Digital Information Training (DIGIT)

Handbook





THE CARTER CENTER

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Unit 1
Introduction

> “It is vital to equip individuals, who act as both information consumers and producers, with digital information skills...”



What does it mean to be media literate in our era?

Modern-day information and media ecosystems, including our communication tools and technologies, increasingly blur the lines between information producers and consumers and between our online and offline lives. While social media has become a vital tool in the democratization of knowledge and media systems, it has also amplified the spread of false information and requires users to be savvier in the way they consume information.

Media literacy today is about more than the ability to critically analyze and evaluate media systems and information. It also is about knowing how to evaluate our place within these media systems and critically analyze how media systems, trends, tools, and structures impact our lives. One major impact is the rise of mis- and disinformation, which has had a cascade of political, social, cultural, psychological, and even physical ramifications.

The circulation of inaccurate information is not new. Humans have been spreading bad information for as long as they've been communicating with each other. Sometimes they do it purposely to deceive — we call that disinformation; other times, they do it because they believe it to be true — we call that misinformation. But today, mis- and disinformation take new forms and pose new challenges to individuals and society writ large. It can lead to divisiveness, disruption, and distrust and can weaken democratic processes.

It is vital to equip individuals, who act as both information consumers and producers, with **digital information** skills so that they can evaluate media and messages, distinguish between credible and potentially false or misleading information, and refrain from unwittingly spreading misinformation that could cause harm.

This curriculum seeks to empower a wide range of information consumers and producers with skills not only to navigate increasingly complex media and information ecosystems but also to take action around issues and challenges raised by mis- and disinformation. We have broken the curriculum into nine modules that explore different facets of **digital information**, media systems, and disinformation, with the **aim** of making it accessible and adaptable to a wide range of individuals, facilitators, and groups.

We hope the content empowers and inspires you to develop your **digital information** skills and share your knowledge with others. We encourage you to adapt the material to your needs and purposes.

Module 1:
Evaluating Media Sources

Introduction

We have always found different ways to communicate. From cave paintings to photographs, newspapers to blogs, and telephone calls to text messages, we are always developing new ways to connect. And with all those communication tools have come new ways to spread rumors, gossip, conspiracies, and other bogus information. It's both a feature and a bug in our communication systems.

The need to evaluate sources is not new. We've always had sensational coverage, biased media, propaganda, and rumors. But today's technology creates some unique challenges for evaluating sources.

Outcomes

In this module, you will learn how to do the following:

- Identify different types of media sources
- Understand unique aspects and challenges of evaluating sources online
- Discover and use techniques for evaluating sources
- Explore ways to further develop source evaluation skills

For an overview of the following chapter, please watch The Carter Center's video for Module 1: Evaluating Media Sources found here.



Preliminary Assessment

What do you look for or consider when you are evaluating a source?

1. **What is source evaluation?**
   - A. Deciding whether a source is good or bad
   - B. Determining what you personally think about a source
   - C. Critically analyzing a source to determine its credibility and accuracy
   - D. An unnecessary practice because all sources are subjective
2. **Which of the following is not a challenge to properly evaluating media sources?**
   - A. The ease with which people share content
   - B. The speed with which one consumes content
   - C. Newspaper paywalls
   - D. Obscure content origin
3. **True or false: Media sources are clearly good or bad; you just need to know how to tell the difference.**
   - A. True
   - B. False
4. **What useful information for media evaluation could you garner from researching the producer of a piece of media?**
   - A. The financial success of the producer
   - B. The background and authority of the producer
   - C. How long the producer has been sharing content
   - D. The location of the producer
5. **What is lateral reading?**
   - A. Skimming the first sentences in each paragraph
   - B. Reading other pieces of media from the content producer
   - C. Engaging with content across different media
   - D. Looking for additional information to substantiate the source material's claims

Evaluating Media Sources Overview

Every day, as soon as we switch on our phones or computers, we're inundated with information, from news alerts and articles to social media posts, ads, and text messages. The always-on delivery and the variety of content can make it challenging to classify what we're seeing and hearing, and to evaluate the credibility of sources.

Fortunately, there are strategies that can help. In this module we will learn techniques to make sense of content you encounter, to identify credible sources, and to evaluate different kinds of information.

What does it mean to evaluate a source?

We evaluate sources to determine whether they are credible and present accurate and high-quality information.

And we can and should evaluate sources of all kinds — including opinions. Sources such as editorials, commentary, persuasive stories, and marketing campaigns are a valuable part of open discourse. But we need to analyze them to see whether the author has expertise on the topic, if the views expressed are rooted in facts, and whether the source is believable and trustworthy — in other words, credible.

Ultimately, there is not always a clear distinction between "good" and "bad" when it comes to sources and content. Sometimes a piece of content is completely false, but many times, the situation isn't so clear-cut: A misleading headline could be paired with a factual, informative article, or a quality source could intentionally be repurposed and framed in a negative way. Simply labeling a source as "good" or "bad" doesn't allow for deeper analysis or help in figuring out more complex situations. Instead, it can be helpful to consider accuracy, credibility, and quality when it comes to evaluating sources.

What is challenging about evaluating sources today?

- **Shifts in where we get information** – Previous generations tended to get news from a few TV outlets or newspapers. Today, there's virtually no limit to potential sources, particularly online. Social media sites are endless feeds of information, mixing news with random commentary. Some outlets claiming to be news sites are actually tabloids or glorified rumor mills. Distinguishing fact from fiction online requires an evaluation of the source.
- **Obscure sources** – The internet has a tendency to make things look the same. Tweets look like tweets, for example, whether they come from The New York Times or from a Random Guy who Believes the Earth is Flat. Combined with social media's tangling of commentary and news, it can be hard to tell where content is really coming from.
- **Speed is encouraged** – Social media sites present information in a rapid, endless scroll that encourages skimming and knee-jerk reactions. Stories emerge rapidly and disappear just as quickly, replaced by the next breaking news items. In this environment, it's hard to slow down and truly evaluate something.
- **Sharing is easy** – With one click, you can spread a story far and wide. On one hand, that means more people can have their voices heard. On the other, it's all too easy for noncredible information to spread unchecked. It can make it difficult to trace something back to its origin or debunk false information.

Traditional source-evaluation practices can only get us so far in this complex environment.

Evaluation of Best Practices

To better evaluate sources, we must develop habits and mindsets that empower us to pause and ask questions, rather than forming snap judgments and hastily sharing unverified information. In other words: Let's take five. A brief pause and a few questions can prevent the spread of inaccurate information.

Take 5 Evaluation Tips

Pause and reflect – When you encounter a source, consider your reaction to the content. Is it a strong emotional one? Do you feel like firing off your own post in response? That can be a sign to slow down. Are you knowledgeable about the topic? If this is new information or content you aren't familiar with, take the time to learn more.

Examine what you are seeing – Can you identify the source of the content? Are you familiar with it? Can you tell where the information originally came from? If you cannot answer those questions, do more investigating.

Consider the purpose – What is this source trying to accomplish? Why did someone bother to share this information? Sometimes the purpose of a source is quickly apparent (For example, an ad is trying to sell something), but other times it's unclear from a headline, image, or caption alone.

Check out the producers – Take a few moments to check out the source and its author. A quick online search can reveal red flags such as a source's bias or negative reputation, or if the author is difficult to find.

Check the facts – Evaluate the claims the source is making. Again, a quick online search can often reveal a wealth of information. If you start seeing hits for fact-checking websites, pieces debunking the claims, or disagreement, that is a sign to investigate the issue further to ensure you are consuming accurate information.

You can adapt these questions and strategies for different circumstances, including learning about a health issue, deciding whom to vote for, or making a major financial decision.



Practical Application: Evaluating Online Content

As we noted before, evaluating sources online can pose some unique challenges. Here are a few situations where you can employ the evaluation tips we shared.

Situation 1: Breaking News

Breaking news and viral content are key aspects of online life and information consumption. We will look at the reasons why in Module 2, but often these situations result in a lot of speculation and few facts, especially if emotions are running high.

It's crucial to pause and reflect, avoid jumping to conclusions, and refrain from sharing content until you have checked the facts and the source. Waiting puts a huge dent in the spread of mis- or disinformation.

Situation 2: Social Media Feeds

Social media platforms connect us, but they also pose some serious challenges for source evaluation. Take Twitter as an example: Someone posts an inflammatory or clickbait (per AP) headline, others react, and soon everyone is reacting to one another and their views on a headline — and no one has read the actual article beneath it. Taking some time to identify the information's origin can help eliminate knee-jerk reactions, hot takes, and arguments that distract from the original topic.

Situation 3: Skim Reading vs. Lateral Reading

Social media encourages skimming or glancing at content quickly as you scroll. You might think the solution to this is close reading, but that's only partly true. Clicking through to a full article is only one step in your source evaluation. Sources can often appear to be legitimate when they are not. For instance, a source might use data or cite sources, giving the appearance that the content is well-researched, but if you check on the author, the source's reputation, and the supposed facts, you might discover the opposite. Going beyond the source itself is known as lateral reading. Instead of just reading an article thoroughly, you read "sideways" or laterally to fact-check and seek more information.

Final Thoughts

Getting access to endless amounts of information online can be beneficial, but sifting through it can also be exhausting. Fortunately, some platforms are stepping up their efforts to help.

Regulating content on democratized platforms requires careful balancing with freedom of expression, but many social media platforms are working to curb the spread of misinformation and fake news. For example:

- Facebook has partnered with watchdogs and used newsfeed algorithms and content markers to identify and counter misinformation.
- WhatsApp employs limits on forwarding content to reduce the dissemination of misinformation.
- The rapid spread of COVID-19-related disinformation prompted several platforms, including YouTube, to introduce specific guidelines around content about the virus and prevention efforts.

These types of policies provide useful tools to help social media users identify misinformation, but individual media literacy remains critical. Let's put our evaluation tips in action; knowing what to look for and what to ask can make a big difference in combating mis- and disinformation.

Activity: Evaluation in Action

European Super League Football Coverage

This proposed football league sparked protests, resulting in a wide range of coverage (in addition to rants, satire, memes, and other contributions from angry football fans and bemused observers).

Here is coverage from Al Jazeera.
What do you notice about this source?
What would you like to explore further?

Original link
Archive link

Using the evaluation tips, you can see that this is a credible article on the Super League football story. For example:

- The source provides clear, easily accessible information about the author and the publication itself.
- The article uses quotes and cites sources, as well as links to further coverage on the story.
- A quick internet search reveals the author is a credible journalist with history in the field, in addition to information confirming Al Jazeera's history, reputation, ownership, and location.
- While the article included some editorializing, the author included expert voices and shared a variety of views and insights.

Economy | Football

What was behind the collapse of the European Super League?

A victory for football fans over the power of the boardroom? Perhaps not. The European Super League highlighted the fault lines in the new geopolitics of the world's most popular sport.



One of the key stakeholders, the players, appear to have been left behind in the thoughts of the clubs [File: Juan Carlos Hidalgo/EPA]

By James Brownsell
23 Apr 2021

Who would have thought that a multibillion-dollar cash grab forged in secrecy between the 12 wealthiest clubs in European football would go down so badly in the middle of a worldwide crisis and record economic inequality?

Not the brains behind the proposed European Super League, that is for sure.

KEEP READING
- After the Super League debacle, we need a football revolution
- FIFA's Infantino: Super League clubs will 'pay the consequences'
- Super League crumbles after Atletico, Inter follow English exodus
- Why are Europe's top clubs forming a new 'Super League'?

Just days after the fanfare and fury of Sunday's announcement that the continent's self-appointed top teams would break away from domestic competition to form their own exclusive league, with no promotion and no relegation – yet eye-wateringly lucrative potential TV rights – the plans lay in tatters.

So what went wrong?

Football fans across Europe were put in the unusual position of agreeing with former Manchester United captain Gary Neville, when his blistering excoriation of the plans on Sky Sports went viral on Sunday evening.

Ebola Coverage

This is a post on CNN's website about Ebola.

What do you notice about this source?
What would you like to explore further?

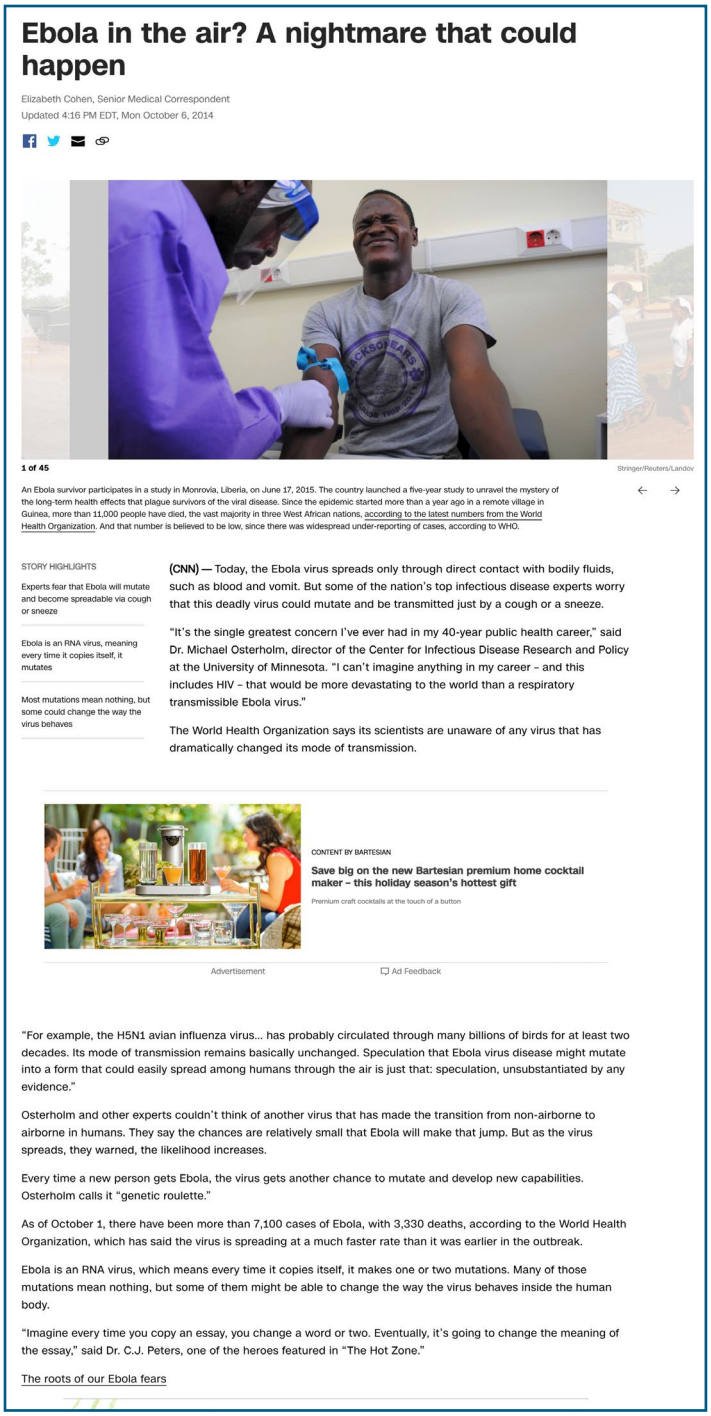
Original link
Archive link

This article brings us into murkier territory: Some of the article's content undercuts its clickbait headline. As we read, we discover that some scientists say the "nightmare" described in the headline is all speculation and not very likely.

Consider these factors:

- The article's author is a medical correspondent, and information about her and the news outlet is available online.
- The article quotes individuals who seem to have expertise on the topic at hand.
- The headline is clickbait, designed to attract interest. It doesn't completely match the article's contents, which offer differing views and qualifications. The idea proposed in the title (airborne Ebola) is not possible, according to sources in the story.

Sources of all kinds use gimmicks to grab attention. This is an example of an otherwise reputable news outlet posting an article that, because of the misleading headline, requires some further checking and might not be worth sharing.



Ebola in the air? A nightmare that could happen

Elizabeth Cohen, Senior Medical Correspondent
Updated 4:16 PM EDT, Mon October 6, 2014

1 of 45

Stringer/Reuters/Landov

An Ebola survivor participates in a study in Monrovia, Liberia, on June 17, 2015. The country launched a five-year study to unravel the mystery of the long-term health effects that plague survivors of the viral disease. Since the epidemic started more than a year ago in a remote village in Guinea, more than 11,000 people have died, the vast majority in three West African nations, according to the latest numbers from the World Health Organization. And that number is believed to be low, since there was widespread under-reporting of cases, according to WHO.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Experts fear that Ebola will mutate and become spreadable via cough or sneeze

Ebola is an RNA virus, meaning every time it copies itself, it mutates

Most mutations mean nothing, but some could change the way the virus behaves

(CNN) — Today, the Ebola virus spreads only through direct contact with bodily fluids, such as blood and vomit. But some of the nation's top infectious disease experts worry that this deadly virus could mutate and be transmitted just by a cough or a sneeze.

"It's the single greatest concern I've ever had in my 40-year public health career," said Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. "I can't imagine anything in my career – and this includes HIV – that would be more devastating to the world than a respiratory transmissible Ebola virus."

The World Health Organization says its scientists are unaware of any virus that has dramatically changed its mode of transmission.

CONTENT BY BARTESIAN

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"For example, the H5N1 avian influenza virus... has probably circulated through many billions of birds for at least two decades. Its mode of transmission remains basically unchanged. Speculation that Ebola virus disease might mutate into a form that could easily spread among humans through the air is just that: speculation, unsubstantiated by any evidence."

Osterholm and other experts couldn't think of another virus that has made the transition from non-airborne to airborne in humans. They say the chances are relatively small that Ebola will make that jump. But as the virus spreads, they warned, the likelihood increases.

Every time a new person gets Ebola, the virus gets another chance to mutate and develop new capabilities. Osterholm calls it "genetic roulette."

As of October 1, there have been more than 7,100 cases of Ebola, with 3,330 deaths, according to the World Health Organization, which has said the virus is spreading at a much faster rate than it was earlier in the outbreak.

Ebola is an RNA virus, which means every time it copies itself, it makes one or two mutations. Many of those mutations mean nothing, but some of them might be able to change the way the virus behaves inside the human body.

"Imagine every time you copy an essay, you change a word or two. Eventually, it's going to change the meaning of the essay," said Dr. C.J. Peters, one of the heroes featured in "The Hot Zone."

The roots of our Ebola fears

Whole Foods Merger Coverage

Next, let's tackle some information swirling around social media that Whole Foods is merging with Monsanto. One of the sources frequently shared and referenced is the blog Healthy Holistic Living.

What do you notice about this source?
What would you like to explore further?

Archive link

This is an example of inaccurate information being shared on social media. Here are some warning signs:

- The author and type of source are unclear. A quick search of the source itself and the headline bring back results from fact-checking websites and other sites debunking this site.
- The site itself uses inflammatory language; the article seems to be selling a cookbook; and the source is overly insistent about readers signing a petition. All in all, not great signs for credibility.
- The article's goal seems to be getting readers agitated about the issue (GMOs are a highly inflammatory issue for many).
- Finally, the article linked in the source is talking about an entirely different topic: an issue with labeling GMO food, not a corporate merger of Whole Foods and Monsanto.

The warning signs and lack of credibility are apparent once you read the blog post. But if you just saw the headline on social media, you might believe it. That's why it's so important to look beyond headlines and run searches to investigate claims.



Whole Foods Joins Monsanto Try to Kill GMO Labeling in America Learn

Facebook Twitter Google+ Pinterest

According to breaking news reports, Whole Foods Market (WFM) has gone full rogue, partnering with Monsanto to kill GMO labeling across America under the guise of a new, fraudulent "GMO labeling compromise" in the U.S. Senate that's actually a fake labeling law requiring no clear labeling of GMOs whatsoever.

Food Democracy Now has issued this red alert, naming the sellout corporations (including Whole Foods) that have betrayed health-conscious consumers with a sellout deal that outlaws GMO labeling nationwide.

The deception on food labeling has never been greater. With this act of ultimate betrayal, **Whole Foods cements its position as a poison-pushing distribution partner of Monsanto**, the world's most evil corporation that produces poisonous, deadly crops laced with *bt toxin* and glyphosate, a cancer-linked herbicide.

With this betrayal of consumers, Whole Foods might as well now be called, "POISON FOODS" because that's what they're pushing.

Click here for the Food Democracy Now petition page to take action now.

What follows is the full text of the Food Democracy Now announcement:

Whole Foods Joins Monsanto Try to Kill GMO Labeling in America

Washington D.C. — National grassroots organizations expressed their outrage today towards a group of U.S. Senators and major, self-described, "organic companies" that have brokered a backroom legislative deal to kill mandatory GMO labeling of food products across America while stifling first-of-its-kind state legislation in Vermont (slated to go in effect this Friday, July 1st) that would mandate labeling of foods that have been genetically engineered in laboratories.

A Guide to Supplements

Finally, let's look at an example that isn't news. This is an article from Goop on the best vitamins and supplements.

What do you notice about this source? What would you like to explore further?

Original link
Archive link

It's important to evaluate any source or piece of information, especially if that source is trying to get you to do or buy something. In this case, we have entered the world of pseudoscience.

Let's see the warning signs and learn how our evaluation strategies can help uncover the reality.

- The site itself looks polished, and the article seems harmless. Vitamins are good, right? But the article is trying to sell you things under the guise of being a "scientific" overview of vitamins. Even worse, the article is trying to sell you products from Goop itself (either made or sold by Goop). It's not even an objective view of the "best" vitamins.
- If we follow our routine of looking up the source, author, and claims being made, we get some troubling results. Reputable outlets' articles about Goop mention controversy, court cases, pseudoscience, angry scientists, and scams.
- Searching the claims about the vitamins themselves leads to results about issues with the vitamin and supplement industry, the lack of regulation, and debates in the medical community on effectiveness.
- Finally, the science portal referenced in the article sounds impressive and makes lots of claims, but also raises a lot of questions.

This article gives the appearance of being accurate and factual, but a brief search shows us this source has a dangerous reputation for peddling pseudoscientific ideas.

A Guide to the Best Vitamins and Supplements

Written by: the Editors of goop | Updated: January 6, 2022



Photo courtesy of Alistair Matthews/The Licensing Project

Whether you're just starting a routine or looking to add nutritional support to your current regimen, navigating the vitamin and supplement aisle alone can be overwhelming.

That's why we have a scientific and regulatory portal for vetting the ingestible products we sell at goop: The scientists on our wellness team make sure that claims on goop-branded and third-party supplements we sell are substantiated by scientific research or, in some cases, by ancient medical traditions. We request extensive documentation sets from the brands we partner with, including product testing like heavy metal testing. And we ensure that all goop vitamin protocols are produced in CGMP-certified facilities, which means extensive testing is carried out to verify the presence of active ingredients and the absence of heavy metals and harmful microbes.

We also want to help you find the supplements that will work best for your needs and daily routines. To cover all your bases, we've outlined the best vitamins and supplements here—from gut-immune support to energy and metabolism boosters.

Supplements for the Gut

A healthy gut is a gateway to a healthy immune system and overall health. And the key to gut health is a balanced microbiome. Supplementing with probiotics, prebiotics, and digestive enzymes can help you get there.

