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How to Fight Misinformation Online

A wikiHow course to help you recognize and counter misinformation online

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Lesson 1

Pause and Ask “Should I Share This?”

Learn how to spot misinformation warning signs and understand the importance of taking a pause before sharing what you read online.

As more people spend time online, it’s becoming more important for everyone to help stop the spread of misinformation.

The internet gives anyone the ability to publish whatever they want to a global audience. While this openness is a good thing, it also means that you can’t rely on information you find on the internet without figuring out where it came from and why it was shared.

If you’re on the internet, chances are you’ve come across false information at some point. It could’ve been *misinformation*, the type of false information spread by well-meaning people who think the story they’re sharing is true and didn’t verify it.

You’ll also see *disinformation*, false information spread by an individual or organization that knows the information is false and wants you to believe it.

Scams and hoaxes make up another form of false information. These can be particularly damaging because they typically attempt to extort something from you. Falling for a hoax or a scam can be expensive and dangerous.

Right now, misinformation about COVID-19 is threatening our ability to end the pandemic. As people spend more time online, it’s becoming more important for everyone to help stop the spread of misinformation. This means taking a bit more time over the content that you share. In doing so, you can help save lives and end the COVID-19 crisis.

This lesson will show you several ways to avoid falling victim to misinformation and help stop it spreading. Start by interrupting your immediate emotional reaction with a pause. Join the United Nations Verified initiative and “Pledge to Pause” to help disrupt the spread of misinformation by pausing and evaluating the information you’re seeing before you share it with anyone else.

MISINFORMATION

- False information spread by well-meaning people
- They think the story they’re sharing is true and did not verify it

DISINFORMATION

- False information spread by those who know the information is false
- Individual or organization that wants you to believe it’s true

SCAMS AND HOAXES

- False information that attempts to extort something from you
- Falling for a scam or hoax can be expensive and dangerous

Ask Yourself: How Do You Feel?

Campaigns seeking to manipulate others often try to conjure up fear, mistrust, and anger. These intense emotions trigger you to act immediately without thinking things through.

This doesn’t mean those negative emotions aren’t valid—it simply means that, rather than let them take over, you need to pause and investigate the information more closely.

Start by taking a step back from the material and asking yourself how you feel. Be on the lookout for the following emotions:

> **Fear or a sense of urgency:** This is a common tactic with misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines and alternative “cures” for COVID-19. This type of misinformation takes advantage of the fact that the pandemic is already a scary situation. It can make you believe that if you don’t share the content, you could be responsible for someone else getting sick or dying.

> **Distrust:** Most people have things they don’t trust. For some, it might be a political party, others might distrust the pharmaceutical industry. When you see information that validates or fuels your mistrust—whatever the target of suspicion may be—don’t just blindly accept the information as true. Research has shown that you are more likely to accept information that supports your pre-existing beliefs. So, if you see information that reflects or supports your distrust of something, scrutinize it carefully to verify its accuracy—don’t just assume that something is fact because it supports views you already hold.

> **Anger or outrage:** Anger is a contagious emotion that encourages its own spread. If something makes you angry, your first impulse may be to share it with others and make them angry too. However, simply spreading anger doesn’t usually solve any problems.

If you come across content that makes you feel these emotions, don’t share the information with your friends and family, hit a reaction emoji, or immediately tell anyone about it. Just pause and take a deep breath. Then, take a moment to ask yourself these 4 simple questions:

1. Who shared this?
2. What is the source?
3. When was this published?
4. Why do you want to share this?

Question 1: Who shared this?

Start with the person who shared the content you’re looking at and ask yourself why they shared it. Does it reinforce their own beliefs? Have they researched where the information has come from? Would they benefit in some way if their friends and followers on social media believed it?

For example, suppose you’re scrolling through Facebook one day. You see posts related to the COVID-19 pandemic from 3 friends.

The first friend is a medical doctor. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, they started sharing content on social media about how to stay safe and protect yourself and your family from the disease. They frequently add links to sources like the World Health Organization or national health authorities that back up what they are saying, and they share discussing their own first-hand experience treating COVID-19.

The second friend has no medical training. They sell essential oils and other natural products for a multi-level marketing company. During the pandemic, they’ve started sharing content that promotes the use of essential oils to both prevent and treat COVID-19, as well as anti-vaccination content that stresses the dangers of putting “unknown chemicals” into your body.

The third friend is a family member you’ve known all of your life. Since the beginning of the pandemic, they’ve become obsessed with information about it. They believe people in power globally are involved in a conspiracy to keep information from the public and share a lot of information from sources you haven’t heard of that they believe proves this conspiracy.

Whose content are you more likely to trust, and why?

It’s important to be able to recognise the motives and background of those you interact with on social media so that you can filter the information you are seeing. Something shared by a medical doctor or a trusted news outlet may be more reliable than something shared by a friend.

Consider who shared it before you comment, like or pass it on.

Note that not all prominent accounts are trustworthy. Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook accounts with blue check marks next to the name only mean that the identity of the account holder has been verified—it doesn’t necessarily mean they’re authoritative.

Consider who shared it before you comment, like or pass it on.

Question 2: What is the source?

After you’ve thought about the reliability of the person who shared the content, consider the reliability of the individual or organization that originally published it.

For instance, if the shared content is an article, click on the link to the article and look at the website itself. Who runs the website? You’ll usually find this information at either the very top or the very bottom of the page. If it’s not immediately clear, look for an “About” page that will tell you who runs the website and why.

If the publisher is a reported article (not an editorial or opinion piece) from a well-known, trusted news source, such as *The New York Times*, *BBC News*, *CNN*, *Al Jazeera*, *Deutsche Welle*, *The Hindu*, and *AllAfrica*, you can usually stop there. Other reliable sources include the big 4 global news wire services: *UPI*, *AP*, *Reuters*, and *Agence France Presse*.

