DISSECTING SOCIAL MEDIA: WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

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Have you checked your Facebook News Feed recently? Watched a YouTube video? Posted on Instagram? Sent a Tweet? If so, you are among the 3.5 billion people worldwide who actively use social media.

Social media users generate a massive amount of information, from personal posts, photos and videos, to blogs, DIY articles and much more. While some content aims to entertain or inform, other information is intentionally meant to mislead or deceive. Those who intend to mislead rely on people sharing their messages to spread misinformation. As a result, it's important to critically evaluate any information you see before sharing it further.

So, how can you tell which information is valid and which is not?

Read on to find some simple tips for checking posts. With a quick review, not only can you learn more about the reliability of what you are seeing, you can also help decrease the amount of bad information received by those in your network.

Looking at the parts of a post

1. Headline

- Does the headline sound true or was it designed to be sensational?
- Does the headline agree with the content of the story?
- Is the headline funny or satirical?

Example: "The CDC has adjusted their COVID19 deaths from 64,000 to 37,000. What do you think about that? Still scared? Angry yet?"

This headline appeared in a Facebook post to support a conspiracy theory that the pandemic is a hoax. FactCheck.org explained that the adjustments were the result of two lists maintained by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and why they were not in sync.

2. Author

- Who wrote the post? If it is anonymous, this should raise a red flag.
- What do you know about the author? Is this an individual or someone representing an organization?
- Does the author claim to be an expert? Do the author's credentials back up the claim?
- Does the author have an online profile? What kind of photo do they use on their profile? What is their screen name?
- Is the author selling something related to the topic?

Example: "OSHA 10&30 certified"

Several social media posts about the effectiveness of wearing face masks have misrepresented information provided by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). In one of them, shown on Snopes, the author claimed to be "OSHA 10&30 certified," but OSHA confirmed that while they have training courses of 10 and 30 hours, the courses do not provide "certification," nor do they cover COVID-19. In this case, the author was presenting misleading qualifications to sound like an expert.

3. Source

In many cases, information will not come from the original source; it may have been forwarded by someone else in a person's network. Often, people assume that because the person who sent it to them is reliable, they can trust the information. But, since not everyone checks the credibility of information before sharing it, users should be wary of any post. For these reasons, you will want to try to determine the original source:

- Who originally posted the information? Information shared on social media can be traced back to an original publication source by either clicking on the post or by searching for the original source online.
- How long has the source existed? New sources that have appeared to address a controversial issue might have a hidden agenda.
- What can you learn about the source? A credible source should include things like: author's name, publication date, organization's mission and purpose, contact information, physical address, current copyright date, accurate reporting supported by evidence, links to other sources that back up the claim.

If you can't find the source or are not sure if the information is credible, it is best not to share it.

Example: "And the people stayed home" poem attributed to an author who lived through the 1918 influenza pandemic

A poem that went viral during the COVID-19 pandemic was misattributed to an author who lived through the "Spanish flu pandemic of 1919." When Snopes traced back the original source of "And the people stayed home," it found that the author wrote the poem in 2020 about the COVID-19 pandemic, not the 1918 Spanish flu.

Trivia Corner

Which famous inventor wished he supported smallpox variolation after his son later died of the disease?

a) Thomas Jefferson

b) Benjamin Franklin

c) Roger Bacon

d) Michael Faraday

Dissecting social media: What you should know [cont.]

4. Content

- When was the post originally published? Is it recent? Old information often resurfaces on social media when it appears timely, so it is useful to check the date.
- Does the author seem biased?
- What evidence is offered to support the claims being made? If the author doesn't offer evidence or if the "evidence" is only anecdotes or opinions, seek other sources for more information before believing what is being shared.
- Can the quotes be attributed to legitimate people? Are those people informed about the topic?
- What is the quality of the writing? Often, articles with noticeable typos or grammatical errors are a sign that the post is not legitimate.
- What do other sources say about this topic? The more outlandish something seems, the more important it is to see if other sources are reporting the same thing. Even when consuming legitimate news, it is important to check the story from a few different sources because they will have different viewpoints and may cover different details, which will allow you to piece together a more complete picture of the situation.
- Has the issue been addressed by fact checkers? Sites like FactCheck.org, PolitiFact.com and Snopes.com are just a few of the websites dedicated to fact-checking.

Example: Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind COVID-19 documentary

When *Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind COVID-19* went viral with outlandish claims about SARS-CoV-2, fact-checkers got busy scrutinizing the content. Both PolitiFact and FactCheck.org highlighted a host of false and misleading claims related to the novel coronavirus pandemic, including its origins, vaccines, treatments and more. *Plandemic* had more than 8 million views in the first week of its release.

5. Visuals

- Does the photo appear shocking, particularly engaging, or simply out of place? Try using Google Images (images.google.com) or TinEye (tineye.com) to find the original photo. In particular, look for any signs that the image has been altered, such as people or things that were not part of the original photo.
- When and where was the original photo taken? Often old images are used to represent current topics, particularly on social media.
- Is a video or audio soundbite being used? If so, try to find the original video or recording so you can evaluate the context for which it was meant.

Example: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation building

A side-by-side comparison of an original photo of the exterior of a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation building alongside a doctored photo (snopes.com/fact-check/gates-foundation-building/) clearly shows alterations. A quick Google Image search brings up many original, unaltered copies of the photo.

In conclusion, as you use these tips more often, you will get faster and better at recognizing misinformation and deception. By thinking critically, looking for the small details, listening to different perspectives, and fact-checking, the spread of misinformation can stop with you.

For more information

Fact-checking websites:

- FactCheck.org
- PolitiFact.com
- Snopes.com
- The Washington Post Fact Checker (washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker)

Additional resources

- News Literacy Project (NLP) (newslit.org) — Provides information for educators and the public to help them become active consumers of news and information.
- Informable mobile App (informable.newslit.org) — A free app by the News Literacy Project aims to help players practice differentiating between good and bad information they find online.
- AllSides (allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-ratings) — Provides media bias ratings for hundreds of media outlets and writers to help the public identify different perspectives.