Election Integrity Project

News Consumers' Toolkit

Covering misinformation and disinformation

Center for Journalism Ethics
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

Wisconsin Watch The Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism

FIRST DRAFT

Sticking up for the truth: A citizen's toolkit for navigating the facts-optional world of social media

By Howard Hardee

Information comes at you so fast on social media that it's hard to know what to believe.

Even professionals get confused. Lewis Friedland, a journalism professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has the expertise, but can't keep up with the overwhelming torrent of articles, memes and cat pics — let alone verify if it's all true.

"I can't check the source of everything that comes across my screen," he said. "I can't even come close. How on earth can we expect single parents working two jobs to do this? It's literally impossible in the time and space of a day, given a normal person's responsibilities."

I'm a reporter with special training on how to track false and misleading content, and I'm also regularly disoriented by what I see on the social web. In February, I began a local social media-monitoring project with First Draft, an international organization that helps journalists identify and report on disinformation. With fellows representing Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin, we're providing this non-partisan service in swing states where a few thousand voters could make the difference in this critical election year.

With backing from the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism and the Center for Journalism Ethics at UW-Madison, I've helped launch the Election Integrity Project, an effort to extend our non-partisan efforts and develop resource kits for journalists and news consumers — and counteract efforts to strip voters of their power in Wisconsin.

As social platforms like Facebook, Twitter and TikTok, and private messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram, have become central parts of everyday life in the U.S., falsehoods have flourished and our democracy has been weakened by an inability to agree on facts.

"The degree of the crisis can hardly be overstated," Friedland said. "I'm usually somebody who looks for positive solutions rather than talking about the sky falling in, but we're starting to get to a point as a society where, at least from the standpoint of shared knowledge and facts — and the shared trust that comes from those things — the sky is starting to fall in."

Though we all play a part in amplifying falsehoods online, it's not up to you to clean up the internet. Social platforms will continue elevating emotional posts. Bad influencers will keep spewing toxic content. All you can do is help your family and friends, and stick up for the truth.

How can you deal with extreme information overload? This guide will show you.

I. How to know what's real: Assessing content's credibility

A lot of people believe there's real news, and "fake" news, and nothing in between. But it's not so simple. Effective disinformation usually contains a kernel of truth.

Facts are often cherry-picked and spun to suit political and ideological motives — and to make money. Funders of shady news websites, special interest groups, and bad actors hocking phony nutritional supplements all stand to profit.

"Many misinformation narratives out there are playing off something that is true," said Shadanay Urbani, a writer and researcher with First Draft. "The problem is often that the kernel of truth is taken out of context or presented to support a particular narrative. Understanding that allows you to take a step back on social media and say, 'OK, this certainly feels true, but what is the context or potential agenda that I might be missing?'"

Developing that instinct is critical. Your default mode shouldn't be to assume that everything you see on social media is true. Here's how to tell if something's trying to fool you:

Go to the primary source.

If you're suspicious of a claim made on social media, don't take your former roommate's word for it — search it yourself. Look for primary sources of information and check the underlying claim. Be especially wary if the content has been captured in a screenshot, and doesn't include a link to supporting evidence.

See something posted to Facebook about unemployment rates that looks shocking but has no link? Go to the homepage for a newspaper or TV station in your state – or a national outlet – and see if you can find a story there. If not, it's likely untrue because big changes in unemployment rates will always get news coverage. If you doubt those sources, you can always go directly to the website for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Look for a name on the article.

If you can't tell who wrote an article, that's an immediate red flag. Some stories are written by an editorial team and will be credited as "staff report" or something similar. But most news stories credit a reporter or two.

"You should know where something comes from, so you know who to hold accountable," said Joy Mayer, director of Trusting News. "Whose viewpoint is being shared?"

Look for the date of publication.

What was true a year ago may not be true now. When you open an article, check to see when it was published. The date should be at the top, near the author's name.

While some content is totally made up, it's increasingly common to see reality-based photos and articles used out of context — usually, old ones presented as if they're new.

See where else it's reported.

Do a quick search to see whether other publications are reporting it, too. Try a few different phrasings in your search query to turn up different results, Mayer said.

"With my very politically interested teenage son, he'll send me something and say, 'Mom, did you hear this?' I'm like, 'Oh, if I Google it with the words you used, I come up with a lot of people who think that's true. If I Google it with more neutral phrasing, I realize that it's kind of a conspiracy theory.' ... Being willing to corroborate something before passing it on or putting your faith in it is a good idea," she said.