Articles in peer-reviewed academic journals or on university websites are also generally reliable. For health and other serious topics, look for websites that cite authoritative sources and work with relevant experts to ensure the accuracy of the information they provide. Check the “About” page to learn more about their editorial standards and how they review their content. Even if an article was written by a non-expert, it’s typically reliable if it was reviewed by someone with relevant expertise.

You might also look at the author of the article. Click their name to read their bio on the site, if one exists, or search their name on the internet.

If the article was written by an expert, is their expertise related to the topic at hand? Have they published books and scholarly articles on the subject? Do they have extensive professional experience working in the field they’re writing about? Do they teach at a well-known university? If the answer to one or more of those questions is “yes,” the information is likely reliable.

If the article was written by a journalist, you need to make sure that they’re truly writing as an unbiased reporter of facts, and not as a commentator or pundit.

When you’re looking at a graphic or meme, rather than an article, try to figure out the original creator. If there’s not a watermark or other signature on the graphic itself, you might be able to find the original by doing a reverse image search.

Question 3: When was this published?

Generally, the more recent an article is, the more reliable it is. Any reliable source will include the date an article was published or last updated. If there isn’t one, you can’t be confident the information is up to date and trustworthy.

The dateline of a news article is typically right under the headline. Some online content might also have a line at the very bottom of the article that tells you when the content was last updated.

An article isn’t necessarily false or unreliable just because it’s old—that depends on the subject matter.

Consider an article from early 2020 about COVID-19. Because of the rapidly developing nature of research about COVID-19, it’s likely that information contained in an article about the virus that hasn’t been updated in over a year is now unreliable.

Illustration from “How to Understand the Difference Between Misinformation, Disinformation, and Fake News” on wikiHow.com

Question 4: Why do you want to share this?

With this question you are, in many ways, asking yourself the same questions you asked of the person who originally shared the content you saw. What do you stand to gain from sharing the content? What do you want to happen? Do you expect people to believe it? Do you want to anger, enrage, or upset people—and if so, why? Are you trying to educate people? In which case, have you checked if the information you’re sharing is reliable?

A strong emotional reaction to an article’s headline is another signal that we should consider whether we should post it or not.

Many people share articles and information online without reading it—they share because the headline has made them react in a certain way. This has become a technique of content creators to provoke a reaction in us that makes us want to share, so that their content travels further. A strong emotional reaction to an article’s headline is another signal that we should consider whether we should post it or not.

The most important step you can take in stopping the spread of misinformation is to make sure you’re not sharing anything that you haven’t verified. If you can’t verify something, or you don’t have time, it’s probably safer not to share it.

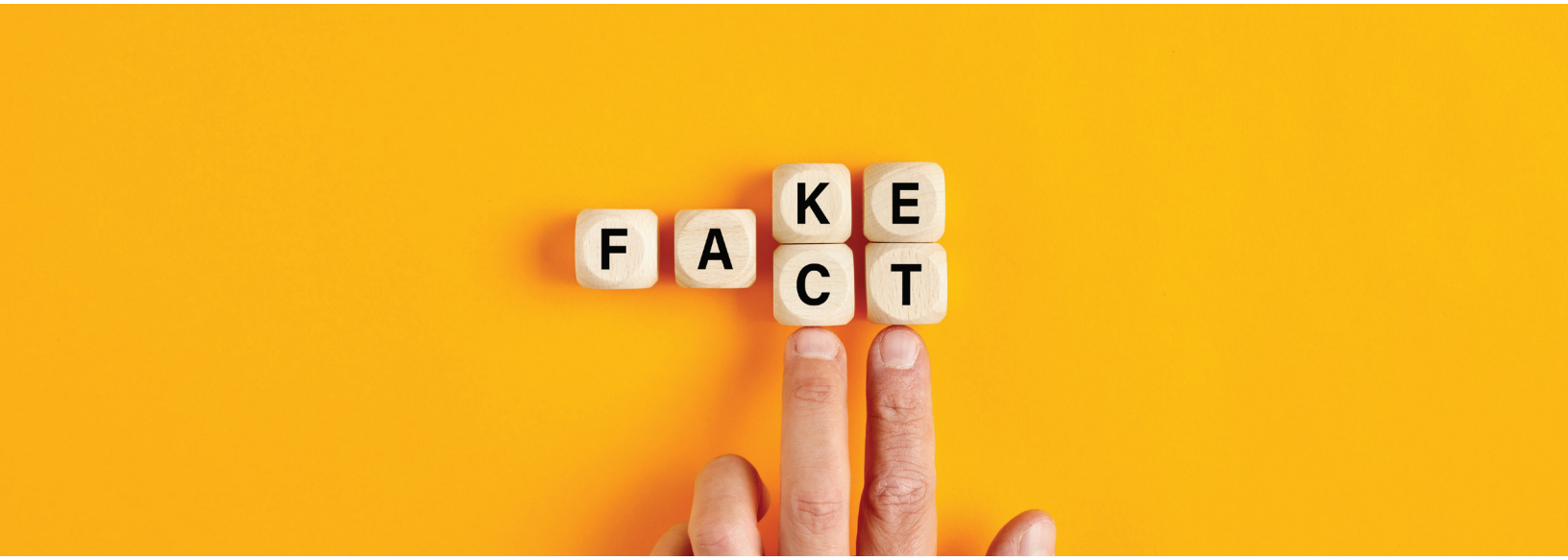
Asking these questions to help you verify before you share should only take a few minutes. And, once you get the hang of it, you’ll be able to quickly and accurately assess the reliability of any content you see!

EXERCISE

Scroll through your favorite social media platform until you find an article that someone has shared. Run through the questions as though you were going to share the article, and see whether you still want to post!

