CHAPTER 5

Fake News Self-Assessment

What might Albert Einstein—or Mark Twain—think about how technology, and the internet specifically, have affected how we access and evaluate information? (See Figure 5.1.) It's easy to imagine their disappointment in our collective befuddlement in the age of fake news, but we think they'd also believe in our capacity to develop solutions to what can seem like an insurmountable problem. As we explored in Chapter 4, our brains naturally seek out patterns in the world that support our own beliefs and that make us feel better about ourselves. This tendency can prove problematic to news consumers, both young and not so young, as we seek to determine what's real and what isn't in the flood of information we are all exposed to each day. The only solution is to develop some skills to help us spot suspect content—preferably *before* we've clicked on it.

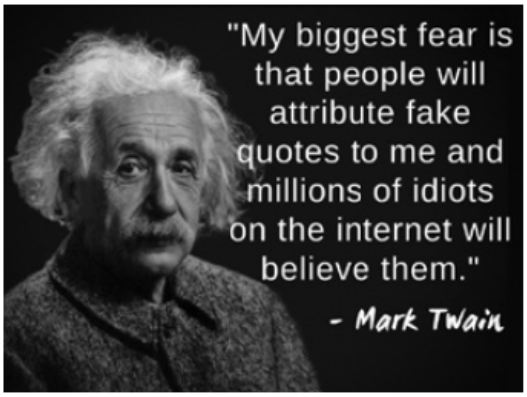


Figure 5.1 The great thing about the internet is that anyone can post just about anything, any time. The terrible thing about the internet is that anyone can post just about anything, any time—including photos of Albert Einstein next to fabricated words of wisdom, attributed to Mark Twain.

Mobile Matters

We also know that the ways in which we access news are changing. According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in January 2018, 77% of Americans reported accessing the internet daily. Of that, 26% reported that they go online

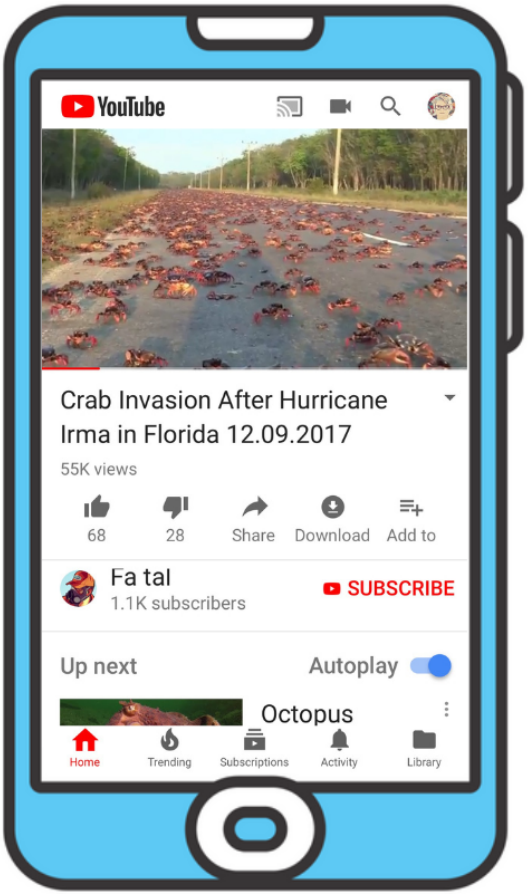
"almost constantly," up from 21% in 2015. "Younger adults are at the vanguard of the constantly connected: Roughly four-in-ten 18- to 29-year-olds (39%) now go online almost constantly and 49% go online multiple times per day." As smartphones and other mobile devices have become more widespread, roughly 83% of the time Americans spend online is accessed from their phones (Perrin & Jiang, 2018). Clearly, most of us, including our students, now use devices that fit in our pockets to both look up and discover new information. We rely on notifications to alert us to what's happening in the world. When we follow those breadcrumbs, they lead us to an ever-growing assortment of options for accessing yet more information. And this is important, because traditional methods for determining source credibility are often difficult to apply to the new ways in which we now get our news.

In the pages that follow, we're going to test your ability to sniff out fake news in the mobile environment. Whether you've spent time teaching media literacy to your students or not, some of your experience with news in other formats will no doubt serve you well here. However, we challenge you to consider how accessing information *on your phone* makes figuring out things like authority, domain, and even the date of a publication a little trickier. As adults, and particularly as educators, we have more experience than our students at determining whether or not a news story can be trusted. But is that experience keeping us from considering how tried-and-true strategies for determining a source's credibility may not apply in the same ways when we access information on a mobile device? Even if students are not allowed to use their phones when researching at school, how are we preparing them to spot suspect information when seeking out information when they're not constrained by the parameters of an assignment? More importantly, are those parameters helping them during more authentic (and potentially higher stake) information searches—or are they holding them back?