THE SUPERPOWDER

Gut Microbiome Superpowder is designed to support gut health, reduce occasional bloating, and promote healthy bowel function. It contains *Lactobacillus plantarum* 299v (LP299V®)—a clinically studied probiotic strain—prebiotics, and digestive enzymes (proteases, lipase, amylase, and cellulase) to help support the digestion and absorption of nutrients from food. And it's stable at room temperature: no refrigeration needed here. Mix the unflavored, unsweetened powder into a smoothie or any cool drink of your choice.*



goop Wellness
GUT MICROBIOME SUPERPOWDER
goop, $55/$50 with subscription
SHOP NOW

THE PROBIOTIC

If you'd prefer your gut support in a capsule, Seed's Daily Synbiotic delivers support for digestive, dermatological, and cardiovascular health with twenty-four strains of probiotics and a prebiotic outer capsule. (There's no need to refrigerate these, either.) Take two daily for the best results.*



Seed
DAILY SYNBIOTIC
goop, $60
SHOP NOW

Testing Your Evaluation Skills



Now, try out your evaluation skills! Test your skills by evaluating the following:

- A source from a news site you follow regularly
- A source from a news site you do not follow regularly
- A post from your social media feeds

Apply the following questions to the sources you review:

1. Pause and reflect. What is your reaction to this content?
2. Examine the source. What are you seeing in this source? What type of source is this?
3. Consider the purpose. What is the purpose or objective?
4. Check the producers. Who is responsible for this source? What is their background or expertise?
5. Check the facts. Is the information presented here accurate?

After you have analyzed your sources, reflect on what you have discovered. Did anything surprise you? Did you notice any trends or patterns?

Conclusion

While evaluating sources can be challenging, it does not have to be overwhelming. Even taking a few moments to consider what you are seeing before reacting and sharing can help stop the spread of misinformation. By practicing your evaluation skills, you can get faster and more efficient at analyzing different kinds of sources. The skills we have covered can empower you to better understand the complex information ecosystems that we all inhabit.

Here are some final thoughts to keep in mind as you develop your evaluation skills:

- **Aim for a healthy skepticism** – As we have seen, taking a few moments to pause and check out a source is a good habit. However, depending on your circumstances, you might want to conduct more (or less) evaluation of a certain source. While it is a good idea to evaluate sources rather than trusting everything you see or hear, you also want to avoid distrusting everything automatically. A mindset of healthy skepticism is a good one to adopt.
- **Reflect, don't react** – One of the overall goals of evaluating is to get into the habit of reflecting and analyzing sources rather than just reacting to them. Gaining insight into your own reactions can be empowering.
- **Develop good habits and behaviors** – Evaluating sources is a skill you can practice and refine every day.



Closing Assessment

After exploring this module, what will you do differently as you evaluate sources in the future? Are there new questions you might ask, or approaches you might adopt?

What are some ways you can incorporate source evaluation into your daily life? How do you plan to practice your skills?

1. **What is source evaluation?**
   - A. Deciding whether a source is good or bad
   - B. Determining what you, personally, think about a source
   - C. Critically analyzing a source to determine its credibility and accuracy
   - D. An unnecessary practice because all sources are subjective
2. **Which of the following is not a challenge in properly evaluating media sources?**
   - A. The ease with which people share content
   - B. The speed with which one consumes content
   - C. Newspaper paywalls
   - D. Obscure content origin
3. **True or false: Media sources are clearly good or bad, and you just need to know how to tell the difference.**
   - A. True
   - B. False
4. **What useful information for media evaluation could you garner from researching the producer of a piece of media?**
   - A. The financial success of the producer
   - B. The background and authority of the producer
   - C. How long the producer has been sharing content
   - D. The location of the producer
5. **What is lateral reading?**
   - A. Skimming the first sentences in each paragraph
   - B. Reading other pieces of media from the content producer
   - C. Engaging with content across different media
   - D. Looking for additional information to substantiate the source material's claims

Resources

Glossary

- **Source evaluation** – A process and practice of critically evaluating a source to determine its credibility and whether it is appropriate for an intended use.
- **Credibility** – The degree to which a source is trustworthy and accurate.
- **Disinformation** – Inaccurate or non-credible information that is spread intentionally to manipulate or mislead.
- **Misinformation** – Inaccurate or noncredible information that is spread unintentionally. Because it's not always possible to know the intent of someone who shares inaccurate information, this handbook often uses the term "misinformation" to refer to all false information narratives.
- **Lateral reading** – Going outside a source to verify its information.

Learn More

There are numerous fact-checking sites that walk you through the process of evaluating sources and debunking false information. Here are a few examples:

FactCheck.org
Politifact.com
Snopes.com

There are also a number of Twitter accounts that flag fake news, including:

SM Hoax-Slayer (@SMHoaxSlayer)
Alt News (@AltNews)
Boom Fact Check (@Boomlive_in)

Resources are also available to help you identify doctored audiovisual content. For example, edited images are often shared on platforms like WhatsApp as political propaganda or to incite violence. Various free mobile tools function as reverse image checkers and can help you verify whether an image is authentic or morphed, including:

Google's Reverse Image Search
TinEye
Fake Image Detector

You can also visit your local library to learn more about source evaluation. Libraries often have guides, workshops, and other programs dedicated to helping people develop their critical analysis and source evaluation skills.

Finally, many news outlets have fact-checking sections on their sites, and these can also be spaces to see fact-checking in action.

Module 2:
Assessing Media Intent

Introduction

The term "media" encompasses a huge range of forms, from traditional television news, newspapers, magazines, and movies to VR games, social media posts, memes, and tweets. Even limiting our focus to news media, we still have a huge array of formats.

Aside from differences in format and style, news media also encompass a wide range of goals. The idea of "*news*" as something neutral is not always accurate, just as the idea of "*bias*" as something inherently bad is not always accurate. All news media carry different viewpoints and intentions, and being a savvy consumer means being aware of and alert to media intent.

In this module, we will learn more about the systems, structures, and trends that influence the news media we consume, and we will explore strategies to better recognize and analyze media intent.

Outcomes

In this module, you will learn how to do the following:

- Develop techniques to recognize and analyze media intent
- Explore systems and structures that shape and influence news media
- Analyze and assess manipulation techniques that can appear in media

For an overview of the following chapter, please watch The Carter Center's video for Module 2: Assessing Media Intent found here.



Preliminary Assessment

Where do you get your news? Feel free to list different sites, outlets, social media platforms, or individuals.

1. **How do you define bias?**

2. **What is an echo chamber?**

   A. An online forum where commenters argue with one another

   B. A media environment where views and opinions are continually reinforced

   C. A media source that discusses only one topic

   D. A public social media platform with lively discussion

3. **Which of the following questions is not relevant to identifying bias in media?**

   A. Does this platform lean one way or another on the topic being discussed?

   B. What sort of opinion or viewpoint does this platform express?

   C. Is this platform more than a year old?

   D. Is this platform trying to hide or conceal anything?

4. **How might a media source attempt to bias an audience? Select all that apply:**

   A. The producer uses hyperbolic language.

   B. The content contains multiple quotes.

   C. The content omits details that undermine the preferred narrative.

   D. The tone of the content is emotional.

5. **Which is not important when considering media intent?**

   A. Bias and purpose

   B. Audience

   C. Creators and funding

   D. Subject topic

Media Intent
Overview

Media, and news media in particular, have always had an intent, goal, or purpose behind them, usually to inform people of current events.

This definition rapidly gets complicated when we start considering all the things that carry a "news" label. Can a news media source be emotional, funny, or biased and still be informative? Is the idea of dry and neutral news a thing of the past?

Let's unpack these questions to get a better sense of the history and structure of news media.

The Evolution of News Media

To start with a bombshell worthy of a dramatic headline, the news has not always been dry and neutral — but it hasn't always been salacious, biased, and overwrought, either. It's always been both. What's evolved over time is people's understanding of what news is and what constitutes appropriate journalistic behavior.

In American history, for example, the news has swung between being extremely, and proudly, biased to being meticulously, and proudly, neutral and factual. When the United States was founded, it was common — even expected — for newspapers to be explicitly aligned with a political party. And in the late 19th century, so-called "yellow journalism" offered salacious and outrageous headlines to the public, and even helped start the Spanish-American War. Pushback ensued and ushered in an era of more neutral and sober news coverage.

Additionally, throughout history, many countries have seen ebbs and flows in government interference and control over news media. Nondemocratic governments have limited, and still limit, freedom of the press, instead favoring partisan or state-run media outlets. America used to impose the Fairness Doctrine, which required broadcast news outlets to give airtime to, and fairly reflect, different viewpoints on issues. In the mid-1980s, the rule was dropped — a decision that paved the way for overtly partisan cable and radio news channels.

Our understanding of what news media is and should be remains complicated; the rise of the internet and both accurate and false information has only made it more so.

Trends in News Media

Let's explore some current trends that shape how we define and understand news.

- **Echo chambers** – Thanks to 24-hour cable news and curated social media feeds, it's easy to find ourselves in echo chambers where our views and opinions are continually reinforced. Within an echo chamber, you rarely see or hear content that challenges or contradicts a prevailing narrative. If someone starts following content about a conspiracy theory, for example, they can end up only seeing content that promotes the conspiracy theory and nothing that presents an opposing view. Because nothing challenges their worldview, the person can become fully entrenched in it. In echo chambers, you can consume a steady diet of content masquerading as news.
- **Funding models** – The internet has siphoned funding from more traditional media. News outlets need to make money, and that income often comes from advertisements, especially since so many of us expect to get information "for free" online. Pressures from advertisers, investors, and the pursuit of an audience can complicate — or even compromise — editorial decisions.
- **Attention-grabbing techniques** – To capture and keep an audience's attention, some news media use clickbait headlines or program debates that devolve into shouting matches. The line between entertainment and news gets increasingly blurred.
- **Social media** – Increasingly, people are getting their news from social media. That's not so bad if the sources are credible, but plenty of mis- and disinformation circulates alongside reputable content. Keep the motivations of sharers in mind.
- **Fake News** – The term "fake news" is part of a broader struggle to define and understand what news is and should be. The term gets tossed around to attack and sow doubt as to what news is. Less reputable outlets often use the term to attack media that express different views or cover the news in a less overtly partisan way. More precisely, fake news is fabricated information that appears as news media content but is intentionally and verifiably false, designed to manipulate perceptions of facts. Other types of misinformation — such as rumors that don't originate from news sources, unintentional reporting errors, biased reports, and conspiracy theories — do not qualify as fake news.



Analyzing Media Intent

The news media landscape is a complex one, with shifting definitions and understandings of news. News, at the end of the day, should be accurate. But there are many ways to present and share accurate information. Let's explore some questions that can help us better understand media intent.



Bias – Most media professionals favor particular policies or personal opinions about social issues. These predispositions can seep into the media we consume, making media biased to some degree. But just because something is biased doesn't mean it can't be informative or accurate. In Module 1 we saw that an op-ed can be biased but informative. Propaganda, on the other hand, is biased in a such a way that it presents untrue narratives or omits key information as it attempts to persuade.

Questions to ask about bias:

Does this source lean one way or another on the topic being discussed?
What sort of opinion or viewpoint does this source express?
Is this source trying to hide or conceal anything?



Purpose and goal – Beyond considering the intent of a story, consider the purpose and goal of an entire media outlet or platform. All media have some sort of purpose or goal, whether to inform, entertain, persuade, sell something, or even to deceive and manipulate.

Questions to ask about the purpose and goal:

What sort of language is being used? Is the tone very emotional, for instance?
What trends are you noticing for the outlet or platform?
What is the overall point of this source?
Is this source trying to hide or conceal a purpose or goal?



Creators and responsible parties – As we learned in Module 1, it is crucial to figure out who created the media you are analyzing. This includes the author and publisher, but it could also include the individual sharing the news media. The basic goal is to gain insight into who is responsible for the media you are seeing and what their motivations and biases might be. Another element, which we will explore in Module 3, is the idea of framing, or how media sources present information to audiences.

Questions to ask about creators:

Who is responsible for this source? What do you know about them?
What is the reputation of the author or publisher or outlet?
What are the motivations or goals of the creators? What could they gain from creating and sharing this source in a certain way?
Who is sharing this news source, and what is their reputation?



Audience – Considering the target audience or users of a media outlet or platform provides insight into the purpose and intent of the media you are analyzing.

Questions to ask about the audience:

Who might find the content you are analyzing appealing?
Are you seeing certain stories or ads from a media outlet that appeal to certain audiences?
Who are the users and followers of this site or media outlet? What are their characteristics?

Funding and funders – Media outlets obtain revenue in a variety of ways. Many depend on advertisements; some rely on subscriptions; others receive funding from government or philanthropic sources. A media outlet's revenue sources can impact the coverage you see and hear.

Questions to ask about funding:

How is the media outlet (or individual) funded? Are you seeing ads, offers to subscribe, requests for donations, etc.? Pay attention to what you see on media outlet websites, radio or TV channels, or social media pages for outlets and individuals.

What sorts of ads are you seeing? What are these ads trying to sell?

Research how a media outlet is funded and who the funders or investors are. Is that information readily available, or are you struggling to find it? If that information isn't available, why might that be?

Here are some additional tips and considerations for analyzing media intent:

Pay attention to what is hidden or concealed. You might have noticed we included questions about hidden motivations, intents, and investors. Reputable news media outlets generally make that information easily accessible. Less reputable ones typically obscure it. Remember, many types of outlets can masquerade as news. If a supposed news outlet is saying one thing but doing another, pay close attention.

Read laterally. Your lateral-reading skills from Module 1 will come in handy when evaluating media intent. Going beyond the source you're examining to figure out factors like the author's reputation or the publisher's funding model will help you understand media intent.

Think of all of this as an extension of the Take 5 Tips we outlined in Module 1. These questions can help you gain a deeper and richer understanding of both individual sources and entire media outlets and platforms, which will make you a savvier consumer of news media.



Practical Application: Assessing Media Intent

One of the best ways to see media intent in action, and to gain practice, is to follow issues across platforms and outlets.

Situation 1: Crime News

Let's consider the differences in intent we could see across outlets covering a crime story.

- **Local TV news outlet** – Shares the basic facts to inform people about a crime in their community.
- **Tabloid magazine** – Interviews the victim's family to provide a human-interest angle, shares sensational details, or speculates about the perpetrator.
- **Podcast** – Tells a story that elaborates on the crime and contextualizes it, with the goal of drawing listeners into the complete series.

Situation 2: Business and Finance News

Let's think about some possible differences in the way various kinds of media cover a story on the stock market:

- **Foreign outlet** – A foreign outlet might make a brief mention of stock market developments in another country to share information with a general audience.
- **Business trade publication** – A trade publication for investors might have in-depth coverage and tips for a specific audience.
- **An op-ed from an activist** – An opinion piece by someone opposed to capitalism might endeavor to persuade their audience to agree with their views.

Situation 3: War and Crises Reporting

Coverage of war, disasters, and crises can include a wide range of intentions depending on the outlet.

- **Reporter in the field** – A news outlet's reporter could share stories from the frontlines to inform and provide a human angle by focusing, for example, on an ensuing refugee crisis.
- **Citizen journalist** – A citizen journalist could use social media to share firsthand accounts of the conflict to draw support to a cause or make the world aware of suffering (For example, citizen journalists who used Twitter to cover the Arab Spring).
- **Propaganda outlet** – A propaganda outlet for a regime waging a war may spread lies and disinformation to demonize their opponent and to shore up support at home (or at least hide the truth and quash dissent).

Closing Thoughts

When considering media intent, pay attention to the context of the reporting, the type of story and coverage you see, and the news outlets themselves. A certain type of news story can receive very different coverage across different media outlets. Recognizing these differences in purpose and intent is a key part of evaluating media more generally.

Activity: Assessing Media Intent

Tabloid or News (or both)

The Daily Beast and Buzzfeed are examples of outlets blending entertainment and tabloid styles with more serious news. This can be good for business because it increases engagement and offers something for everyone.

Daily Beast

Explore the site, run a quick search on the site's reputation, and jot down observations.

Observations:

Bias and purpose – The Daily Beast describes itself as a "high-end tabloid," which gets at that blend of entertainment and news.

Audience – The language used is often humorous or tapped into internet slang and seems to appeal to a more left-leaning audience.

Creators – The Daily Beast has won awards and features professional journalists.

Funders – This outlet has publicly available information about its funding and also offers subscriptions.

Be aware that this type of outlet — one that blends entertainment, gossip, humor, and news — can lean toward clickbait or more dramatic hot takes on issues to entertain while it informs.



News Conglomerate

Numerous factors, including the popularity of internet outlets, have put a financial strain on local news outlets. Newspapers have lost subscribers and TV news stations have lost audience members, causing many of them to go out of business. In the United States, telecom conglomerates and hedge funds have purchased and reorganized struggling local TV outlets and newspapers to make a profit by substituting centrally produced content for locally produced reporting.

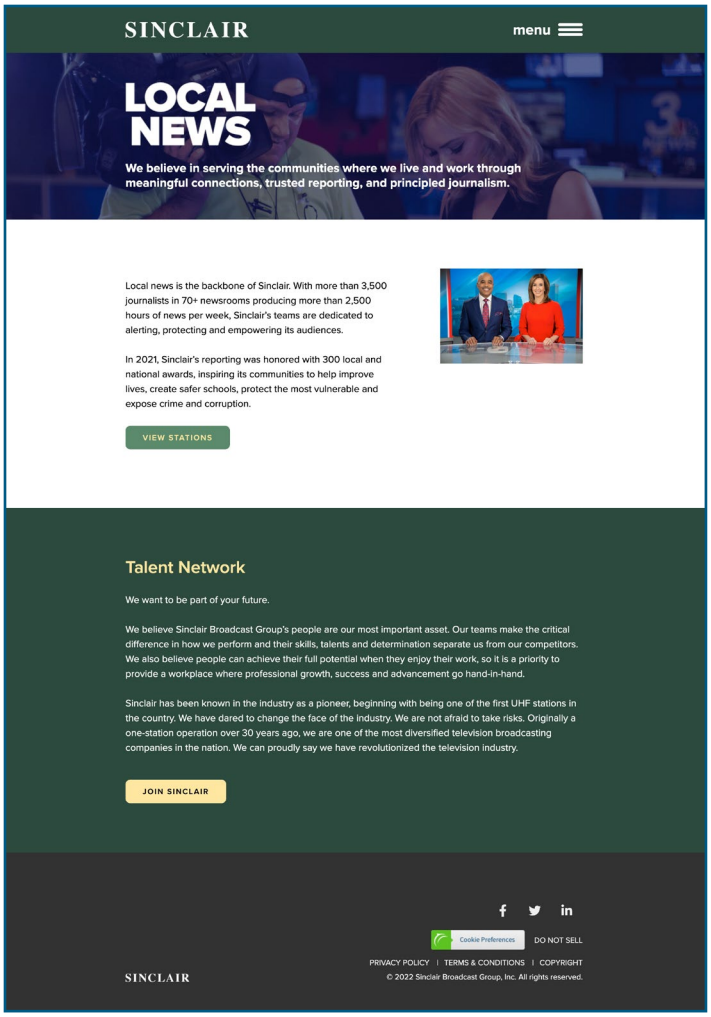
Do some research on Sinclair Broadcast Group and jot down observations:

Sinclair Broadcast Group (Nasdaq: SBGI)

Online research reveals that Sinclair has some red flags, including skewed coverage, biased content, and obscured identity.

Coverage and bias – In 2018, political scientists Gregory J. Martin and Joshua McCrain found that stations bought by Sinclair increased programming devoted to coverage of national politics while decreasing coverage of local affairs. These scholars also found that the ideological tone of the Sinclair-acquired stations shifted significantly following the acquisition. Researchers did not find that increasing national political coverage and shifting ideological tone expanded the stations' market share.

Audience and purpose – Sinclair has apparently bought up local news outlets to spread and normalize its content by presenting it in the guise of a trusted local news outlet. Its purpose may be to unwittingly expose this audience to certain kinds of ideas.



Sinclair is a vast media corporation that controls hundreds of local news outlets; an ordinary viewer may need to learn if a telecom conglomerate in Maryland controls their local station. This issue of obscured or false identity crops up a lot online (for example, as a news story that is really an ad, an allegedly informative article that is propaganda, or a Twitter account that is actually a bot).

News as Entertainment

There has been a rise in satirical news shows — such as The Daily Show or Last Week Tonight with Jon Oliver — that both make fun of political figures and share serious news.

The Daily Show

Do some research and jot down your observations.

We've now entered a somewhat murky area of conflating entertainment and news. You might have noticed that if you search for The Daily Show, you get hits for both a YouTube channel and Comedy Central's website — a signal that we are starting to stretch the definition of news.

Bias and purpose – The Daily Show has repeatedly and publicly expressed itself as a satirical and entertainment show, not a news show. Its goal is to point out the flaws in politics and in more traditional cable and broadcast news outlets.

Audience – The Daily Show (and its various iterations) attracts a younger audience, and many of them use it as their primary news show. Despite what The Daily Show says, its audience has often accepted it as news and, in their view, as more informative than actual news outlets.

Creators and funders – The Daily Show is run by comedians and is funded the way a TV show on a network normally is — with ads.

The popularity of satirical news shows points to a noteworthy dynamic: news outlets using entertainment techniques to draw an audience, and entertainment shows presenting the news in a humorous, albeit often informative, way — though often from a particular political viewpoint.



Additional Areas for Exploration

Here are some other examples to consider as you refine your skills in analyzing media intent.

- **State-funded media –** Many countries have a national broadcasting company, such as the CBC in Canada or NHK in Japan. It can be interesting to compare these outlets — and their funding, audiences, and practices — with state-run, propaganda-pushing outlets such as Russia Today.
- **Individual content creators –** Many of us have favorite independent podcasts, Twitter accounts, or individual blog accounts that share interesting news and stories. Don't forget to research their funding models, too.

Being aware of media intent can help you better engage with and make decisions about the media around you.



Testing Your Evaluation Skills

Now, try out your evaluation skills on the following:

- A news outlet you regularly follow
- A news outlet you do not regularly follow
- A social media account or podcast you follow

Apply the following questions to each of your sources you review:

1. What is its bias?
2. What is the purpose and goal of the outlet?
3. Who is the target audience?
4. Who is responsible for the content produced by the outlet?
5. How is this outlet funded?

After you have analyzed your selected outlets, reflect on what you have discovered. Did anything surprise you? Did you notice any trends or patterns?

Conclusion

Intent – just as outlets themselves — can be complex and ever-evolving. Ultimately, news media should be accurate, if nothing else.

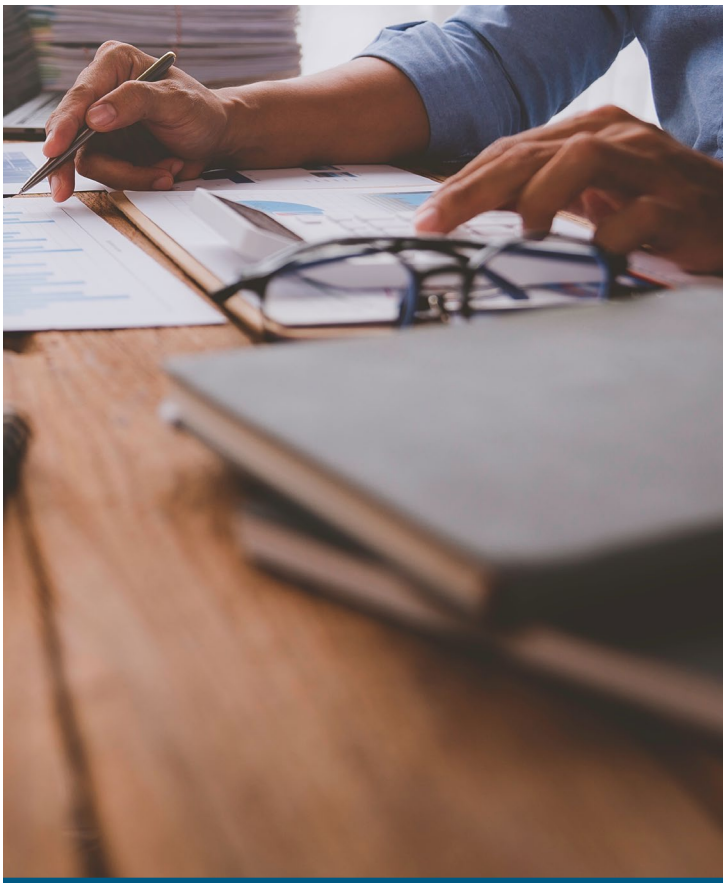
Here are some final considerations as you continue to develop your media analysis and evaluation skills:

- **Read laterally.** Intent doesn't exist in a vacuum, so check your outlet's possible motives.
- **Recognize bias.** Bias isn't inherently bad, but understanding bias helps you understand intent.
- **Be wary of what you aren't seeing.** Any attempts to conceal or mislead should spark scrutiny.
- **Remember news takes many forms.** Be aware of how the "news" label is used and how it can be abused or misappropriated by outlets pushing propaganda or disinformation.

