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When Photos Lie

Fake images are tricking countless people on social media. Here's why that matters—and how you can avoid getting fooled.

BY LAURA ANASTASIA AND MARY KATE FRANK

THE INCREDIBLE IMAGE appeared on Twitter just hours after Hurricane Harvey struck Texas in August 2017. In the photo *(see right)*, a great white shark swims alongside drivers on a flooded Houston highway. It's no surprise that hundreds of thousands of people clicked on the post, and many shared it. The pic was even broadcast on national news.

The problem? The image was fake. A hoaxster had used photo-editing software to insert the fearsome predator into a picture of a flooded road.

The shark shot is one example of a fast-growing problem in the digital age: phony photos. As tech tools once available only to pros become more accessible and sophisticated, just about anyone can alter photographs.

Some doctored images are meant to be a joke (think: a pic of your birthday party with Beyoncé added in). But others are created to spread lies and stir up controversy. Russian operatives, for instance, filled social media networks with phony images as part of an effort to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Like other forms of fake news, manipulated photos can make people believe things that aren't true. They can be even more powerful than fake articles, experts say, because people are more likely to trust a photograph. Plus, images arouse strong feelings in people instantly, says John Silva of the nonprofit News Literacy Project.

"With the right image and the right headline," he says, "you can manipulate people's emotions and make them believe all sorts of things."

In this altered pic of activist Emma González, a ripped gun-range target was replaced with the U.S. Constitution. Her face was widened and shadows were added under her eyes.

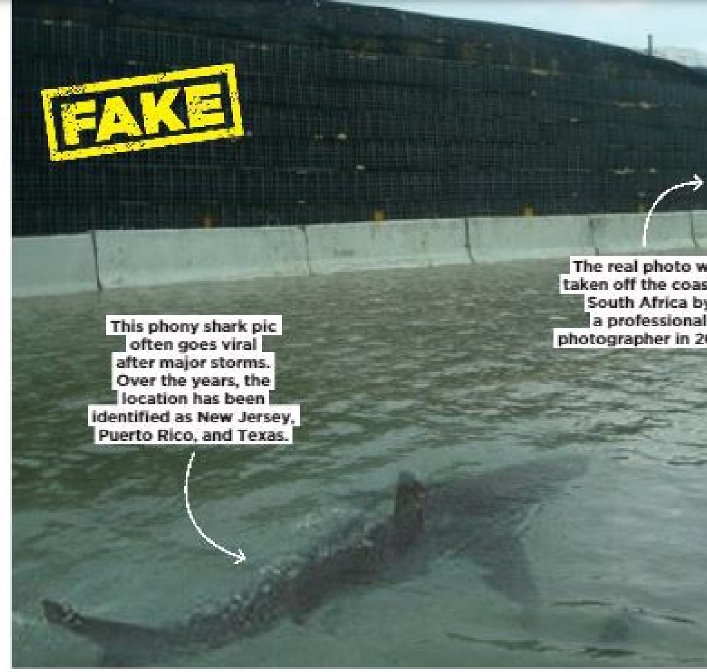
The real photo was published by *Teen Vogue.*

The Power of Images

It's not always easy to spot a fake. In a study by Warwick University in England, people could identify manipulated images only about 60 percent of the time. Even when people *did* detect a phony pic, most couldn't pinpoint what had been altered.

Many sham photos seem authentic because they were created from real images that have been changed only slightly. For example, this past March, a fake picture surfaced on Twitter of teen gun-control activist Emma González appearing to tear up a copy of the U.S. Constitution *(see left)*. The real photo shows González, a survivor of the Parkland, Florida, school shooting, ripping a gun-range target.

PAGE 16: TYLER MITCHELL (REAL EMMA IMAGE); PAGE 17: THOMAS P. PESCHAK/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE (REAL SHARK IMAGE)



This phony shark pic often goes viral after major storms. Over the years, the location has been identified as New Jersey, Puerto Rico, and Texas.

The real photo was taken off the coast of South Africa by a professional photographer in 2005.

The fake was posted by a bot (or robot) account on Twitter. It prompted outrage, especially among gun-rights activists. That's the goal of many fake photos: to stir up strong feelings around hot-button issues. In this case, the phony image reinforced fears some Americans have about losing their **Second Amendment** rights. That made them less skeptical of the altered photo.

"When an image hits a belief that we already have, we will readily accept it," Silva says. "And we will share it."

Weaponizing Fake Photos

Could a bogus photo help determine who you vote for? Russian operatives were hoping so during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, experts say. The Russians used false images in an attempt to sway Americans to vote for Donald Trump.

For example, as Trump promised to crack down on illegal immigration and voters' emotions ran high around that issue, a Russia-backed Facebook account posted a photo that appeared to show a woman and child at a pro-immigration rally with a sign reading, "Give me more free [stuff]." The hackers had digitally altered an image from more than a decade ago. In reality, the woman's sign read, "No human being is illegal."

The fake image—crafted to reinforce negative stereotypes that some people have about undocumented immigrants—was shared hundreds of times.

TIP
Drag and drop any image into the search box on images.google.com to help determine whether a photo is fake.

"Start Asking Questions"

Fake photos worry experts for many reasons. For one thing, research shows that people are more likely to share images than plain text on social media, so phony pics spread quickly. Plus, exposure to all those frauds can make us doubt real news photos.

In addition, tech companies—still struggling with how to combat fake news articles—are even less equipped to deal with the rise of fake images. Facebook, one of the top sites where fake photos are posted, has expanded its fact-checking program to include photos and videos. But those efforts still depend largely on people doing the verifying—and that takes time.

The best defense against fake photos may be taking a minute to consider images you see on social media before re-posting them, especially ones that seem shocking or are getting a lot of attention.

"If you're having a very strong reaction, that's a warning sign," says Silva. "You need to sit back from your screen and start asking questions." ◆

CORE QUESTION What are some effects of the spread of fake photos? Cite the text.