Recommended Reading

- How to Improve Critical Thinking Skills
- How to React to Upsetting Posts Online
- How to Understand the Difference Between Misinformation, Disinformation, and Fake News



Lesson 2

Fact-Checking

Learn how to effectively fact-check an article and evaluate the credibility of its sources with a critical eye.

When you see a piece of news content on social media, click on the link to go directly to the source—don't just stick to reading what you see in your feed.

Any information you find on the internet is only as valuable as the research put into it by the individual or organization that published it, and the care that they took to ensure that what they are presenting is accurate, comprehensive and up to date.

Careful attention to where the information you find online comes from is especially important when the topic involves rapidly-evolving situations such as news around the COVID-19 pandemic—careless or misleading sourcing is all too common on these topics.

The good news is that despite the internet's potential for spreading poorly-researched, misleading or outright false content, anyone can develop the skills to avoid being misled by it. In this lesson, you'll learn how to take a deeper dive into the sources of information you find online. With these techniques, you'll be able to evaluate the reliability of a source and verify the truth of content you see.

Vetting the Original Source

Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms are the most common places misleading content is shared. When you see a piece of news content on social media, click on the link to go directly to the source—don't just stick to reading what you see in your feed. When you go to the source, read carefully to see how the article was created. Many content sources that thrive on social media use a technique known as "aggregation." This just means that they combine information from multiple sources to create their articles. The aggregation process creates a lot of opportunities for errors and bias, as content creators pick and choose what to include in the aggregated article.

Aggregated content is created using other sources

If you're reading an aggregated article, you'll often see clues that the article was created using other sources. Aggregated articles often include links to or information about the original source below the headline or at the end of the content. Usually, this line will say "Adapted from" or "Reposted from" followed by the name of the original website. Aggregated content isn't always inaccurate or misleading, but it often can be. When you find that an article has been created that way, you know it's time to dig deeper by looking at the original source material and doing your own searches.

If the source is not one that you know is trustworthy, do your own search using keywords from the content to find out if a reliable outlet is covering the same story. If you don't see any mainstream news outlets covering the story—such as *The New York Times*, *BBC News*, *CNN*, *Al Jazeera*, *Deutsche Welle*, *The Hindu*, *AllAfrica*, or the big 4 global news wire services: *UPI*, *AP*, *Reuters*, and *Agence France Presse*—that's a red flag that the content is likely not reliable.

Other red flags that the material might not be reliable include a page clogged with ads and pop-ups, slideshows that require you to click through several pages to read the content, the use of all caps or excessive use of bold and italic formatting, and text with a lot of spelling or grammar errors.

Spend some time learning about who is behind the site, and what their goals are. Read a site's "About" page to learn more about who created it and their editorial process.

Is it a news site? If so, look for an ethics statement and other information about their reporting process and how sources are verified.

Is the site an academic journal? If so, check to make sure the articles it publishes go through a peer-review process. Some publications that look serious and academic aren't peer-reviewed and will publish any article as long as the author is willing to cough up the fees they charge. You can also use Google Scholar, or government-run indexes, such as EDGAR, MEDLINEplus, and PubMed to evaluate academic work.

If you're still not sure, try doing an online search for the name of the site with the word "fake" (or other words that suggest it can't be trusted) and see what comes up. Approach this process with skepticism and curiosity. Sources that provide solid, reliable information will typically be validated by other well known, trustworthy sources. On the other hand, if you can't find supporting information for claims in an article outside of YouTube or Facebook, that's a sign it can't be trusted.

Illustration from "How to Fact Check Misinformation" on wikiHow.com

Evaluating Potential Media Bias

Media bias refers to the beliefs and political opinions of reporters and news organizations that shape their coverage of newsworthy events. This bias typically affects both the selection of which events and stories to cover as well as how those stories are reported.

The easiest way to get an idea of how much bias influences a source's viewpoints is to look it up on the Ad Fontes Interactive Media Bias Chart. The chart is maintained by Ad Fontes Media, a public benefit corporation that serves as a media watchdog. Ad Fontes analysts evaluate the news content of articles, news-focused television shows, and online media both for bias and reliability. As the chart shows, most media outlets have some political bias, and there are more and less reliable sources on both sides of the political spectrum.

Comparing coverage of a particular story or an event will show you evidence of bias. For example, if you look up coverage of the same event on Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, Bangkok Press, Al Jazeera, and BBC, you'll see that each outlet has a different slant to its coverage. Bias doesn't usually affect the truthfulness of reported facts by reputable news organizations, but it does affect what facts are reported, how those facts are interpreted, and the language used in presenting those facts.

For example, consider the coverage of "breakthrough" COVID-19 infections—infections in people who are fully vaccinated—in the USA. As a result of these infections, the CDC recommended that people return to wearing masks indoors even if they're fully vaccinated.

On July 30, 2021, CNN, a left-leaning news outlet, went with the headline, “CDC shares ‘pivotal discovery’ on COVID-19 breakthrough infections that led to new mask guidance.” On the same day, Fox News, a right-leaning news outlet, reported, “CDC ‘worrisome’ COVID-19 data cited in mask update included breakthrough cases in Massachusetts outbreak.”

Which account is “correct”? Both of them are, technically. The CDC published new guidance on wearing masks indoors, citing breakthrough infection data. That guidance included the words “pivotal discovery” (quoted by CNN) and “worrisome” (quoted by Fox News).

However, the CNN headline sounds cautiously optimistic—”discovery” is an optimistic word—while the Fox News headline uses words like “worrisome” and “outbreak” which implies fear. Each headline could reinforce your existing beliefs about the use of masks, and skew your own bias further.

If you have a general idea which direction a media outlet leans towards, you know what language to look for. Try to ignore the way the outlet has framed the story and focus on the facts. Ultimately, it’s the facts themselves that are important—not the package they are in.

Verifying Online Content

Remember: the most important step you can take in stopping the spread of misinformation is to make sure you’re not sharing anything that you haven’t verified.