Closing Assessment

How would you describe bias now?

Reflect on the news media you consume and follow. Has the content we explored in this module given you new insights or a different understanding of the news media you are consuming?



1. **How do you define bias?**

2. **What is an echo chamber?**

   A. An online forum where commenters argue with one another

   B. A media environment where views and opinions are continually reinforced

   C. A media source that discusses only one topic

   D. A public social media platform with lively discussion

3. **Which of the following questions is not relevant in identifying bias in media?**

   A. Does this platform lean one way or another on the topic being discussed?

   B. What sort of opinion or viewpoint does this platform express?

   C. Is this platform more than a year old?

   D. Is this platform trying to hide or conceal anything?

4. **How might a media source attempt to bias an audience? Select all that apply:**

   A. The producer uses hyperbolic language.

   B. The content contains multiple quotes.

   C. The content omits details that undermine the preferred narrative.

   D. The tone of the content is emotional.

5. **Which is not important when considering media intent?**

   A. Bias and purpose

   B. Audience

   C. Creators and funding

   D. Subject topic



Resources

Glossary

- **Bias** – An inclination or prejudice for or against something
- **Lateral reading** – Going outside a source to verify its information and claims

Learn More

Many fact-checking sites provide profiles of different news outlets to help you learn more about the outlet's history, background, reputation, and funding. One long-running example is the site Media Bias/Fact Check: *mediabiasfactcheck.com*

Module 3:
Interpreting Media Messages

Introduction

As we explored in Module 2, media come in a wide range of forms and encompass a wide range of viewpoints, intents, and goals. Media messages can make us laugh or cry. They can anger us, inspire us, influence our decisions and actions, and teach us new skills.

The techniques that content creators use to elicit these responses fall under the umbrella of rhetoric: essentially, the power of words to accomplish different goals, whether to enlighten an audience or to incite an angry mob. So, if you are wondering why a certain piece of media made you mad, or encouraged you to make a purchase, or swayed your vote, it pays to understand rhetoric.

Whether you're watching a news broadcast, reading an article, or scrolling through social media, the intent and goal of an author, the way in which an idea is presented, and the medium all work together to create messages.

In this module, we will learn about different media-analysis techniques to build on what we have learned in Modules 1 and 2. Rather than passively consuming media, we will learn how to analyze and employ critical thinking to become more aware of the message behind the message, so to speak.

For an overview of the following chapter, please watch The Carter Center's video for Module 3: Interpreting Media Messages found here.

Outcomes

In this module, you will learn how to do the following:

- Identify and explore rhetorical strategies and trends in media messages
- Explore strategies for contextualizing and analyzing different media messages
- Unpack and examine the concepts of media frames



Preliminary Assessment

Think of a time you persuaded someone to do something. Perhaps you convinced someone to do you a favor or to agree with your side in an argument. How did you go about persuading them?

1. **What is a media frame?**
   - A. A logo or brand for a media outlet
   - B. The way a story is packaged and presented to an audience
   - C. The way visuals are presented in media
   - D. Another way of talking about bias
2. **Which of the following is not a common component of media framing?**
   - A. Defining a problem
   - B. Providing a historical background
   - C. Making a moral judgment about the cause of a problem
   - D. Proposing a solution
3. **Which rhetorical strategy appeals to the logic or reason of the audience?**
   - A. Ergos
   - B. Pathos
   - C. Logos
   - D. Ethos
4. **Which of these macro-level media frames could not apply to a story about the municipal fire department's expansion?**
   - A. Policy story
   - B. Horse race story
   - C. Social frame
   - D. Conjecture story
5. **Using the language of "illegal alien" instead of "undocumented migrant" is an example of:**
   - A. Creative license
   - B. Micro-level framing
   - C. Ethos
   - D. Medium message conflict

Media Messages
Overview

As we have seen in Modules 1 and 2, media never exist in a vacuum. From print stories to broadcast news to social media posts to true crime podcasts, all kinds of media are shaped by factors like politics, history, individual intents, audience reactions, and funding.

Media messages are also influenced by the platform through which they are delivered. The 2019 Notre Dame de Paris fire received worldwide coverage. And different platforms all conveyed different messages about the unfolding event. A long-form magazine article provided in-depth history, context, and reflections on the impact of the fire; video footage shared sights and sounds of the disaster; photographs conveyed the shock and sadness of Parisians who gathered to watch the blaze; and tweets shared real-time updates from people at the scene. All of these media tools covered the story differently, giving audiences a variety of ways to view and understand the unfolding events.

The communication tools and media platforms available to us play a huge role in shaping media messages, influencing both how an author conveys ideas and how an audience receives and interprets them. Let's look at three major concepts that shape media messages: mediums (or tools), frames, and rhetorical strategies. In other words, the where, why, and how of media messages.

Mediums and Messages

"The medium is the message." In coining that famous phrase in 1964, media theorist Marshall McLuhan was saying that the medium — the tool used to communicate a message — influenced the message itself. In other words, it is impossible to separate the meaning of a message from the tool used to communicate it.

Audiences can experience and understand events differently through various media, as we saw with the Notre Dame cathedral fire. In other examples, Twitter helped the Arab Spring emerge as it did; the televised Watergate hearings influenced how Americans processed the unfolding scandal; and centuries ago, new, easy-to-print pamphlets shaped the way the French Revolution developed.

People have always had to adapt to new tools, changing how they communicate — and often what they communicate — as a result. Meanwhile, audiences developed different expectations based on the tool. Consider an example from the movie world: Silent film actors relied on exaggerated facial expressions and dramatic gestures to convey meaning to an audience. Then came the "talkies," and audience's ideas of what good acting was changed.

In our multimedia era, some important questions arise. **What happens when a platform is used in an unintended way? How do we make sense of messages on social media, which started as places to connect with friends and became de facto news platforms? And what happens when news media outlets, for instance, start using multiple tools to convey their message?** Newspapers are now on social media, including video-based platforms like YouTube and TikTok; TV shows like Dateline (a true crime investigation series in America) have launched podcasts; and individual anchors from network news programs have their own individual Twitter accounts.

The medium influences the message. **But do media outlets that use different tools convey totally different meanings across platforms?** It depends on the framing.

Media Frames

Media framing refers to the ways in which messages are presented and interpretations are encouraged or discouraged. A media frame can draw our attention to certain topics and shape how we think about them by encouraging us to view them through a certain lens.

Our ability to recognize and interpret media framing techniques is a powerful tool in critically evaluating and analyzing media.

Frames address four major points for audiences:

- **Defining a problem** – What is the issue here?
- **Diagnosing the cause of a problem** – What factors caused this problem?
- **Making a moral judgment about the cause of a problem** – What is the implication of all of this?
- **Proposing a solution** – How do we fix this problem?

Macro- and Micro-Level Frames

A macro-level frame emphasizes a major idea. Here are some examples of macro frames:

Natural frame	A physical occurrence caused an event (For example, faulty wiring caused a structural fire)
Social frame	Social factors caused an event (For example, insufficient fire-safety regulations led to the faulty wiring, which caused the structural fire)
Conflict story	The focus is on conflict in a situation (For example, two political parties are fighting over legislation)
Horse race story	A story about winners and losers (For example, candidate A is beating candidate B in an election)
Conjecture story	A story speculating about future events (For example, if Candidate A wins the election, here is what might happen)
Reality check story	A story that fact-checks or responds to something (For example, an article fact-checking statements Candidate A made)
Personality story	A story that focuses on the personality of an individual (For example, a profile of Candidate B with personal details and anecdotes)
Policy story	A story that focuses on the impact of a policy (For example, an overview of Candidate B's policy proposals and what impact they might have on taxes)

You can also see differences in frames across geographic lines. Local outlets might cover a natural disaster differently than outlets in another country. Likewise, certain groups or issues may be portrayed differently in one location than in another, reflecting different cultural stereotypes or assumptions.

Micro-level frames operate at the sentence or word level, for instance "undocumented worker" versus "illegal alien" or "war" versus "special operation." These loaded terms can influence how an audience perceives an issue.

Media Frames in a Multimedia World

Media frames intersect with a media outlet's overall brand. For example, The New York Times airs commercials emphasizing its skill and importance as a space for investigative journalism. That branding — or framing — can influence how audiences interpret The New York Times content across a variety of platforms.

Because media tools and framing can work together and also disrupt each other, it's important to consider them both. A snappy tweet can remove nuance from a complex policy issue, regardless of framing efforts, if the reader doesn't dive deeper. Conversely, an author might attempt to humanize the dry medium of a chart by including an analogy or anecdote in an accompanying story.

Rhetorical Strategies and Appeals

When we consider media frames at the micro level, rhetorical strategies often become apparent. As we noted at the start of this module, rhetorical strategies are the ways we can use language to convey a certain message to or elicit a certain response from an audience. There are a few common rhetorical strategies that can be helpful to consider when you are analyzing media.

- **Ethos, or an appeal to authority** – Using the author's expertise or credibility to win the audience's trust
- **Logos, or an appeal to logic** – Using research or statistics to appeal to an audience's sense of reason
- **Pathos, or an appeal to emotion** – Eliciting an emotional response from the audience through word choice, stories, or sentence structure

When considering rhetorical appeals, keep an eye out for repetition, word choice, tone, and the order in which ideas are introduced.

Analyzing Media Messages

Analyzing media messages is the next step after analyzing media sources and media intent. Here are some questions to consider:

Medium (the communication tool or platform used to deliver the message to an audience)

- What is the tool being used?
- Are there restrictions to this tool or certain stylistic conventions that this tool follows?
- How does this tool shape the information presented?

Frame (how media messages are packaged and presented to an audience)

- How is this issue or story presented?
- What problem is being identified and what solutions are being proposed?
- What does the author want me to focus on or think about?

Rhetorical strategy (language choices that shape messages and convey meaning)

- What language or stylistic choices is the author making?
- What sort of appeal is being made?
- How does the sort of appeal influence the message?

Intentionally or not, media tools, framing techniques, and rhetorical strategies work in concert to shape messages and influence how an audience might perceive stories and issues. Being able to recognize those influences is an empowering step on our media literacy journey.



Practical Application: Assessing Media Messages

Let's look at some examples of the different facets of media messages.

Situation 1: Differences in Medium

Changes in media tools have had significant effects on debates between political candidates.

- **Newspaper coverage:** Back in the day, if you didn't attend a debate, you had to read about it in the newspaper. A written news story might include quotes, a recap of events, and some color commentary (e.g., a candidate "appeared flustered").
- **Radio coverage:** Radio allowed audiences to hear the debate live, taking in every word that candidates said as well as audience applause and vocal responses.
- **Television coverage:** Television brought even more of a debate into people's homes, allowing them to view the setting, the candidates' appearance and performance, and audiences' facial reactions to candidates' statements.
- **Online coverage:** In our multimedia world, picking up our devices can sometimes feels like turning on a firehose. Now you can watch the debate live on YouTube, read audience comments on Twitter as the debate unfolds, check news outlets' real-time fact-checking, and post your thoughts to TikTok.

Situation 2: Differences in Frame

The frequent, intense debates around climate change have employed many different frames over the years.

- **Teen Vogue:** Historically, this outlet has covered issues such as pop culture, fashion, and relationships. Recently, it has made room for political and social issues that are increasingly important to teen readers. For a climate change story, the magazine sometimes uses a conjecture frame, covering issues its young audience might have to deal with in the future. Writers might also use a story frame, presenting accounts from teen activists as a way to connect with the audience.
- **Science Focus:** This magazine features articles from scientists who study climate change. Writers might use a policy frame, delving into the impact of policy decisions, or a reality-check frame that debunks misinformation, provides readers with facts and data, and perhaps even persuades the audience with its reporting.
- **Mother Jones:** This magazine includes a range of stories, often longer narratives on major social and cultural issues. Writers might use a personality frame, sharing stories of individuals affected by climate change, or a wrongdoing frame that examines a scandal involving an oil company. With either choice, the outlet might use frames not just to tell compelling stories, but also to express a moral judgment about climate change — or inspire readers to develop their own.

Situation 3: Differences in Rhetorical Strategies

Political and marketing campaigns are gold mines for exploring rhetorical strategies. Both use language and appeals (such as ethos, pathos, and logos) to connect with audiences across different platforms.

Let's look at a political campaign:

- **Humor:** Candidates can use funny commercials or slogans to humanize themselves and connect with voters. You're more likely to think fondly of someone who makes you laugh, after all.
- **Community ties:** Rhetorical strategies don't necessarily have to involve language. Candidates might choose certain clothing items or event settings to connect with a particular community.
- **Attacks:** A time-honored tradition is the political attack ad in which a candidate denigrates their opponent's ideas and track record to appear to be the better choice.
- **Image:** Political ads frequently use both verbal and visual shorthand to communicate that the candidate is in line with the audience's values, whether they're shown on a farm, holding a baby, or signing important-looking papers.

Now, consider rhetorical strategies in the context of a marketing campaign:

- **Humor:** To make a brand or product appealing or memorable, ads commonly use jokes, funny scenarios, celebrity comedians, or catchy songs.
- **Community ties:** Brands or products might emphasize causes they support or communities they benefit to appeal to buyers with similar values.
- **Attacks:** Ads might imply that a competitor's product doesn't work as effectively so you'll stick with the "*better*" brand.
- **Image:** Ads often emphasize an aspirational lifestyle, whether tempting adventurous buyers with scenes of people driving a rugged SUV through the mountains or appealing to parents by talking about a van's safety features.

Situation 4: Medium, Frames, and Rhetorical Strategies

Finally, let's consider an example that weaves all these considerations together: a journalist crafting a Twitter thread about a story they wrote.

- **Medium:** In this case, multiple platforms are working together. The journalist wrote an opinion piece for a major newspaper about proposed legislation. In a Twitter thread, they link to the op-ed, share points from it, and reply to comments. The full op-ed provides nuance and detail, while the accompanying Twitter thread provides main points plus comments and reactions from others.
- **Frame:** The op-ed in the newspaper might use a policy frame to dissect the legislation and a history frame that considers the context. Meanwhile, the Twitter thread might provide more conjecture or reaction frames as the journalist responds to comments.
- **Rhetorical strategy:** The language and word choices in the article versus the Twitter thread might differ, with the latter using more casual language. Likewise, the journalist might appeal to logic in the op-ed while on Twitter they use an appeal to authority or their own personal credibility.

Media messages fluctuate across platforms, and by analyzing them, we can gain deeper insight into how platforms, outlets, and tools work together in our complex media ecosystems.

Activity: Assessing Media Messages

For this activity, we will refer to some of the sources we explored previously to consider their media messages. As we revisit these previous examples, consider the following:

What medium is being used?

What frame is being used?

What rhetorical appeals or strategies are apparent?

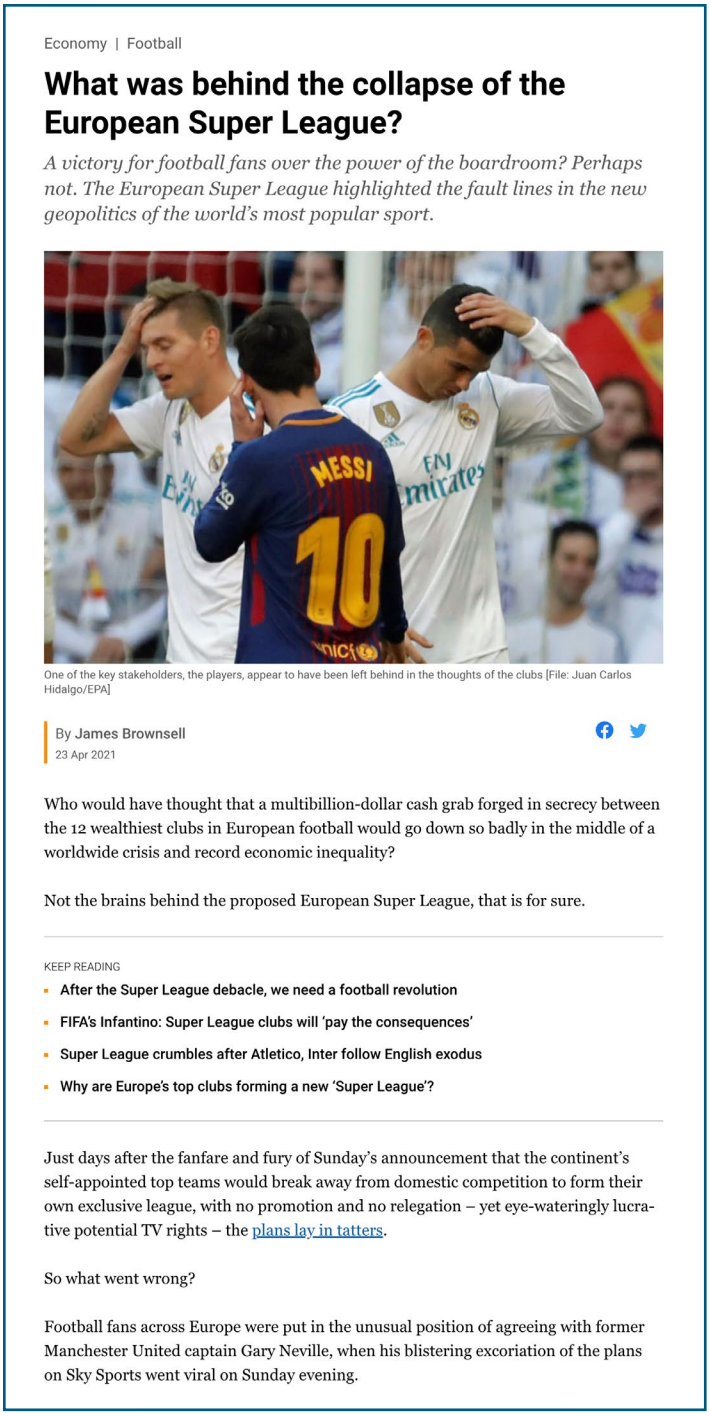
Al Jazeera Coverage of the European Football Super League

The Daily Beast and Buzzfeed are examples of outlets blending entertainment and tabloid styles with more serious news. This can be good for business because it increases engagement and offers something for everyone.

Original Link
Archive Link

Write down your observations.

- **Medium** – This is an article in an online news outlet, which leaves space for extended discussions, detail, and quotes and thoughts from others on the issue. This medium also allows for links to related content and external sources.
- **Frame** – The writer uses a policy frame to unpack the issues and social framing to consider the underlying social, cultural, and financial causes of this event.
- **Rhetorical appeals** – This article includes humorous language and is written in an approachable style, and the author is upfront with his opinions.



Economy | Football

What was behind the collapse of the European Super League?

A victory for football fans over the power of the boardroom? Perhaps not. The European Super League highlighted the fault lines in the new geopolitics of the world's most popular sport.

One of the key stakeholders, the players, appear to have been left behind in the thoughts of the clubs [File: Juan Carlos Hidalgo/EPA]

By James Brownsell
23 Apr 2021

Who would have thought that a multibillion-dollar cash grab forged in secrecy between the 12 wealthiest clubs in European football would go down so badly in the middle of a worldwide crisis and record economic inequality?

Not the brains behind the proposed European Super League, that is for sure.

KEEP READING

- After the Super League debacle, we need a football revolution
- FIFA's Infantino: Super League clubs will 'pay the consequences'
- Super League crumbles after Atletico, Inter follow English exodus
- Why are Europe's top clubs forming a new 'Super League'?

Just days after the fanfare and fury of Sunday's announcement that the continent's self-appointed top teams would break away from domestic competition to form their own exclusive league, with no promotion and no relegation – yet eye-wateringly lucrative potential TV rights – the plans lay in tatters.

So what went wrong?

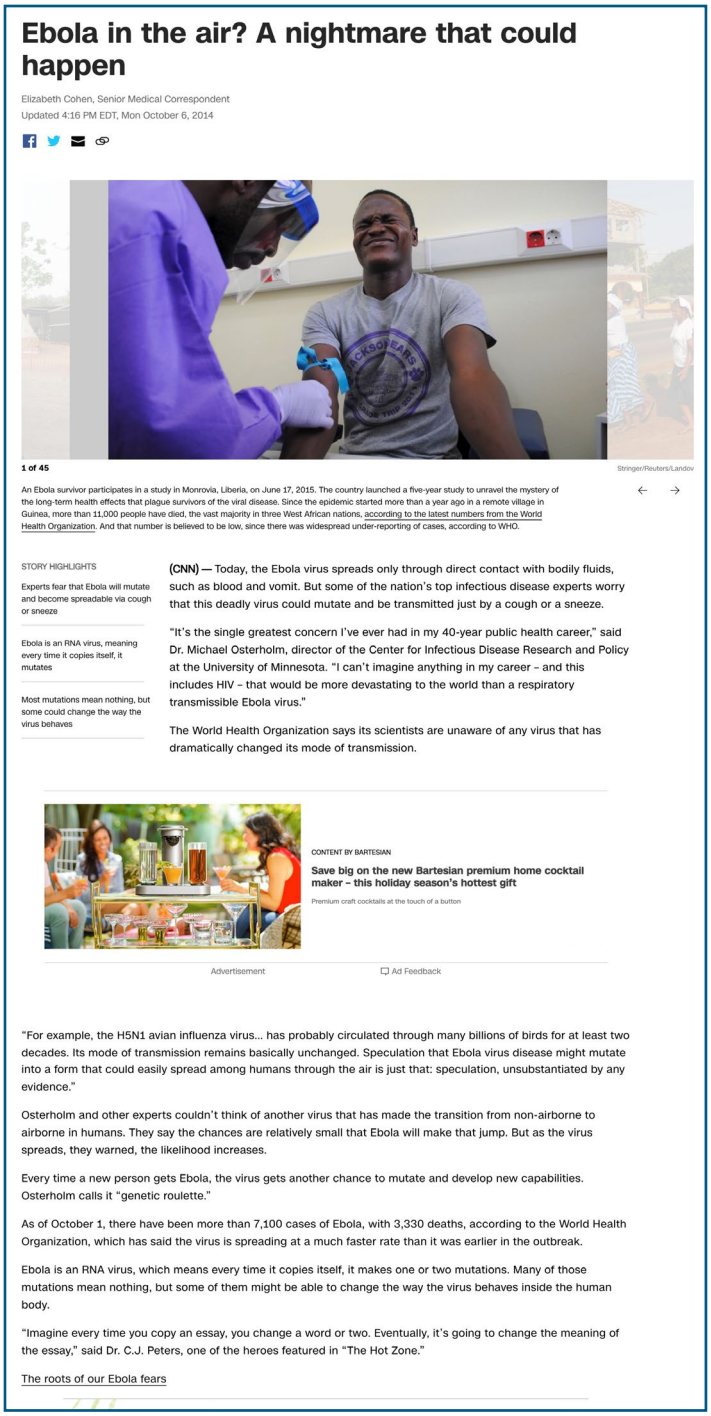
Football fans across Europe were put in the unusual position of agreeing with former Manchester United captain Gary Neville, when his blistering excoriation of the plans on Sky Sports went viral on Sunday evening.

