

Avoiding Deception: Detecting Disinformation

We live in an age when huge amounts of information are available with the swipe of a touch-screen. We're also seeing a growing presence of disinformation—intentionally false or misleading content—that is widely available and can have a major impact on our decisions, including whether or not—and how—we vote.

Disinformation can take many forms: supposed news stories that are [hoaxes](#), completely made-up. Or fake websites that [look like trusted news sources](#). Or actual news stories that are reposted with sensationalized clickbait headlines, often in ALL CAPS, which may distort the actual meaning of the story.

Disinformation can be spread to gain an advantage over an opponent, to simply confuse and dishearten people, or to just make a fast buck. In recent years, we've seen disinformation in [the 2020 elections and their aftermath](#), in [the COVID-19 pandemic](#), in [climate discussions](#), and in [the war in Ukraine](#).

Circulating false stories isn't new. [Examples go back to Roman times](#) at least. But today's online disinformation campaigns can spread across the world instantly. In the three months leading up to the 2016 election, the top 20 fake election stories on Facebook [generated more engagement](#) than the 20 best-performing stories from major news websites. And four of the 10 top-performing fake election stories [came from a 24-year-old Romanian man](#) who'd never been to the U.S.

Disinformation Can Lead to Distrust

A disinformation campaign may have a specific goal, maybe to damage the reputation of an organization or an individual, such as a political opponent.

Or a campaign might also promote fake favorable stories, falsely implying that someone prominent supports a favored candidate. Sometimes a campaign has a big picture goal, like breeding general distrust of elections and a sense that voting is pointless.

As the global COVID-19 pandemic spread, false stories proliferated. Some promoted untested or debunked medi-



HOW TO SPOT FALSE CONTENT

- 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 judgement.
- ASK THE EXPERTS**
Ask a librarian, or consult a fact-checking site.

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cations and unsubstantiated prevention or detection techniques. Others created conspiracy theories about COVID's origins. During the height of the shutdown, nearly half of the Twitter accounts [that discussed "reopening America" may have been bots](#). Fact-checking sites have documented [a wide range of false pandemic stories](#).

Another far-reaching goal of disinformation is to discredit fact-based news sources. The phrase "fake news" has become part of campaigns intended to call into question the credibility of journalists, both in the U.S. and abroad. In this way the concept of "fake news" has itself become a form of disinformation, sowing confusion about [what is real and what is not](#).

Zoom Out for Context

This landscape of questionable, confusing content can feel overwhelming. But you can do a lot to verify the content you consume. A crucial starting point is putting things in context, zooming out to get a broader picture.

One of the most dangerous features of online disinformation campaigns is that they can be [micro-targeted](#) at individuals. You may see different pieces of disinformation from what your friends see, based on your online profile. You might receive false information attacking a candidate that goes only to a select set of readers. That candidate will never have a chance to see and refute the false attacks. Disinformation campaigns often play on fears or uncertainties to hook you in and make their stories more clickable. One of your best defenses is to step back, look for context, question why you might be seeing a piece of content at a particular time. And explore the resources listed below, to get the skills to detect disinformation.

Look for Trusted Sources and Acknowledge Your Mistakes

It isn't easy to be constantly on your guard, figuring out what's true or false. So you might well be taken in by some piece of disinformation. It often makes sense to share content that people you trust already endorse. But if you post a story that you later learn is false, go public with your discovery. Your admission can help build trust with your online community.

Know the source of your information. Information shared by your friends may also be false because they either interpret it wrong or are repeating false information. If you get information that looks shocking, ask for the source. If it's not available, don't believe that information.

Prioritize reputable and trusted sources, as in the chart on the first page from the International Federations of Library Associations and Institutions. Know that the vast majority of journalists are professionals who know how to get accurate information and are reliable sources. Social media, on the other hand, is likely the least reliable source of information; information from more credible institutions is far more so.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The Poynter Institute's [articles on online fact-checking](#)
- [FactCheck.org's debunking of false stories](#) on Facebook and other platforms
- Other credible professional fact-checking sites, such as [PolitiFact](#) and [Snopes](#)
- California University of Pennsylvania's [comprehensive site on Fake News](#)
- Arizona State University's [tools to identify fake images and videos](#)
- The Washington Post's [guide to manipulated video](#)
- [guides.vote](#), home of our nonpartisan candidate guides, researched and edited by veteran journalists



Guides.vote produces nonpartisan candidate guides that show where candidates stand, with links to credible sources, so you can go to the polls with confidence.

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