



HOW TO BE A PROVEN WAYS TO DETECT WHETHER WEB OR SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS IS FAKE OR DECEPTIVE SMART NEWS CONSUMER

BY EMILY PAULIN

Not too long ago, most American households subscribed to a newspaper, watched the news on one of three networks and maybe read a newsmagazine. Which meant most of us got a consensus view of the world each day.

As of 2018, however, only 16 percent of Americans read a printed newspaper. While TV remains a major news source, it is spread over far more stations with vastly different coverage and perspectives. But the biggest change is how our news consumption has shifted online; today about half of Americans get the news via Facebook, the world's largest social media site.

But staying informed online has its risks. Unlike a print publisher, a digital news provider can observe and store your every news choice, how long you interacted with it, whether you shared it and what you did after viewing it. With such data, it can filter what you see, showing you more content that aligns with your worldview—essentially putting you in a “news bubble.”

Sometimes filtering leads consumers to made-up news—5G cellphone towers found to cause COVID-19! Drinking bleach kills the virus! Facebook has taken steps to identify such hoaxes, but more are posted every day. And they get millions of likes.


At right, fact-checkers, journalists and digital media experts share simple ways you can inspect what you are reading for accuracy and validity. □

► **THE BYLINE** Do a web search for the writer's name, says Cristina Tardáguila, associate director of the International Fact-Checking Network. If a common name, add “journalist” or “writer” to the search. (No author cited? That's an immediate red flag, she notes.) The writer's articles should appear in the search results, along with a LinkedIn profile or a verified Twitter account. You'll tell quickly if this author has credibility.

► **THE HEADLINE** “Seventy percent of people don't read beyond the headline on articles they share,” says Emily Bell, founding director of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University. Manipulators use that to their advantage by creating clickbait headlines that distort a story's truth. Read the whole story before liking it or sharing it (or believing it).

► **THE SOURCES** Research an article's sources, says Jon Greenberg, senior correspondent at the fact-checking site PolitiFact. A quick search can reveal whether people, studies, surveys or reports that provide evidence for the news story have political or business affiliations. Having these affiliations can be fine, but you'll benefit from knowing who and what they are.

► **THE CALL TO ACTION** If there is language urging you to take some action—send money, join an organization, share the report or simply “click this link”—be highly cautious, Bell notes. Reporting should provide facts and insight, and be clear in its intent and transparent in its sourcing. Articles that sell or promote something often are not truly unbiased; a fervent push to have you click on a link could even signal fraud.

► **THE BLUE BADGE** Social media platforms—such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter—indicate legitimate accounts with a check mark that can look like this: . If the verified badge appears next to the name on the profile and next to

the account name in the search results, it means the platform has confirmed that the account is authentic and run by the public figure or organization cited.

► **THE PICTURES** Tampered or completely fake photos and videos are common in the disinformation realm. Use “reverse-image searches” if you suspect a faked photo, Tardáguila says. Drag and drop a photo into Google Image search, for example, and it will spit out information for that image, such as its original source, when it first appeared and more.

► **THE COVERAGE** Legitimate news stories rarely show up on just one site, says Alex Mahadevan, senior multimedia reporter at Poynter's MediaWise project. He encourages lateral reading—consulting other news sources to see if they have similar stories or information.

► **THE FORMATTING** Facebook notes that “many false news sites have misspellings or awkward layouts.” If you see these, be dubious. Most legitimate news providers edit and groom content before publishing.

► **THE DATES** This spring, a poem went viral that was supposedly written in the late 1800s, but it had the perfect sentiment and messages for today. Turns out it was written in March 2020, as anyone who consulted Snopes.com or other fact-checking web services would have discovered.

► **THE REPORTING** Is it really news you are reading, or is it opinion or advocacy? Reporting covers the who, what, when, where and why. If a news story is missing any of these, be suspicious, Tardáguila says. Ask yourself: “Who wrote and shared this? What is its goal? When was it created? Where is it getting its information from? Why am I getting this now?”

FACT-CHECKING EXPERTS

Many independent fact-checking sites analyze popular claims, quotes and factual assertions for their accuracy. Tardáguila recommends these for when you want to investigate what you've read, seen or heard:



- PolitiFact.com
- FactCheck.org
- Snopes.com
- LeadStories.com

- ScienceFeedback.co
- CheckYourFact.com
- poynter.org/CoronavirusFactsAlliance
- WashingtonPost.com/news/fact-checker