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# ***The Curious Person's Guide to Fighting Fake News***

by David G. McAfee

With each passing day the potential reach of a single false news story—and its ability to negatively impact the world—grows in both size and scope. Although politicians and citizens have historically complained about deceptive or biased news reports, the term “fake news” exploded in popularity in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election and has become a permanent part of our collective vocabulary. Despite its widespread usage today, the term itself defies easy definition. Taken literally, it refers to fabricated news stories that are demonstrably false or intentionally misleading, but often, the term is deployed as a means to dismiss or discredit any news item with which a person happens to disagree, no matter how careful the reporting, how verifiable the facts, and how credible the sourcing.

Seeking to bring some much-needed clarity to the subject, journalist and author David G. McAfee documents the myriad definitions of "fake news" and its various incarnations throughout history, from ideologically motivated disinformation operations to commercially motivated misinformation campaigns, in his new book *The Curious Person's Guide to Fighting Fake News* (Pitchstone, October 12, 2020, paperback, \$14.95). With more than a decade of experience as a reporter, including at some of the biggest news organizations in the United States, he understands well the establishment media machine and the mechanics of professional news creation. And as someone who writes about charged topics, including religion and politics, he regularly witnesses the problem first-hand and understands that, in today's climate, charges of "fake news" come with the territory. In fact, as a well-known proponent of scientific skepticism, he'll often find his efforts to debunk real fake news, such as reports about the homeopathic cure for, say, insomnia, are met with impassioned cries of fake news.

He warns that the amplifying effect of social media and quickly changing media business models mean journalists must be extra vigilant in their reporting and in how they engage with their readers. Here, he speaks too from direct experience, as he also manages his active author page on Facebook, which has more than 225,000 "followers," and blogs on the popular *Patheos* network. On both platforms and elsewhere on social media, he sees every day, in real time, the far-reaching effects and rapid spread of fake-news items, especially when it comes to promised quick fixes to personal problems or, in the political realm, hotly contested matters of immediate public interest.

“To cite one recent example,” McAfee says, “a screenshotted tweet by Donald J. Trump dated April 3, 2016 started being shared widely right after Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s death. It reads, ‘Obama should wait until he leaves office to pick another Justice! If he doesn’t, he should be fired!’” Yes, the tweet might sound like Trump and align with other things he’s said publicly, McAfee acknowledges, but the tweet itself is a fake. “Any time a piece of fake news has an element of truth and appeals to an audience’s confirmation bias, you’re giving it an evolutionary advantage. It’s much more likely to go viral and be taken as fact.”

There are multiple mechanisms through which fake news spreads, according to McAfee. Citing another example, he points to a meme popular in far-right circles that quotes Democratic vice-presidential nominee Kamala Harris as saying, “Take the guns first. Go through due process second, I like taking the guns early.” McAfee researched the quote and found Harris has never said any such thing, though he did discover that President Trump said almost exactly that in the wake of the school shooting in Parkland, Florida. “This is an instance of deflected misinformation,” McAfee says, “a common signature of memes created for the purposes of political propaganda.”

Inevitably, McAfee notes, fakes news typically tracks closely with current events. This is part of what makes disentangling fake news from real news so challenging. “I checked Google Trends today,” he says, speaking at the end of September, “and the top seven searches on Google with the words ‘fake news’ in the search relate to COVID-19—‘covid fake news,’ ‘corona fake news,’ ‘covid 19 fake news,’ ‘is coronavirus fake news,’ etc.” Other popular “fake news” searches relate to

George Floyd, Syria, and Russia. As the news cycle evolves and changes, McAfee adds, these searches will change accordingly.

Fake news need not always be driven by current events. Sometimes it's simply a matter of economics, with "news" sites trying to generate advertising dollars through so-called click-bait. Although this species of fake news might be less nefarious or deliberately inflammatory on its surface, it has an equally corrupting influence that both misinforms the public and breeds distrust in media. This type of fake news can come with some degree of danger, McAfee warns, especially when connected to untested products that misleadingly purport health benefits or medical advice that is based on new-age woo and not on peer-reviewed science.

In documenting how misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda have always existed, McAfee demonstrates how they present special challenges to democratic societies, especially in the age of the Internet, in which information knows no boundaries or borders. This challenge is particularly daunting in an election year, he cautions, when candidates themselves often deploy the term fake news to dismiss unwelcome reporting—or even create their own form of it as a means of discrediting their opponent. Demonstrating that we are all culpable in the creation of the current fake-news pandemic, he concludes his book by presenting a number of practical and actionable suggestions for combatting the problem. In the end, however, he argues that each of us, no matter our political bent, have an important role to play in curbing the insidious spread and most dangerous effects of fake news.

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### **About the Author**

**David G. McAfee** is a journalist and author who writes about science, skepticism, politics, and faith. His numerous books include *The Belief Book* and *No Sacred Cows*. He is a graduate of the University of California, Santa Barbara.

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