The October 1938 broadcast of Orson Welles’ adaptation of the novel by H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds,* performed in a style that mimicked news bulletins interrupting regular broadcasting, fooled many listeners into thinking that Martians had landed in central New Jersey and were embarking on a global rampage. Enough people who tuned in after the radio drama was underway panicked to the point where the incident became shorthand for how fake news can roll the real world.

Kate Freedman G’10, Undergraduate Education Librarian for the UMass Amherst Libraries, who teaches a course on information literacy, grew up near Grover’s Mill, the real town named as the landing place for the fictional alien invasion. She has a long-standing interest in that historical curiosity.

“The reason people thought it was real wasn’t because Welles was deliberately trying to deceive them,” she said. It was that radio is what she calls “a chronological medium.” People tuning in couldn’t “just rewind” to hear the beginning of the show, or flip back a few pages. Instead, they listened to actors playing extremely dramatic roles, and the radio drama was underway panicked to the point where the incident became shorthand for how fake news can roll the real world.

Freedman says that the Library holds a unique place in the university as an institution because it cuts across disciplines. This is important both because its mission is focused on the research process, rather than on the end result, and because it is a resource for every department on campus. Moreover, many students, especially those in the incoming class, may not yet have departmental affiliation, and they are at a crucial stage in their development as thinkers. Having just run the gauntlet of high school, they find themselves at a moment when their intellectual horizons are expanding. The Libraries exist within their larger institutions as repositories of reliable information. They also make information available in ways that allow for vetting, evaluation, and reconsideration in new contexts.

Freedman created a one-credit course called “De-mystifying Library Research,” in which she challenges students to “look at the foundational building blocks of what critical thinking really is.” Part of constantly questioning new information is what she calls “source evaluation.” Often that means looking at the sources of your sources.

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Steve Fox practiced journalism both in print and online as the Washington Post before coming to the UMass Journalism department. One of the courses he teaches, News Literacy, deals specifically with fake news. Because it was recently approved as fulfilling a general education requirement, the course is attracting more and more non-journalism majors.

“T"
HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS

Chancellor Kumble R. Subbaswamy challenged researchers, scholars, and teachers “to protect the pursuit of truth on our college campuses... through rigorous, fact-based presentation and dissemination of information based on scholarly processes.” He added, “Today, in this age of ‘fake news,’ ‘alternative facts,’ and increasing intolerance for opposing viewpoints, the defense of this treasured ideal is more important than ever.”

Law and Public Policy Librarian Lisa Di Valentino aggregated some of those tools on a few pages of the UMass Amherst Libraries website. They are meant to support Fox’s course and others like it as news literacy is more important than ever.

is the “firehose of information that comes at us on a daily basis” through any number of electronic platforms, according to Fox. “Our devices are screaming at us pretty much 24/7.” The challenge, he says, is to teach people “to take a deep breath” and learn “how to be skeptical without being cynical.”

Fundamental to this is sharing responsibly. Don’t repost something unless you know it is true. “People tend to believe things if they are dramatic enough or if there are visuals to go with them,” said Fox, especially if they come from “sources that support their preconceived beliefs.” By actively seeking out alternative sources of news, consumers can hone their radar for what is—and is not—credible.

There are also tools to help people become better consumers of news to verify things that they read, see, or hear.

Consider the source. Click away from the story to investigate the site, its mission, and its contact info.

Read beyond. Headlines can be outrageous in an effort to get clicks. What’s the whole story?

Check the author. Do a quick search on the author. Are they credible? Are they real?

Supporting sources. Click on those links. Determine if the info given actually supports the story.

Check the date. Reposting old news stories doesn’t mean they’re relevant to current events.

Is it a joke? If it is too outlandish, it might be satire. Research the site and author to be sure.

Check your biases. Consider if your own beliefs could affect your judgment.

Ask the experts. Ask a librarian or consult a fact-checking site.

One of the problems is that in the past, the financial incentives were weighted in favor of being accurate and building a reputable brand, whereas today there is a lot of money to be made in simply attracting attention, according to Di Valentino. Over time, she said, sifting through and vetting news items taxes our brainpower. This is partly because “there are only so many minutes in the day” and because algorithms are becoming more sophisticated in their ability to deceive.

The web pages include links to sources of scholarly articles on the fake news phenomenon. Most require a UMass ID and password to access them. “There is a lot of academic research going on right now. It’s sort of exploding,” she said. There are also links to articles and news stories that she knew of or that people are bringing to her attention about various aspects of fake news.

Di Valentino also included links to fact-checking websites such as Snopes, which grabs headlines that are going viral and drills down into their sourcing to determine whether they are reliable, and PolitiFact, which rates the accuracy of claims made by U.S. politicians with a “Truth-o-Meter.”

There is also a link to a guide for evaluating websites based on telltale signs like odd domain names, writing style, sources, design, and how the site describes itself. The LibGuide, which includes a table evaluating hundreds of websites, is 34 pages. The length alone indicates how difficult it would be for any individual to apply a full measure of critical skepticism to everything they read or hear.

“I didn’t want it to be overwhelming, but I wanted it to give people an idea of the scope of the problem,” said Di Valentino. As a librarian, she sees herself as “a curator of resources” people can use to assess verity.

Megan Hayes ’20 is majoring in journalism and also studying environmental science. She hopes to someday cover an environment beat. Her dream job would be with National Geographic. As a consumer of news, she said she often triangulates to make a judgment as to whether something is reliable by searching to see if it has made it onto multiple platforms.

Hayes thinks that there will always be people publishing things that aren’t true. But as the phenomenon gets more attention, she believes the impact of that behavior will diminish.

Does she have faith that news consumers will become savvy to the pitfalls and promises of our rapidly evolving information environment? “Yes, I do,” she said. “I do.”

There’s nothing novel about antagonism between journalists and people in power. What is new is when a prominent politician’s words at a public speaking event makes reporters think twice about their physical safety, said Fox. “Trump and the Trump administration have made reporters think twice about their physical safety, and that’s supposed to be anathema in a democracy,” she said.

Similarly, agitprop, concerted rumor mongering, propaganda, information warfare and even the infiltration of newsrooms are not new. What we haven’t seen before