



PUBLIC POLICY CENTER

TAKE TIME TO CARE BEFORE YOU SHARE

How to Avoid Spreading Misinformation

Sharing information is easier and faster than ever before because of the internet and many social media outlets. The ease and speed of digital content can lead people to believe and share false information created to stir a negative emotion. When coming across provoking information online, take time to care before you share.

A good consumer of information and media thinks critically about what they are reading, hearing or seeing. Analyze and evaluate content for accuracy and intent before you accept it as valid. The following steps and questions can help you with this information journey.

WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF THE INFORMATION?

- Determine if the author is a real person. Research the author to check their expertise on the subject matter.
- Check the website's "About Us" section. Most reliable information sources will include its business name, an editor or publisher's name, contact information and their history.
- What is the position of the person who wrote the material? Is it a reporter, columnist or editorial writer? A blogger or paid content generator? Their role can be a clue about the intended impact of the information.
- If looking at a social media account of a company or someone of public interest, has the account been verified? Twitter uses a blue check mark next to the account's name to indicate it is authentic.
- Did the information come straight from a press release or social media post? Was the information copied from another outlet? Consider looking at the original source of information to see if any details changed or were left out to alter its meaning.

HAVE YOU READ BEYOND THE HEADLINE?

- Read past any headline before sharing the headline you read as fact.
- Slow down and read intentionally. Scrolling through content can often lead to information overload, or consuming more information than you can process. Information overload can prevent you from thinking critically and evaluating a contents validity.
- Check the date – how old is the information and is it possible the situation has changed since its publication? Breaking news can be wrong with accurate details revealed as more time passes.

WHAT IS THE MISSION OR PURPOSE OF THE AUTHOR OR PUBLISHER?

- Is the purpose of the site or content to inform, persuade, provoke or entertain?
- Does the author or platform have an agenda to persuade you for political, financial, religious, or other reasons?
- Ask yourself if the material you're reading was meant as a joke or written as satire. News satire is a type of parody presented in the same format as typical of mainstream journalism. It is presented in way that it could be confused with actual news. Publications such as The Onion are famous for satire but other, less well-known satirical websites and social media pages now exist. Parody accounts for retailers and government agencies have fooled some readers.
- How local is your information source? If reading about a news event, many times local news outlets may provide more context for understanding the situation.
- How do they react to their mistakes? Many information outlets are quick to issue corrections or notify the public that mistakes were made. How a media outlet responds to errors can be telling about their desire for sharing truthful information.

IS THIS NEWS OR SOMETHING ELSE?

- Is the author sharing information as a researcher, reporter, content contributor, or editorialist? It can be easy to mistake an author's opinion for factual reporting.
- Make sure the article is actually a news report. Many trustworthy news media outlets include paid content that imitates the look and feel of news reports, on their websites. This content used to be distinguished in print publications with "paid advertisement" or "contributed by," but online this distinction may be difficult to tell apart from real news content.
- Online publication layouts can make it difficult to determine what is a news article and what is editorial commentary. Many newspaper websites no longer follow traditional hierarchy layouts, with the most important news at the top of the page. Some may present information based on your reading interest/history or promote a story that has been read the most that day.
- Reader habits and the availability of more space on the internet have changed how some media outlets write headlines to grab your attention. This phenomenon is called "clickbait." While clickbait can be entertaining, it may not be a reliable source of factual information.



With such an overload of information available, digesting and comprehending news and other published materials can be harder for readers.

HAVE YOU CHECKED YOUR OWN BIASES LATELY?

- Seek out and consume media from various different viewpoints and countries. By diversifying the news you consume, you will prevent creating an echo chamber where you only hear voices that reinforce the same viewpoint over and over.
- Engage with news media outlets or platforms that hold a differing position than your own to gain perspective on all sides of an issue.
- Check in with yourself before sharing content with others. Question both, who might benefit from me sharing this information and who might be harmed? If the information makes you uncomfortable, or you find yourself getting defensive, turn to curiosity. Step back and ask yourself "Why am I feeling this way about this?"
- Having doubts about information? Do a quick internet search about the issue to see what else has been published about the topic. If you don't find multiple sources about the issue, do more research before deciding whether the information is accurate. Remember that creating an instant emotional response, particularly outrage, is a common goal of fake news creators.