

## Is “Fake News” Fake News? Understanding Media Misinformation

Fake news has become quite the buzzword, but not everyone agrees about what “fake news” means - or even whether the term is valid. Let’s take a closer look at what misinformation is, so we can better understand how to spot it.

One late August day in 1835, readers of the *New York Sun* opened their papers to find a truly incredible news update: a high-powered telescope had reportedly enabled an astronomer to glimpse *tailless beavers walking upright on the moon!*

The article, one of six in a series expounding on “great astronomical discoveries,” reported, “*The (extra-terrestrial beaver) resembles the beaver of the earth in every other respect than in its destitution of a tail, and its invariable habit of walking upon only two feet. It carries its young in its arms like a human being, and moves with an easy gliding motion... From the appearance of smoke in nearly all (its huts), there is no doubt of its being acquainted with the use of fire.*”

Other newspapers soon picked up the story.

A personal letter by the story’s apparent author, Richard Locke, revealed that he likely intended the piece as *satire*. Still, many people fell for it. Even after the series became known as a hoax, the Sun never fully retracted the articles.

### The “Fake News” Phenomenon

As the beaver incident illustrates, “fake news” is nothing, well, new. Even Scripture documents cases of false information shared as news. For example, Matthew 28:12-15 records that after Jesus’ resurrection, the chief priests bribed the guards of Jesus’ tomb to report that His disciples stole the body - a report which became “widely circulated” among the people.

Millennia later, various shades of false reports still circulate as widely as ever - especially thanks to the internet. Rising concerns about media misinformation have sparked a firestorm of discussion among scholars and civilians alike, even leading Google to alter their search algorithms. But while everybody seems to be talking about “fake news,” few can apparently agree what it is - or what should be done about it. Let’s take a closer look at the “fake news” debate, so we can better think biblically and critically about claims in the media.

### Debatable Definitions

“Fake news” may sound like “news which is fake.” The trouble is, there’s no single, expert definition to pin down exactly what it means. Does “news” only mean information from professional journalism platforms? Or does it also include reports broadcasted from other platforms, social media accounts, and citizen journalists, like bloggers? Does “fake” only mean intentional deception, or can it include honest mistakes? Do partial truths count as “fake news?” How about facts reported from only one perspective?

### Types of (Potentially) Misleading Information

However we define it, false or misleading information does appear in the media and does demand our critical thinking in response. Here are a few types of potentially problematic messages which communications researcher Claire Wardle has identified:

- **Satire or parody:** exaggerated or completely made-up news stories intended to entertain rather than to inform. Like Locke’s alien beaver story, these reports may sometimes be taken as true.
- **Misleading content:** messages which present select facts in a misleading manner. For instance, photos may be angled or cropped to make a crowd look larger or smaller.
- **Imposter content:** messages from impersonated sources.
- **Fabricated content:** made-up information presented as legitimate news and intended to deceive.
- **False connection:** headlines, captions, or visuals which don’t accurately relate to the information they’re supposed to support.
- **False context:** information which has been taken out of its original context in order to mislead.
- **Manipulated content:** materials including photos or videos which have been altered or otherwise manipulated to deceive.

### The Foundation for Thinking Critically About the News

There is considerable disagreement when it comes to determining which content should be considered “fake news” and which should be excluded. This holds especially true as the term “fake news” has become highly political and is often used as a buzzword not only used to describe fabricated information but to undermine the credibility of news organisations or argue against commentary that disagrees with our own opinion. Classifying a piece of content as false requires a grounding of a universal truth, which can be a difficult endeavour that requires collective consensus, and herein lies the problem.

To talk about what is false, we need a foundation for understanding what is true, and according to so many ‘experts,’ it is *popular consensus* that helps to define universal truth. But if the subjective human perceptions which made up that popular consensus *happened to be wrong*, would those many wrong beliefs add up to one objective, universal truth? No!

We need God as the source of absolutes. A biblical worldview provides the foundation for truth to exist and be knowable. Therefore, it also provides us a foundation from which to think critically about claims in the news.

Even claims about extra-terrestrial beavers.