Be skeptical about information you encounter online. If you’re going to make any assumptions about it at all, assume it’s false. Then, look for objective evidence that it’s true. Make sure sources are trusted authorities for the information they’re talking about.

Ask lots of questions. What information is left out, and why? Is there anything you need to know before you can determine if the information is true or false?

If you find out the post is misinformation, you might be tempted to share it yourself with a comment that the content isn’t reliable—but this isn’t as effective as you might think. Many people won’t read your commentary, they’ll simply look at the content. And if you share a link that people can click on, you’re giving the content creator more traffic. Remember: the most important step you can take in stopping the spread of misinformation is to make sure you’re not sharing anything that you haven’t verified. If you can’t verify something, or you don’t have time, it’s probably safer not to share it.

EXERCISE

The game of “telephone” shows how a basic statement can change as it’s shared from one person to the next. You start with one piece of information, and by the time many people have shared it, the information is much different than when it started! With this concept in mind, find a piece of content that appears on one of your social media feeds. Then, track the path that piece of content took to get to you back to its origins. When you get to the original piece of content, compare the two. You’ll see how content can change as it passes through filters.

Recommended Reading

- How to Spot Misinformation Online
- How to Recognize Political Bias
- How to Stop the Spread of Misinformation Online

Lesson 3

Resisting Popular Myths and Fake News

Learn about the "illusory truth effect" and how to make your news feed less biased.

The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the global development of the 5G mobile network. This network promised faster download speeds and better quality of service than its 4G predecessor. Because of the coincidental timing, some began to claim it was responsible for the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Despite the lack of scientific evidence to back up the claim that 5G networks were related to the spread of the virus, this idea spread like wildfire over social media during the early months of the pandemic. One study analyzed 233 British Tweets discussing 5G and COVID-19 and found that over one third of them claimed a link between 5G and the virus. Around the same time, a separate survey revealed that 5% of UK residents believed COVID-19 symptoms were actually caused by 5G radiation. Why did they believe this claim, despite substantial debunking efforts? Repetition.

> *Repetition doesn't make something true—but hearing something again and again can make it more believable. This is thanks to the operation of something known in psychiatry circles as the "illusory truth effect."*

The theory behind the illusory truth effect is that repetition makes it easier for your brain to process a piece of information—this is why you might repeat a speech or poem to memorize it. The problem is that the same repetition also makes it more likely that you'll believe a statement is true.

Once your brain has decided something is true, it's pretty difficult to reverse that thinking—but it's not impossible. In this lesson, you'll learn how to balance repetition with fact-checking, and how to short-circuit the potentially dangerous illusory truth effect.

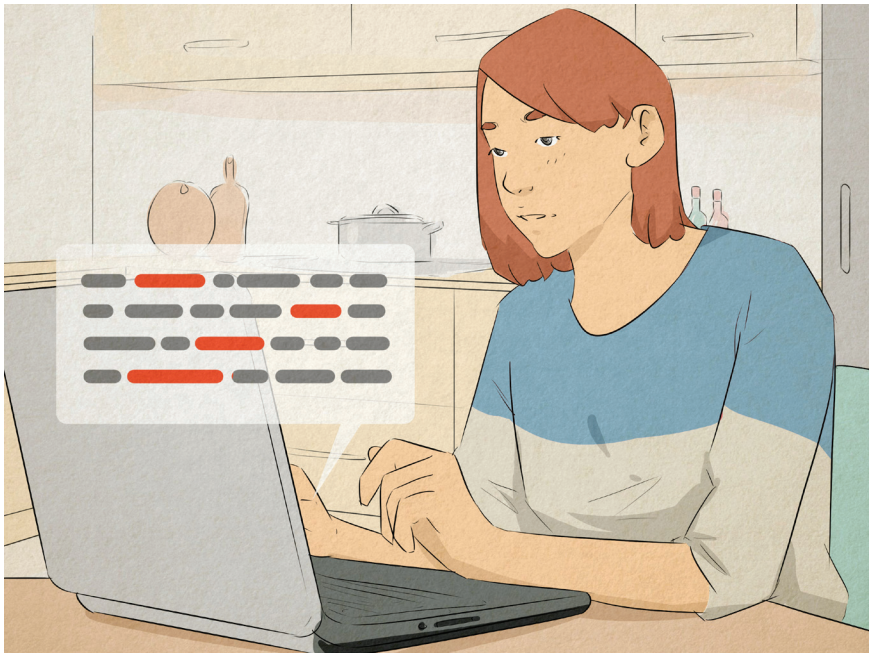


Illustration from "How to Fact Check Misinformation" on wikiHow.com

Resisting the Pull of Repetition

So how can we resist the truth effect of repetition? Your defenses start with a gut-check. If you find that you're starting to believe something, ask yourself if it's because you've been hearing about the thing more and more.

For example, suppose someone you follow on social media shares a video containing an outrageous cure for COVID-19. The first time you see this video, you think to yourself, "That's rubbish." Then you see it again. And again. And again.

One friend shares the same video along with the comment that they tried it and it "worked" for them.

Another friend shares the video and comments that they looked into it and the claims are unfounded and not backed by science. Even if you read their comment, the effect is the same—you're repeatedly exposed to the same video.

After a couple of days, you're unable to go on social media without seeing the video at least once. More and more people you follow are sharing the video, many without comment. Through repeated views, you may start to wonder if there could be something to this claim after all.

Your initial instincts were absolutely correct. But the repetition wore you down because you never stopped and broke the cycle.

This is how much of the internet—especially social media—works. In a world where value is measured in clicks and shares, going viral has become more important than getting the facts right. If you take a moment to assess the truth of a piece of content, every time you see it you can mentally reinforce what is true rather than what is misinformation.

