Fact Checking Online News and Social Media

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When information is shared online, it can be tricky to figure out what's true and what's not. Here are some basic strategies to help you check whether information is reliable before you pass it on.

LOOK FOR RELIABLE SOURCES

No matter what the topic, use a reliable source that you recognize. This is especially important if you are passing information along to others since they may put trust in the information **because it came from you**. It makes sense to believe people we know personally. We hear about their lives and trust them for firsthand information about our community.

Unfortunately, social media makes it easier to unintentionally share information that is not from a reliable source. When this happens, we may pass along information that is untrue, out of date, or even harmful. It's also easy to be influenced by **confirmation bias**: prioritizing information that matches a pre-existing belief or assumption, even if we have not double-checked to make sure it's true or up to date.

This type of information is called fake news, misinformation, or disinformation. Each of these terms has a slightly different meaning.

- **Fake news** is false or misleading information that is presented in the form of news that we expect to be able to trust.
- **Misinformation** means that the information is false, but people have spread it casually without necessarily trying to mislead others.
- **Disinformation** is misinformation that is being spread knowingly. Sometimes this is organized propaganda to promote the goals of a group or government.

Sometimes fake news, misinformation, or disinformationcan appear in formats that feel similar to mainstream news, but with a surprising or sensational twist.

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Or, the story may seem to serve an agenda. Fake news is not just something that you disagree with. Rather, it's news that does not have a factual basis or that includes made-up claims or extrapolations about a factual story.

WHAT SOURCES TO TRUST?

In the past, people didn't necessarily have access to "fake news" in the way we think of it today. Instead, there were rumors, tall tales, unreliable salespeople, and tabloids in the supermarket checkout line. These stories were meant to entertain you or tempt you to buy something. Because we see these things in a certain context, we know not to believe them. Nowadays, with social media and websites, fake news can be harder to spot. When one webpage looks much like another, it can be hard to tell immediately what to trust.

One way to check whether a source is trustworthy is to see if you can verify the information with other sources. If you see similar (but not identical) reporting from multiple reputable sources, it's more likely to be trustworthy. Look for confirmation from news agencies, nonprofits, or governmental or educational sites. Educational institutions have web addresses that end in .edu, while official U.S. government sites use .gov. (For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is cdc.gov.) If you're looking at Wikipedia, check the links to sources at the end of each article.

If you don't recognize the name of a site, your next step is to check whether it has been flagged as unreliable. Anyone can buy a URL that ends in .org, .com, .net, or .news. Sites that regularly seem to hype up stories or cater to sensationalism should be approached with caution. For example, never believe a news story from The Onion, The Borowitz Report, or the Babylon Bee, which are parody publications.

Articles labeled as op-ed (which stands for "opinion-editorial") may appear in reputable newspapers, but have not gone through the same rigorous fact checking as regular news articles. Similarly, news networks sometimes broadcast non-news shows hosted by TV personalities who express their opinions, including information that hasn't been verified. Sometimes content like this is called **infotainment** or **soft news**.

It's also good to know whether a page belongs to an organization with a vested interest in a topic. Searching the name of the publishing organization can help you distinguish a trusted, mainstream source from a fringe group.

Sometimes a piece of misinformation will be replicated by many unreliable sources. Most often when this happens, the images or text will look similar on each site. Seeing text or images that appear to have been copied and pasted is a red flag or warning sign. If you search online for a piece of information and the search results include many sites with names you don't recognize, be cautious. There are fact-checking sites that can help you sort facts from misinformation (or speculative claims). These include FactCheck.org, Politifact.com, and Snopes.com.

BUILD YOUR MEDIA LITERACY

To build media literacy, become familiar with a few trustworthy news sites and learn their style of reporting. As you gain experience with reliable sources, you'll have a better sense of what makes a story trustworthy. Look for stories or videos that offer multiple perspectives, cite their sources of information, and where headlines don't overstate the actual content of the article or video.

Reliable sources of information include libraries, federal agencies, universities, the Cooperative Extension Service, and news sites from reputable newspapers, magazines, or TV news. When searching online, it's a good idea to look for sites associated with a university, federal agency, or news network. Librarians at public or academic libraries are often happy to help you do research and find high-quality sources.

For scholarly books and journal articles, you can search for information at sites like Google Scholar (scholar.google.com), which focus on peer-reviewed publications. This means the information has been carefully reviewed by experts in the field. Depending on your topic, you may want to limit your search to publications within the past five or ten years. For more general information on a topic, look for "review articles," which summarize the findings of multiple published studies.

Beware of "copycat URLs" that almost but not quite replicate a well-known site. An example is the site washingtonpost.com.co, a false news site that added ".co" to the end of its URL to fool people into thinking it was the real *Washington Post*. Wikipedia maintains a list of false news sites at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fake_news_websites. However, since these sites can be set up quickly and are ever-changing, don't assume that a site is trustworthy just because it's not on this list.

FRONT STAGE AND BACK STAGE NEWS

Just like a theater, information has a **front stage** and a **back stage**. The front stage is what you see reading or watching the news. Live reporting on TV news is a good example of the front stage.