Fake News Self-Assessment

Take a look at this series of news stories as they might appear on your (or a student's) mobile device. Ultimately, we want you to label each one as being legitimate or fake, but because there's often more to the story than whether or

not it's "real or fake," see what else you can answer about each potentially true piece of information. For example, pay particular attention to the app that's being used in each example and how each tool presents information differently. Additionally, if you decide that a story is fake, try to further dissect that assessment: Label the story as being a particular type of fake news, and then record some of the red flags that led you to that determination. It may not seem like it, but some of these *are* real, so take your time and examine each example carefully. You'll find an answer key later in this chapter, but in the meantime, have fun—and no cheating!



From what app is this information being accessed?

How does this information make you feel?

What words, phrases images or features in the app most trigger the emotions you shared above?

How do those emotions affect your urge to trust or share this content with others?

1 = very little

5 - very much

Given your answers above, is this information trustworthy enough to engage (like/share etc) with?

Yes ☐ No ☐

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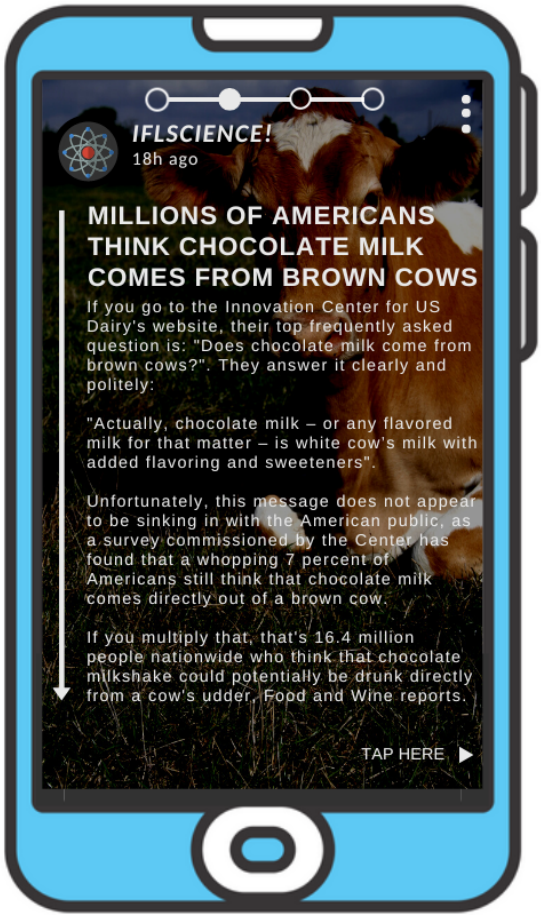

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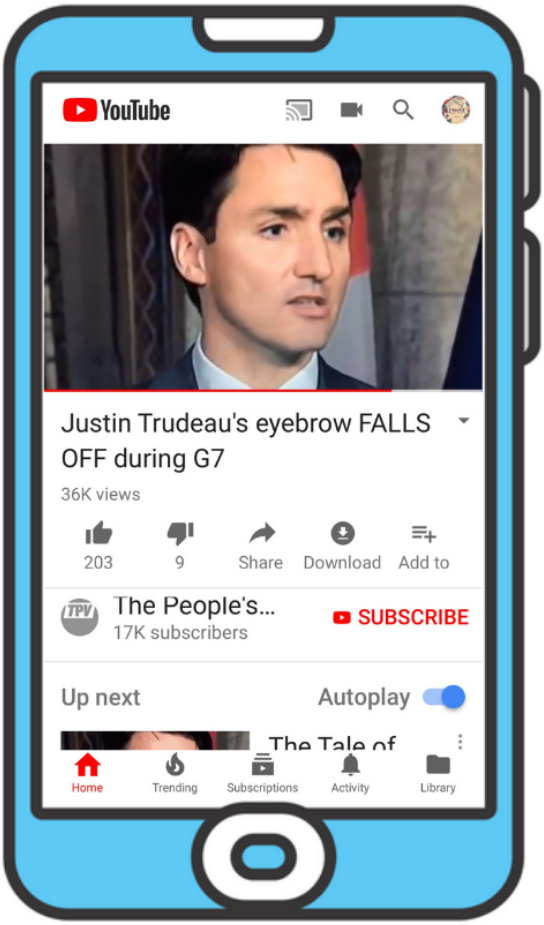

