

# A civic duty for today's news consumer: Identify fake news

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Pennsylvanians are social people, often engaging with family, friends and others through numerous social media platforms. Information shared on these platforms can come from reputable news sources or, unfortunately, from other untrustworthy contributors that publish verifiably false content. Engagement with unreliable news sites is on the rise and it is important for news consumers to know how to identify these sources of misinformation.

Since the run-up to the 2016 election, the rate of engagement with content from such organizations has increased by 102 percent, according to a recent study published by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, a non-partisan policy organization that works on issues including the future of democracy, security and defense in the United States and Europe. The media outlets noted in GMF's Digital New Deal project study have an uncanny and often indiscernible appearance from independent journalism sites. What is different is that the information within the sites is not the unbiased and factual news the consumer expects, but rather disinformation likely funded by a company or individual with political or financial interests.

"The things that you share on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram – they have value," said Andrew Conte, director at Point Park University's Center for Media Innovation. "People act like posting on social media is very ephemeral – like it doesn't have value or weight – but it does."

While the existence and engagement with such sites is cause for serious concern, what's more concerning is that the method by which these sites are being shared and promoted most frequently is by close friends, family and other members in the reader's life. A study from the Media Insight Project found that on social media, people who see an article from a trusted sharer that is written by an unknown media source have much more trust in the information than people who see the same article that appears to come from a reputable media source shared by a person they do not trust. Bottom line: *who* shares an article on social media influences whether people trust it.

Most social media users wouldn't consider themselves powerful influencers among their social circle; however, that paradigm is overdue for a shift if balance is to be brought back to the digital democracy. The first step of this shift is the acceptance of a newly evolved civic duty: to be educated, empowered and emboldened in the consumption and distribution of news.

"When you discover something and then you create a post, you are essentially creating journalism," said Conte. "You are taking something you discovered, took into your own mind, processed and prepared to share back with people in your sphere." While the responsibility is great, the means are not impossible, and many consumers are already keenly aware of some of the telltale signs of questionable news sites. The finesse of the look and feel of the sites can be quite deceiving however, so it is important to stay current on the tips to uncover bias and unreliability.

"First thing anyone needs to know is that pieces of content that make you emotionally unstable – very happy, very sad, very nervous - if something affects you in that way you should be careful and aware," said Cristina Tardáguila, associate director of the International Fact-Checking Network at Poynter.

Tardáguila pointed out that falsehoods used to elicit emotions in a reader are a strong clue to pause because most reporting based on facts alone should not make a person feel emotionally charged.

Headlines, too, can provide an excellent window into the credibility and intent behind a media site. Tardáguila said the use of “heated headlines,” or ones that seem to quickly seize the reader’s attention, can be a warning sign. She encourages consumers to thoroughly read the article to discern if the headline is even directly addressed in the body of the article because she says it often is not. Tardáguila also notes that some aspects of the article that readers wouldn’t think to look at might, in fact, be crucial to the integrity of the news. “Look for the date – when it was published,” said Tardáguila. “Sometimes it is true content, but it is out of context.”

Another significant tell of low-quality reporting is poor grammar and punctuation. “Call the grammar police,” said Russell Frank, associate professor at Penn State’s Bellisario College of Communications. “If their copy does not conform to journalistic standards – word usage, grammar, punctuation – you need to question if this is a legitimate news source.” Frank says that in addition to writing quality, the content quality should be closely examined by the reader, and one of the most important things to look for is corroboration, both inside and outside the story. “As a reader you should be looking for information that is coming from multiple independent sources in an article, not just one,” said Frank. “It is more credible coming from several sources.” Outside of the story and website, Frank says readers should probably be able to find the information elsewhere with a quick search, especially from sources that are historically known for reliable reporting on significant or breaking news.

Don’t forget the critical question, “Do I know this publication?” warns Jim Iovino, Ogden Newspapers visiting assistant professor of media innovation for West Virginia University’s Reed College of Media. “If you don’t know the news outlet, start with the basics,” said Iovino. “Go to the ‘About Us’ section, read about the authors (there should be bios), see if they have a mission statement, and try to find any funding sources. That is all very valuable information.” Iovino said that in the recent past, news sites with unreliable or politically bent articles were much easier to identify early in the viewing experience, but as these sites are being made to look more like independent, unbiased news sites, it is getting much harder to differentiate the two. “Even myself, as someone in the business for 25 years,” said Iovino, “It takes time to really analyze and go through the steps to discern whether or not I have found a reliable news source.” However, Iovino says it is possible to sort out the real from the fake with the suggestions like those offered by him, Frank and Tardáguila. He echoed Tardáguila’s message of awareness during reading. “You should think, ‘If something agrees with me totally – that should give me pause. The same thing is true if something is the exact opposite of what I think – take pause, examine and evaluate, because there might be more to it.’”

The duty of reader education and reliable news identification is only the first aspect, however, of the news consumer’s civic duty. Once a reader is prepared to evaluate and validate his or her news sources, he or she should also feel obligated to use this newly found or honed ability to assist their social circle in doing the same. They now assume a role of news consumer and purveyor, an influencer who can lift up worthy, trusted news sources and extinguish those sites with inaccurate or potentially biased information before it reaches anyone else. “If you’re sharing something that’s not accurate it can create a sort of game of telephone where truth and fact take a long, winding path,” said Conte, “Filter things, and be responsible to research and review the information before you share it. There is so much more power for citizens.”

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