When we see a TV reporter doing a story on site, it can feel like the front stage is all there is. They are telling us what's happening in real time! However, there's much more going on back stage. The reporter on the screen is supported by a team of people who provide background information and make sure the story is being reported as accurately as possible.

In the same way, if you tell your friend about something that you have heard or read, or share something on social media, that is the front stage. You are the one who is performing the news and telling your friend about it. Therefore, you need to take a few steps back stage to make sure that what you are sharing is accurate.

The more work a source does back stage, the more trustworthy we can expect them to be. At serious news

agencies, reporters and fact checkers look into the stories and double or triple check each claim to make sure what's being reported is true. News writers use their background knowledge to frame the story with context and an explanation of terms and timeline.

In the same way, all of us can work back stage to make sure the information we share on social media is accurate and up to date. As we read and listen to news or scroll social media, we can do our part by choosing trustworthy sources; evaluating memes, images, headlines, or posts before sharing them; checking multiple sources to confirm our information; and using background knowledge and common sense.

HOW TO TALK TO KIDS ABOUT FAKE NEWS

The nonprofit Common Sense Media (commonsensemedia. org) recommends that adults help kids understand news or information by asking the following questions (Filucci, 2020):

- "Who made this?
- Why did they make it?
- Is it for or against something or someone?
- Are they trying to get a big reaction from me or just inform me?
- What's left out of this content?"

One way to engage kids in critical thinking is to ask whether something is a **fact** or an **opinion**. It's also important to talk to kids about the role that emotions play when we hear upsetting or exciting news. Strong emotions can make us temporarily shut down our reasoning. For example, during the March 2020 Covid quarantine in Italy, many people circulated footage that claimed to show dolphins swimming in the canals of Venice. It was such an inspiring story that it was tempting to believe it. The footage was actually taken elsewhere in Italy. To make it more confusing, in March 2021, two dolphins really did make a brief appearance in the Grand Canal of Venice (Machemer, 2021). To understand the spread of this fake news—and the subsequent true news—required news sources to do some work back stage.

WHAT ARE PLATFORMS DOING TO REDUCE THE SPREAD OF FAKE NEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

Some companies have been making changes to their policies, terms of service, or algorithms to minimize circulation of fake news. (Algorithms are rules that computers use to solve problems, in this case about how to sort and distribute information.)

YouTube has policies that prohibit hate speech and the spreading of medical misinformation, as well as deceptive practices and "deep fakes" (editing a video to impersonate someone or falsely imply that something happened). Their stated goal is "raising up authoritative sources for news and information, and reducing recommendations of borderline content and harmful misinformation" (YouTube, n.d.).

Facebook has adjusted its algorithm in response to concerns about the spread of misinformation. The platform stopped circulating posts that suddenly send a lot of traffic to new websites (Dreyfus and Lapowsky, 2019), and introduced notices beneath misleading posts or memes, with links to information from independent fact checkers (Hutchinson, 2021). Facebook owns other media and communication platforms, including Instagram, which are also affected by its changes in policy.

In 2021, Twitter began prompting users to read articles before sharing. If a user starts to re-share a link when they have not first clicked through, Twitter will ask, "Want to read this before retweeting?" Twitter is also testing a reporting option for misleading information (Binder, 2021). We can expect these and other social media platforms to continue pushing back against the spread of disinformation.

Sometimes, individual users on social media take a stand against fake news. For example, during the Covid pandemic, scientists and medical specialists created their own posts on the social networking service TikTok to debunk false information in side-by-side reaction videos, using the Duet feature. As individual users, we look for ways to push back against those spreading false information by using humor, creativity, and facts.

WHAT ABOUT NEWS MEDIA BIAS?

All reporting is based in human perspectives, so different news sources will always have somewhat different perspectives. For example, a story about a rural community reported in a newspaper from a major city will take an outside perspective, whereas the local paper may be able to better understand the experience of local residents. International news often simplifies stories about other countries because readers don't have the background knowledge to understand more detailed reporting. These are examples of **factual reporting with a certain perspective**. Some newspapers or magazines write from a known political stance or include a lot of subjective analysis. For example, *The Economist* writes about news and politics with a perspective based in free market economics and individualism. *National Geographic* prioritizes the conservation of natural ecosystems and traditional ways of life. Both of these publications rigorously fact check and practice careful reporting. We deepen our understanding when we read sources that report on the news from various perspectives, as long as we choose news that is based in journalistic integrity, uses accurate headlines, cites reliable sources, and gives context for stories.

SUMMARY

When information is shared online, it can be tricky to figure out what's true and what's not. Look for reliable sources,

and learn how to spot misinformation. This is especially important if you are passing information along to people who trust you. Look for stories or videos that offer multiple perspectives, cite their sources of information, and where headlines don't overstate the actual content of the article or video. Trustworthy news media organizations do a lot of work back stage to verify their statements. In response to an epidemic of misinformation online, some companies have been making changes to their policies, terms of service, or algorithms to minimize the circulation of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. We can all do our part to share reputable sources and keep our online communities free of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation.

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