



CAMPUS ELECTION ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

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DO NOT BE DECEIVED: DETECTING DISINFORMATION

We're surrounded by information. But not all of it is accurate, and some is disinformation—intentionally false or misleading content, also called fake news. How we filter and analyze all this is key to how we understand the world around us—particularly when weighing immensely consequential choices, like voting to choose the President or a Congressperson.

Circulating false stories isn't new. There are examples [throughout history, going back to Roman times](#). But today's online disinformation campaigns achieve global reach with amazing speed. During the 2016 election, a 24-year-old Romanian man who'd never been to the US [created false stories](#) like "The Pope Endorses Donald Trump" that got more Facebook engagement than any of the largest real stories related to the election.

Disinformation can take many forms: supposed news stories that are completely made-up, or [hoaxes](#); sites that [look like trusted news sources](#) but are designed to fool readers; news items given sensationalized headlines, or clickbait, often IN ALL CAPS, that may distort the actual meaning of the story. Opinion is different from disinformation, but readers should also avoid confusing it with news.

DISINFORMATION LEADS TO DISTRUST

What is the purpose of these disinformation campaigns? Sometimes a campaign is specific, aimed at damaging the reputation of an organization or an individual, like a political opponent. Disinformation campaigns can also be trying to promote falsely positive stories, like implying that someone prominent supports a favored candidate, when they don't. Sometimes a campaign has a big picture goal, like breeding general distrust of elections, leading to a sense that voting is pointless.

As the global pandemic of COVID-19 has spread, false stories have proliferated, some urging conspiracy theories and

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.

 International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

some promoting unsubstantiated prevention or detection techniques. No, holding your breath for ten seconds will *not* determine whether you have a coronavirus infection. You can double-check phony advice like that at fact-checking sites that have been tracking and documenting a wide range of [false stories related to the pandemic](#).

Another far-reaching goal of disinformation is discrediting fact-based news sources. For example, 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 content can feel overwhelming, but you can do a lot to verify content you consume. A crucial starting point is putting things in context, which means 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 information, or disinformation, than your neighbor, based on your online profile. You may receive false information attacking a particular candidate, but it will only go to a select set of readers, and that candidate will never have a chance to see the false attacks. Disinformation campaigns often play on fears or fantasies to hook you in and make their stories more clickable. One of your best defenses is simply to look for context, to question why you might be seeing a particular piece of content at a particular time.

ADMIT MISTAKES AND LOOK FOR TRUSTED SOURCES

Don’t worry if you get taken in by some piece of disinformation. It isn’t easy to be constantly on your guard, figuring out what’s true or false. It often makes sense to share content that others you trust already endorse. If you post a story that you later learn is false, then go public with your discovery. Your admission can help rebuild trust with your online community.

You can also prioritize reputable and trusted sources, as in the chart on the first page from the International Federations of Library Associations and Institutions. Know that social media is likely the least reliable source of information, and that information from more credible institutions, like your college or university, is far more so.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Materials from a course](#) that Professor English Brooks, of Utah’s Snow College, designed with this guide as a centerpiece.
- 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](#), [Snopes](#), and [TruthOrFiction.com](#) and the News Literacy Project’s [checkology.com](#)
- [Guides.vote](#), home of our [Campus Election Engagement Project’s](#) nonpartisan candidate guides, researched and edited by veteran journalists to contrast actual candidate stands.
- 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](#).