



CNET &gt; Tech Culture &gt; How to avoid getting conned by fake news sites

# How to avoid getting conned by fake news sites

Here's how you can identify and avoid sites that just want to serve up ads next to outright falsehoods.

## Tech Culture



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You don't need Socrates to tell you that some websites spin crazy, made-up yarns just so you'll click a link.

False information and fake news have been a problem on the internet almost since the beginning. The situation is so bad, one website, [Snopes.com](#), is dedicated to debunking crazy internet tales and rumors that pop up like digital cockroaches.

The issue rose to prominence again with [the election of Donald Trump](#), which [critics say was aided by fake news reports that were rampant across social media](#), especially Facebook. [CEO Mark Zuckerberg](#) has called that notion "pretty crazy" but says his company is [working to clamp down on bogus articles](#).

In the fervor over whether Facebook should do something to separate fiction from fact, you may have wondered how you could figure out whether an article is worth clicking on. Here's our advice on how to flag false stories that just want to take you for every click you're worth.

## What is 'fake news?'

First of all, let's be clear: We're not talking about websites with paid journalists who fact-check their reporting and build their brands on accuracy. (Reputable companies have rules on fact-checking. CNET's reporters and reviewers are required to verify information and back it up with links to source material such as press releases, videos and websites.)

The issue is that legitimate news stories get mixed in with everything else on your Facebook "news" feed. That includes stories from websites that are posing as news sources to harvest your clicks. What's more, even if you click a link to a well-researched Wall Street Journal story, Facebook could show you related stories from sites that don't meet those same standards.

As [CNET News Editor-in-Chief Connie Guglielmo pointed out](#), the problem here is that everything in social media is treated like news, with no distinctions.

## How to flag fake news sites



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg. The social network has been criticized for not vetting stories that appear on the site.

Photo by James Martin/CNET

The best tool at your disposal, of course, is common sense. No matter what your political bent, if a story serves only to reinforce your beliefs, it's best to be extra skeptical before sharing it.

If a report is purportedly based on other news stories, find the original source of the information. You might find some of the quotes are correct, but the rest may have been taken out of context or fabricated.

If the potentially false story you're reading doesn't link to an original source, well, that's a bad sign. Use a search engine to look for the keywords in the story to see if that "news" is being reported by any other outlets.

Some stories, intentionally or not, read like satire. If it sounds like it could be a headline on the Onion, it's best to double-check the story.

Also check the URL. If it has a strange ending, think twice about the story. An article claiming President Barack Obama banned the national anthem at US sporting events -- false, if you were wondering -- came from a website with the suffix ".com.de," which makes no sense.

Finally, don't trust a photograph. If you see a compelling photo and are just itching to share the story behind it, try this first:

No, this is not a real story.  
Photo by Screenshot by Laura Hautala/CNET

- Take a screenshot of the photo, cropping out everything but the image itself.
- Open up [Google Images](#) in your browser.
- Drag the screenshot into the Google Images search field.

Google will tell you its best guess as to who or what is pictured and where the image originated.

I tried this on a black-and-white photo that ran with a meme about Susan B. Anthony. The photo showed a woman in a Victorian gown lying in the street as police and bystanders stood over her. It turned out the suffragist in the photo was Britain's Ada Wright, not Anthony.

Pro tip: You can do this with photos from dating and real estate websites too, and **you might catch a scammer while you're at it!**

## More ways to flag fake news sites

Programmers have put their heads down to come up with tools that can flag unverified reports in your social-media feeds.

For example, [three students programmed a browser plugin](#) that automatically evaluates stories linked in social media and highlights those that have been debunked elsewhere. The cute name for the plugin: FiB.

Photo by Getty Images

The plugin isn't available for download yet, but the students are enlisting help in finishing it, through [an open-source project](#).

New York Magazine writer Brian Feldman programmed a plugin too -- it's not automated, but it [checks articles against a list of known fake news sites](#) put together by Merrimack College media professor Melissa Zimdars.

## Who's writing this fake news?

According to [a BuzzFeed story](#), young people in Macedonia created more than 100 pro-Trump websites to spread false news. The motive wasn't political; it was to make money off your clicks.

Maybe we should be glad they're not turning to cybercrime to capitalize on our collective naivete, like young people in other parts of Eastern Europe have done. Still, it's pretty strange to think that Macedonian website owners were gaming Google's or Facebook's ad programs to make money off fake-but-viral news stories.

Google and Facebook [each said on Monday](#) that they will ban fake news sites from using their respective ad-selling software.

[Snopes also has a guide to fake news sites](#), some of which are political and some of which are simply purveyors of wild and wacky lies.

The election may be over, but there's still plenty of fake news to go around.

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**Update, 11:10 a.m.:** Adds link to story about Friday night comments from Mark Zuckerberg.

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