

Lesson 4 Be Smart in the Digital World

Fake or Fact, That Is the Question

British writer Oobah Butler wanted to experiment with how easily one can manipulate public opinion online. He created a fake restaurant called The Shed at Dulwich. Butler set up an account for his “restaurant” on a popular online review site. He did not provide an exact address and wrote it was reservations only. He did this to make people think The Shed was a special restaurant.

He faked photos of The Shed’s food with shaving cream, whitening tablets, and even his own foot. He then asked his friends to write favorable fake reviews on the review site.

Things quickly got, in Butler’s words, “a little out of hand.” From the lowest of the charts of the review site, The Shed continuously climbed the London rankings. He started getting e-mails and phone calls requesting reservations. Interest further increased when he told callers The Shed was “fully booked for the next six weeks.”

Even funnier, food suppliers started guessing The Shed’s address and sent him free samples, and many job applications came in. These things happened without Butler serving a single meal. The Shed eventually became London’s number-one restaurant on one of the most trusted restaurant review sites. According to Butler, The Shed held that ranking for two weeks.

Butler’s story shows that much of what we see on the Internet cannot be trusted. This emphasizes the importance of digital literacy. Digital literacy is about more than just using computers. It is the ability to use digital technology to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information. To become digitally literate, we need to develop an attitude and knowledge that enable us to detect false information online. False information is any information that misinforms or deceives people. It can be about anything such as health, the environment, and economics across many platforms. It can be influential, as The Shed incident shows.

If people had been digitally literate, they would not have been fooled by The Shed experiment so easily. Digitally literate people would have carefully considered information about The Shed without being distracted by other people's reactions. They would have been suspicious that the restaurant did not have an address. They would have wondered why reviews on the restaurant did not appear in other more credible media. If they had done these things, they would likely have suspected that something was not right.

Fortunately, The Shed incident was an experiment that caused little damage. However, false information can cause emotional or financial harm to people. For example, false information about a certain gender or belief group can stir up hatred against that group. It can cause fights between those who support the group and those who do not. In addition, misleading online reviews about questionable products often trick people into wasting money.

To avoid being deceived by false information, we need to develop a habit of critically evaluating what we see online. If you see a story that looks too good or too bad to be true, check the source first. Look at the website the story comes from. Does it look real? Are there spelling errors? Does it have other stories or just the one you read? Check that the story contains references and links to other information. Click on those links and see if the other information looks reliable. Websites with false information often do not have many real stories about other topics. They also often have lots of advertisements that pop up when you visit the sites.

You should then check the credibility of the content creator. If a story has no writer's name, this could be a sign that its content is questionable. If there is a name, find out what and where the person has reported before. If the person has not written anything else or writes for a website that looks unreliable, think twice before believing the content.

Finally, check who else is reporting the story. If no other media are reporting the same story, the story may not be true. Pick a few keywords from the story and put them in a search site to see if other media are supporting the story.

Sorting through the vast amount of information created and shared online is challenging. However, it is important that we know what false information is and how it spreads. The better we recognize false information, the better we will be at avoiding it and helping others do the same.