

explainity explains: Fake News

Tim has grown up with the Internet and also uses it to find information about events in the world. Recently, he has been noticing more and more reports about “fake news”. Politicians warn of this – or are annoyed by it - and social networks such as Facebook want to flag it up better in the future. But what actually is “fake news”?

As the term suggests, put simply “fake news” is news that is deliberately false, and which is mainly distributed via the Internet. The concept is not a new one: for example, there is the story of the balloonist Monck Mason, published in 1844, and propaganda in times of war – targeted disinformation has been around for centuries. “But why is fake news spread around?” Tim wants to know. Well, there are different reasons for this.

The influence of political debates for example. Indeed, fake news is unlikely to motivate anyone to change their opinion – existing views are reinforced however, in that they are confirmed by supposedly reliable news. Some time ago, for example, Tim stumbled upon a report online that the American president was related to Superman. He immediately thought it was strange. Someone who believes in superheroes and is a fan of the president in any case might say: “See! They are even reporting in the news how super the president is!”

“It’s not as bad as all that” thinks Tim, “opinions existed before that anyway”. Well, unfortunately, it is not that simple. For people often form opinions without considering the facts. Therefore, people also say that we live in a post-factual age. If fake news confirms these fact-free opinions, it becomes ever harder to “correct” preconceived images of the world.

Also, politically undecided people can be steered by deliberately spread fake news in a specific direction. The fear: voters may be influenced in favour of or against certain parties.

Another reason for inventing fake news: money! If authentic-looking false headlines express the opinion of an advocate who picks up on them, you can assume that they will be shared more or less unchecked via social media – and millions of times over. Users who click on the link land on the page of the alleged news – this is simply brimming with advertising banners – and the originator of the fake news cashes in!

“Ok” Tim thinks. “Now I just have to find a way to uncover fake news.” A friend tells him about websites that help check reports for facts. And even if he does not have any time for this, he should always check the sources of “news”. Usually a short search online is sufficient here: for example, if the source is from a well-known newspaper this is “real” news. However, if a known name has been changed slightly then Tim should watch out, for this is trying to give the impression of being reliable news!

He immediately checks the source of the Superman / President report and discovers that it was published on the website www.100prozent-serioese-nachrichten.org (100 per cent reliable news) ... “That’s not a good sign” he now knows and blocks the site straight away.

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