Ebola Coverage

Original link
Archive link

Write down your observations.

- **Medium** – Like our first example, this article appears in an online news outlet, which leaves space for extended discussions, details, and thoughts from others on the issue. Because CNN is a television news outlet that also has a website for written news stories, many articles on the website feature embedded video.
- **Frame** – This article uses a conjecture frame to consider a scary possibility for the evolution of the Ebola virus. It also, oddly enough, uses a reality check frame as quoted experts debunk or at least challenge the fearful proposition presented in the article's title.
- **Rhetorical appeals** – This article uses an interesting blend of emotional appeals (with upsetting visuals and a scary conjecture) alongside more logical appeals (by quoting scientists and sharing facts).



Ebola in the air? A nightmare that could happen

Elizabeth Cohen, Senior Medical Correspondent
Updated 4:16 PM EDT, Mon October 6, 2014

1 of 45

Stringer/Reuters/Landov

An Ebola survivor participates in a study in Monrovia, Liberia, on June 17, 2015. The country launched a five-year study to unravel the mystery of the long-term health effects that plague survivors of the viral disease. Since the epidemic started more than a year ago in a remote village in Guinea, more than 11,000 people have died, the vast majority in three West African nations, according to the latest numbers from the World Health Organization. And that number is believed to be low, since there was widespread under-reporting of cases, according to WHO.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Experts fear that Ebola will mutate and become spreadable via cough or sneeze

Ebola is an RNA virus, meaning every time it copies itself, it mutates

Most mutations mean nothing, but some could change the way the virus behaves

(CNN) — Today, the Ebola virus spreads only through direct contact with bodily fluids, such as blood and vomit. But some of the nation's top infectious disease experts worry that this deadly virus could mutate and be transmitted just by a cough or a sneeze.

"It's the single greatest concern I've ever had in my 40-year public health career," said Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. "I can't imagine anything in my career – and this includes HIV – that would be more devastating to the world than a respiratory transmissible Ebola virus."

The World Health Organization says its scientists are unaware of any virus that has dramatically changed its mode of transmission.

CONTENT BY BARTESIAN

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"For example, the H5N1 avian influenza virus... has probably circulated through many billions of birds for at least two decades. Its mode of transmission remains basically unchanged. Speculation that Ebola virus disease might mutate into a form that could easily spread among humans through the air is just that: speculation, unsubstantiated by any evidence."

Osterholm and other experts couldn't think of another virus that has made the transition from non-airborne to airborne in humans. They say the chances are relatively small that Ebola will make that jump. But as the virus spreads, they warned, the likelihood increases.

Every time a new person gets Ebola, the virus gets another chance to mutate and develop new capabilities. Osterholm calls it "genetic roulette."

As of October 1, there have been more than 7,100 cases of Ebola, with 3,330 deaths, according to the World Health Organization, which has said the virus is spreading at a much faster rate than it was earlier in the outbreak.

Ebola is an RNA virus, which means every time it copies itself, it makes one or two mutations. Many of those mutations mean nothing, but some of them might be able to change the way the virus behaves inside the human body.

"Imagine every time you copy an essay, you change a word or two. Eventually, it's going to change the meaning of the essay," said Dr. C.J. Peters, one of the heroes featured in "The Hot Zone."

The roots of our Ebola fears

Testing Your Evaluation Skills



Test your skills by evaluating the following:

- Compare two different media tools and consider how different messages might emerge from them.
- Examine an issue across two different outlets to see how those outlets frame it.
- Compare the language and rhetorical strategies used in two different articles on a common issue.

Reflect on what you have noticed in your comparisons.

Did anything surprise you?
Did you notice any trends or patterns in terms of media messages?

Conclusion

Analyzing media can be a complex undertaking. But by raising your awareness, considering a few key questions, and practicing your skills, you can become both savvy and efficient at critically analyzing media. And being able to critically analyze media is an increasingly vital skill in a world where free media and democracies are facing considerable challenges.

In the next set of modules, we will delve into misinformation, including the factors contributing to its spread and the detrimental impacts it can have on civil society. We will apply the skills we covered in these modules to different forms of misinformation. But remember: It's important to critically analyze all forms of media. The practice helps you fully understand what you are seeing or hearing, unpack trends, and make informed decisions.

Here are things to look for when you critically analyze media:

- **Who or what is responsible for the media?** Consider the author and the media outlet or platform. What is their reputation? Who funds them? Do they have an agenda or goals?
- **What is being said?** Consider whether the content is factual or if it warrants further investigation.
- **What is the intent?** What is the purpose or goal of this medium ?
- **Who is the audience?** For whom was this medium created, and how might that affect its intent?
- **What is the message?** What are the main ideas being communicated?
- **What tool is being used?** How might the medium shape or influence the message?

Continue to build good habits as you develop your media analysis skills:

- **Read laterally.** Pay attention to the context. Check out the source's author and platform. Look to other sources to confirm the facts in what you're reading or to be exposed to different perspectives.
- **Note what you aren't seeing.** Whether you are having trouble investigating an outlet or you note that a source is using a rhetorical strategy to obscure its true intentions, hidden information can tell you almost as much as what's actually on the page.
- **Pay attention to your reactions.** Get into the habit of checking your reactions to media sources. This can give you insight into the appeals or rhetorical strategies the source is using to trigger certain responses.
- **Take your time.** Speed can hinder your ability to fully analyze a media source. Slow down, reflect on what you are seeing, ask questions, and check out the source to determine whether it's credible.

Closing Assessment

Reflect on the news media you consume and follow. Do they tend to use certain frames when discussing issues?





1. **What is a media frame?**

   A. A logo or brand for a media outlet

   B. The way a story is packaged and presented to an audience

   C. The way visuals are presented in media

   D. Another way of talking about bias

2. **Which of the following is not a common component of media framing?**

   A. Defining a problem

   B. Providing a historical background

   C. Making a moral judgment about the cause of a problem

   D. Proposing a solution

3. **Which rhetorical strategy appeals to the logic or reason of the audience?**

   A. Ergos

   B. Pathos

   C. Logos

   D. Ethos

4. **Which of the macro media frames could not apply to a story about the municipal fire department's expansion?**

   A. Policy story

   B. Horse race story

   C. Social frame

   D. Conjecture story

5. **Using the language of "illegal alien" instead of "undocumented migrant" is an example of:**

   A. Creative license

   B. Micro level framing

   C. Ethos

   D. Medium message conflict

Resources

Glossary

- **Rhetorical strategy** – Language choices designed to provoke a desired response in an audience
- **Rhetorical appeal** – Certain kinds of persuasive techniques
- **Medium** – A communication tool or platform, such as a type of social media or audiovisual technology
- **Media frame** – A way in which a story is packaged and presented that can encourage an audience to adopt a certain interpretation of an issue or topic

Learn More

Media Frames:

Visit NewsFrames to learn more about how framing works in news media and find additional studies and resources for exploring media frames.

Media Framing and Ethics Module created by Dr. Dean Mundy and hosted at Penn State's Arthur W. Page Center.

Explore this visual guide to rhetorical strategies and logical fallacies, which covers different rhetorical appeals.

Citations

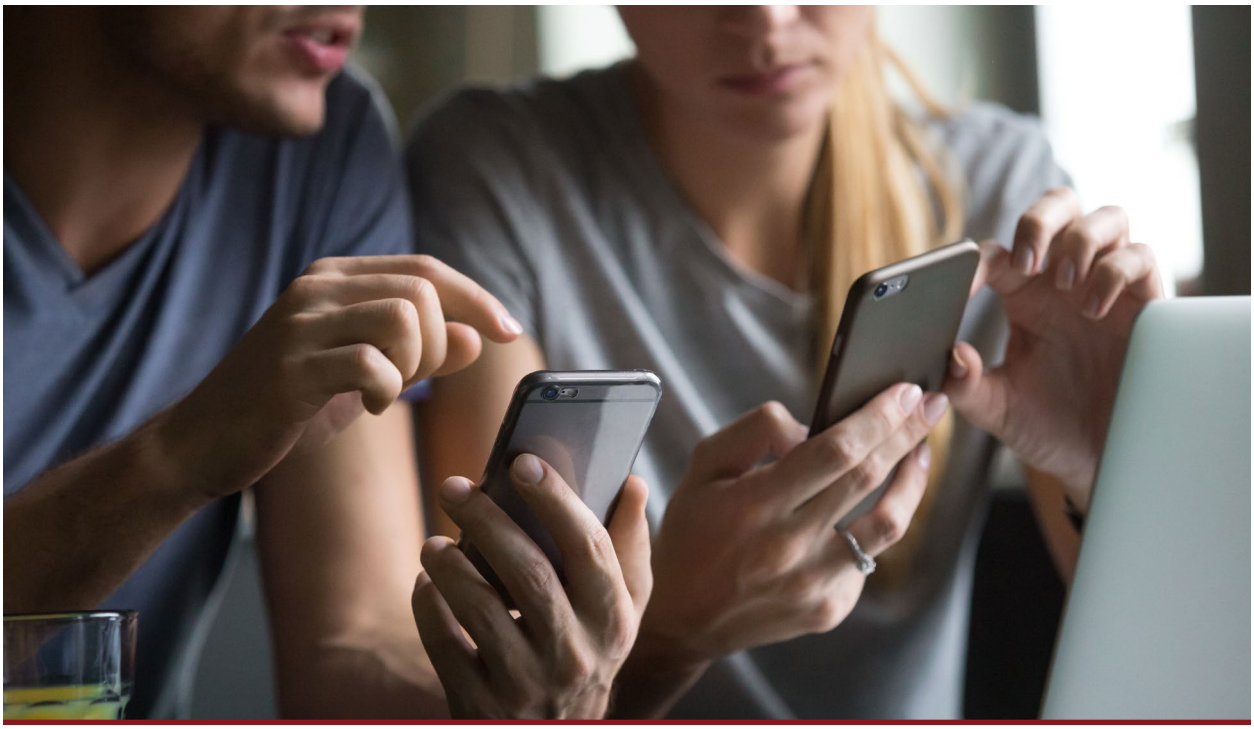
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Unit 2
Introduction

"Misinformation takes some common forms. It tends to appear around topics that are complex, uncertain, or polarizing, such as scientific concepts, government processes, or deeply held personal beliefs."



Media messages and sources can vary wildly in terms of how they are presented and framed, how they are consumed, how they spread, and what their goals are. And not all media are created equal. Some media sources are highly credible and informative, while others are inaccurate or even manipulative. A type of media that is increasingly important to understand is misinformation, or information that is not accurate.

Misinformation takes some common forms. It tends to appear around complex, uncertain, or polarizing topics, such as scientific concepts, government processes, or deeply held personal beliefs.

The consequences of misinformation are considerable: It erodes distrust in institutions, disrupts communication and the ability to debate issues, increases polarization, and even exacerbates public health crises. Misinformation can be spread unwittingly, but those who seek to manipulate, disrupt, or control their audiences can use misinformation for their own benefit. Mis- and disinformation are often used by autocracies to suppress free and open media and civic engagement, and sow discord abroad in established democracies.

In these next modules, we will explore misinformation and manipulative media content through the lenses of psychology, emotion, and technology; examine common themes and topics; and study scenarios where we see this type of content. We'll learn more about its structures, trends, and causes, and we will learn how to tackle its challenges using **digital information training**.

Module 4:
Understanding How the Brain Processes Information

Introduction

All kinds of media have some sort of driving purpose and, as we saw in Module 3, can be framed and presented in different ways to encourage certain interpretations.

Misinformation in particular can be extremely emotionally charged and manipulative, with goals that are often obscure, or — in the case of disinformation — deliberately concealed. To better understand how this content works, it helps to consider the ways our brains process information and the psychological and emotional factors that shape how media work.

For an overview of the following chapter, please watch The Carter Center's video for Module 4: Understanding How the Brain Processes Information found here.

Outcomes

In this module, you will learn how to do the following:

- Explore the psychology of how we process and recall information
- Consider the psychological and emotional factors that shape and inform misinformation and how it spreads
- Experiment with using mindfulness principles and other reflective techniques to navigate the psychological and emotional challenges of misinformation and our media ecosystems



Preliminary Assessment

Think of a time you fell for a rumor or bit of gossip that turned out to be untrue. What happened in this situation? Why did you initially believe it, and how did you feel when you learned more details that disproved it?

1. **What is metacognition?**

   A. The ability to reflect and critically think about your own thought processes

   B. When you can quickly analyze a story and understand its intent

   C. When you understand the interconnectivity of several pieces of media

   D. The ability to identify misinformation

2. **What is shallow processing?**

   A. When misinformation is read and quickly dismissed

   B. A psychological skill that is triggered by fallacies

   C. When your brain reactively, intuitively, and impulsively processes information

   D. When you skim a piece of media instead of reading it thoroughly

3. **If someone continues to be influenced by a piece of misinformation after learning of its faults, they are experiencing:**

   A. Intentional Spreading

   B. High Impact Narratives

   C. The Misinformation Effect

   D. Continued Impact Effect

4. **What is the difference between disinformation and misinformation?**

   A. Disinformation is spread on social media.

   B. Misinformation and disinformation are the same.

   C. Disinformation means it was intentional.

   D. Misinformation is spread only by state actors.

5. **Heuristics are _____. (Select all that apply.)**

   A. Often the cause of misinformation's spread

   B. A shortcut in information processing relying on cues and recognition

   C. Unable to be mitigated by human cognition

   D. A natural component of human development

How the Brain Processes Information

Overview

Our brains do an incredible job of processing information, recalling details, and helping us make decisions and articulate ideas. But when we're tired, stressed, or distracted, those jobs become a little more challenging. Our hyperconnected world can make things even harder for our brains. Information overload has a real effect on how we process information. Our media environments, particularly social media, encourage skim reading and snap judgments, foster distraction, shorten attention spans, and leave us feeling overwhelmed.

Essentially, our brains process information in two main ways:

Deeper processing that is more reflective, analytical, and methodical and allows us to better understand meaning.

Shallow processing that is more reactive, intuitive, and impulsive, and sparks quicker responses.

Our brains are also busy processing sensory data from the world around us, often subconsciously.

We connect, store, and recall information in different ways, thanks to the way memory works:

- **Short-term memory** makes needed information available for a short period of time. For example, if someone gives you directions to a nearby shop, you can store that information in your short-term memory and then forget it once you don't need it.
- **Long-term memory** helps us recall important information and events over a long period of time. Maybe you're recalling information about performing work tasks or dancing at your wedding.
- **Sensory memory** is not consciously controlled and helps store sensory input from experiences.



Our memory storage and retrieval can be tricky, however. Our memory of an event can be altered or disrupted by things that happen after it — a concept in psychology known as the **misinformation effect.**

Studies have shown that if we learn and remember something incorrectly, it can be difficult to dislodge that information or replace it with corrected information. Through a phenomenon known as the **continued influence effect,** a person can continue to recall or be influenced by misinformation even after they learn the truth. Though researchers continue to study the continued influence effect, it appears that repetition and more detailed corrections can help people process the new information and successfully recall it later.

There are plenty of pitfalls when it comes to how we process information. We forget things; we misremember them; we look for shortcuts to help us deal with information overload and end up using more shallow processing techniques.

Misinformation Factors and Considerations

- **Intent –** Sometimes someone deliberately spreads content to deceive, manipulate, or cause harm — often using psychological techniques to fool audiences. As we've said, this is typically referred to as disinformation. Other times, someone shares misinformation because they genuinely believe it to be true. They aren't intentionally trying to deceive people.
- **Impact –** Not all mis- and disinformation causes significant harm or tricks many people. If, for instance, someone takes a satirical story seriously and shares it on social media as a "real" story, they may get corrected and feel embarrassed, but overall, the impact is low. But some misinformation has major impact, tricking a large number of people and causing serious disruption or harm. During the early months of the COVID-19 outbreak, false information about the virus' origin sparked an uptick anti-Asian rhetoric. Incorrect information led to increased incidents of hate speech and hate crimes targeting people of Asian descent in the United States.
- **Identity –** A person's worldview, beliefs, and values can make false information narratives more or less appealing to them. If a false information narrative aligns with a person's identity, they're more likely to believe it and less likely to give up that belief even when faced with facts.



Self-Reflection and Metacognition

All of us are prone to faulty reasoning, shallow information processing, being deceived, and even lying to ourselves. But not all misinformation lands the same way for everyone, and not all manipulation tactics have an equal effect. Pausing to take stock, perform some self-reflection, and ask questions can help you distinguish credible from noncredible sources and avoid spreading or falling for bogus information.

The ability to perform this sort of critical thinking and self-reflection is termed **metacognition.** Essentially, metacognition is an awareness of your own thinking and information-processing abilities and tendencies. It involves not just passively or subconsciously processing information but paying attention to patterns and thought processes.

Let's take a deeper dive into the psychological tactics and factors that drive misinformation.

The Psychology of Misinformation

The following factors are often present when misinformation arises:

- Complex or confusing topic
- Uncertainty
- Heightened emotions
- Media platforms that encourage shallow processing
- Emotional and psychological appeals tricks

Manipulation tactics help misinformation thrive. These include:

- **Fallacies (or distraction techniques)** – Fallacies can derail an argument and make dialogue and debate challenging. Pay attention if someone throws out distracting details, irrelevant information, or nonsensical conclusions — you might be seeing fallacies at work.
- **Easy answers to complex problems** – Simplistic answers are appealing because they're easier to process than ambiguity and nuance, which require deeper processing.
- **Community appeals** – Misinformation often tells a compelling tale and can make people feel like they belong, which is something everyone wants.
- **Appeals to values** – This tactic is connected to emotional appeals and allows misinformation to take root as it connects to someone's beliefs, identity, and sense of self.
- **Scapegoating** – Blaming another group is an easy solution for complicated issues. It fosters community through an "us vs. them" mentality and exploits existing grievances, inequalities, and other social issues.
- **Heightened emotions** – Misinformation often plays upon our fear, anger, anxiety, and sadness — when your emotions are aroused, it's harder to think clearly.
- **Repetition** – Misinformation relies on repeated slogans, phrases, or ideas (which are rhetorical strategies and media framing techniques) to reinforce an idea. The more you hear something, the more likely it is to stick in your brain.

These tactics can lead to faulty information processing, hasty judgments, reactive behavior, and poor understanding of issues.

Critical Evaluation Skills

Recognizing these psychological techniques will help you spot misinformation — and deal with it.

Pay attention to appeals, frames, and purpose, and always ask what's going on behind the scenes — who created the media? What are its goals?

Be aware of manipulation techniques, including emotional language, suspect reasoning, and distractions or fallacies.

Lean in to metacognition. Consider your emotional reactions, reflect on your own thought processes, and be alert to topics you don't know much about.

When in doubt, pause before engaging (e.g., firing off that furious tweet). None of us are immune to manipulation. Taking time to reflect and ask questions can prevent you from spreading misinformation.

Recall the emotional and psychological manipulation techniques you learned so you can be aware of content's effects and why people might believe misinformation narratives.



Practical Application:
Misinformation and Psychological Techniques

These examples can shed light on how our brains process information — and how certain psychological tactics can disrupt those processes.

Technique or Appeal	Examples	Psychological Tactics
Fallacies	On Twitter, trolls distract from information about the war in Ukraine by employing "whataboutism" — talking about other wars as a way to derail the original discussion. A politician might use what are called ad hominem attacks to undermine an opponent, attacking their marriage rather than discussing their actual political stance or track record.	Fallacies take advantage of how easily we can be distracted while processing information to derail a conversation with unrelated or irrelevant information.
Easy Answers	Health and diet content often provides easy solutions to complicated mental and physical health issues. Claims that the introduction of 5G networks led to the spread of COVID-19 or that it was a hoax presented a single answer for worldwide uncertainty and fear. Speculation about what a government office is or is not accomplishing — and why — often relies on oversimplified versions of events and a lack of knowledge about how government functions.	We tend to use shortcuts instead of performing deeper processing. "Heuristics," or the framework that allows us to use some sort of cue or indicator to make a quick judgment, can lead us to jump to incorrect conclusions.
Community and Identity	The trucker convoys that took off across the U.S. and Canada in 2022 illustrate how individuals form community ties and identity around misinformation — in this case regarding COVID policies and border controls.	The psychological tactics that often appear around identity and community appeals are known as pluralistic ignorance — the phenomenon of thinking your view is held by the majority — and confirmation bias, where you believe information that reinforces your views. Both tactics can leave someone feeling confident in their erroneous views.
Appeals to Values and Beliefs	Studies have shown that anti-vaxxers tend to value the ideas of freedom and purity, which sheds light into why anti-vaccine sentiments appeal to them.	Confirmation bias can also come into play if something "feels" right or if something easily slots into your existing worldview and identity.
Scapegoating	Anti-Asian statements and violence throughout the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the use of scapegoating, or blaming a group for a complex problem. Scapegoating also comes into play in antisemitism, xenophobia, and racism.	Psychological tactics used here include stereotyping, which functions as a sort of mental shortcut and a form of shallow processing.
Emotional Appeals and Manipulation	The diet industry has played upon our insecurities for decades to sell unproven weight loss treatments. In countries with a dominant religion, accusations of blasphemy can stir up violence against those who belong to other religions.	Emotional appeals rely on confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance, which is a negative feeling we experience when something or someone contradicts our views. Both can result in someone holding firmer to their beliefs.
Repetition	During the Brexit referendum, those in favor of leaving the European Union repeated lies about the future of the National Health Service. Repeated scapegoating, lies, and hate speech aimed at the Rohingya Muslim community in Myanmar led to genocide. At rallies, Nazis used repetition, scapegoating, heightened emotions, and identity appeals to spew falsehoods and brainwash the audience.	The psychological tactic that underpins repetition is known as fluency, or the ease of processing information. When someone has heard something before, it seems legitimate. Fluency is a helpful way for our brain to quickly process information and make a decision. But this tendency goes awry when it comes to misinformation. Just because we hear something repeatedly doesn't make it true.

Activity: Assessing Psychological and Manipulation Tactics

Understanding the psychological technique or emotional appeals used in misinformation can lessen its impact. Getting into the habit of critically analyzing media and reflecting on your own reactions provides a good foundation for processing information that might be emotionally intense.

As we look at these examples of misinformation, try to identify manipulation tactics, appeals, and psychological techniques they use.

Situation 1: Wartime Propaganda and Disinformation Campaigns

First, we will consider some examples of propaganda and false information narratives surrounding Russia's invasion and the war in Ukraine. Explore the overview blog post and sites with collected links *here.*

What manipulation tactics can you identify? Do any trends emerge?

Write down your observations:

Here are some trends and techniques you might have spotted:

- **False equivalency or whataboutism –** Commenters compared this war to other wars to derail discussions or create a distraction.
- **Stereotyping and scapegoating –** Russian propaganda has been spewing negative commentary about Ukraine, accusing its citizens of being Nazis, for example.
- **Repetition and flooding media platforms with junk –** Russian disinformation tactics often rely on repeating bogus information. The idea isn't necessarily to convince people this bogus information is true, but to sow doubt.
- **Victim shaming –** Narratives that blame NATO, the EU, and Ukraine for somehow causing the invasion to happen have flourished.
- **Confirmation bias –** Individuals who are already inclined to think positively about Russia and/or negatively about the European Union, NATO, etc. believe that such false information narratives reinforce their views.

