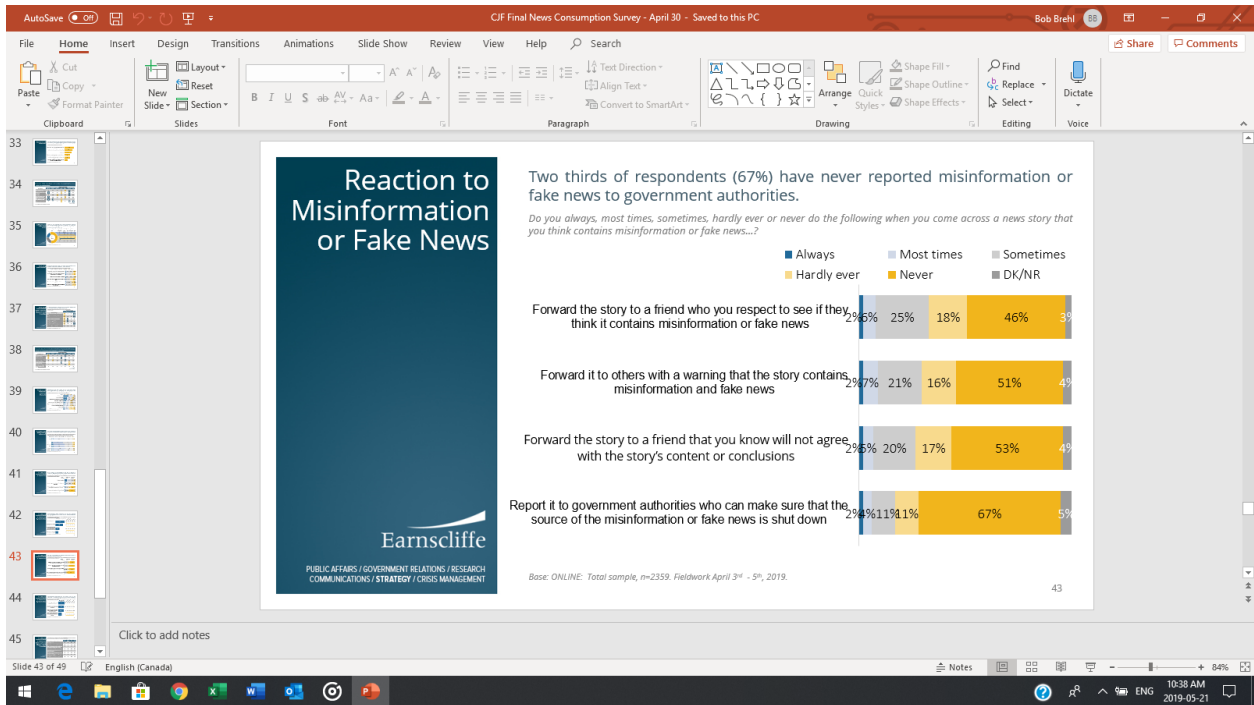
they have encountered a situation where “a story was forwarded from someone they knew that contained misinformation or fake news”.



- Sources believed to contain “a lot” of misinformation and fake news include social media sites (42%), links received via email (29%), and messages sent by friends (28%). And the most concerning examples of fake news and misinformation are stories that put health at risk by spreading wrong information about medical risks and benefits.



- There are marked generational differences in terms of how news is consumed and how consumers come across their news. Four in five (83%) Traditionalists (born before the end of WWII) were specifically looking for news compared to two-thirds of Generation Z (born since 1996) who were doing something else when they came across news. Nearly six in ten (58%) of Traditionalists got their online news using a computer, whereas 48% of Generation Z used a mobile device.
- There is also a straight-line relationship between how consumers react to fake news – the older the consumers the more passive the response and the younger, the more proactive.



5. How to Combat Fake News

A crucial part of that strategy should involve media literacy training and equipping news consumers with tools that will allow them to gauge the legitimacy of the news source, but also become aware of their own cognitive biases.

That's why Google and the CJF are expanding their partnership and building a bigger, better NewsWise site, an online tool to help Canadians understand the differences between fact-based journalism and fake news in the digital world. The Google News Initiative grant of \$1 million to the CJF to build out NewsWise for voting-age Canadians. The original and successful NewsWise is geared towards students from Grade 5 to 12. Launched and built last year by the CJF and Civix (the team behind Student Vote), NewsWise is already reaching more than one million Canadian students.

"To be an engaged citizen is to have access to quality journalism," says Richard Gingras, VP Google News. "That's why we're thrilled to support the Canadian Journalism Foundation in building NewsWise - a program to help Canadians of all ages understand how to find and filter authoritative information online. News literacy is fundamental to a healthy democracy and a central pillar of the Google News Initiative."

NewsWise for voting-age Canadians is especially important this year as we head to a federal election in October. Democratic elections around the world have been impacted by fake news and misinformation. Designed and developed by educators and communications experts,

NewsWise provides users with interactive tools like tests and videos to improve verification and detection skills. Improving visual literacy and digital literacy skills in tandem helps develop everyday fact-checking habits, critical thought and stretches users' ability to better interpret data and images.

“Misinformation is not a solved problem and NewsWise is not a silver bullet,” says CJF’s Turvey, “but it can be another arrow in the quiver of truth.”

In other ways to combat the problem, researchers at several universities have developed the so-called CRAAP test for identifying fake news. CRAAP stands for Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy and Purpose.

Currency is the timeliness of the information. When was it published or posted? Is that easily discernible? Has the information been revised or updated? Can you tell if the information is current or out-of-date for your topic? And, importantly, are the links functional?