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Using Reliable Fact-Checkers

Another effective tool that you can use to combat fake news is to make use of fact-checking organizations that are dedicated to sharing accurate information about common internet myths and controversies. These sites can't match the dedicated fact-checking departments of large, mainstream news organizations, but can provide resources and additional information on much of the content we see in the news every day. Check these sites regularly for accurate information of common discussions.

Here are some reliable fact-checkers to keep in your toolkit:

Politifact	This Pulitzer Prize-winning site focuses on statements made by elected officials and others in American political circles. Along with a "Truth-o-Meter" that measures the relative truth of the statement, you'll find a discussion of the statement and the context in which it was said.
Punditfact	A companion project to *Politifact* that focuses on statements made by pundits, columnists, bloggers, political analysts, and other members of the American media.
FactCheck.org	This non-profit, non-partisan project also monitors American politics, with a focus on the factual accuracy of statements made by major US political players in TV ads, news releases, interviews, debates, and speeches.
Snopes	This website offers objective analysis of all matter of information spread over the internet, including urban legends, folklore, myths, rumors, and other misinformation. Although not registered as a nonprofit, the company releases its financials on its website every year.
Duke Reporters' Lab	A searchable map with links to more than 300 fact-checking projects around the globe.
International Fact Checking Network	A forum of global fact-checkers hosted by the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. Check out their CoronaVirusFacts database.
Africa Check	A non-profit, non-partisan fact-checking organization dedicated to promoting accuracy in public debate and media on the African continent.
Alt News India	An independent fact-checking website that debunks misinformation in Indian social media and mainstream media.

Escaping the Echo Chamber

On social media, you probably tend to follow organizations and individuals you agree with and support. That means that on any given day, your feed will be filled with posts that you like, posts that say things that make sense to you, and posts that reinforce your basic beliefs.

Sure, you might have a few outliers—a distant relative you haven't seen since two Christmases ago, or that old friend from high school who went in an entirely different direction than you did—but for the most part, your friends are your friends because they support and reaffirm your point of view.

There's nothing inherently wrong with limiting your online consumption to sources you agree with and support, but you might find that you're trapped in an echo chamber. Everyone likes, comments, and shares the same articles, memes, comments, and infographics. Even if you don't pay any attention to something the first time you see it, you might after you see it posted 5 or 6 times.

Seek out accounts with differing backgrounds and points of view that you can follow.

How do you fight this?

> **Seek out accounts with differing backgrounds and points of view that you can follow.** Add a few official accounts for national health services or international organizations like International Human Rights Watch or Pew Research Center to your list.

> **Take a cue from the United Nations Verified Initiative and *pause*.** Before you share something, take a moment to verify the information in that piece of content—even if you've seen it a hundred times. Remember that seeing something over and over doesn't make it any more true than it was the first time.

> **Pay attention to your mood as well.** The "illusory truth effect" is a lot stronger if your mind is fatigued, or if you're tired or distracted. When you get to the point of information overload, it's often better to take a longer pause and refrain from posting or sharing while you give your mind a break.

EXERCISE

Scroll through your social media feed and notice how many people are posting news or opinions that you agree with and how many you disagree with. Compare the two numbers. If the vast majority of the accounts you follow are posting things you agree with, you might be stuck in an echo chamber. Add some accounts with different points of view to help make your view more balanced.

Recommended Reading

- How to Fact Check Misinfirmation
- How to Talk to Your Children About Online Misinformation

Lesson 4

Digital Detox

Understand the importance of taking a digital detox and how our online behaviors can help combat misinformation.

The internet is always there—but that doesn't mean you need to always be on it. In fact, being constantly connected can do more harm than good.

The internet is always there—but that doesn't mean you need to always be on it. In fact, being constantly connected can do more harm than good.

When you're too connected, it can take a toll on your focus, concentration, productivity, and even your relationships with the people you love. You might feel more stressed and anxious; you might get lower quality sleep.

All of these things can make you more vulnerable to misinformation. Researchers at UCLA found that increased use of technology led to a decline in critical thinking and analysis—skills you need for evaluating a piece of content.

Other studies have shown that mobile phone and internet usage are linked to anxiety and depression. These emotional states cloud your thinking and make it more difficult to resist the pull of misinformation designed to upset you.

Developing a healthy relationship with social media and technology requires conscious effort, but it is possible. In this lesson, you'll pick up some tools that can help you be more mindful when you're on the internet, and know when it's time to take a break.

Using Social Media Mindfully

A lot of times, you probably pick up your phone and look at it without even thinking. Whether you're waiting in line, eating at a restaurant, or watching TV at home, your phone is easily accessible.

Decide what you want to get out of your time using social media before *you log into your account or open the app.*

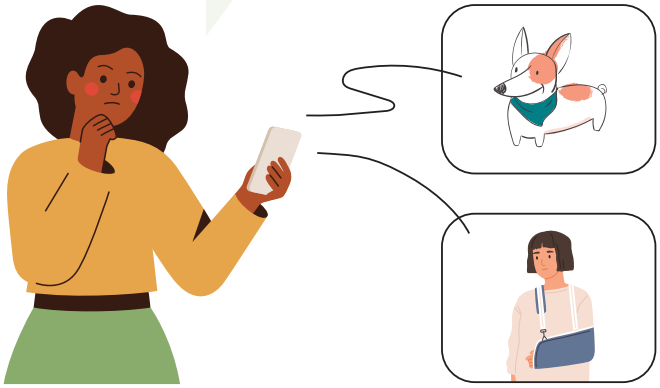
Social media is a good way to feel connected to others and fight off boredom. But it can also be alienating and take you out of the present moment. A divided mind and divided attention can leave you feeling scattered and anxious—an emotional state that can make you more vulnerable to misinformation.

Decide what you want to get out of your time using social media before you log into your account or open the app. If you find yourself scrolling mindlessly, pause. Using social media in an intentional manner can keep you from getting distracted by posts designed to trigger emotional reactions.