Situation 2: Immigration and Anti-Refugee Stories

Let's look at some examples of mis- and disinformation campaigns aimed at migrant and minority groups in the European Union. Check out this report, which provides examples and overviews of false information narratives aimed at migrants and minority groups in the European Union:

www.europarl.europa.eu

What manipulation tactics can you identify? Do any trends emerge?

Write down your observations:

Here are some trends and techniques you might have spotted:

- **Stereotyping and othering** – Sharing negative information, blaming these groups for social problems, and casting them as somehow "other" or not part of the community builds an us vs. them mentality.
- **Framing techniques with negative associations** – Stories and examples often mention minority groups in the context of crime, disease, and other negative topics.
- **Value and identity appeals** – Writers cast migrant or minority groups as a threat to a certain audience's values, identity, and culture, and use dehumanizing language to reduce the ability to relate to another group (For example, "illegal aliens" or "terrorists").
- **Easy answers and mental shortcuts** – Scapegoating was used to blame migrants and minority groups for complicated problems such as high unemployment.

Situation 3: COVID Cure Myths

Finally, let's consider some examples of misinformation trends surrounding COVID-19. Explore this resource, which highlights some major COVID-19 myths and misinformation centering on treatments and cures:

Special reports

What manipulation tactics can you identify? Do any trends emerge?

Write down your observations:

Here are some trends and techniques you might have spotted:

- **Heuristics** – Mental shortcuts and cues for quick judgments often crop up in fake-cure narratives. Many of the proposed "cures" have some prior positive associations (like Vitamin C), which increases the likelihood that people will think they work.
- **Confirmation bias** – People inclined to distrust vaccines or science reporting might double down on their views because of these narratives.
- **Pluralistic ignorance** – Narratives giving people a sense that "everyone" views COVID the way they do builds their confidence in their ideas.
- **Heightened emotions and easy answers** – The pandemic was scary; it involved a lot of change and uncertainty. These misinformation examples often used appealingly simple and definite "answers," such as the 5G conspiracy, to help relieve anxiety.

Testing Your Evaluation Skills



Test your skills by evaluating the following:

- Look at content covering a contentious and polarizing topic on social media platforms or other media sites.

Consider the following questions:

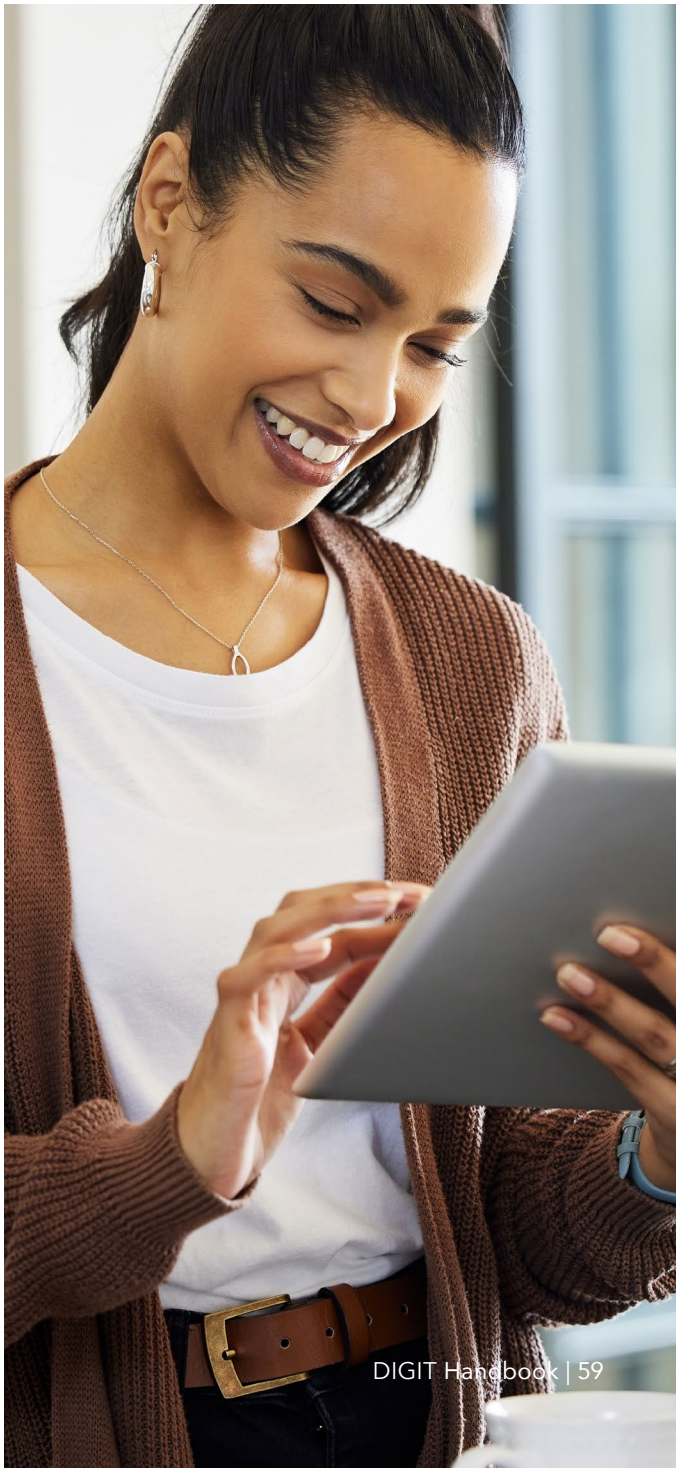
1. How is the topic presented and discussed on different media platforms?
2. What trends or differences are you spotting across platforms?
3. What appeals, frames, or psychological techniques are being used?
4. Are you seeing examples of misinformation?

Reflect on what you have noticed in your comparisons and write down your observations:

Conclusion

Our brains use a variety of techniques to process information, but those techniques can work against us when it comes to misinformation, which thrives on emotional and psychologically manipulative tactics. Authoritarian regimes often rely heavily on mis- and disinformation, shutting down free press, limiting access to information, and disseminating propaganda to control their audiences.

Recognizing how our brains process information — and how mis- and disinformation play on those processes — helps us identify suspicious content. It's important to think critically about not only what we're reading but also how we're reacting to it in order to avoid being fooled.



Closing Assessment

Reflect on ways to be more self-aware and mindful when consuming media. How can you use reflection and critical thinking to avoid hasty reactions or falling prey to manipulation?

1. **What is metacognition?**

   A. The ability to reflect and critically think about your own thought processes

   B. When you can quickly analyze a story and understand its intent

   C. When you understand the interconnectivity of several pieces of media

   D. The ability to identify misinformation

2. **What is shallow processing?**

   A. When misinformation is read and quickly dismissed

   B. A psychological skill that is triggered by fallacies

   C. When your brain reactively, intuitively, and impulsively processes information

   D. When you skim a piece of media instead of reading it thoroughly

3. **If someone continues to be influenced by a piece of misinformation after learning of its faults, they are experiencing:**

   A. Intentional Spreading

   B. High Impact Narratives

   C. The Misinformation Effect

   D. Continued Impact Effect

4. **What is the difference between disinformation and misinformation?**

   A. Disinformation is spread on social media.

   B. Misinformation and disinformation are the same.

   C. Disinformation means it was intentional.

   D. Misinformation is spread only by state actors.

5. **Heuristics are _____. (Select all that apply.)**

   A. Often the cause for the spread of misinformation

   B. A shortcut in information processing relying on cues and recognition

   C. Unable to be mitigated by human cognition

   D. A natural component of human development

Resources

Glossary

- **Misinformation** – Inaccurate or noncredible information that is spread unintentionally. Because it's not always possible to know the intent of someone who shares inaccurate information, this handbook often uses the term "misinformation" to refer to all false information narratives.
- **Disinformation** – Inaccurate information that is deliberately spread with an intent to cause harm
- **Fallacy** – A misleading or unsound argument, a failure in reasoning
- **Misinformation Effect** – A memory phenomenon that can result in someone not recalling an event accurately because of things that happen after the initial event
- **Continued Influence Effect** – The ability of a piece of misinformation to continue to influence someone, even after they've received the correct information
- **Deeper processing** – Engaging in critical thinking and reflection as we consider information
- **Shallow processing** – Relying on intuition and making quick judgments as we consider information
- **Short-term memory** – Allows for quick recall of information that's immediately needed (and often soon forgotten)
- **Long-term memory** – Involves recalling important knowledge, tasks, or events from the past
- **Sensory memory** – The brain's way of processing sensory input
- **Heuristics** – A shortcut in information processing that relies on cues and recognition
- **Confirmation bias** – Believing information because it aligns with your existing views
- **Pluralistic ignorance** – The belief that most people hold the same view as you do, even when your opinion is not held by the majority
- **Fluency** – The ease of processing information; often relates to repetition
- **Cognitive dissonance** – The negative experience someone can have when new information challenges their prior beliefs or views; can cause someone to double down on existing views.
- **Metacognition** – An awareness of your own thought process, responses, or patterns in processing information

Learn More

Many websites track and collect examples of mis- and disinformation. Here are just a few:

Atlantic Council's Disinformation Hub
EU Disinfo Lab
First Draft News

These sites offer detailed information about rhetorical strategies and logical fallacies:

Site 1
Site 2

Citations

Ecker, U. K., et al. (2022). The psychological drivers of misinformation belief and its resistance to correction. Nature Reviews Psychology, 1(1), 13-29.

Shane, T. (2020). The psychology of misinformation: Why we're vulnerable. First Draft News.

Van Hoose, N.A. (2020). Educational Psychology. Hudson Valley Communication College.

Module 5:
Understanding How Online Media Shapes Perceptions

Introduction

As we've seen, a variety of factors influence media messages, and studying the environments where we encounter, consume, create, and share media is increasingly important. Our media environments are now largely online. The internet has shifted not just how we consume media, but how we communicate with one another. It has created spaces for both media innovation and the spread of mis- and disinformation. Understanding the nature of the internet itself, and how it is structured, is essential for helping us analyze media messages, our perception of media, and our perception of the world around us.

Outcomes

In this module, you will learn how to:

- Unpack how algorithms work and how the internet is structured
- Understand how social media affects our brains
- Apply a deeper understanding of how our media ecosystems and the internet function as you evaluate sources and media

For an overview of the following chapter, please watch The Carter Center's video for Module 5: Understanding How Online Media Shapes Perceptions found here.



Preliminary Assessment

Consider your own social media use. What sites do you visit on a regular basis, and how do you feel about them? Do you have fun using social media sites, or does it feel like a stressful obligation?

1. What is an algorithm?

A. A set of rules or a program computers follow to perform a task or solve a problem

B. A computer program that decides what content is popular

C. A computer program used only by social media sites

D. A completely automatic process that computers naturally do

2. What is artificial intelligence?

A. A process where a person programs a computer to do something

B. Another way of referring to robots

C. Intelligence demonstrated by machines as opposed to humans or animals

D. A way of gathering data

3. What are some things algorithms can do online? (Select all that apply.)

A. Determine what search results you see in a search engine

B. Personalize content in search engines and social media sites

C. Influence the ads you see online

D. Ensure your social media posts are popular

4. Can algorithms be biased?

A. Yes

B. No

C. Don't know

4. What are some strategies you can use to search for information online? (Select all that apply.)

A. Try different search engines to compare results

B. Use different search terms to get a broader array of results

C. Try using a private browser to get away from personalized content

D. Just look through your social media feeds to see what people are saying

5. On a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being not confident and 5 being completely confident), how confident do you feel in your ability to search for information online?

1 2 3 4 5

Understanding Online Media

Overview

How the Internet Is Structured

We live out much of our lives on the internet — to the point that the distinction between being "online" and "offline" is increasingly blurred. We communicate with others via social media platforms and messaging tools such as text or email; we conduct business online; we consume most of our media and news online; and we use search engines to find information and make decisions, from what restaurant to visit to what doctor to see. And the internet has infiltrated much of our older communication tools, giving us "smart" phones, televisions, thermostats — even toasters. We often take for granted that the internet is omnipresent, but how was it created? How do people shape it?

The internet is structured largely by **algorithms,** which are essentially programs that tell a computer to do something. When you enter a keyword into a search engine, an algorithm helps to determine what results you see. Advances in **artificial intelligence, or AI,** — which is essentially machine learning — also help shape the internet. Programs that learn from our inputs, such as voice-activated assistants like Alexa or Siri, are examples of AI at work. Any site or platform that gives you personalized or predicted content puts algorithms and AI to work in the background to curate the content you see.

But algorithms and AI don't just appear; they are created by people and can reflect the biases of those people, which complicates assumptions about how the internet works. Here are some things to consider as we think about how and what we see online:

- **Bias** – The companies that create the platforms and internet-connected devices we use every day tend to be dominated by certain groups (largely men and often white men), and their views and assumptions can affect their creations. Studies in recent years have looked at how algorithms reflect and reinforce biases and prejudices, from job-application screening tools that automatically prioritize certain candidates to facial-recognition tools that work better for certain skin tones.
- **Proprietary technology** – Most of us don't know how the algorithms that power the internet work, partly because most of the sites we use are run by private corporations that do not make this information fully public.
- **Filter bubbles and echo chambers** – Algorithms can create filter bubbles and echo chambers, spaces that expose you to personalized content that continually reinforces your views and can influence how you perceive the world. And because this personalization happens seamlessly in the background, we often don't even know we're in a bubble.

"The internet is structured largely by **algorithms,** which are essentially programs that tell a computer to do something."

- **Predictions and privacy** – Thanks to algorithms and AI, the decision-making processes about what people see are increasingly automated. Consider online ads. Instead of buying ads on a particular website, a company can target a certain demographic and let a program determine what ads would be most appealing to them. But to achieve this level of personalization and prediction, algorithms and AI need inputs from users, which requires gathering a lot of data about us. The data these systems and programs collect and how it is used are usually not fully apparent to users.
- **Monetization** – Ultimately, social media platforms are businesses, and profit levels depend on user engagement. Algorithms are thus designed to frontload content that will resonate with particular users based on engagement history, demographics, search histories, and other data. In the context of misinformation, users who are vulnerable or predisposed to certain narratives may repeatedly see misleading content because they tend to click on it.

People create and often unwittingly fuel algorithms and AI, which means the experiences we have online are far from neutral. In fact, these experiences can have a huge influence on how we perceive and understand the world around us.

How Social Media Works

Social media has a number of features that influence how we use the platform, how we communicate, and how we perceive media. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- **Social media addiction** – The addictive nature of social media sites is no joke. Studies have shown that many platforms borrow techniques from the world of gambling to keep people engaged. For example, "likes" on social media posts can trigger the release of dopamine, which fuels the effort to get more likes and attention, and chase that emotional high.
- **Trends and speed** – Social media companies design their products around speed, constantly feeding us new and easy-to-digest content so we don't get bored and move on to something else. It encourages skimming, quick reactions, and short attention spans — none of which lends itself to media literacy.
- **Shifts in content** – Nearly every social media platform has evolved from a space for personal engagement to a de facto news outlet. News stories are often complex and require us to reflect in order to truly understand what's happening. The social media model, however, discourages audiences from spending much time analyzing what they're seeing.
- **Consuming news online** – In addition to posing challenges for individual consumers of news, social media and the internet also encourage media outlets themselves to adapt and shape content to the medium, influencing the way news stories are presented and framed.

Personalized content has a lot of benefits. For example, you can search for a store and instantly get local results, reviews, and maps. And the internet and social media have opened new avenues for individuals to share their ideas, be creative, and advocate for causes, which is especially important in environments where traditional media outlets are subject to government restrictions or function as propaganda outlets.

But these benefits can backfire: Echo chambers give us a false sense of the world around us and make it easier to believe misinformation; social media sites make it easier to bully others and sow division; and algorithms and AI can reflect and reinforce their creators' biases. And the speed and reach of online information mean that certain strains of misinformation can quickly create dangerous real-life situations.

Digital Informaiton and Web Literacy

Being media literate also means being web literate, or being aware of and able to analyze the ways the internet affects our experiences with media and information. To analyze media, we need to understand the technologies at their root. This is especially complicated because when we analyze online media, we are often using the same tools and technologies (such as search engines) that are serving up content to us.

Strategies are available to enhance your media-analysis skills:

- **Get out of your own bubble.** We just learned the internet is set up in a way that personalizes content and creates filter bubbles and echo chambers, so burst your bubble. Try using a different search engine or a private browser, which should offer results that aren't tailored to you. If you use Google frequently, for example, it has stored information about your interests, preferences, and location based on your search history. To get a sense of other kinds of results or how other search engine algorithms might work, you could try Bing, open an incognito window, or seek out a search engine that takes a different approach. Duck Duck Go, for example, does not track or store any information about users.
- **Experiment with search terms and keywords.** Sometimes, a small tweak in the words you use can make a major difference in search results. Try a synonym or use Booleans, which act as shortcuts and provide instructions to a search engine.

Search technique	Why use this technique	How to use this technique
Narrow your results	You might get an overwhelming number of results that make it hard to find or understand the information you're seeking.	Add more search terms to better describe what you are seeking. Search engines generally try to match all the words in your search. The more you provide, the fewer results you tend to get. (**Example:** Add a specific country to your search for "parliamentary elections.")
Broaden your results	You might end up with results that are too localized or too narrow in scope.	Remove search terms, refer to your search in more general terms, or try another search engine to avoid overly personalized content. (**Example:** Try to delocalize voter turnout information by using a private browser.)
Find related results	You want to learn more about a topic.	The psychological tactics that often appear around identity and community appeals are known as pluralistic ignorance — the phenomenon of thinking your view is held by the majority — and confirmation bias, where you believe information that reinforces your views. Both tactics can leave someone feeling confident in their erroneous views.
Structure your search with Booleans (words)	You want another way to refine your search.	AND tells a search engine to find all the words you indicated. (**Example:** Polar AND bears will give you results only on polar bears.) OR gives you different combinations of results containing any of the words in your search. (**Example:** Searching polar OR bear will give you results about polar environments, bears in general, and polar bears.) NOT will exclude a term from your results. (**Example:** Bears NOT polar will give you information on all kinds of bears except polar bears.)
Structure your search with Booleans (symbols)	You want another way to refine your search and tell the search engine to perform a certain task.	Use quotation marks to indicate you want results about an exact phrase or name. Use an asterisk to find a variety of options that contain your original word. (**Example:** Search child* to find results for child, children, childhood, etc.)



Sometimes you just need to run a quick search. But understanding these more advanced search techniques can help you in situations where you need to conduct more in-depth research. And this knowledge can give you better insight into how search engines work and why you might be seeing — or not seeing — certain kinds of results.

It is a good idea to spend some extra time analyzing media sources in the following types of situations:

- You're trying to find information to help you make a major health or financial decision.
- News is breaking about a contentious topic, and there is a lot of uncertainty.
- You know very little about a topic a lot of people are discussing.

Analyzing media sources involves not only just thinking critically and asking questions about the media sources themselves, but also considering the platforms and technologies that fuel those media sources.

Practical Application: Online Media

Let's look at some examples of how the internet shapes our perceptions of media.

Search engines

Search engines can affect our experiences with, and perceptions of, media and information in different ways:

- **Popular content** – While search engines have proprietary algorithms to show relevant content, they tend to boost popular content, too. Something can be popular because it comes from a well-known site, has been linked to by a lot of other sites, or comes from a site that is using search engine optimization (SEO) to rank higher in search results. SEO techniques include using descriptive keywords or a memorable URL.
- **Personalized content** – Search engines use personal factors, particularly location, to show you relevant results.

Data voids

A data void exists when there is a lack of information on a topic, whether because the topic is new and quickly developing or because it is surrounded by uncertainty. Because false information narratives thrive in uncertain and stressful situations, data voids leave room for mis- and disinformation to take over the conversation.

Container collapse

This refers to the fact that online content tends to look the same regardless of its origin, or "container." Tweets, for example, look the same regardless of the credibility of their source or the validity of their content. Even more so than search engines, social media shows you content based on personalization factors and popularity (i.e., trending content on a platform). And it can be harder to distinguish the quality of the content you encounter on social media platforms, which don't necessarily prioritize distinguishing between the quality of content you see.

Going viral

While chasing a popular story isn't a new phenomenon, trending online content spreads at an unprecedented speed and scale. This can cause media outlets (and individuals) who are competing for an audience to jump on the same trend and cover the same type of story, creating an echo chamber.

Data collection and targeted content

Personalized content needs user data to work effectively. This can be a helpful way to shop for shoes, but it becomes problematic when you're looking for news. Seeing only information that's tailored to you based on what an algorithm predicts you want to see can give you a skewed view of an event. And people who produce and deliberately spread false information can use these personalization systems to manipulate audiences.

Emotional turmoil

Research has found that excessive social media usage can cause a variety of emotional issues for users, including depression, anxiety, and isolation. Social media sites also make it easy to "doomscroll," or endlessly skim posts and get upset about the news. The more emotional someone is feeling, the harder it can be to step back and critically analyze the content they are viewing.

Becoming more aware of how the internet is structured and why we see the things we do online makes us savvier media consumers who are capable of critically analyzing what we see.

Activity: Filter Bubble Activity

One way to explore online media and understand how algorithms work is to experiment with different ways of accessing content and dodging algorithms. Browse online media using different search engines, private browsers, and different platforms to see how these factors affect the content you see; this is a great way to explore media framing, as well.

Let's consider a hypothetical example before you test your own skills.

The Carter Center is based in Atlanta, Georgia, in the United States. If we were to search for information on an upcoming election on a search engine like Google, which has our profile information and knows where we are located, we'd get tailored, local results mixed in with more general news on elections. For example, we might see autocomplete suggestions from Google about Georgia or a local county, election stories from local news outlets, ads from local candidates, and hits from local government agencies. If we ran the same search on a private browser that did not know our location, we'd see more general information and national election news.

Testing Your Evaluation Skills

Now, try to disrupt your own personalized online experience as you research one of the following:

- A local news story, organization, or event
- A personal interest, such as a hobby or a favorite team
- A contentious or debated issue

Search for these topics with the following approaches:

- Use your most frequently used search engine.
- Use a search engine you do not use frequently.
- Use one or two social media sites you use often. (Try to select a site where you tend to consume more news and another site you use for more personal interests or social connections.)

Consider the following questions:

- Do your search results change from search engine to search engine? If so, what changes do you notice?
- Why do you think you are seeing these particular results?
- Based on your observations, what sort of assumptions do you think these platforms (search engines and social media) are making about you?

Reflect on what you have noticed in your comparisons and write down your observations:

Conclusion

The internet dominates and shapes how we experience, create, and share media. Understanding that process is a crucial aspect of media literacy and analysis. Our online experiences shape both our perceptions of media and our perceptions of the world — often without our even being aware of it, thanks to algorithms and AI. Learning how these technologies and media experiences work helps us critically analyze media and be more alert to situations where mis- and disinformation may be prevalent.

Closing Assessment

Based on what we've explored in this module, are there any changes you might like to make to your social media and search habits?