In your searches, avoid loaded terms like "exposes," "hoax" or "uncovers" and use neutral phrasing instead, such as "where to vote" or "vaccine information."

Watch for red flags.

Inflammatory, provocative and loaded language is a sign that the source isn't credible. So is an ALL-CAPS RANT with lots of punctuation mistakes and exclamation marks!

Misinformation:

WELL, WELL, WELL!! Isn't it just an interesting coincidence that Remdesivir is made by Gilead and is the "CURE" for COVID-19....and here's where it gets interesting China holds the patent on the drug through an agreement with Gilead's drug patent sharing subsidiary branch called UNITAID who has an office near Wuhan and you'll never guess who are the main financial investors in UNITAID....none other than George Soros, Bill & Melinda Gates, and WHO. I know what your thinking! It's just all a coincidence isn't it! Oh, don't let me forget the other coincidence that Gilead and UNITAID were financial supporters of Hillary Clinton. Oh, silly me I forgot one more coincidence Fauci was the one authorizing millions to be sent to The Wuhan Institute of Virology specifically for the "study" of Coronaviruses......I sure am thankful it's all just coincidences! Nothing to see here just keep moving along....
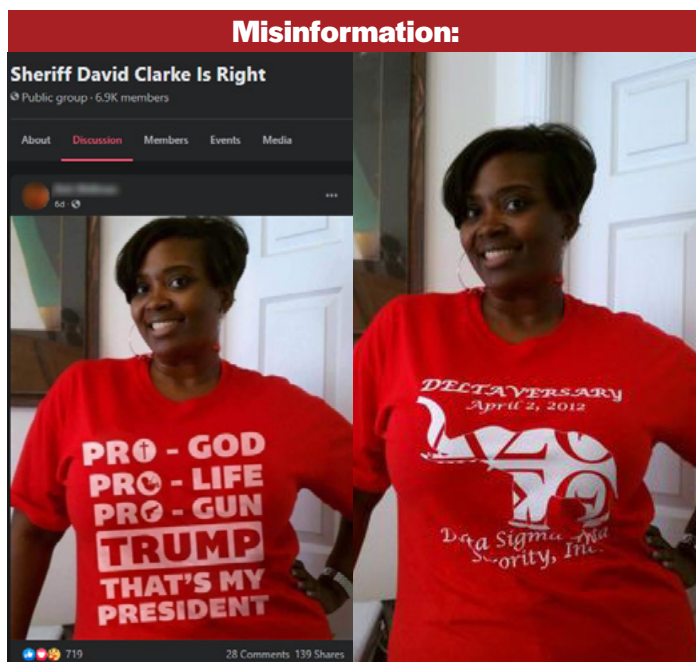
PBS.TWIMG.COM

😊😠😮 701   128 Comments

This post making a series of false connections is ridden with telltale signs of illegitimacy.

Check out iffy images.

Strange, off-putting and disturbing photos are another warning sign. Trustworthy news organizations won't manipulate a photo or present an old one as an original.

Ordinary-looking images can be misleading if used out of context or labeled incorrectly.

Misinformation:

Sheriff David Clarke Is Right
Public group · 6.9K members

About   Discussion   Members   Events   Media

😊😮😠 719   28 Comments 139 Shares

This image of a woman seemingly wearing a pro-Trump T-shirt appeared in the public Facebook group Sheriff David Clarke Is Right. But a reverse-image search shows that the text was digitally imposed onto her clothing.

"Most of the viral misinformation we see is visual," Urbani said. "If you're on a news page and there's a really incendiary photograph, do a reverse-image search. A lot of suspicious websites will repurpose old images, and that's the kind of thing you figure out really quickly. If a news source is using a repurposed image, you know immediately they're not holding themselves to the same standard that other news organizations might be."

Running a reverse-image search is easy. Right-click the image, save it to your desktop, and upload it to a tool like TinEye. That will show you other places it has appeared online.

For the super savvy news consumer, the RevEye browser extension for [Chrome](#) and [Firefox](#) allows you to right-click on a photo and perform a search on multiple platforms.

II. Finding the good stuff: How to identify trustworthy sources

An alternative to struggling to control the firehose of misinformation that is your social media feed: Just turn it off.

Find news organizations you trust, support them with a subscription or donation (search for nonprofit newsrooms via [NewsMatch](#)), and go to them for information — not Facebook or Twitter, where algorithms and disinformants are waiting to exploit your emotions.

Knowing where to find good information is critical. Here's how to do it.

Click the 'about' page.

See who's on staff, how it's funded, and where it's based. How many people are involved? What are their credentials?