Remember: social media platforms are designed specifically to keep you using them, and one of the most effective ways they accomplish that is by constantly pushing emotionally triggering content into your feed.

For example, instead of just randomly opening these apps on your phone, you might say to yourself:

> I'm going to post that funny picture of my dog I took yesterday. I also want to see how my friend is doing after her surgery and send her a message to let her know I'm thinking about her.



If you're having a hard time being disciplined on social media, try deleting the apps from your phone so you have to be on your computer to use them. You might also try logging out of your accounts every time you are done using them. You'll be less likely to use them mindlessly if you have to log on first.

Setting Healthy Boundaries

Here are a few tips and tricks for making sure that social media is something that improves your life, virtually and otherwise!

> **Clean up your social media accounts.** Block, mute or unfollow accounts that post content that you don't trust. Stay connected to accounts that post content that help you feel well-informed and give you a rounded perspective.

Give yourself time limits for using social media each day. On your phone, you can use built-in features to help you monitor your social media apps usage.

For iPhones, there's the Screen Time feature, which allows you to set the maximum amount of time you're allowed to use an app each day. Android phones have a similar feature, called Digital Wellbeing, which locks you out of an app after a specified amount of time.

Automated monitoring features aren't perfect, because you can always disable them or access your accounts on another device, but they will help keep you in check.

Schedule specific times for social media. Instead of hopping on social media when you've got a few minutes to yourself, set a dedicated time each day devoted solely to social media activities. You might post, scroll through your friends' posts, or comment. When your time is up, log out of your accounts and go do something else.

Turn off push notifications. Think back to the last time you got a social media notification. How long after your phone buzzed with the notification did you check the app to see what was going on?

Most social media notifications aren't urgent. You can find out who engaged with your posts when you decide to log onto your account.

Create physical barriers. You'll be less inclined to reach for your phone and check it every few minutes if it's on the other side of the room or in another room entirely. Try setting up a charging station in a central location of your home. Leave your phone there when you're not actively using it.

Pausing before Sharing

As you start to approach social media more mindfully, you're in the perfect place to *pause before you share*. Instead of clicking a react or share button, pause. Take a moment to truly engage with the content, and yourself, before you decide to react.

Original graphic courtesy of United Nations Verified

Taking a Break from Social Media

If you're finding it difficult to use social media mindfully within the healthy boundaries you've set, a digital detox or social media fast might help. With a true digital detox, you abstain from all *technology* for a set period.

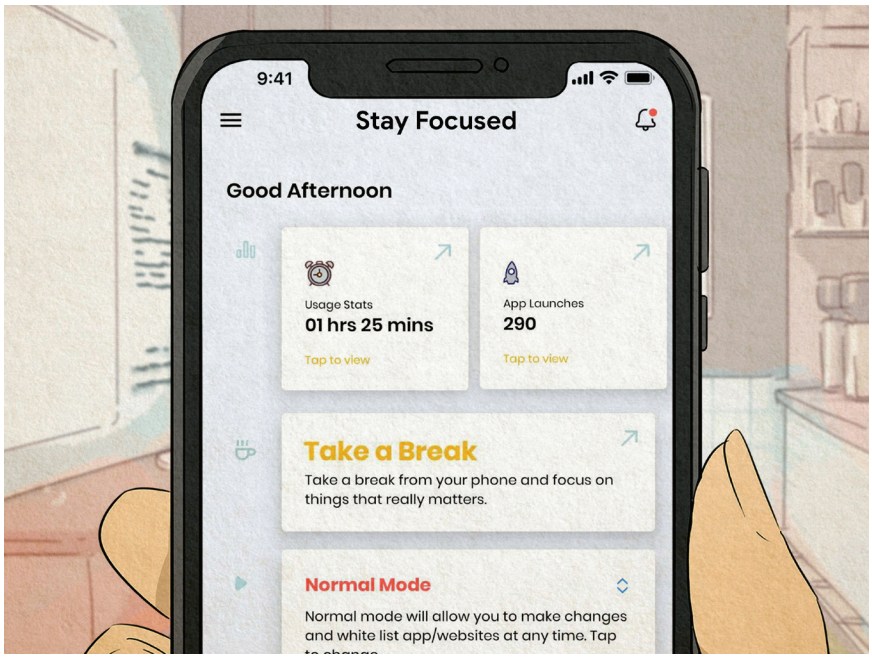


Illustration from "How Long Should You Take a Break From Social Media" on wikiHow.com

Here, we're going to talk about a lighter version of this—a social media fast. All this means is that you stay off of social media entirely for a period you set yourself. Doing a social media fast for an evening is a good place to start, but you might commit to it for a weekend, a week, or even a month.

Most people find that taking this break helps reduce their compulsion to use social media. Once you've seen what life can be like without it, you're in a good place to return to social media. You'll be better equipped to use it mindfully as a tool to connect meaningfully with others and share helpful information.

Because a lot of misinformation is spread through social media, a social media fast also helps reset your mindset when it comes to the controversial topics that are the most common subjects of misinformation.

To prepare for your social media fast, you might put up a post on your accounts announcing when you'll be leaving and when you'll be back. Announcing those dates makes you accountable to others. Then, to help you stay off your accounts, delete all of the social media apps from your mobile devices.

The day before you start your fast, make a list of things you're going to do during the time you would normally be on social media. Remember—you might spend more time on social media than you think. Make plans to connect with people in real life, find time to enjoy the outdoors, or start a new project around the house.

Illustration from “How Long Should You Take a Break From Social Media” on wikiHow.com

EXERCISE

Schedule an evening free from social media. Think about what barriers you might want to put in place to help you stay away from your accounts. Plan how you'll spend your time and what you'll do when you feel the urge to log in and check your accounts. At the end of the evening, write a short paragraph about the experience and what you learned from it.