1. **What is an algorithm?**

   A. A set of rules or a program computers follow to perform a task or solve a problem

   B. A computer program that decides what content is popular

   C. A computer program used only by social media sites

   D. A completely automatic process that computers naturally do

2. **What is artificial intelligence?**

   A. A process where a person programs a computer to do something

   B. Another way of referring to robots

   C. Intelligence demonstrated by machines as opposed to humans or animals

   D. A way of gathering data

3. **What are some things algorithms can do online? (Select all that apply.)**

   A. Determine what search results you see in a search engine

   B. Personalize content in search engines and social media sites

   C. Influence the ads you see online

   D. Ensure your social media posts are popular

4. **Can algorithms be biased?**

   A. Yes

   B. No

   C. Don't know

5. **What are some strategies you can use to search for information online? (Select all that apply.)**

   A. Try different search engines to compare results

   B. Use different search terms to get a broader array of results

   C. Try using a private browser to get away from personalized content

   D. Just look through your social media feeds to see what people are saying

6. **On a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being not confident and 5 being completely confident), how confident do you feel in your ability to search for information online?**

   1 2 3 4 5

Resources

Glossary

- **Algorithm** – A process or procedure that a computer follows to solve a problem
- **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** – Machine learning, as opposed to learning by humans; increasingly used by "smart" technology and online tools to automate processes
- **Container collapse** – A term that refers to the fact that online content tends to look the same regardless of its origin, or "container," making it difficult for an individual to distinguish between kinds of content
- **Filter bubble** – An online space consisting of curated, personalized content; often people are unaware they're in one or how it's created
- **Echo chamber** – An online space where curated, personalized content reinforces a person's existing views
- **Data void** – A lack of findable information on a topic — which typically occurs when a news story is developing or when situations are uncertain — that leaves room for the spread of misinformation
- **Search engine optimization** – A set of techniques to boost a website's popularity and ranking in search results, including using descriptive keywords, links, or memorable URLs

Learn More

Many organizations and sites can help you explore how the internet functions and learn to avoid possible pitfalls, including:

Data and Society releases reports on aspects of online information, including issues with algorithms, data-collection and privacy concerns, and AI.

Stanford Internet Observatory produces reports on issues like mis- and disinformation campaigns and online safety issues.

Freedom House explores issues of online freedom and democracy around the world.

Mozilla Foundation produces reports on internet freedom and security, with an increased focus on smart technology and AI.

Citations

Golebiewski, M., and Boyd, D. (2019). Data voids: Where Missing Data Can Easily Be Exploited. Available *here*

Buhler, Amy G., et al. "Container Collapse and the Information Remix: Students' Evaluations of Scientific Research Recast in Scholarly vs. Popular Sources." Proceedings of the ACRL Conference 2019, 2019. Available *here*

Module 6:
Spotting Potentially False and Misleading Information

Introduction

Media literacy involves the ability to understand and navigate our complex media and information landscapes. While media literacy can help you manage and explore any kind of information, it is particularly valuable when it comes to identifying and dealing with the challenges posed by misinformation, which has unique features.

For an overview of the following chapter, please watch The Carter Center's video for Module 6: Spotting Potentially False and Misleading Information found here.

Outcomes

In this module, you will learn how to do the following:

- Consider and recognize different types of misinformation
- Unpack trends that drive and shape common forms of mis- and disinformation
- Use digital informaiton skills and a deeper awareness of misinformation trends to identify false and misleading information



Preliminary Assessment

Where do you think misinformation is particularly common? Are there certain types of media spaces where misinformation is more likely to emerge? Are there specific topics that misinformation is more likely to focus on?

1. **When is lateral reading useful?**

   A. When you are trying to fact-check and evaluate information

   B. When you are trying to closely read and analyze a text

   C. When you are trying to read something for leisure or fun

   D. None of the above

2. **Where does misinformation commonly appear? (Select all that apply.)**

   A. Political campaign ads

   B. Media coverage of a war or conflict

   C. Film reviews

   D. Social media discussions of scientific discoveries

3. **What is a conspiracy theory?**

   A. A belief in something that is false

   B. An explanation for a difficult event or problem that identifies and blames an external threat

   C. A belief in aliens or paranormal phenomena

   D. A system of thinking that is hostile to any sort of authority figure

4. **When might a conspiracy theory emerge?**

   A. After a traumatic or upsetting event

   B. When a confusing event lacks a clear explanation

   C. When a story is complex or difficult to grasp

   D. All of the above

5. **What strategies will help you spot misinformation? (Select all that apply.)**

   A. Go with your gut instinct as to whether the information feels true

   B. Check outside the source you are looking at for additional context and confirmation of the facts

   C. Pay attention to trends and make note of situations where misinformation commonly appears

   D. Get information from a few sources that you find trustworthy and ignore what else is being said

6. **How confident do you feel in your ability to spot misleading or false misinformation, with 1 being not confident and 5 being very confident?**

   1 2 3 4 5

Our Current Era of Misinformation

Overview

As long as it's been around, misinformation has been format-agnostic, adapting to whatever communication medium emerges. It may not be a new challenge, but it is a growing area of concern because new forms of media make it easier for misinformation to take root, which has serious implications for the health of free media, civil society, political discourse, and democracies around the world.

Though mediums change, misinformation itself tends to revolve around consistent themes, topics, and trends.

It thrives on sowing uncertainty and fostering discord, which makes it hard to find credible and accurate information, much less debate and discuss them effectively. Our current misinformation age, dominated by social media and the internet, also features some unique elements that can make misinformation difficult to spot and manage.

What makes our current era of misinformation so challenging?

- **Speed** – The internet allows news to travel at unprecedented speeds, but it doesn't distinguish between true or false information. Whether true or false, all "news" can spread rapidly. Millions of people can digest a piece of misinformation before someone can fact-check it and publish a correction.
- **Scale** – While there are certainly people worldwide who have limited or no access to the internet, many of us carry personal computing devices in our pockets or have them strapped to our wrists. If it was challenging to connect and engage in previous eras, it is difficult to disengage today. That means misinformation can reach huge numbers of people and have a much larger impact.
- **Sophistication** – Misinformation is often quite sophisticated. Emerging forms of misinformation can be hard to combat, including doctored videos or images that are almost indistinguishable from real ones and disinformation campaigns that use an advanced understanding of psychology.

Features of Our Misinformation Age

Whether the topic is celebrity gossip or geopolitics, you can find some type of misleading information in nearly any format. However, misinformation most often appears around topics that are confusing, contested, or uncertain. Its appeal is often based on the fact that it provides reassurance and easy answers and plays on strong emotions, identity, and values.



Misinformation Topics

The following are some common topics around which misinformation is likely to arise.

Science	Information about scientific theories and discoveries can be confusing to the reader, especially if that information is uncertain or contested. Science prizes curiosity and discovery, which can, ironically, open the door for misinformation to appear.
Politics	Political misinformation is as old as politics itself. Emotions, deeply held convictions, and intense competition collide in politics. The competitive nature of politics — and the resulting likelihood of viewing the other side in a negative light — provides fertile ground for misleading information to spread. Sometimes it takes the form of attack ads. Other times, it's in a disparaging article that people share because it reinforces their confirmation bias against an opposing party or candidate.
Health	Health misinformation is a subset of science misinformation, but it is uniquely poised not only to spread widely, but also to cause harm. We all deal with health concerns, and the fear and uncertainty they can engender make us vulnerable to the spread of misinformation.
Finance and business	Financial misinformation preys on people's concerns about their security. Sometimes that means full-blown scams. Other times, it means misleading advice that takes advantage of people's fears and persuades them to make decisions that aren't in their best interest.
Hate speech	Misinformation that encourages prejudice against a certain group based on race, religion, sexuality, nationality, or other factors is unfortunately quite common. The root causes of these prejudices might connect to someone's values, personal identity, or fears. Regardless of the driving factor, this type of misinformation uses emotional and identity-based appeals and can find a receptive and susceptible audience willing to believe the worst about certain groups and use them as scapegoats.
Conspiracy theories	A subset of misinformation, conspiracy theories address uncertain or stressful situations by "explaining" them and casting some sort of external threat as the "enemy." Conspiracy theories, at their core, are often good stories and appeal to a receptive audience's values, identity, and emotions.
Conflicts	Events such as a long-running war or a sudden, violent terrorist attack cause heightened emotions, fear, and uncertainty. Misinformation easily spreads as people look for quick answers and a sense of security in a complex situation.

Misinformation Motivators

Having a sense of why people create and spread this type of content can help you understand how to combat it.

- **Money** – Misinformation sharers can be in it for the money. It can prove quite lucrative for people who create and spread it, whether they use it to scam people out of their money or to generate views and ad revenue.
- **Ideological factors** – Misinformation sharers are often motivated by some ideological aim, such as gaining political power and influence.
- **Organizational involvement** – Misinformation sharers sometimes belong to an organization or act on behalf of their government in a state-sponsored disinformation campaign to achieve national interests or organizational goals.
- **Sincere belief** – Misinformation sharers might genuinely believe the false information and seek to warn or help others.

Misinformation Forms

Misinformation can take an almost endless array of forms and appear on any sort of communication platform, but it usually involves the following factors:

- **Easy answers –** Misinformation often presents some sort of easy explanation to a complex issue.
- **Stressful situations –** The more stressful the situation or topic, the more likely misinformation is to make an appearance.
- **Primed to go viral –** Like a real virus, misinformation wants to reach as many people as possible, so it's typically quotable, easy to share and digest, and emotionally charged.
- **Heightened emotions –** Misinformation often draws upon and tries to elicit a strong emotional response.

Spotting False and Misleading Content

Thanks to the trifecta of speed, scale, and sophistication that modern communication technologies offer, it's difficult to rein in mis- and disinformation. Digital Information Training can help us slow the spread.

Consider the challenges we face today:

- **Emotions and psychology –** Misinformation preys on our emotions, uses psychologically manipulative techniques, and leverages our information-processing tendencies (such as a preference for more rapid, shallow processing) to mislead us.
- **Communication technologies –** Social media and the internet help misinformation spread by encouraging skim reading, rapid consumption, filter bubbles and echo chambers, intense personalization, and information overload. These behaviors make it difficult to analyze, evaluate, or process information effectively.
- **Complex media systems –** Our media systems employ framing techniques and rhetorical strategies, carry intentions, and are subject to business models and technological formats that can be tricky to unpack. When you understand these elements, you're better equipped to distinguish information that's biased but credible from content that is false or misleading.

> "...misinformation itself tends to revolve around consistent themes, topics, and trends."

We've already learned some ways to critically analyze content and media sources. Consider deploying the following techniques in situations that carry a high risk of misinformation:

- **Pause and reflect.** Dealing with emotionally charged misinformation requires you to pause and reflect on your reactions and awareness of the topic. If you are having a strong reaction or if the topic is contentious, uncertain, or complex, slow down and investigate further. If you aren't sure what you are looking at, it is better to take some time to investigate than to spread the potential misinformation further. This is especially true in breaking news situations.
- **Consider the source.** As you examine the message, look at who created and shared the content, and consider the possible intention, message, frame, and audience.
- **Read laterally.** Don't take what you see at face value. Consult other sources and search for information on the content's author, on the publication, and on the claims being made. You might quickly discover that a fact-checking site has already flagged the content or its source. Just remember that when you are reading laterally, you still need to consider the new sources you encounter. You don't want to fact-check using a bogus source by mistake.
- **Consider the content's appeal.** Think about why this content might resonate with others. Learning how to recognize appeals to emotions, identity, or values can help you better spot misinformation narratives.
- **Make note of trends.** Spotting misinformation is a skill that you can practice. Keep track of techniques used, appeals made, or topics covered.

Practical Application:

Types of Misleading and False Content

As we look at how misleading content can appear, we should consider the appeal of these narratives.

Science topics

Name a scientific topic, and you can probably find some misinformation surrounding it. Climate change is ripe for misinformation. Climate-change denial misinformation might appeal to those who don't want to believe it exists because it is stressful, scary, and might require them to reevaluate parts of their identity, career, or behavior. Climate-change doom narratives, on the other hand, might emotionally appeal to those who believe climate change is real but feel hopeless and don't want to be on the hook to do anything about it.

Politics

The grievance narrative of the stolen election, which extends nearly as far back as democracy itself, appeals to a group that lost an election and does not want to admit defeat. Rather than accept reality, they find an easy explanation and someone to blame for the result. Variations of this type of misinformation appear in false claims that massive numbers of people are illegally voting (or that dead people are voting), or around wars (For example, the infamous "stab in the back" myth the Nazis propagated to target Jews and explain why they lost World War I).

Health

False and misleading diet narratives target people's emotions, worries, and insecurities about their physical appearance and often manifest as scam products. This type of misinformation can feed into narratives around beauty standards that vary by culture and location, showing how misinformation can adapt to different audiences and contexts by drawing upon certain shared fears and anxieties.

Finance and business

The investment scam has a long history. It relies on psychologically manipulative techniques like false scarcity — presenting an opportunity as limited or exclusive to encourage you to jump on board quickly. In other words, they push the targets to engage in shallow processing.

Hate speech

This type of content stirs up anger toward a certain group of people. Refugees or immigrants are often set up as scapegoats, becoming the focal point for fears, grievances, and concerns another group might experience around issues like job opportunities. This content can also be more insidious; instead of taking the form of overt anger, it can take a more "reasonable" tone. For example, an article might purport to be about immigration policy, but the messaging, framing, and subtext are all aimed at denigrating immigrants. Digital information skills can help you see below a misleading surface.

Conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories contain nearly every trend and feature of misinformation, including easy answers and scapegoating. One long-running type of conspiracy theory centers on the occult or aliens. Conspiracy theories use narratives that define some sort of external threat (in this case, the ultimate evil of the devil or the ultimate outsider: an alien) and can be appealing because they offer us a chance to be "in" on the "truth" of the conspiracy. Other tactics include repetition of ideas and circular reasoning, where any sort of evidence can be used to confirm the conspiracy theory. Many conspiracy theories might seem convoluted, but they're often presented in a way to seem "obvious" to those who know the alleged truth about the conspiracy theory.

Activity: Spotting False and Misleading Information

The more you use your digital information training to find misinformation, the better you will get at quickly spotting all kinds of false and misleading information. Here are a few suggestions as you develop your skills:

- Pause and reflect on your own emotions, knowledge, and awareness of the topic (including whether it is a topic around which misinformation tends to emerge).
- Consider the source, including the author, intent, claims, and audience.
- Read laterally, checking the source and the claims to see whether other reputable parties have weighed in to either contradict what is being said or reinforce the claim.
- Consider why this narrative might be appealing, and make note of any trends you spot to help you get faster at spotting these issues in the future.

Find examples on fact-checking sites or via reports

Looking for examples of misinformation via reports or fact-checking will help you practice your evaluation skills, learn about trends in misinformation, and check your work as you go, since the content has already been debunked.

Let's revisit the *COVID Cure Myths report from NewsGuard*

Check out some of the examples and practice your skills using the questions and actions listed above. Write down your observations here:

If you read laterally and search these individual cure myths, you'll likely notice a lot of fact-checking articles that debunk them. Additionally, the cure myths themselves have some interesting common trends. Many list known ingredients that have positive associations (like Vitamin C) or address certain themes or appeals, such as a fear of authority (For example, governments either caused COVID-19 or are withholding COVID treatments) or unfounded claims about the dangers of vaccines.

Follow a contentious issue on social media

Pick a social media site and look for a topic that is likely to have misinformation associated with it, such as a political or science topic. Consider using a private browser or a secondary account to overcome any personalization you might be getting from a platform you commonly use.

Practice your skills using the questions and actions listed. Write down your observations here:

Conclusion

Misinformation features common forms and themes you can learn to recognize. While our current era of misinformation is highly complex, and misinformation spreads at an unprecedented speed and scale, media literacy equips you to better recognize false and misleading content and disrupt the process.

Closing Assessment

Based on what we've explored in this module, is there a topic or a type of misinformation that you are interested in exploring further? Select from the list here and explain your choice below.

- Science misinformation
- Health misinformation
- Political misinformation
- Financial or business misinformation
- Hate speech
- Conspiracy theories
- War or conflict
- Other (explain)



1. **When is lateral reading useful?**

   A. When you are trying to fact-check and evaluate information

   B. When you are trying to closely read and analyze a text

   C. When you are trying to read something for leisure or fun

   D. None of the above

2. **Where does misinformation commonly appear? (Select all that apply.)**

   A. Political campaign ads

   B. Media coverage of a war or conflict

   C. Film reviews

   D. Social media discussions of scientific discoveries

3. **What is a conspiracy theory?**

   A. A belief in something that is false

   B. An explanation for a difficult event or problem that identifies and blames an external threat

   C. A belief in aliens or paranormal phenomena

   D. A system of thinking that is hostile to any sort of authority figure

4. **When might a conspiracy theory emerge?**

   A. After a traumatic or upsetting event

   B. When a confusing event lacks a clear explanation

   C. When a story is complex or difficult to grasp

   D. All of the above

5. **What strategies can help you spot misinformation? (Select all that apply.)**

   A. Go with your gut instinct as to whether the information feels true

   B. Check outside the source you are looking at for additional context and confirmation of the facts

   C. Pay attention to trends and make note of situations where misinformation commonly appears

   D. Get information from a few sources that you find trustworthy and ignore what else is being said

6. **How confident do you feel in your ability to spot misleading or false misinformation, with 1 being not confident and 5 being very confident?**

   1 2 3 4 5

Resources

Glossary

- **Misinformation** – Inaccurate or noncredible information that is spread unintentionally. Because it's not always possible to know the intent of someone who shares inaccurate information, this handbook often uses the term "misinformation" to refer to all false information narratives.
- **Lateral reading** – Going outside a source to verify the information and claims that you are seeing; an act of fact-checking and verification.
- **Conspiracy theory** – A narrative that provides an explanation for an uncertain or stressful event by assigning blame to some sort of external threat.

Learn More

The following organizations and sites provide fact checks and reports on misinformation. You can use them to practice your evaluation skills.

Fact-checking sites:

www.factcheck.org
www.politifact.com
www.snopes.com

Reports:

www.newsguardtech.com/reports
firstdraftnews.org/tackling
www.junkipedia.org/about

Module 7:
Investigating Suspicious Claims and Images

Introduction

Misinformation can appear in a variety of forms, adapting to the technologies and communication tools available. Two communication-technology trends in particular support the spread of misinformation:

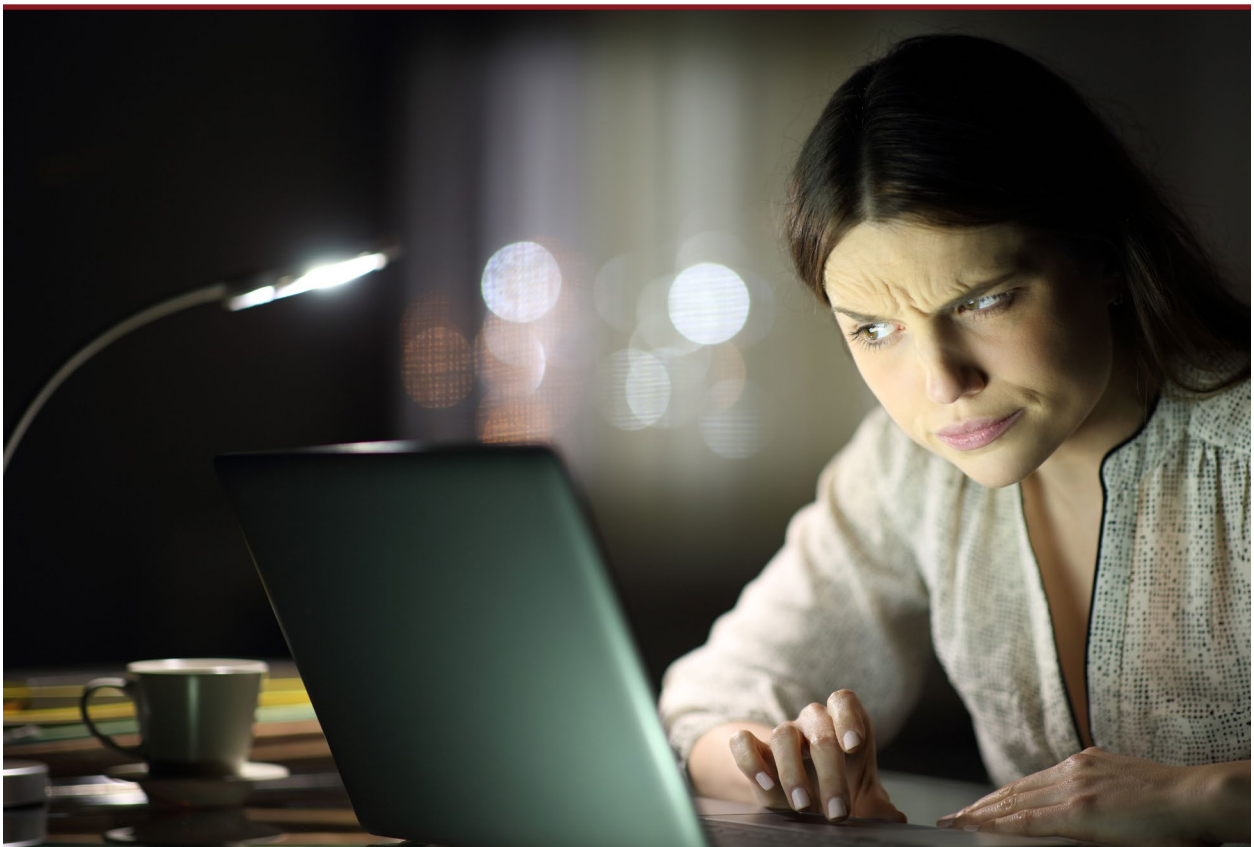
- Visuals, including videos, gifs, photos, memes, and animations
- Brief, attention-grabbing content or claims

For an overview of the following chapter, please watch The Carter Center's video for Module 7: Investigating Suspicious Claims and Images found here.

Outcomes

In this module, you will learn how to do the following:

- Identify visual forms of mis- and disinformation and examine trends like the rise of deepfakes and manipulated or fabricated audio/visual content
- Investigate suspicious claims and analyze visual misinformation
- Use fact-checking and analysis techniques like those used in different industries and professions



Preliminary Assessment

Reflect on a time when you were fooled by a fake image or claim online. What was the fake image or claim, and why do you think you fell for it?

1. **How common is visual misinformation?**
   - A. Very common. It's increasingly the most common form of misinformation.
   - B. Somewhat common, but textual misinformation is still more common.
   - C. Not very common at all
   - D. Unsure
2. **How can you investigate a suspicious image? (Select all that apply.)**
   - A. Determine what the image is supposed to be about
   - B. Determine who is responsible for creating the image
   - C. Study the image closely and look for anything suspicious
   - D. Consider whether the image is of high or low quality
3. **What is a reverse image search?**
   - A. A way to search by image as opposed to searching by text and keywords
   - B. A way to verify the source of an image
   - C. A way to find related images
   - D. All of the above
4. **What is fact-checking?**
   - A. A process of verifying and determining whether something is accurate and true
   - B. A way of determining whether someone is lying
   - C. A technique that reputable journalists use and not something that just anyone can do
   - D. A way of investigating scientific theories
5. **How confident do you feel in your ability to spot suspicious images? Select on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not confident and 5 being very confident?**

   1 2 3 4 5

Investigating Misinformation

Overview

Visual Misinformation

Visual mis- and disinformation has always existed — just look at the political pamphlets and cartoons of the 18th century — but the visual nature of the internet has helped it grow. People can easily create and share photos, drawings, infographics, memes, and videos. The ease with which visuals can be consumed makes them ideal misinformation media. Remember, misinformation thrives in places where we tend to skim or to not pay full attention or engage in deep processing.

