fake news

HOW IT WORKS

In order to teach your kids to avoid it, you need to understand how fake news operates. Multiple experts explain that its success is based on interrelated and overlapping principles, none of which would be as effective without the others. These are the key concepts you need to be familiar with.

SKIMMING/GRAZING
We ingest information from many more sources but read at around the same rate. Outcome: We skip more. “We live in a grazing culture,” says Peter Adams, senior VP of education at the News Literacy Project. “If a fake news site with a name and logo fabricates a story that ignites people’s beliefs and biases in some way, those people will often click to share the story without having read it. That’s the main way fake news exploits people.” (There’s a good chance you’re skimming this article right now.)

ALGORITHMS
If you saw every post from your friends on social media, it would be overwhelming. Enter algorithms, which are fine-tuned to feed you content that will get your mental defenses down. You’re more likely to share content (right).

THE ECHO CHAMBER
On today’s internet, it’s easy to find someone to validate any point of view. (For proof, try Googling “flat earth.”) In a world full of oppositional viewpoints, social media is a choice environment to find more of what you already think.

PRIMING
Science has shown that simple repetition gradually wears down your mental defenses toward false information, even for conscious believers. “Familiarity breeds believability,” says Kris Shaffer, PhD, instructional technology specialist at University of Maryland Washington. Put another way: Hearing something multiple times is powerful.

COGNITIVE BIASES
The latest science says our brains are biased toward simplicity—a nice way of saying they’re lazy. In practice, this means that once we get an answer, we stick with it, which often leads to other conclusions.

FLUENCY VS LITERACY
Fluency is knowing how to use any given mode of communication. Literacy is fully understanding the information that it delivers. We confuse the fact that our kids are fluent in the use of digital devices with them being capable of analyzing the info those devices provide, says Wineburg.

SENSATIONALISM
Social media favors the shinier and most outrageous content. “You’re not navigating toward information,” says media theorist Douglas Rushkoff, PhD. “You’re in a funhouse where the most exciting or sensational link wins.”

NOISE
Free speech absolutists have long held that the answer to hateful or incorrect speech should not be censorship but more (presumably correct) speech. Unfortunately, the internet may have done significant damage to the “more speech” remedy. The overwhelming number of inputs today means there is no longer any dominant consensus narrative.

DECONTEXTUALIZATION
In the print era, visual differentiators conveyed information about the source at a glance. These days, viewing content within a social media platform interface means every story appears with the same layout, colors and fonts, whether it’s from The New York Times or Breitbart. This dulls news reports to the point that bombastic news organizations carry the same weight as a video of the surprising friendship between a cat and a mouse.

ALL OF THE ABOVE
Taken together, the aforementioned means of coercion are formidable arsenals in the war for our attention and our opinions. So if you (and your kids) want to have any hope of maintaining a firm grasp on what is or is not true in the coming years, you’re going to need to take matters into your own hands.