

What you need to know about...

ONLINE HOAXES

Part of our Online Information Series



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What are they?

'Online Hoaxes'

Online hoaxes are fictional stories circulated online, frequently intended to shape people's beliefs or opinions. They have been around as long as the internet itself. Older more basic and transparent hoaxes have been replaced with something far more believable.

Nowadays, anyone can put together a believable looking photo, video or website in hours and minutes, rather than days and weeks. Combined with the speed at which social media operates, this allows online hoaxes to flourish.



Know the Risks

Taking dangerous advice

While many online hoaxes are harmless fiction created to make people smile, some are actively dangerous. This can affect almost any topic, including serious health related information such as cancer or coronavirus. Hoaxes can cost money as well as time.



Spreading disinformation

Even if children don't believe the content of a hoax, engaging with hoaxsters can inadvertently send misinformation to those that might. This can happen directly by sharing or retweeting, but it can also occur accidentally through discussion. Liking a post or replying can bring the original hoax into your children's friends' and family's feed which could have a serious impact.



Preventing genuine advice

Many online hoaxes thrive on a distrust of authority figures: doctors, academics, and journalists. Spreading an online hoax as fact amplifies this distrust, but also drowns out these important voices, seemingly giving each one equal balance. The two shouldn't be equivalent, for obvious reasons.



Spotting a Hoax

Check the source

Although hoaxes are most likely spread by friends and family on social media, finding the original source usually isn't too difficult on the likes of Twitter. A new account that has a history of sharing dubious content or behaves a bit like a bot isn't a guarantee that the viral story/picture/video is fake, but it is a red flag that warrants further investigation.

Look deeper

If a claim, story, picture, or video has gone viral, there's a chance that other hoax slayers will be on the case. Start off with Google and Google News, and be sure to favour trusted news sources rather than anonymous blogs that often seek to amplify rather than critique. Visit independent fact checkers online to establish what is real.

Tell-tale signs

If no one else seems to be investigating, you can take steps to do it yourself. Fake accounts can be identified by analysing posting patterns and doing reverse image searches. They're usually stolen from somewhere to make a bot or troll appear more authentic. A reverse image search can also be used to find genuine pictures being used for the wrong thing.

Safety Tips

Talk about trusted sources

Children need to learn quite quickly that not everything they read or watch on the internet can be taken at face value. Explain that there are people who seek to actively deceive for attention, profit or ideology. Teach them to look for reliable resources such as established news channels, health authorities and fact checking sites, and not take everything they read on social media as fact.

Encourage critical thinking

It's best to encourage scepticism: if something sounds a bit too perfect or too unlikely, it probably is. This scepticism should also be aimed at children themselves; encourage them to pay extra attention to shared content if it is something they believe. If they want to believe something is true, then red flags may be invisible. This is called confirmation bias.

Think before they share

Encourage children to stop and think before hitting the share button. In the online world, being among the first to share something can be incredibly tempting but stopping to think can save embarrassment later when something dubious is exposed as false.

Our Expert Alan Martin



Alan Martin is a highly respected technology journalist and former acting editor who has written for a number of major publications including Wired, TechRader, Stuff, PC Pro, Gizmodo and CNET. He has also contributed work to Business Insider and MSN and created content for tech giants Microsoft, Currys, LG and OnePlus.