In her social network, Mayer gets a lot of requests from people who can't tell whether a website is trustworthy.

"It really doesn't take me all that long to figure out that the editor used to work for the Trump campaign, or that it's funded by a partisan nonprofit," she said. "Just diving in a little bit helps you see who is this person, or what is this organization and what are their goals?"

Look for geographic locations and contact information. Your spidey sense should tingle if there is little or no identifying information in the "about" page.

Find out how it's funded.

Good news organizations are transparent about their funding sources. Whether they operate on an ad-based or nonprofit model can help you understand the organization's interests.

If you can't learn about a news organization's funding model from its website, be skeptical.

Know how to spot slant.

Typically featured in a special section of a news website, opinion pieces are lifted from that context as they cross the social web. It should say in the article that it's opinion-based.

These articles show what an individual person thinks about something and don't necessarily reflect the views of reporters in the newsroom. They don't try to eliminate or diminish bias.

Straight news reporting does. Reporters try to draw conclusions from facts but don't express opinions. So, don't think that all reporting has an agenda.

"You can go too far and assume all news has a discernible, intentional slant, and that all information is out to manipulate you, serving some ideological or partisan agenda. That isn't true," Adams said. "People have to be open to the idea that there really are sources of information that are centering the readers' needs. How well they do that, day-to-day, is up for debate, obviously, but the aspiration is there."

Let outlets earn your trust.

Good sources don't ask you to trust them, they show why you should.

"They'll lay out their sourcing pretty clearly, often with links in the actual piece, to say, 'Here's how we know.' They're also transparent about what they don't know," Adams said.

A credible source will own up to its mistakes.

"If an outlet takes the time to correct a story, to add an editor's note when they've made an update or change, those are signs of credibility," he said.

III. Whoa, there: Slowing down and practicing good judgement

Since social media algorithms elevate posts with emotional content, disinformation is amplified by strong reactions — usually negative ones.

Social platforms encourage people to glance at stuff, react emotionally, and share it right away. And they've been flooded with rumors, conspiracies and hoaxes designed to get your blood boiling.

"We could all benefit from being more aware of how something makes us feel," Mayer said. "When we read or watch something and say, 'Oh, yeah, right on!' A lot of times information is framed in a way to elicit an emotional response. We should think critically about whether the thing making us feel that way is open to and reflective of multiple viewpoints ...

"When we see something that makes us feel strongly, it's a good idea to ask, 'Was this created to persuade me of something?"

Pause before you share.

If something makes you angry, fearful or anxious, don't click "share" right away, and don't compose a scorched-earth hot take. Slow down and let your rational mind take over. Despite what you've been encouraged to do, nobody's waiting for you to share this meme or that article.

Misinformation:

Recall "Tyrannical Tony" Evers
@recallevers

Liberals want you to die. Remember this.

Hyperpartisan content is often designed to get your blood boiling — and to share without thinking.

This applies beyond outrage. If content makes you feel emotionally or intellectually validated, stop to consider whether it was designed for that purpose. Reflect on what you're interacting with, and be aware that social media platforms are designed for engagement and "frictionless sharing," Adams said.

"That's the revenue model," he said. "Facebook and Twitter want you to stay on their platforms, to like and share and comment because the more vibrant that space is, the more people spend time on it and the more ads get served."

If you come across an attention-grabbing headline, don't just pass it along. Click the link, read the article, and know what you're sharing. If you're uncertain, don't share it at all.

Be skeptical, not cynical.

Propagandists would have us believe that nothing can be trusted. That's behind the strategic attacks on the media and government institutions that have become so commonplace. Don't fall for that mindset.

"Somebody who is deeply steeped in, say, Sean Hannity's aggressive punditry — or outright propaganda, at times — isn't open to considering mainstream sources of news and information because they've so thoroughly ingested the notion that they're not to be trusted, that they always manipulate the news, and that they're lying to you," Adams said. "They've surrendered the notion of a knowable truth."

Navigating the social web requires emotional skepticism. But that doesn't mean throwing up your hands and giving up, or becoming a hardened cynic.
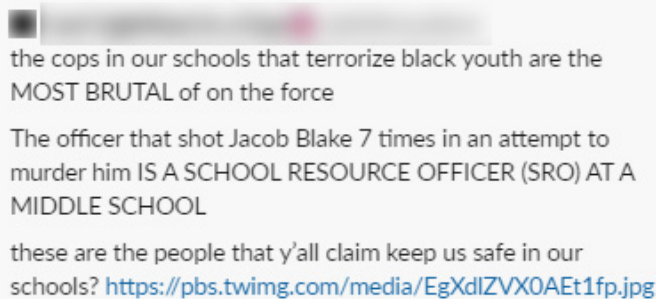
Bypass chatter on social media.