Planning on trying the social media detox? Write to us at marketing@wikihow.com with the subject line “My Social Media Detox Story” for a chance to have your story featured!

Recommended Reading

- How to Do a Digital Detox
- How Long Should You Take a Break from Social Media
- How to Overcome Internet Addiction

Lesson 5

Responding to Misinformation

Learn what constructive actions you can take when you come across misinformation, and how you can help it from spreading.

It all starts with the advice from the United Nations Verified initiative to pause before you share.

Through this course, you've learned how to be smarter about information that you see on the internet, particularly content shared through social media. You now have plenty of tools at your disposal to fact-check the content you see and to determine if it's truth or misinformation. After all, misinformation can be deadly—especially when it relates to a global pandemic like COVID-19.

In this lesson, you'll learn what constructive actions you can take when you come across misinformation, and how to help others do the same. It all starts with the advice from the United Nations Verified initiative to *pause* before you share.

Take a Pause

Avoid reacting to a post immediately. Instead, *pause* and consider the factual claims made by the post. You might even jot those claims down in list form to aid in your fact-checking. Remember that any reaction (a like, a share, or a comment) brings the false information to a wider audience.

Note which facts are true. Misinformation is hardly ever completely false. Usually there are some statements that are true, and others that are false or that don't reasonably follow the facts given. Starting with the truth of a post allows you to more kindly point out the misinformation to others.

Illustration from “How to Understand the Difference Between Misinformation, Disinformation, and Fake News” on wikiHow.com

Consider the Other Side

Try to put yourself in the position of the person who shared the misinformation, or someone who might believe it. What are their priorities? What are they afraid of? Is there some reason they might want the information to be true?

Let’s examine the false claim from Lesson 3 that COVID-19 is caused by a 5G network. This theory provides a simple “solution” to the complicated question of where diseases come from and how they mutate and spread.

It’s also something that’s within human control—if 5G were the cause of COVID-19, the 5G network could be shut down. In a global pandemic, there’s a lot of uncertainty. It’s understandable that a simple solution within human control would be compelling.

So when you see someone sharing misinformation, look for common ground. Is there something about the person’s position you can empathize with? That can help you understand why they would want to share the content or why they would believe it to be true. It also helps you figure out what might convince them that the content is untrue or misleading.

Gather Your Sources

If you’re going to respond to misinformation, you need to be able to show the person who shared it how the content they shared is wrong. It’s not enough to simply tell them “because I said so.”

Fact-checking and debunking websites are great places to start, but sometimes they can be a bit heavy-handed. Even though many fact-checkers are unbiased and reliable, a lot of people mistrust them or perceive them as having an agenda.

Since you want your information to be as reliable as possible, look to information from government agencies, universities, and nonprofit organizations. If you're fact-checking something related to COVID-19, the World Health Organization, national health authorities, the Verified website and the United Nations websites are great places to start.

Beyond government and academic sites, look for articles from mainstream news sources. Stay away from politicized content or opinion pieces, and stick to the facts. If you're fact-checking something related to COVID-19, good news sources include *BBC News*, *CNN*, *Al Jazeera*, *Deutsche Welle*, *The Hindu*, *AllAfrica*, and the big 4 global news wire services: *UPI*, *AP*, *Reuters*, and *Agence France Presse*.

Focus on sharing something that both provides reliable information about the issue and makes it clear how that information was produced. This can encourage the person who shared the misinformation to find out the truth on their own.

Illustration from "How to Fact Check Misinformation" on wikiHow.com

Remember—misinformation is designed *to trick you. Anyone can fall for it.*

Talk to Friends and Family Privately

It can be upsetting to come across misinformation that was shared by someone you care about. You might not have expected them to share such a thing, but remember—misinformation is *designed* to trick you. Anyone can fall for it.

When you know the person who shared the misinformation, it's usually best to bring it up with them privately. If you normally text them or message them on social media, you might do it there. If you're more comfortable talking to them face-to-face or over the phone, wait for an opportunity to do that.

Start by saying something like, "Can we talk about that article you shared yesterday?" If they agree, ask them what they liked about it or why they shared it—then *listen* to their answer. What they say allows you to empathize with them without assuming anything about their reasons for sharing the content.

From there, you may be able to gently point them to resources that will give them more information about the issue. You might say that you have found out some more context about the issue and ask if you can share something you've found about it to give them another perspective. You might also provide multiple articles with the same news that cite authoritative sources. The important thing is that you do this in such a way that the person never feels attacked or belittled.

Comment with Caution

Before you post a fact-checking comment, look at the post's engagement (the likes and shares):

HIGH ENGAGEMENT

- Viral post with thousands of likes and shares
- Like or up-vote comments that attempt to fact-check or point out misinformation
- Commenting on a viral post will increase its visibility

MEDIUM ENGAGEMENT

- Public post with a few hundreds likes and shares
- Engaging with the post may trigger the platform's algorithm to show it on more people's feeds
- Use your best judgment; your comment may not be read or it could help others see the post

LIMITED ENGAGEMENT

- Private or friends only with fewer than a hundred likes and shares
- Commenting that the post contains misinformation may help others
- Be sure to include links to sources if you choose to comment

Be empathetic in your comment. Recognize the risk that the person who shared the content will be upset or embarrassed if you call them out "publicly" like that.

Avoid attacking the person who shared the content or others who commented agreeing with them. This creates further polarization, and does little to stop the spread of misinformation.

Instead, provide reassurance that it's understandable why they would believe the content they shared. Providing reliable sources to counter the misinformation also helps to give a different perspective that is founded in fact.

Understanding the Limitations of Fact-checking

People are motivated to believe misinformation for many reasons, often ones with deep emotional resonance such as social, religious, or political affiliations. It's an unpleasant truth, but despite your best efforts and intentions, many people will be unlikely to be persuaded by reports from mainstream media, scientific authorities, or well-established institutions.