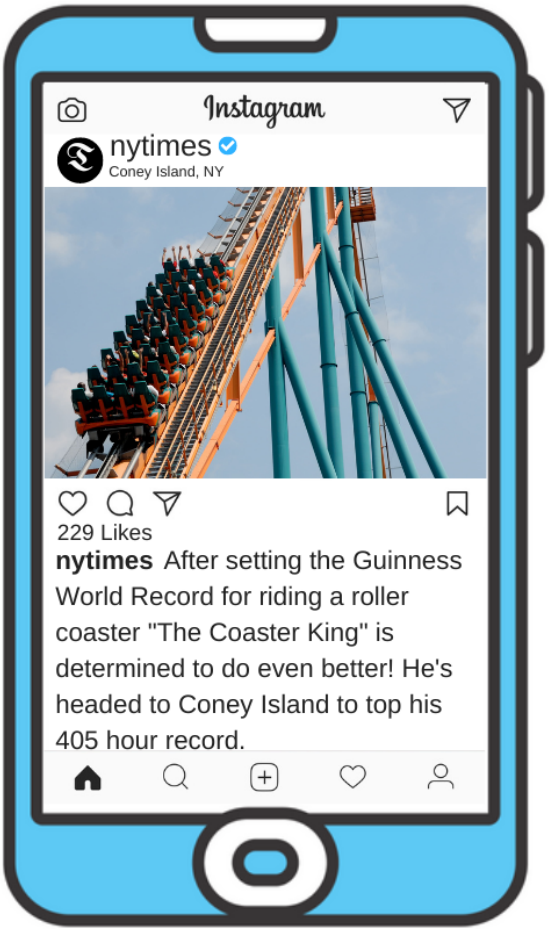

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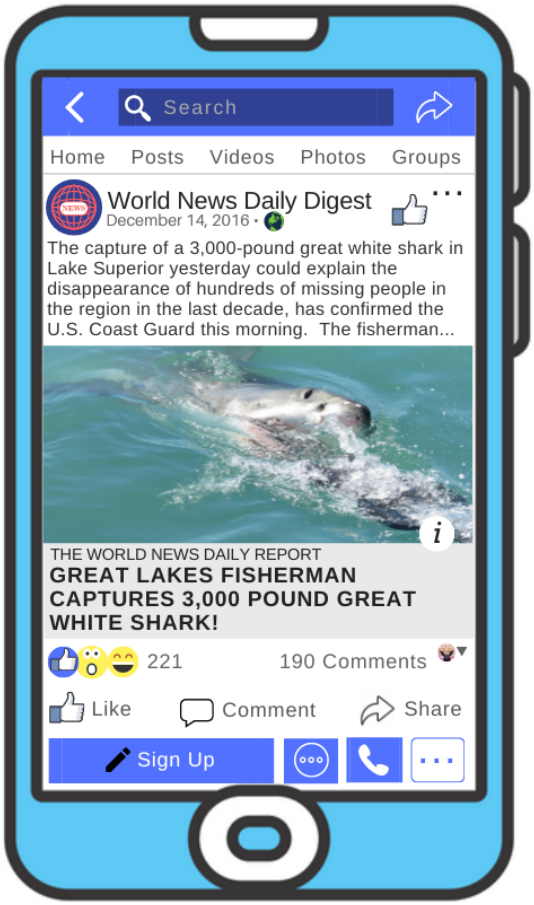