Social media adds layers of filtration that muddy a person's understanding of the news. You don't need friends, family or Facebook algorithms interpreting what's important. Go right to reputable sources instead.

"Most people are looking at the headlines, and at whatever caption was provided by their family and friends in their network, and that's it," Urbani said. "You're going to get a lot better information if you actually read the article. The subject of the article may not match whatever they were trying to grab you with in the headline."

When you depend on social media for news, the content you see is packaged with potentially inaccurate or misleading commentary that may shape your impression of reality.

Misinformation:

the cops in our schools that terrorize black youth are the MOST BRUTAL of on the force

The officer that shot Jacob Blake 7 times in an attempt to murder him IS A SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICER (SRO) AT A MIDDLE SCHOOL

these are the people that y'all claim keep us safe in our schools? https://pbs.twimg.com/media/EgXdlZVX0AEt1fp.jpg

In the immediate aftermath of the Jacob Blake shooting in Kenosha, left-leaning accounts misidentified the shooter as a school resource officer and used the falsehood to argue against having police in schools.

There's a better way to get the news than constantly "info grazing," Adams said.

"Just be deliberate and go to specific sources," he said. "There are still some really great news broadcasts. Watching your favorite local TV news for 30 minutes a day, or *PBS NewsHour* for national news, can be a really good way to get out of that trap."

Mix it up.

If you must use social media for the news, build a balanced social media feed. You should have a good mix of news websites, advocacy groups, nonprofits and partisan sites. Don't find people who share your worldview and block out everybody else.

"It's a good idea to follow a diverse set of pages and accounts," Mayer said. "Somebody told me recently that they love Rachel Maddow, they trust everything Rachel Maddow says and that makes it easier because she doesn't have to wonder who to

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believe. Anytime I hear somebody going, 'Well, so-and-so says,' and that's kind of the final word, that makes me nervous. ...

"I think a mix of sources with different missions and purposes and political bents is really useful."

Be a proactive source of good information.

You don't have to wait for a falsehood to share credible information. Stick up for the truth enough, and you could become a go-to resource within your network.

IV. So, this is awkward: Fact-checking people you know

We've all been there: Your friend, father or elected representative shares an article pushing the Pizzagate conspiracy on Facebook, or goes on a Twitter diatribe about how COVID-19 contact tracers are spying on them. (They aren't.)

Since you get your news from a variety of reputable sources, you know what they're saying or sharing isn't true, and knowing loved ones haven fallen for propaganda or hyper-partisan content can be highly distressing.

You should speak up, even if it isn't easy, said Leticia Bode, a researcher at Georgetown University who studies the effect of corrections on social media bystanders.

"It's important to call out misinformation you see on social media because it provides a counter narrative," she said. "If you imagine

a random person scrolling through their social media feed, they have no idea that what they're seeing is misinformation. If they immediately see a comment saying that it's not true, that can prevent them from believing it in the first place...

"The research says you should call them out in public," she said, "because otherwise people are going to think that the misinformation is true, and you have an opportunity to show everyone else that it's not."

Corrections are more effective when provided by close friends and family, rather than strangers, Bode said. But it's a delicate situation: People don't like being called out in public.

"It's going to make them uncomfortable, it's going to make them defensive, and to the extent that you care about furthering that relationship, it can be a dangerous thing to do," she said. "I think you should tread very carefully in that regard."

But you can make a difference for people in your circle and people from high school whose names you would have forgotten if you weren't on Facebook.

Here's how to fact-check people you know without burning bridges:

Be kind, empathetic and diplomatic.

Most people don't spread falsehoods on purpose. Be civil if you offer a correction — especially if it's directed at a loved one.

"People should be talking to their friends and family," Urbani said. "If your uncle shared something in the family group chat that you think is problematic or out of context, you should say something. A lot of misinformation circulates among well-meaning people who are just trying to help. If you can confront those people on a personal level, in the shared interest of having better information, that goes really far.

"Don't blame the individual," she continued. "Frame things in a way that doesn't threaten their worldview, and provide reasons why they could have been misled. Instead of saying 'You're stupid for believing this vaccine doesn't work,' you could say something like 'I'm concerned that this group is trying to mislead people about vaccines because they're trying to make money by selling supplements.'"

Mayer advises keeping those conversations focused on the information being discussed and avoid being drawn into emotional arguments.