Relevance is the importance of the information for your needs. Does it relate to your topic or answer your questions? Can you tell who is the intended audience? Have you looked at a variety of sources before determining this is one you will use? Would you be comfortable using this source for a research paper or even in a discussion with friends or co-workers?

Authority is the source of the information. Who is the author, publisher, or sponsor? Are the author's credentials or organizational affiliations given and easily attained? What are the author's qualifications to write on the topic? Is there contact information, such as a publisher or e-mail address? Does the URL reveal anything about the source? For example: .com (commercial), .edu (educational), .org (non-profit organization), .net (network), or .gc.ca (Canadian government). Examine the URL closely because sometimes tricksters alter one or two letters to make it look like it is something it is not. For example: ABCNews.go.com (real) vs. ABCNews.com.co (fake).

Does the URL look off in some way? This is often a tell-tale sign of a website that shares fake news, as some fake news websites try to mimic the URL, logo, and design of legitimate news websites, in order to trick readers.

The website abcnews.com.co published fake news stories and misled readers into thinking that they were reading stories from abcnews.com.

ARE OTHER NEWS SITES REPORTING ON THE STORY?
Chances are, if the majority of other news sites are reporting on the same story, it's at least partially true. Read multiple stories on the same subject to see what sources are being used and where the differences lie.

BE WARY OF SLOPPY WRITING
If you are reading an article and the author uses five exclamation points at the end of a sentence, it is often fake news of some sort. Also be skeptical of an abundance of spelling or grammatical errors, or if the writer uses caps lock.
Most credible news sources have copy editors that will check for these mistakes before publication, and will also have rules restricting writers from using features like caps lock for the sake of professionalism.

Accuracy is the reliability, truthfulness, and correctness of the content. Where does the information come from? Is the information supported by evidence? Has the information been reviewed by others? Can you verify any of the information in another source or from personal knowledge? Does the language or tone seem biased and free of emotion? Are there spelling, grammar, or other typographical errors?

Purpose is the reason the information exists. What is the purpose of the information? Is it to inform, teach, sell, entertain, or persuade? Do the authors or third-party sponsors make their intentions or purpose clear? Does the point of view appear objective and impartial? Are there political, ideological, cultural, religious, institutional, or personal biases that are obvious?¹³

And when in doubt, ask the professionals. Visit the many terrific fact-checking websites like FactCheck.org, [International Fact-Checking Network \(IFCN\)](http://International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)), PolitiFact.com, or Snopes.com. You'll feel more confident in being able to identify fact vs. fiction.¹⁴ (Ironically, when checking out a supposed Canadian fact-checking website, it could not be easily verified if it is real or fake. Because of doubt, we left it out.)

If what you're seeing seems too good to be true, or too weird, or too reactionary...it probably is. Caveat emptor – buyer beware.

¹³ <http://iue.libguides.com/c.php?g=595482&p=4120560>

¹⁴ <https://www.summer.harvard.edu/inside-summer/4-tips-spotting-fake-news-story>

6. Conclusion

We must all be vigilant because we all deserve the truth. If you're tricked by fake news, you're not alone, but you're also damaging your credibility. If arguments are built on bad information, it will be much more difficult for people to believe you in the future.

Fake news can hurt you, and a lot of other people. Purveyors of fake and misleading medical advice like Mercola.com and NaturalNews.com help perpetuate myths like HIV and AIDS aren't related, or that vaccines cause autism. These sites are heavily visited and their lies are dangerous. Earncliffe data identified medical news fallacies as the most concerning examples of fake news.

Real news benefits all of us. We need accurate news about health and medical benefits. We require accurate articles to invest our money wisely. We must read valid and factual information on political candidates to vote for the person who best represents our ideas and beliefs.

"The rules of the game have changed so quickly that many of us simply don't currently have the tools to separate the information chaff from the wheat," says CJF's Turvey. "It's incumbent upon us to learn the skills and maybe start thinking more like a scientist when online: adopt a questioning attitude, motivated by curiosity, while understanding our personal biases."

As citizens, we've got to step up public awareness on fake news; not simply identifying it, but reporting it, too. Earncliffe found less than a tenth of Canadians "always" or "most times" utilize the tools offered by social media platforms and other authorities to report abuse.

"Perhaps we are seeing low numbers because Canadians are not aware of the tools they have at their disposal," says Earncliffe's Allan Gregg, adding the public awareness campaign must be digital to reach the most people getting tricked. "If people were more educated about the ways of combatting fake news and misinformation, the frequency of people reporting it to government or social media entities may rise."

But it's not just the responsibility of individuals. Social media sites and other media outlets should pay closer attention to the content and authors publishing on their sites and make an effort to actively combat news that is deemed fake or contain misinformation. Social media platforms have promised to strengthen their rules, but fake news continues almost unabated.

We should also encourage people in news media to behave differently by verifying their sources and ensuring quality and accurate reports so as not to contribute to the spread of fake news and misinformation. With tight budgets and shrinking revenues in many journalism organizations these days, this is no easy task. But as the adage says: you fail at 100 per cent of the goals you don't set.

Sadly, there's no easy fix to the problem. Tweaking algorithms — something Facebook and Google are trying to do — can help, but any real and lasting solution must include news consumers through education and knowledge. If market demand falls, supply will as well. We all need to be more skeptical and better-equipped to rate the quality of information we encounter.

The problem will only get worse without proper action as more people get their news online and politics becomes more tribal and more polarized.