



MEDIA

# < Stanford Study Finds Most Students Vulnerable To Fake News

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**KELLY MCEVERS, HOST:**

How do kids and teenagers perceive what they read online? Can they tell real news apart from fake news or ads? A new study from Stanford University asked more than 7,800 students to evaluate online articles and news sources. And the results, says lead author Sam Wineburg, are bleak.

Large portions of the students - at times as much as 80 or 90 percent - had trouble judging the credibility of the news they read. Wineburg is a professor of education and history at Stanford, and I asked him earlier today to describe one of the tests they used.

**SAM WINEBURG:** We showed them a picture of daisies that looked like they were deformed. There was a claim on a website that they were the result of the nuclear disaster at the Fukushima district in Japan. The photograph had no attribution. There was nothing that indicated that it was from anywhere.

And we asked students, is - does this photograph provide proof that the kind of nuclear disaster caused these aberrations in nature? And we found that over 80 percent of the high school students that we gave this to them had an extremely difficult time making that determination. They didn't ask where it came from. They didn't verify it. They simply accepted the picture as fact.

**MCEVERS:** So what do you think can be done about this?

WINEBURG: We simply have not caught up to the way these sources of information are influencing the kinds of conceptions that we develop on a day-to-day basis. But the only way that we can deal with these kinds of issues are through educational programs and recognizing that the kinds of things that we worry about - these - the ability to determine what is reliable or not reliable - that is the new basic skill in our society.

MCEVERS: So you're talking about programs to just educate people from the get-go about the devices that they use and the information that they get on them and how - what would that look like? What would that sound like in school?

WINEBURG: Right now, Kelly, in many schools there are internet filters that direct students to previously vetted sites and reliable sources of information.

But what happens when they leave school and they take out their phone and they look at their Twitter feed? How do they become prepared to make the choices about what to believe, what to forward, what to post to their friends when they've given no practice in doing those kinds of things in school?

And so consequently what we see is a rash of fake news going on that people pass on without thinking. And we really can't blame young people because we've never taught them to do otherwise.

MCEVERS: If there were a way to start teaching - talking about this inside a school, what do you think it would or should sound like?

WINEBURG: In search of expertise, we were led to professional fact-checkers at some of the nation's most prestigious publications. And we found that fact-checkers actually look at web content in ways that is - that are very different from what the typical user does. The typical user looks at web content when they come to a page that they're not familiar with, and they read it almost like a piece of print journalism. They read it vertically from up and down.

What a fact-checker does when they land in an unfamiliar place - is that they take bearing. They almost immediately open multiple tabs, and they read horizontally. And

they get a fix. But my question is that - who actually does this? What we really want to do is try to figure out how to make those five minutes worthwhile.

MCEVERS: So basically teaching people to be fact-checkers.

WINEBURG: Exactly. The kinds of duties that used to be the responsibility of editors, of librarians now fall on the shoulders of anyone who uses a screen to become informed about the world. And so the response is not to take away these rights from ordinary citizens but to teach them how to thoughtfully engage in information seeking and evaluating in a cacophonous democracy.

MCEVERS: Sam Wineburg is a professor of education and history at Stanford University. He's the lead author of a new study that tested hundreds of middle schoolers to college students about their ability to differentiate fake from real news. Thank you very much.

WINEBURG: Thank you.

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