If someone believes something erroneous about the COVID vaccines because they were told that by a popular figure they admire, and that belief is common among their peers, it's likely to be difficult for you to persuade them otherwise.

You can always try to reach people with empathy and accurate information, but it's important to know that you may not be able to change something they deeply want to believe. What you can always do, however, is work to avoid sharing or amplifying misinformation, and where possible, discourage it from being shared by others.

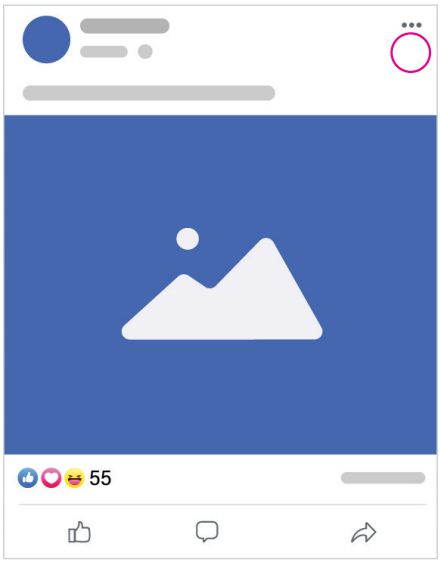
Block and Report Misinformation

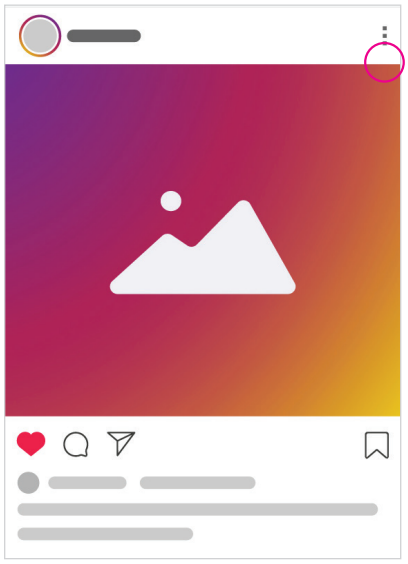
You also have the option of reporting misinformation to the social media platform where it was shared. The person who shared the content won't know it was you that reported it, although they might get a notification if the content is removed.

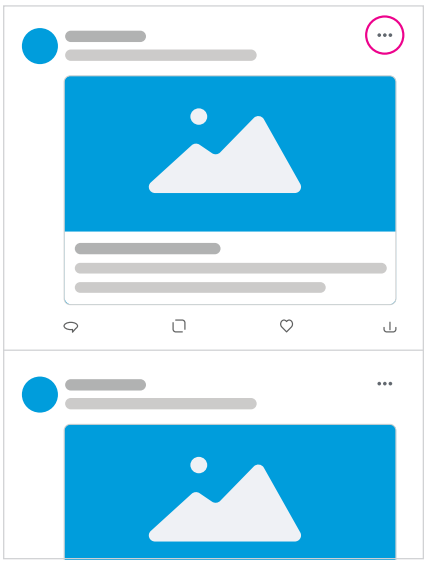
On Facebook, click on or tap the 3 dots in the top right corner of the post you want to report, then select "Give feedback on this post." Choose the reason that best describes the reason you're reporting the post, then click "send."

On Instagram, click on or tap the 3 dots above the post, then tap or click "Report." Follow the instructions to submit your report.

On Twitter, tap or click the 3 dots at the top of the Tweet, then select "Report Tweet." Choose the reason you're reporting the Tweet, then submit your report. You might be asked for further detail about your reason for reporting.







Correct Misinformation You Shared

But...what if you're the one who shared misinformation?

First of all, try not to beat yourself up about it. Remember, misinformation is *designed* to trick you and make you want to believe it's true. It can happen to anyone.

If this happens to you, do what you can to set the record straight. Go back to the post where you shared the misinformation and edit your caption. State plainly that the link you shared is misinformation, then provide a link to the correct information.

Normalize correcting the information publicly so others won't feel ashamed or embarrassed to do so themselves.

What's important is that you don't delete the post. Normalize correcting the information publicly so others won't feel ashamed or embarrassed to do so themselves. Set an example for others by openly admitting your mistakes and apologizing for misleading anyone.

If only a few people engaged with the post, you might also want to reach out to them directly and let them know that the information in the post was false. Provide them links to the correct material so they can learn just as you did.

Original graphic courtesy of United Nations Verified

EXERCISE

Look back over your own posts on social media and apply the fact-checking and source-finding skills you've learned in this course. Have you shared misinformation? If so, think about why you shared that information and what it was about it that convinced you to do so. Then, edit your post to reveal your findings. If only a few people engaged with the posts you found, you might also reach out to them directly and explain that the post contained misinformation.

Recommended Reading

- How to Find Reliable Information About the COVID Vaccine
- How to Tell Someone That They Have Shared Misinformation
- How to Report Misinformation

Congratulations!

Thank you for taking on this course! Through it, you've learned how to identify possible misinformation, investigate where it came from, do your own fact-checking, and respond to misinformation. You've also seen how to use social media more mindfully, and the benefits of giving yourself breaks from social media.

With these tools, you're now in a better position to help yourself—and others—avoid the pitfalls of misinformation online.

Looking Ahead

The next time you're online, remember: "A small share can have big consequences."

Even if you're only able to help change a few minds, those people can help others, and so on. Every piece of misinformation you avoid sharing, or help get taken down reduces the number of people who are likely to be misled.

Your individual actions in spreading the truth may be relatively minor, but the impact they have can be amplified by the same platforms and social dynamics that spread misinformation to begin with!

We all have a part to play in making the world a more well-informed place. By spending your time on this course, you've taken an important step in doing so.