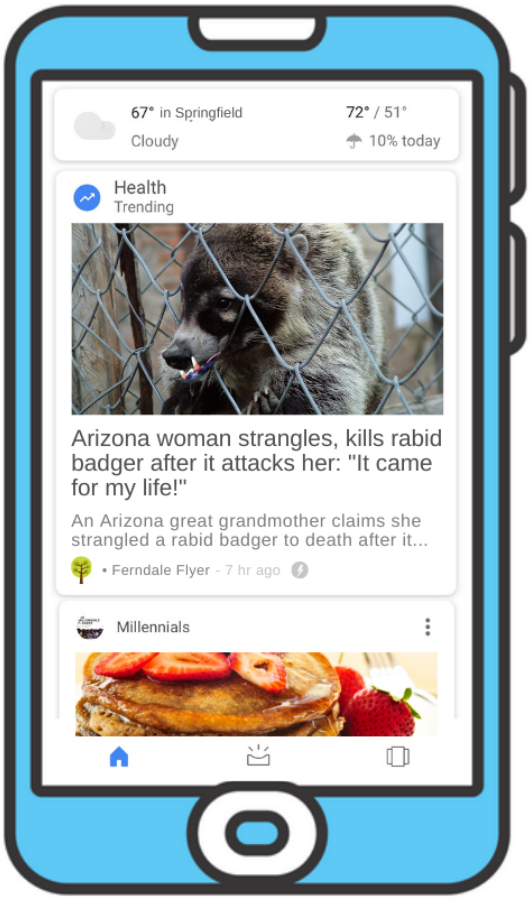

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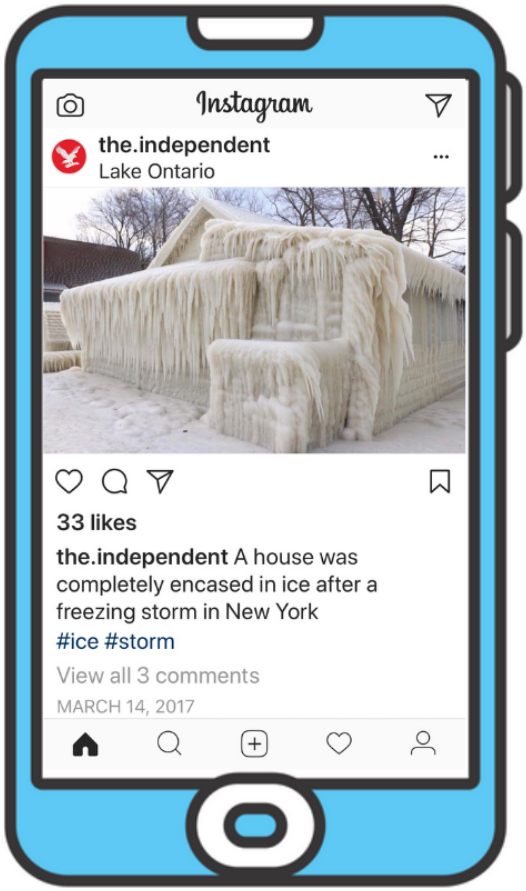
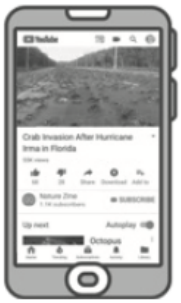
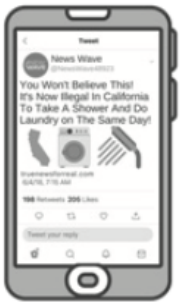


Answers: Fake News Self-Assessment

Ready to check how you did? Table 5.1 lists the details on each news story.

Table 5.1 Self-Assessment Answer Key

Story	Status	App	Notes
	Fake	YouTube	This story uses a *clickbait* title and a video of another event (natural crab migration) to spread *disinformation* about a real one: Hurricane Irma. YouTube has surpassed Facebook in number of American users (Majority, 2018).
	Fake	Snapchat	This story uses a *clickbait* title and *misleading numbers* along with an unrelated graph to spread *propaganda* related to a proposed minimum wage increase. Snapchat presents news stories in ways that are often difficult to discern from advertisements.
	Fake	Twitter	This story uses a *clickbait* title to spread *propaganda* related to a real law proposing increased conservation efforts in California. Twitter is a growing news source among all age groups (Shearer and Gottfried, 2017).
	Fake	Facebook	This story uses a *clickbait* title to stoke *conspiracy theories* related to government overreach. During the last U.S. presidential election, fake news stories like this were shared more often on Facebook than were legitimate news stories (Silverman, 2016).

Story	Status	App	Notes
	Real	Snapchat	This is a real story! But it still uses some *misleading statistics* to get you to click on it. Instead of saying "only 7% of Americans believe brown cows produce chocolate milk" the authors of this story chose to lead with, "Millions of Americans" Snapchat continues to grow as a new source especially among young people (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).
	Fake	Facebook	This fake news story uses a *misleading video* to spread *disinformation* about a global leader during a highly politicized event. Although bad lighting contributed to this example, such apps as FakeApp and Lyrebird give anyone with a computer or smartphone the ability to create what are known as "*deep fakes*" or highly edited videos that make it seem as though a person has said something they really didn't (Meserole & Polyakova, 2018). YouTube has yet to come up come up with a plan for combating them (Lewis, 2018).
	Real	Instagram	This Instagram story is real. Although the numbers are incredible, they are accurate.
	Fake	YouTube	This fake story relies on a *clickbait* title and *disinformation* in the form of a *misleading image* along with reference to "hundreds of missing people" in the lead to the story in order to get people to click on it. Facebook has recently implemented an "about this article" feature that allows users to learn more about the sources of information before clicking (Lewsing, 2018).

Story	Status	App	Notes
	Fake	Google (News Alerts)	This fake story uses a *clickbait* title and a *manipulated image* (to depict a rabid badger) in order to spread *disinformation*. Google and similar apps allow users to create news notifications that are tailored to them based on their browsing habits along with user selections. The result is the mobile version of a filter bubble.
	Fake	Browser (such as Safari)	This fake news story is an example of *satire*, or actual fake news. Although satirical news sites identify themselves as such, they are often shared like legitimate news stories, particularly when the fake headlines parallel existing *conspiracy theories* (Woolf, 2016).
	Fake	Apple News Alerts	This fake news story uses *disinformation* in the form of *misleading statistics* to make readers think scooters are unsafe. Even if the numbers in the story are true, they are presented outside of the context of other years or even the total number of scooter owners. Apple News and similar apps allow users to create news notifications that are tailored to them based on their browsing habits along with user selections.
	Real	Instagram	This story is real. Brrrr!