Visuals — as opposed to other types of media — pose some unique challenges. Tools that allow people to create sophisticated fake images and videos make it trickier to spot and critically analyze suspicious images.

Here are a few types of challenging visuals that we can encounter online:

- **Misused images** – A real image is presented as depicting something else entirely. For example, someone might post a war-zone image, claiming it's from a current conflict, when in reality the picture was captured during a different war a decade ago.
- **Manipulated and fabricated images** – Using Photoshop or other image-editing software to manipulate or fabricate images, someone could present an event in a different light or make it seem as if something happened that did not. Screenshots can be manipulated as well. For example, someone can create and share a fake tweet to make it seem as if someone said something they did not say.
- **Deepfakes** – New tools and technologies make it possible to create sophisticated images and videos with one person's likeness replaced by another's so that it looks as if someone is saying or doing something they never said or did. The dangers of high-quality fake images and videos are still being studied, and people are developing tools and techniques to combat them.

> "Misinformation thrives in places where we tend to skim or to not pay full attention or engage in deep processing."

While you might not immediately be able to discern whether an image or video has been manipulated, you can be alert to the possibility and take steps to identify and fact-check suspicious images.

Suspicious Claims

The internet influences how claims appear and spread, the structure and format they use, and the topics they tend to cover. Online, it's easy to say whatever you want anonymously. Suspicious claims can travel quickly before getting debunked. Rarely is anyone held accountable for their creation.

Here are a few types of suspicious claims you might encounter online:

- **Outrageous statements** – Outrageous claims come in a variety of forms, including memes, videos, podcasts, tweets and other social media posts, and headlines on dubious websites. Regardless of medium, these claims grab attention, and sometimes go viral, because they stir up strong emotions, causing confusion and chaos.
- **Unearned authority or anonymity** – Boldly stated and outrageous claims can (and do) come from anonymous sources online. You should approach claims from anonymous sources with extra suspicion. But do your homework on claims from individuals not hiding behind avatars as well. Not all of them have the knowledge or expertise to back their claims. For example, a random YouTuber can exercise unearned authority by making strong claims about treatment protocols for a complex disease without having the expertise to understand and interpret medical research.
- **Distracting or irrelevant statements** – Suspicious claims can be hard to disprove or argue against. This is often by design. Mis- and disinformation often uses manipulation tactics and rhetorical tricks to cause distractions, confusion, or to derail a conversation. For example, say people are discussing a complex political issue online, and someone insists that a certain politician who holds a position different from their own is evil. This suspicious claim distracts people from their debate by attacking an individual.

People making a suspicious claim might use some of these key phrases or behaviors:

- Refer to "they" or "them" as a source, not really specifying or indicating where their information came from in the first place
- Get defensive if their claim is challenged
- Make overly confident and insistent statements

Fact-Checking Approaches

Fact-checking is the process of verifying information and, if it is not verifiable, locating correct information. The practice is part of a broader set of digital information skills that involve asking questions, understanding trends and how media systems and structures work, recognizing credible and noncredible information, and critically analyzing and evaluating media. You can think of fact-checking skills as tools in your toolkit.

Journalists and researchers who regularly investigate claims sometimes have access to more sophisticated tools to verify information, but an array of fact-checking techniques is available to all of us.

A key aspect of fact-checking is using your critical reflection skills and asking questions about the information you are encountering. Ask the following questions:

- **Who created this content?**
- **Why is this content being shared?**
- **What tool is being used to share this content?**
- **What is being claimed or argued?**

Additional techniques you can use to investigate suspicious claims and images include:

- **Awareness of yourself, the topic, and the context** – What is an image or claim's overall context? Here are some situations where you might slow down and investigate further:

    1. **You do not know much about a topic.** If you do not know much about a topic, don't take claims or images at face value; seek out information that can verify what you are seeing.

    2. **The topic is contentious or newly developing.** Suspicious images and claims can appear during breaking news situations or around topics that are hotly contested or fraught. For example, wars and conflicts often prompt the spread of manipulated images and outlandish claims.

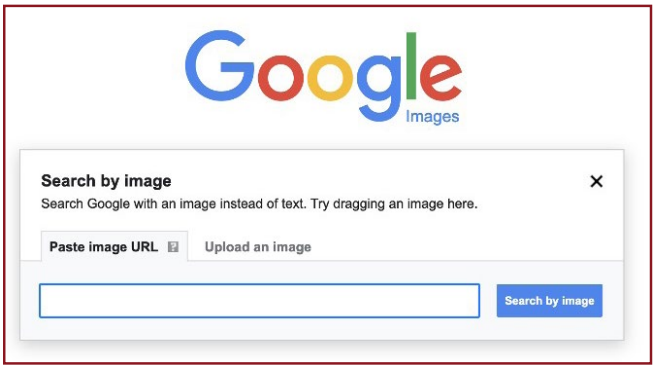
    3. **The origin of the image or claim is unclear.** On social media, for instance, it's common to encounter anonymous content or content with an unclear origin that has been shared multiple times. If you are uncertain who made the claim or where the image came from, proceed with caution; investigate further before sharing or believing the claim or image yourself.

    4. **The framing seems manipulative or suspicious.** Framing techniques can influence how we perceive or interpret content, and images in particular can be presented in ways that elicit strong emotional reactions. While this is a powerful technique for telling a story, it is also a technique for manipulation. Pay attention when images or claims are presented in ways that seem emotionally manipulative.

- **Reverse image searches** – This powerful technique allows you to search with the image itself to find information about its origins and about images that may be related to it. Google Image Search is one of the best-known tools to use for this. You have two options for searching:

    1. You can copy and paste the image's URL into the search bar.

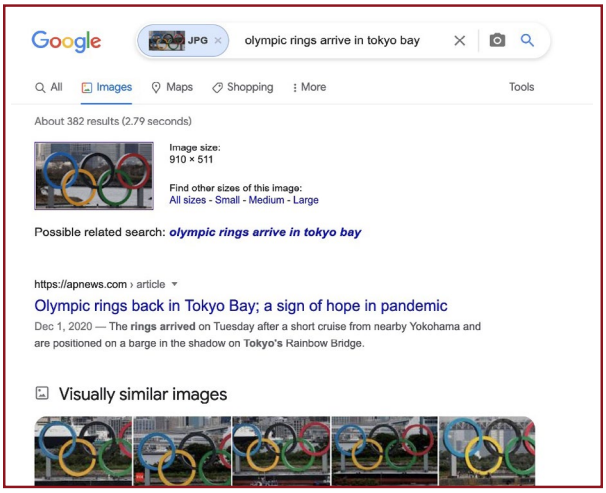
    2. You can upload the image, whether it's a screenshot or a version you downloaded to your computer.



Here is **an article about the 2021 Summer Olympics in Tokyo.** This article features an image of the Olympic rings near a body of water. The article has an author, a label for the picture, and other indicators that it might be legitimate. You assume this is a picture of the rings in Tokyo, but it is a bit hard to be sure about the photo. To double-check, you can run a reverse image search.



When you run a reverse image search — either by uploading the image or copying the URL — you get a results page with an original article, information about the image, and related images that confirm this is a picture of the rings by Tokyo Bay.



Other reverse image search tools include *TinEye* or Microsoft's Bing image search.

- **Lateral reading and searching for verification** – Reading laterally — or searching for information outside of the source — helps you verify what you are seeing. If your search brings up results for fact-checking websites or other items that debunk the claim you are seeing, you know to proceed with caution and investigate further. While professional fact-checkers can spend lots of time investigating and verifying claims and images, a quick search can often give you enough information to know whether the claim you are seeing is likely legitimate.

Here are a few ways you can search for verification:

- Search the claim itself by copying and pasting the statement.
- Search using keywords that sum up what the claim is saying or capture the topic being discussed (For example, for a video about genetically modified organisms (GMOs) being dangerous, you can search for "GMO danger" or "GMO pros and cons.")
- Search for information about the author, publication, or person who is sharing the claim.

Whether they're in journalism, science, law, or academia, people engaged in professional fact-checking often use advanced, time-consuming tools and techniques. While the fact-checking you engage in might not be as rigorous or detailed, there are still a lot of commonalities. When we fact-check, we are all looking for corroboration or verification of an image or claim, engaging in lateral reading, gauging credibility, and not jumping to conclusions without first investigating.



Practical Application: Suspicious Claims and Images

Let's look at examples of suspicious images and claims you might encounter and how you can investigate them.

Images that are used in the wrong context or in a misleading manner

In this situation, someone is posting, or inadvertently sharing, an image that does not depict what they claim it does. Often the image being shared is from a prior, similar event. These types of misused or misleading images often appear in content related to wars or conflicts.

How to investigate:

- Perform a reverse image search.
- Consider the context: The more contentious the topic, the greater the potential for misleading images to appear.

Manipulated images

Photo-editing tools can be used to fabricate images, conceal something or make it appear as if something is happening that is not, and create screenshots of fake social media posts.

How to investigate:

- Perform a reverse image search and search for information about what the image is purporting to illustrate.
- Search for the topic or claim the image is making. Sophisticated fakes might require more advanced debunking techniques, so check whether professional fact-checkers have investigated the image you are seeing.

Suspicious or manipulative framing of images

While the image itself might be real, the source sharing the image might be more dubious.

How to investigate:

- Use your critical analysis and evaluation skills to ask questions and find more information about who is sharing this image, what their goals might be, and whether they are credible.
- Perform a reverse image search to find out where the image came from and how it is being used elsewhere online.

Inflammatory or outrageous claims

These types of claims — which can take the form of clickbait headlines, dramatic and irate social media posts, or shouted statements on videos or podcasts — are more about garnering attention or creating chaos than sharing thoughtful information.

How to investigate:

- Read laterally: Search the claim itself to find additional sources and look at the reputation and credentials of the person sharing the claim — if they aren't hiding behind anonymity.

Anonymous or unknown sources

Speaking of anonymous sources, we should always investigate suspicious claims that have an unclear origin (such as a repeated rumor or something "they" said) or that are being spread by an unknown person. Granted, well-known individuals can make outrageous claims and spread mis- and disinformation, whether knowingly or unknowingly, but anonymous sources pose specific fact-checking challenges.

How to investigate:

- Search for information about the claim itself to see whether it is accurate.
- If the source is anonymous or unknown, look for information about the site or publication where the information is being shared or examine the social media account of the person sharing the suspicious claim.
- Ask questions: Does this person or account have a history of posting outrageous content or conspiracy theories? Do they have followers? Is the account new? (A new account with few followers and a record of posting suspicious claims might be a bot.)

Rhetorical tricks and fallacies

One place where manipulative rhetorical techniques often appear is in political debates. Even if candidates don't tell outright untruths, they often use rhetorical tricks to score points or to make their opponent look bad. This is why you see professional fact-checkers out in full force during debates to determine whether candidates are making accurate claims.

How to investigate:

- Aside from consulting professional fact-checkers' work, you can use your digital information skills to analyze what you are seeing and to make notes of any tactics or techniques that seem manipulative.
- Search for information that verifies or disproves the claim.
- Compose an argument in your head that addresses and refutes the claim. We will talk more about debunking techniques in Modules 8 and 9, but if you find you are struggling to put together a clear argument that addresses the points in the claim, it could be a sign the candidate is deploying an unsound argument, or fallacy, designed to derail discussion and make it difficult to get back on track.

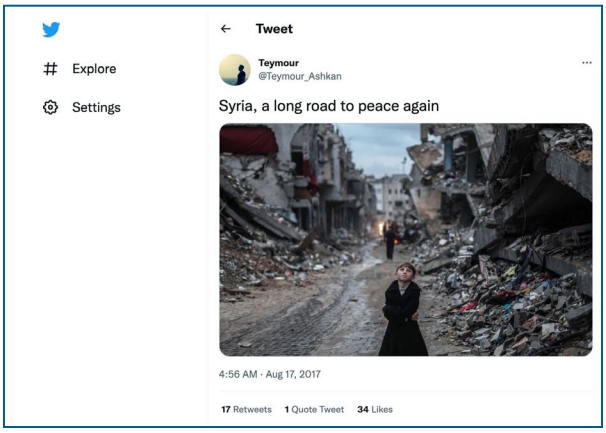


Activity: Investigating and Fact-Checking Suspicious Images

Let's practice fact-checking by looking at a few examples of suspicious images. Use your critical evaluation and analysis skills and consider who is responsible for the image; why, where, and how it is being shared; and how it is being framed. What's the context? What else can you learn about the topic?

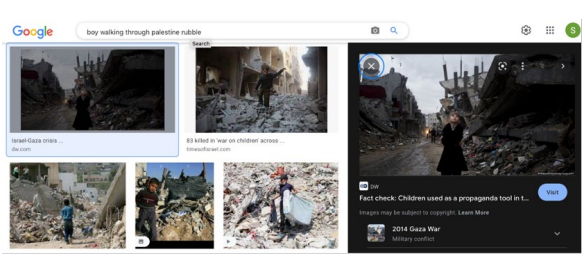
Example 1: Aftermath of Shelling

Tweet



Study this image and run a reverse image search using Google Image search. Note your observations below.

The reverse image search yields results from a pro-Palestinian organization. While the tweet claimed this was an image of Syria, the reverse image search indicates this might be an image of Palestinian territories. A way to investigate further is to run a search for what the image depicts. See an example below:



The first result takes you to a fact-checking website indicating that this image is from 2014 and depicts Palestinian territory, not Syria as the 2017 tweet claimed.

Example 2: Hurricane Floods Airport

Original Link



Study this image and run a reverse image search using Google Image search. Note your observations below.

The reverse image search returns results from a lot of fact-checking sites, indicating that this image is fake. It was digitally created to illustrate a what-if scenario about climate change, but it ended up getting used to falsely illustrate damage from Hurricane Harvey, which hit Houston, Texas, in 2017. The repurposed image of alleged hurricane damage was cropped and looks a bit blurrier than the original digitally created image. This is a good example of being cautious during situations like natural disasters, which often give rise to a lot of fake images.

Example 3: Long-Lost Titanic Footage

Video Link



Check out the following clip and see whether you can verify it.

A quick search reveals that this is bogus footage. Various fact-checking sites have flagged this as fake content and part of an established trend of fakes and conspiracy theories surrounding the Titanic's sinking. The person who posted this seems to have used scenes from the 1997 movie Titanic and manipulated them to make them black and white. This is an example of clickbait content designed to garner attention and views.

Example 4: Amelia Earhart Image

Original Link



Study this image and run a reverse image search using Google Image search. Note your observations below.

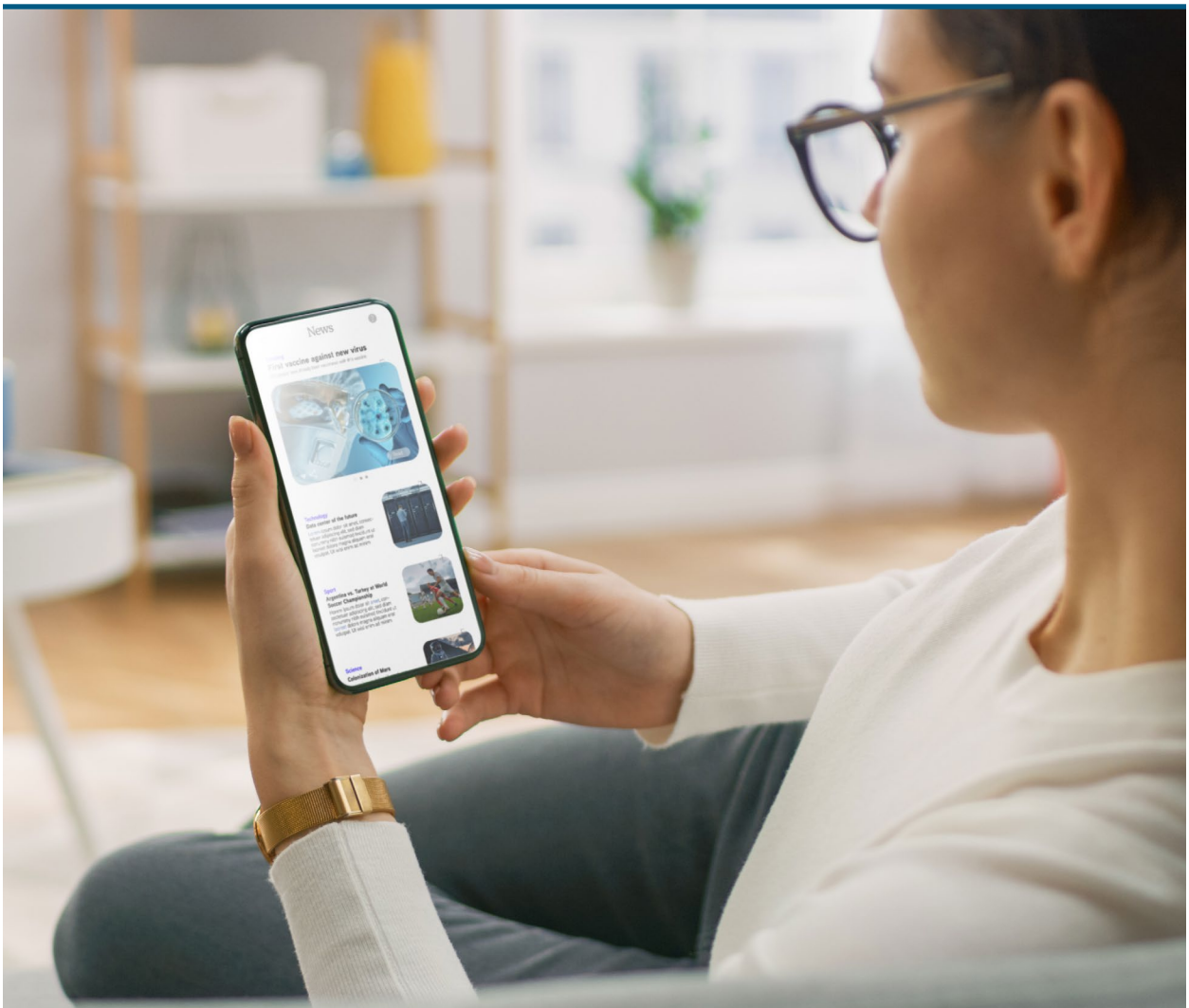
As you can see from the reverse image search, this is supposedly an image of Amelia Earhart after her famous plane crash and disappearance. While you can verify what the image is allegedly about, no one has yet definitively determined whether the image is actually of Earhart. This is an example of a contested image that has fueled further debate and conspiracy theories around the mystery of Earhart's transpose crash.

> "Use your critical evaluation and analysis skills and consider who is responsible for the image; why, where, and how it is being shared; and how it is being framed."

Conclusion

Fact-checking skills are something anyone can develop and use.

While many professionals engage in more advanced fact-checking techniques as part of their jobs, individuals can fact-check and critically analyze information of all kinds, including suspicious images and claims. You can investigate by double-checking and verifying what you are seeing, performing reverse image searches to learn more, and paying attention to the context surrounding the image or the suspicious claim you are encountering. Fact-checking skills are an important part of your overall media literacy toolkit.



Closing Assessment

1. **How common is visual misinformation?**
   - A. Very common. It's increasingly the most common form of misinformation.
   - B. Somewhat common, but textual misinformation is still more common.
   - C. Not very common at all
   - D. Unsure
2. **How can you investigate a suspicious image? (Select all that apply.)**
   - A. Determine what the image is supposed to be about
   - B. Determine who is responsible for creating the image
   - C. Study the image closely and look for anything suspicious
   - D. Consider whether the image is high or low quality
3. **What is a reverse image search?**
   - A. A way to search by image as opposed to searching by text and keywords
   - B. A way to verify the source of an image
   - C. A way to find related images
   - D. All of the above
4. **How can you investigate a suspicious claim? (Select all that apply.)**
   - A. Search the claim and see what other results say
   - B. Look at who is making the claim and what their reputation is
   - C. Consider the context of the claim and why it is being made and shared
   - D. Decide whether you agree with the claim
5. **What is fact-checking?**
   - A. A process where you verify and determine whether something is accurate and true
   - B. A way of determining whether someone is lying
   - C. A technique that reputable journalists use and not something that just anyone can do
   - D. A way of investigating scientific theories
6. **How confident do you feel in your ability to spot suspicious images? Select on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not confident and 5 being very confident.**

   1 2 3 4 5

Resources

Glossary

- **Misinformation –** Inaccurate or noncredible information that is spread unintentionally. Because it's not always possible to know the intent of someone who shares inaccurate information, this handbook often uses the term "misinformation" to refer to all false information narratives.
- **Lateral reading –** Going outside a source to verify the information and claims that you are seeing; an act of fact-checking and verification.
- **Fact-checking –** The process of verifying information and ensuring it is factual and accurate.
- **Reverse image search –** The process of using an image itself to search out information about its origin and verify whether it is being presented accurately.

Learn More

The following resources can help you learn more about fact-checking:

Guide to Using Reverse Image Search for Investigations
NewsCo/lab tools for investigating fake images or videos
FirstDraft News guide for verifying online information

Module 8: Practicing Good Media Hygiene

Introduction

Media and communication technologies continually evolve. While smartphones and social media dominate today, the ways we consume, create, and share information could shift tomorrow. If media are constantly evolving, then our **digital information** skills must evolve as well.

While the foundations of critical thinking and evaluation remain consistent (rhetorical appeals have Greek names because they've been around since ancient times), our **digital information** skills should adapt to changing technology.

Let's look at ways you can continue to build, adapt, and refine your **digital information** skills in an ever-shifting media landscape by using principles of media hygiene and responsible digital citizenship.

Outcomes

In this module, you will learn how to do the following:

- Explore different aspects of media hygiene, including online security, media consumption habits, and social media use
- Consider approaches that make you a responsible digital citizen and information user, producer, and consumer
- Develop plans to continue expanding and developing **digital information** skills to meet individual goals and needs

For an overview of the following chapter, please watch The Carter Center's video for Module 8: Practicing Good Media Hygiene found here.



Preliminary Assessment

Overall, how would you describe your media habits? Are you keeping yourself secure online? Are you spending too much or too little time in the digital world? How does being online affect your mental state?

1. **How would you define media hygiene?**

   A. Making sure your social media profiles are free of embarrassing or unprofessional content

   B. Ensuring that you consume only high-quality media

   C. Deleting old social media accounts

   D. Being aware of the effects media has on our mental and physical health and developing healthier habits

2. **What is digital citizenship?**

   A. Consuming political news online

   B. Being able to use digital tools

   C. Responsibly using technology to engage with society

   D. Using best practices to be safe and secure online

3. **What is metacognition? (Select all that apply.)**

   A. The ability to reflect and critically think about your own thought processes

   B. When you can quickly analyze a story and understand its intent

   C. A form of critical and reflective self-awareness

   D. The ability to identify and reflect upon your own emotional reactions

4. **Which of the following are media hygiene practices?**

   A. Using best practices to ensure your online accounts and profiles are secure

   B. Reflecting on the impact of your media consumption habits and adjusting as needed

   C. Ensuring that you are sharing information responsibly online

   D. All of the above

5. **On a scale of 1-5 (5 being completely confident), how confident are you that you're practicing good media hygiene?**

   1 2 3 4 5

Media Hygiene and Metacognition

Overview

Metacognition is the ability to reflect and think critically about your own thought processes. Being self-aware and reflecting on how you are thinking about, responding to, and processing information is a key part of media evaluation skills. Noting your own reactions can help you recognize emotionally manipulative tactics and avoid being fooled by mis- and disinformation and inadvertently spreading rumors online.

