free-range THINKING ™

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ATTACK
CHEAT
BAD NEWS
FALSIFY
STRIKE BACK

Fake News is Not a Game (But Learning to Spot It Is)

Did you hear that Attorney General William Barr just resigned? Also, the Houston Astros have been stripped of their last World Series title, and Taylor Swift just punched Kanye West in the mouth. If all three items strike you as suspicious, they should - that's fake news across the board - but if I had tweeted these stories, they would have spread faster, further and deeper than real news.

Fake news isn't merely a nuisance. If we learned anything from the 2016 presidential election, it's that fake news can threaten the very foundation of our democracy. Social media experts estimate that roughly 47 million Twitter accounts are bots entirely devoted to spreading false stories. And that number doesn't even begin to take into account the humans who are retweeting this nonsense.

Jon Roozenbeek

At this rate, it's foolish to believe that fact-checkers can keep up with this tsunami of dishonesty. So what do we do? Jon Roozenbeek says that if you can't debunk it all, then "pre-bunk." And one way to successfully do that, he has discovered, is through a game. (Read full story.) *Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.*

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Fake News is Not a Game (But Learning to Spot It Is)

Roozenbeek is currently a Senior Research Affiliate in the Department of Psychology at the University of Cambridge. Working with DROG, a team of academics, journalists and media-experts based in The Hague; and with Sander van der Linden, Director of the Cambridge Social Decision-Making Lab, he developed an online game entitled "Bad News."

The conceit of the game is that it will teach you how to be a purveyor of fake news. As you play, you earn badges for developing six skills: impersonating other tweeters (especially anyone more famous or credible than you), touting conspiracy theories, antagonizing highly polarized groups, discrediting sources (particularly anyone who dares to criticizes you), trolling, and using emotional content. The

objective is to raise your credibility and attract as many followers as possible in the 15-20 minutes it takes to play the entire game.
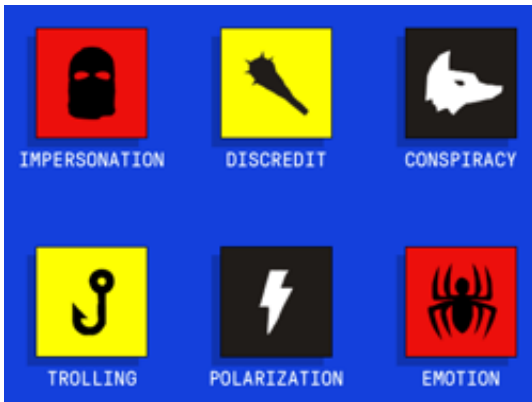
The real purpose of the game, of course, is *not* to educate a new legion of online scammers. By teaching players about the elements of fake news, Roozenbeek says, "we are hoping to create what you might call a general 'vaccine' against fake news, rather than trying to counter each specific conspiracy or falsehood." Or, as Roozenbeek likes to say, pre-bunking instead of debunking.

The English language version of Bad News debuted in February 2019, and since the launch was covered by The Guardian, BBC and other major outlets in the UK, it quickly attracted players. Within a month of publication, over 100,000 people had played, and more importantly, 15,000 of those players participated in pre- and post-game surveys that were embedded in the game.

These surveys provided statistical measures of the effectiveness of the game in making players more discerning of the news items they were reading. A study published in June 2019 in the journal Palgrave Communications reported that players were 21% less likely to believe a fake news story after completing all the steps in the game.

Bad News has been translated into 15 languages and has been played by over one million people to date. There's even a version for kids where the objective is the take over the school website and make fun of the principal.

The game has only reinforced Roozenbeek's belief in "inoculations" as a means to solving serious social problems. He and his colleagues are currently working with an NGO in Lebanon to explore the possibility of developing a similar game which can help people recognize when they are being recruited by terrorist organizations such as ISIS - a story which may sound like fake news, but isn't.

^ back to top

About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Celia Hoffman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.thegoodmancenter.com.

To reach Andy directly, please call (323) 272-4737 or send an email to andy@thegoodmancenter.com.

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where do-gooders learn to do better

The Goodman Center, 251 S Norton Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90004