"Using neutral language wherever possible, and not responding to emotion with emotion, can be persuasive," Mayer said. "Stripping away the emotional and inflammatory language to say, 'It sounds like what you're saying or what you've heard is X. That contradicts something that I've heard. Can we look at that together?'"

If you challenge a person's beliefs, try to do so productively. Consider: What's your goal in posting a fact-check? Are you likely to change anyone's mind? Or are you contributing to the chaos?

Get your own facts straight before correcting anyone.

If you see a friend sharing something you suspect isn't true on social media, your first instinct may be to jump right into the fray.

But you should cool your jets, said Nora Benavidez, a First Amendment and voting rights advocate with PEN America who wrote a [tip sheet](#) for correcting friends and family.

"First, before you even think about commenting, try to verify that the content your friend is posting is false. It might not be," she said. "Before you get into some back-and-forth that escalates or is tense, you want to make sure the content is actually misleading."

Be discreet.

Whether to offer your correction with a public comment or a private message is worthy of careful consideration. Nobody likes feeling duped, and a call-out could invoke a defensive posture, or an argument that could amplify engagement with the post. Not to mention, you don't want to embarrass the person.

"Generally, if something is super fresh and new, and you can confirm that it is misleading or false, it's better to send a private message," Benavidez said.

But there's value in offering corrections others can see. Use your discretion.

Personalize the message.

Acknowledging that everyone – including yourself – is susceptible to misinformation can be helpful. Talk about a time that you were fooled by a viral image or a fabricated news story; be relatable.

Point to expert sources.

Whether it's a public health official, an institution such as the American Medical Association, or an established fact-checking website like Snopes.com, linking to expert sources shows you've done your homework.

Of course, much of the public no longer trusts government and media institutions long considered to be unbiased sources, and there isn't universal agreement on which experts we should listen to.

"That's increasingly true even for things that in the past have been relatively consensus-driven and nonpolitical," Bode said. "That's a big challenge, and that's something for people to think about when they're approaching friends and family: 'What is a source that this person is going to be persuaded by?' That may be something you have to decide for yourself because there are so few organizations that everyone agrees are expert sources, at this point."

Say the truth, and say it again.

Don't restate the falsehood. Repetition is essential to persuasion, so start and finish your correction with the truth.

If somebody else has already offered an accurate correction, go ahead and give one, too.

"That lends more credence to the correction, essentially like putting another tally mark on the side of 'this is right, that's wrong,'" Bode said.

It's important to "establish a norm that we care about the truth," she said, regardless of whether a correction persuades the poster.

Provide context.

Rather than simply telling somebody they're wrong, explain why something is untrue. Give the full narrative version with as much explanatory detail as you can provide.

Distinguish opinion from falsehood.

Emphasize that people are entitled to their opinions, but facts still matter. If somebody is arguing that, say, the coronavirus lockdown was unnecessary, the conversation should stay grounded in reality.

"If you think the coronavirus lockdown was a bad idea, that's fine — you can have that opinion," Bode said. "But you can't say the CDC changed its numbers and that only 6% of attributed coronavirus deaths are actually coronavirus deaths. You don't get to decide that's a fact when it's not a fact."

Know when it's a lost cause.

Some people are beyond convincing, so don't get in a shouting match.

"In our research, we find that people who are very high in conspiracy ideation — people who are prone to believe conspiracy theories — no matter what you tell them, they're not going to be corrected," Bode said.

If someone is really digging in their heels, or the conversation is escalating from constructive to combative, find a delicate way to extract yourself.

"You know the thing — we've all seen it happen — where someone won't see reason or just refuses to acknowledge something," Benavidez said. "It is really worth your time and energy engaging with someone who won't go along with you? At that point, you should have an exit strategy like, 'Here are the resources I use. Good luck.'"

A Wisconsin-based Twitter account pushed the debunked claim that foreign actors were mass-producing counterfeit ballots to interfere in U.S. elections.

V. Read on: More resources on election misinformation

As discussed, it's good to get information from a variety of sources. So, don't take only our word for it: Here are a few helpful guides on how to navigate social media this election year.

First Draft has a free two-week text message course to help people prepare for election misinformation in a way that fits into their schedules. It's available in both English and Spanish.

PEN America has a tip sheet for how to talk to friends and family who share misinformation.

For those interested in becoming a proactive source of good information, Common Cause — an organization that has pursued a pro-democracy agenda for 50 years — offers volunteer training to monitor social media, flag misinformation and help people who post questions about voting and elections.