Metacognition is also a key aspect of media hygiene. To practice good media hygiene, you must be aware of media's mental and physical effects and form healthier media habits. Our media landscape and information environments can spark stress, fatigue, and information overload. The speed and quantity of information we encounter can make it difficult to pause, reflect, and critically evaluate something; instead, shallow processing tendencies take over, leading to snap judgments and faulty assumptions.

Developing better media hygiene supports our media literacy and critical evaluation skills. But it is worth noting that while there are best practices, everyone is different, and the media hygiene approaches that work best for you might not work as well for another person.

Even though there's no one-size-fits-all approach, we can examine media hygiene's key areas:

- **Online security –** Developing online security habits is the first step in the media hygiene process. Create strong passwords and use multifactor authentication, review privacy settings on your social media accounts to determine who can see your personal information and posts, and avoid revealing details about yourself that could make it easier for someone to pretend to be you. By understanding the risks and ensuring your information is secure, you can avoid scams or hacks.

  Online security best practices also help you manage your online experience. That includes things like reviewing the cookie settings of websites you visit and denying them the right to store or sell your information — or private browsers that don't track your online movements. Algorithms constantly gather data to show you relevant search results or targeted ads, and bad actors can use that information to target you with misinformation campaigns. By taking control of your personal information, you can control what algorithms know about you.

- **Media consumption habits –** If media literacy involves being aware of how you are reacting to a specific source, then media hygiene involves taking a step back and considering your media consumption habits and their effects on you.

  Generally, our media habits are pretty terrible. We spend too much time on our devices, and we're suffering from information overload. We're hurting our eyes and our thumbs. We're wrecking our sleep. One solution is to borrow the philosophy from various "slow" movements (For example, slow food, slow gardening, and slow news) and spend less time on our devices consuming media. While "too much media" is subjective, the basic idea is to avoid endless scrolling.

- **Social media use** – Social media's addictive nature can lead to stress, anxiety, poor sleep, and other negative emotional, mental, and physical effects. It also encourages poor media consumption habits, such as skim reading and quick reactions. A media hygiene approach involves monitoring our profiles, refining our privacy settings, and being mindful of how and when we use social media.
- **Digital citizenship** – Digital citizenship refers to the responsible use of technology to engage with society. Being a good digital citizen relates to media literacy in that developing our literacy skills helps ensure we consume credible information and investigate claims before sharing them online.



Practical Application: Developing Good Media Hygiene Habits

So far, our modules have helped us examine our complex media environments. Going forward, there are many ways you can continue developing your media literacy and hygiene. Here are a few suggestions to help you get started:

Reflect on your own habits

- Who are you following and engaging with on social platforms?
- How do you get your news? What sort of platforms or outlets do you follow?
- When do you engage with media? Is it all day long, or are there certain times of day when you consume more news?
- How do you feel when you are using different media platforms and outlets — informed? Entertained? Stressed? Angry?

Take charge of your media use

- Review your social media account settings and adjust your privacy settings to help limit who can see what and whether companies are allowed to target you. Try to learn more about the information you are consuming and sharing.
- Adjust your habits and try out new routines based on your observations about your media habits. For example, if you notice you get stressed out or have trouble sleeping after scrolling social media at night, engage in other activities in the hours before bed. If you spend a lot of time arguing with people online, take some days off. And if you feel like you are following the same types of accounts, introduce other kinds of content into your media diet.

Practice your digital information skills

- Make a point of actively evaluating sources so it becomes second nature. You can start by spending a few minutes fact-checking one source per day.
- You can't be an expert in everything, but you can learn more about topics you encounter to avoid being misled. You might focus your research on an area of mis- or disinformation that you want to help combat or on an issue that interests you.



Activity: Media Hygiene Questionnaire

Reflect on your media use to develop healthier habits going forward.

Media habits

- Overall, how do you feel about your media habits?
  What are you doing well? Where might you be falling short?
- Take stock of your social media use:
  What sites and platforms do you tend to use, and how do you use them?
  Do you passively follow accounts, or do you actively engage and post content?
- Consider a typical day:
  When and how do you engage with media outlets and platforms?
- How do you feel after engaging with different kinds of media?

Online security

- Are you managing your passwords and ensuring they are secure?
- Are you following best practices to keep your devices secure, such as installing updates and using two-factor authentication?
- Are you using security features for your various social media accounts?

Digital citizenship

- Take stock of your media usage more generally:
  What news outlets do you follow and on what platforms (e.g., print, radio, TV, online)?
- Do you tend to share media and information online with others?
  If so, how and what makes you want to share this information?

Next steps

- Based on your answers to these questions, what are your media hygiene goals?
  Are there changes you want to make or new approaches you want to try?

Conclusion

Media hygiene is important in our media landscape, where issues like information overload are increasingly common. Media hygiene encourages us to critically reflect on our media habits and to consider how they affect us mentally, physically, and emotionally. Our media habits have implications for our security and privacy online, for the ways in which we engage with the world and with others, and for how we process information and make decisions. Producing, consuming, and sharing information is part of our role as engaged and informed citizens. As we have seen in our exploration of media literacy, our ability to think critically and evaluate sources is crucial in combating mis- and disinformation, as is our ability to reflect on our roles in these complicated media ecosystems.

“Media hygiene encourages us to critically reflect on our media habits and to consider how they affect us mentally, physically, and emotionally.”



Closing Assessment

1. **How would you define media hygiene?**

   A. Making sure your social media profiles are free of embarrassing or unprofessional content

   B. Ensuring you consume only high-quality media

   C. Deleting old social media accounts

   D. Being aware of the effects media has on our mental and physical health and developing healthier habits

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3. **What is metacognition? (Select all that apply.)**

   A. The ability to reflect and critically think about your own thought processes

   B. When you can quickly analyze a story and understand its intent

   C. A form of critical and reflective self-awareness

   D. The ability to identify and reflect upon your own emotional reactions

4. **Which of the following are media hygiene practices?**

   A. Using best practices to ensure your online accounts and profiles are secure

   B. Reflecting on the impact of your media consumption habits and adjusting as needed

   C. Ensuring you are sharing information responsibly online

   D. All of the above

5. **On a scale of 1-5 (5 being completely confident), how confident are you that you're practicing good media hygiene?**

   1 2 3 4 5

Resources

Glossary

- **Media hygiene** – The practice of being aware of media's effects on our mental and physical health, and developing media habits that are more conducive to our health and well-being
- **Digital citizenship** – The ability to responsibly use technology to engage with society
- **Metacognition** – The ability to reflect and critically think about your own thought processes

Learn More

Below is a small selection of sites that will help you develop your media literacy and hygiene.

Online security

U.K. National Cyber Security Centre

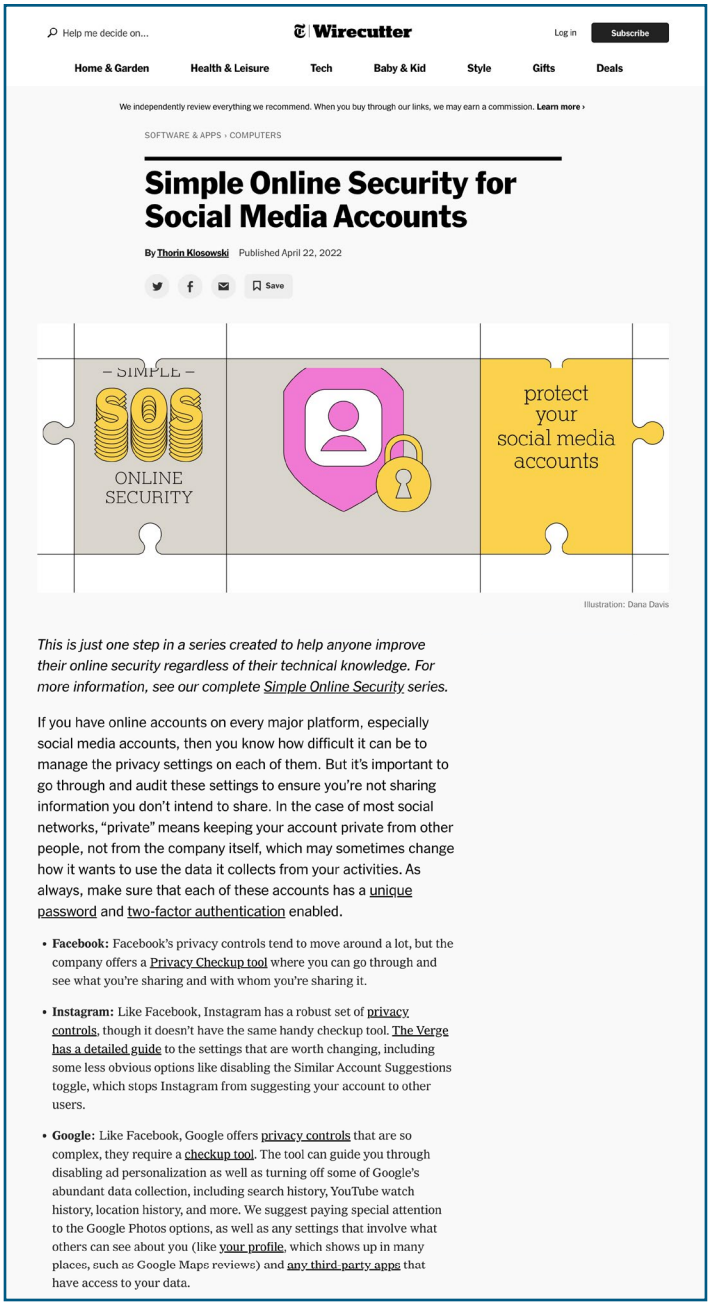
U.S. Federal Trade Commission Online Privacy and Security portal

The Wirecutter Social Media Security guide

Note: Your own government, local news agencies, or local educational and nonprofit organizations might have similar lists available. Government regulations around online privacy vary by locale.

Media habits

Center for Humane Technology's Guide to Healthy Media Habits



Help me decide on... | Wirecutter | Log in | Subscribe

Home & Garden | Health & Leisure | Tech | Baby & Kid | Style | Gifts | Deals

We independently review everything we recommend. When you buy through our links, we may earn a commission. **Learn more ›**

SOFTWARE & APPS › COMPUTERS

Simple Online Security for Social Media Accounts

By Thorin Klosowski Published April 22, 2022

Save

Illustration: Dana Davis

This is just one step in a series created to help anyone improve their online security regardless of their technical knowledge. For more information, see our complete Simple Online Security series.

If you have online accounts on every major platform, especially social media accounts, then you know how difficult it can be to manage the privacy settings on each of them. But it's important to go through and audit these settings to ensure you're not sharing information you don't intend to share. In the case of most social networks, "private" means keeping your account private from other people, not from the company itself, which may sometimes change how it wants to use the data it collects from your activities. As always, make sure that each of these accounts has a unique password and two-factor authentication enabled.

- **Facebook:** Facebook's privacy controls tend to move around a lot, but the company offers a Privacy Checkup tool where you can go through and see what you're sharing and with whom you're sharing it.
- **Instagram:** Like Facebook, Instagram has a robust set of privacy controls, though it doesn't have the same handy checkup tool. The Verge has a detailed guide to the settings that are worth changing, including some less obvious options like disabling the Similar Account Suggestions toggle, which stops Instagram from suggesting your account to other users.
- **Google:** Like Facebook, Google offers privacy controls that are so complex, they require a checkup tool. The tool can guide you through disabling ad personalization as well as turning off some of Google's abundant data collection, including search history, YouTube watch history, location history, and more. We suggest paying special attention to the Google Photos options, as well as any settings that involve what others can see about you (like your profile, which shows up in many places, such as Google Maps reviews) and any third-party apps that have access to your data.

Module 9: Sharing Digital Information Skills

Introduction

Perhaps you want to help members of your community better recognize misinformation. Maybe you and your colleagues deal with the challenges of misinformation every day in your line of work. Maybe you want to help your friends and family develop their source-evaluation skills so they don't inadvertently spread misinformation.

Whatever your motivation and circumstances, there are plenty of opportunities to share media literacy knowledge with others. When we develop and share our skills, we can collectively fight mis- and disinformation. However, this can be a touchy subject, so following a set of best practices can guide your interactions and help you avoid pitfalls.

Let's look at some of the best ways to discuss misinformation with people you know — and people you don't — and help them build their own digital information skills.

Outcomes

In this module, you will learn how to do the following:

- Overcome challenges in discussing mis- and disinformation with different audiences, including reluctant ones
- Share media literacy knowledge online and effectively provide fact-checking information and corrections
- Support different communities through media literacy knowledge

For an overview of the following chapter, please watch The Carter Center's video for Module 9: Sharing Digital Information Skills found here.



Preliminary Assessment

Have you tried to talk about misinformation with others, or correct misinformation when you come across it? How did that experience go?

1. **What is the backfire effect?**
   - A. A cognitive phenomenon that causes people to reject evidence that contradicts their views and to strengthen their existing views
   - B. When someone unconsciously manipulates data to get an expected result
   - C. A phenomenon where your expectations shape and alter your perspective
   - D. A refusal to plan for something that hasn't happened before
2. **What is prebunking?**
   - A. The process of debunking lies or manipulative tactics and sources before they emerge and spread
   - B. A form of fact-checking that educates people about the tactics they are encountering
   - C. A form of inoculation theory, or a way to protect someone against future persuasion or manipulation
   - D. All of the above
3. **What makes mis- and disinformation appealing? (Select all that apply.)**
   - A. Easy answers
   - B. Belonging and identity reaffirmation
   - C. Confirmation of views
   - D. Connection to values
4. **True or false: Everyone is susceptible to misinformation and manipulation, but there are strategies you can use to avoid being manipulated.**
   - A. True
   - B. False
5. **Why do digital information skills matter?**
   - A. They equip people to critically evaluate sources and to think critically about media.
   - B. They help people better understand our media ecosystems.
   - C. They help people avoid falling for or amplifying mis- and disinformation.
   - D. All of the above

Sharing Digital Information Skills

Overview

Discussing Digital Information Tranining with Others

Misinformation and other manipulative forms of media excel at triggering strong emotional and psychological reactions that encourage shallow processing and snap judgments. This type of content appeals to our sense of self and can even become entwined with our identity.

The emotional nature of mis- and disinformation is something to be aware of when discussing media literacy. You do not want to alienate your audience or have them tune you out because they feel disrespected or attacked. In this section, we will examine how to approach people you already know.

Avoid attacks and remain calm. Mis- and disinformation can trigger lots of emotional responses, including frustration for those who haven't been taken in by it. It can be aggravating to argue with someone who believes a conspiracy theory that you find nonsensical or illogical. Use the source-evaluation skills of pausing and reflecting. Remain calm, and don't antagonize your audience — doing so can cause someone to get defensive, stop listening to you, or hold even more firmly to their views.

Don't force the issue. It's possible that you aren't the right person to deliver the message, the timing is wrong, or your audience is just not receptive. If you sense strong resistance, back off but leave the door open for future interactions.

Avoid the backfire effect. A form a cognitive bias, the backfire effect is a phenomenon that causes someone to reject evidence that contradicts their views and cling even more firmly to them. In this case, contradictory evidence can cause beliefs to grow rather than be dislodged. You can minimize this effect by thinking about how to present your evidence. You should be careful not to engage in personal attacks, be dismissive, or be overly aggressive or argumentative. A form of fact-checking known as prebunking can also help (more on that later in this chapter.).

Have a private conversation. Online or in real life, publicly shaming someone is not a good tactic. Speaking privately — especially if the misinformation is highly emotional or entwined with the other person's identity — allows you the space to be more thoughtful. You can ask questions about their views, listen to what they have to say, respectfully share your own position, and let them know you're available to continue the conversation if they want to talk more later.

Share resources. Sharing resources from experts or fact-checking sites can be a great approach, but there are a few points of caution:

- Be mindful of your audience. You don't want to share resources that someone will automatically distrust or that will shut down the conversation. For example, if someone believes in a conspiracy theory involving a certain government agency, sharing resources from that agency might trigger the backfire effect.
- Thoughtfully present your resources. Provide context and explain why you are sharing this particular source.

Find common ground. Misinformation and conspiracy theories provide reassurance, validation, identity confirmation, and easy answers to complex problems. During the conversation, think about what might be driving the belief or whether there is common ground to draw upon. Maybe there's an underlying fear behind their belief that you feel, too; sharing your own fears and then explaining why you've come to a different conclusion might open doors.

Community engagement and trust. Mis- and disinformation often targets historically marginalized or vulnerable groups and preys upon groups whose experiences lead them to distrust certain types of authority. With that in mind, ask yourself what the keys are to a successful interaction — and whether you're the right person to deliver the truth. Sometimes, people need to hear from someone with whom they feel they have more in common.

Sharing Knowledge Online

Most of us are more likely to encounter mis- and disinformation online rather than in person. Sometimes a friend or relative is spreading a rumor, but misinformation more often comes to us from strangers. Rather than getting into social-media shouting matches, try some of the following strategies when you're engaging with people you don't know online:

Practice prebunking. A form of fact-checking that debunks or corrects misinformation before it appears and spreads, prebunking educates people about what misinformation is and what manipulative tactics are being used. Instead of simply correcting faulty information, prebunking explains what's going on, how the content is manipulative, and what trends are present.

Prebunking is rooted in inoculation theory, which suggests you can protect people from manipulation by exposing them to examples and equipping them with the knowledge they need to avoid it.

You could argue that digital information education, and sharing media literacy knowledge with others, is a form of prebunking. Getting ahead of misinformation is crucial. We tend to remember the first thing we hear, and dislodging that information can be quite difficult. But anticipating misinformation isn't always easy. Prebunking includes the following basic steps:

- Identify the misinformation situation you are in and determine what other sorts of misinformation might start spreading.
- Find an example of the predicted type of misinformation.
- Provide warning and context — and unpack the technique. Teach people about the mis- or disinformation tactics at play rather than just sharing the source with no context.
- Fact-check, debunk, explain, and educate as you share your example rather than trying to debunk after the fact.

Avoid amplifying misinformation. When you are addressing misinformation online, consider how you share it. For instance, instead of reposting an article or tweet, which helps it gain views and traction, post a screenshot of it.

Don't cede the floor. Mis- and disinformation excel at disruption and stealing the middle ground. They can derail conversations and debates by introducing ridiculous claims or fallacies that people waste time refuting. One way to deal with this is to call out the tactics and techniques that you see, or share resources, fact-checks, and information from experts. Calling out the tactics being used in addition to correcting the false information can help you get a conversation back on track and refocus on an actual issue.

Offer corrections without attacks. Avoid antagonizing people or getting sucked into circular arguments. If you are interacting with someone you know online, consider messaging them privately with a fact-check or correction. If you don't know the person, you can reply with a resource showing the correct information and just leave it there for others to see.

Develop and share your expertise. Share your own experiences and knowledge. Perhaps you have expertise in a field and can provide more detailed corrections or explanations to counter misinformation. Science communicators often do this well; think of the doctors and nurses who shared video messages during the early days of COVID, for example.

Digital Information Training Engagement Opportunities

If you get the opportunity to share your knowledge with a group, try one of the following approaches:

Train the trainers – This technique involves sharing **digital information** skills with people who then will teach others. It's a powerful method because it helps build trust and community engagement. You might not have the capacity to reach a large number of people, or the trust of a particular community, but you can empower others who do.

Community partnerships – Find local community spaces and groups and team up with people already doing the work. Libraries, local news organizations, professional organizations for scientists or journalists, and civic organizations can be good places to start.

> "We tend to remember the first thing we hear, and dislodging that information can be quite difficult. It can be hard to overcome initial impressions or beliefs."



Practical Application: Sharing Digital Information Skills

Let's look at a few examples of how people teach others about misinformation and digital information.

- **Science communication** – Science communicators are on the front lines of the misinformation fight because so much of the faulty or misleading information out there revolves around complex scientific and health topics. They are taking steps to more effectively share public health information, educate people about the threats of misinformation, and build trust. They also are working to avoid giving credence to false claims.
- **Fact-checking and journalists** – Many journalists are using new practices, such as putting the words "Fact-Check" in headlines that contain misinformation to help avoid inadvertently lending legitimacy to misinformation narratives. Professional fact-checkers are trying out approaches like labeling content as suspicious or from a trusted source, using different reporting methods, and amplifying debunking. Some fact-checking and research organizations even have games and activities that help people engage with media literacy concepts. In *GetBadNews.com*, for example, you compete to become a fake news tycoon, along the way learning a lot about mis- and disinformation techniques and topics.
- **Media and digital lit education** – Libraries are places where you can find resources to help people develop technical and critical-thinking skills. You can also find (or create) digital information education packaged in different ways to appeal to crowds with different interests and concerns, such as building technology or job skills or avoiding scams.
- **Civic groups** – Civic organizations that support democratic processes or work with campaigns are increasingly tackling misinformation head-on and considering media literacy a component of civic engagement and involvement.
- **Technologists** – People in the technology sector are developing and testing out solutions to better flag misinformation, halt the spread, warn people about suspicious content, and use machine learning to help combat the problem.

Activity: Sharing Digital Information Skills

Consider the following scenarios and brainstorm approaches you can use to navigate them. Write your ideas below.

Example 1: Difficult In-Person Encounter

At a gathering, someone you know starts sharing a conspiracy theory that involves engaging in behavior that could be risky for their health. They're encouraging others to adopt this approach and citing bogus facts and sources.

How can you approach this situation? Draw on the best practices listed above and consider your own preferences, style, and comfort level.

Example 2: Online Interaction

You come across someone ranting on social media about a new piece of legislation, spreading rumors and false information about it.

How can you approach this situation? Draw on the best practices listed above and consider your own preferences, style, and comfort level.

Conclusion

You can have a positive impact and empower those around you with media literacy knowledge. Even if you introduce just one person to source-evaluation resources, that is one more person who is better equipped to recognize and avoid spreading misinformation. As you share your knowledge, you will be building and refining your own skills, becoming a more informed, critical, and savvy user, consumer, and producer of media.



Closing Assessment

1. **What is the backfire effect?**

   A. A cognitive phenomenon that causes people to reject evidence that contradicts their views and to strengthen their existing views

   B. When someone unconsciously manipulates data to get an expected result

   C. A phenomenon where your expectations shape and alter your perspective

   D. A refusal to plan for something that hasn't happened before

2. **What is prebunking?**

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   B. A form of fact-checking that educates people about the tactics they are encountering

   C. A form of inoculation theory, or a way to protect someone against future persuasion or manipulation

   D. All of the above

3. **What makes mis- and disinformation appealing? (Select all that apply.)**

   A. Easy answers

   B. Belonging and identity reaffirmation

   C. Confirmation of views

   D. Connection to values

4. **True or false: Everyone is susceptible to misinformation and manipulation, but there are strategies you can use to avoid being manipulated .**

   A. True

   B. False

5. **Why do digital information skills matter?**

   A. They equip people to critically evaluate sources and to think critically about media.

   B. They help people better understand our media ecosystems.

   C. They help people avoid falling for or amplifying mis- and disinformation.

   D. All of the above

Resources

Glossary

- **Prebunking –** Debunking lies or manipulative tactics and sources before they emerge and spread, educating people about the manipulative tactics in the process
- **Inoculation theory –** A social psychology theory that exposing people to the ways in which misinformation works can protect them from future manipulation or persuasion
- **Backfire effect –** A cognitive phenomenon that causes people to reject evidence that contradicts their views and to strengthen their existing views

Learn More

Learn more about prebunking in this *First Draft news guide*

See approaches to labeling and flagging misinformation at *NewsGuard*

Explore some research into misinformation solutions:

Data & Society

Nieman Lab

University of Washington Center for an Informed Public

Stanford Cyber Policy Center