

Read the article about the 'tree octopus'. Choose the correct option (a–c) to answer the question.

What is the tree octopus?

a a rare animal that is in danger of dying out
b an animal that was made up as a hoax
c an unusual type of sea animal that also lives on land

Read the article again. Are the statements True (T) or False (F)?

1 The tree octopus website was created to prove that people believe anything they read online.
2 According to the website, tree octopuses cannot survive in water.
3 Not all of the information on the website seems realistic.
4 According to the website, the tree octopus is rare because they are hunted for food.
5 The students in Dr Leu's experiment said they wouldn't recommend the website to anyone else.
6 A small number of university students continued to believe the tree octopus was real after they had learnt it was a hoax.

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The Tree Octopus

Do you believe everything you read online? If so, you're not alone.

In 2006, Dr Donald Leu, a professor at a university in the US, tried an experiment to prove that people believe anything that they read online. He told a class of high school students that they were going to research an endangered animal – an animal that may soon die out – and directed them to a website about a very unusual octopus called a 'tree octopus'.

The website, which was created just for fun in 1998 by writer Lyle Zapato, gives lots of details about this rare animal. Unlike other types of octopus, which can only survive in water, the tree octopus can – the website says – also live on land and spends much of its life in forests. The website also describes the animal's appearance, habits and diet and explains how it moves through the trees looking for birds' eggs to eat.

The information on the website seems real – it has scientific names, photos, videos and suggestions of what you can do to help save the tree octopus from dying out. But there are signs that the website is a hoax. It refers to other made-up animals, such as the 'mountain walrus', and suggests that the tree octopus is in danger because they are being killed for people to put on hats.

Despite these clues, ninety-six percent of the students who took part in Dr Leu's experiment believed the information on the website and said that they would recommend it to other students. Even after they were told that the website was a hoax, many students still believed that the tree octopus was a real animal.

In 2018, the experiment was repeated at a high school in the Netherlands with similar results – only eight percent of students thought it was a fake story. But it wasn't just school children who were deceived. In 2020, a professor at another university in the US used the website with his science students. After reading the information, ninety percent of them believed that the tree octopus was a real animal, and even after watching a video that proved it was fake, almost eight percent still believed it was real.



With the increase in fake news stories in recent years, it is becoming harder to know what to believe, and the story of the tree octopus shows just how easy it is to be deceived.

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