

A Quick Guide to Spotting Misinformation

TIPS FOR FACT-CHECKING, STAYING INFORMED, AND TALKING IT OUT
by UNICEF.org (Europe and Central Asia)

Knowing what information to trust is increasingly difficult on social media, where false claims frequently are disguised as facts.

Fake news typically refers to news stories or headlines that are deliberately fabricated to mislead or manipulate readers. **Disinformation** usually refers to the *intentional, knowing distribution* of fake news. **Misinformation**, on the other hand, is fake news shared *unintentionally or unknowingly*.

Modern A.I. can create lifelike images, videos (“deepfakes”), audio, and even write articles that seem like real news. A.I.-driven bots also can flood social media with the same false story over and over, making it look like everyone believes it.

How to Spot Fake News and Stop It from Spreading

1. Foster a diverse news media ecosystem

Getting your news from multiple sources and outlets allows a wide range of information to come into your regular news content. If the same news is corroborated across multiple channels there is a higher chance that it is not misinformation. Cross-reference with other reliable sources.

2. Critically assess the credibility of sources.

Tracing back the information to the original source is a great way to fight misinformation. If the information comes from a less-than-reputable source or is contrary to expert advice, be skeptical of the information presented, and make a note that the channel where you found the information may not be the best.

3. Amplify the voices of experts

Support real experts who are distinguished in their field. With any piece of content, once sourced, it’s important to learn about the credentials of the author. *Does this expert have an advanced degree related to the topic or years of experience in their field? Are they reputable in their field? Is this peer-reviewed information from a credible academic journal?*

4. Address the rumors and explain why they are incorrect

Once you have the facts in your hands, be straightforward and succinct. Avoid emphasizing misinformation when countering false claims. Explaining why misinformation is incorrect is more effective than simply labelling it as blatantly false (and even the term “fake news” can bring up politicized connotations).

How to Talk to Someone Who Believes Misinformation

1. Understand the emotional side

False information is usually shared through our emotions rather than logic. Knowing this, creators of misinformation use gimmicks to play on our emotional reactions.

2. Watch out for confirmation bias.

This is when we believe information that supports what we already think or believe. Because it matches our existing beliefs, we’re more likely to share it, which only makes those beliefs stronger.

3. Generalizing entire groups. (added by Pastor Caleb)

Human beings are very complex individuals, as are the groups we belong to or identify with. False information often uses deliberate generalizations of groups: *“these people are dirty / they are the problem / they are to blame / they are all trying to steal our jobs.”* “They” is usually a generic term; when pushed for evidence, supporters may not have many specific examples.

4. Black-and-white thinking. (added by Pastor Caleb)

False information is often couched in absolutes: “all,” “none,” “never,” “always,” “they all,” “everyone.” False information needs to be promoted using the most exaggerated terms to compensate for its deception. *(You should know this, everyone knows it!)*

5. Need for belonging.

As social beings, we want to feel part of something bigger (especially if that “bigger something” sounds countercultural). When we connect with people who share our opinions, this sense of belonging grows – and can strengthen certain groups and messages, whether they’re good or bad, true or false. *(Churches are not exempt from this.)*

6. Herd mentality.

This happens when a number of people respond in the same way. In the case of information, if everyone is sharing a particular story, it can feel “true” just because so many people are talking about it.

7. Conspiracy theories.

These tend to pop up during times of crisis or uncertainty and offer “answers” to things that are still unclear. Some key traits of conspiracy theories:

- *Rooted in extreme suspicion, making people reject all other more logical explanations.*
- *Distrust of all official stories or mainstream news sources*
- *A proud sense of being “in the know” or being “brave victims” who stand up against so-called conspirators.*
- *Resistance to any form of evidence against it, since all proof is reinterpreted as part of the conspiracy itself.*

How to Talk to “the Other” at the Thanksgiving Table

1. **Avoid using terms like “the other” or “the enemy.”**
2. **Stay calm.** It’s not about winning or losing. It’s about helping people build their critical thinking skills and see things from a new angle (we, too, aren’t exempt from this journey of learning). Digging in one’s heels and being confrontational may actually reinforce false beliefs in the other person.
3. **Listen carefully.** Practice empathy by trying to understand their worries or reasons for believing certain information. Repeat someone’s argument back to them, to make sure they feel heard and to make sure you understand all their points. Do this before responding with your counterargument. *(Sometimes it’s like fingernails on a chalkboard to hear our own falsehoods repeated back to us.)*
4. **Ask questions.** Gently ask about facts, sources, or data. Stay curious. *(You will most likely learn something yourself, too!)*
5. **Explain the nuances.** Make it clear that information (especially people) aren’t always 100% true/good or 100% false/bad. Understanding and appreciating the “gray areas” is an important part of developing critical thinking.
6. **Facts vs. opinions.** Facts can be backed up with evidence, while opinions are personal points of view. Our opinions may be based on our own real-life experiences, but facts are truths documented by many experiences over a sizeable research period. Emphasize the importance of sticking to trustworthy, fact-based information.
7. **Share tools for fact-checking.** Help them find ways to verify their information, like using reliable fact-checking websites or comparing multiple credible sources.

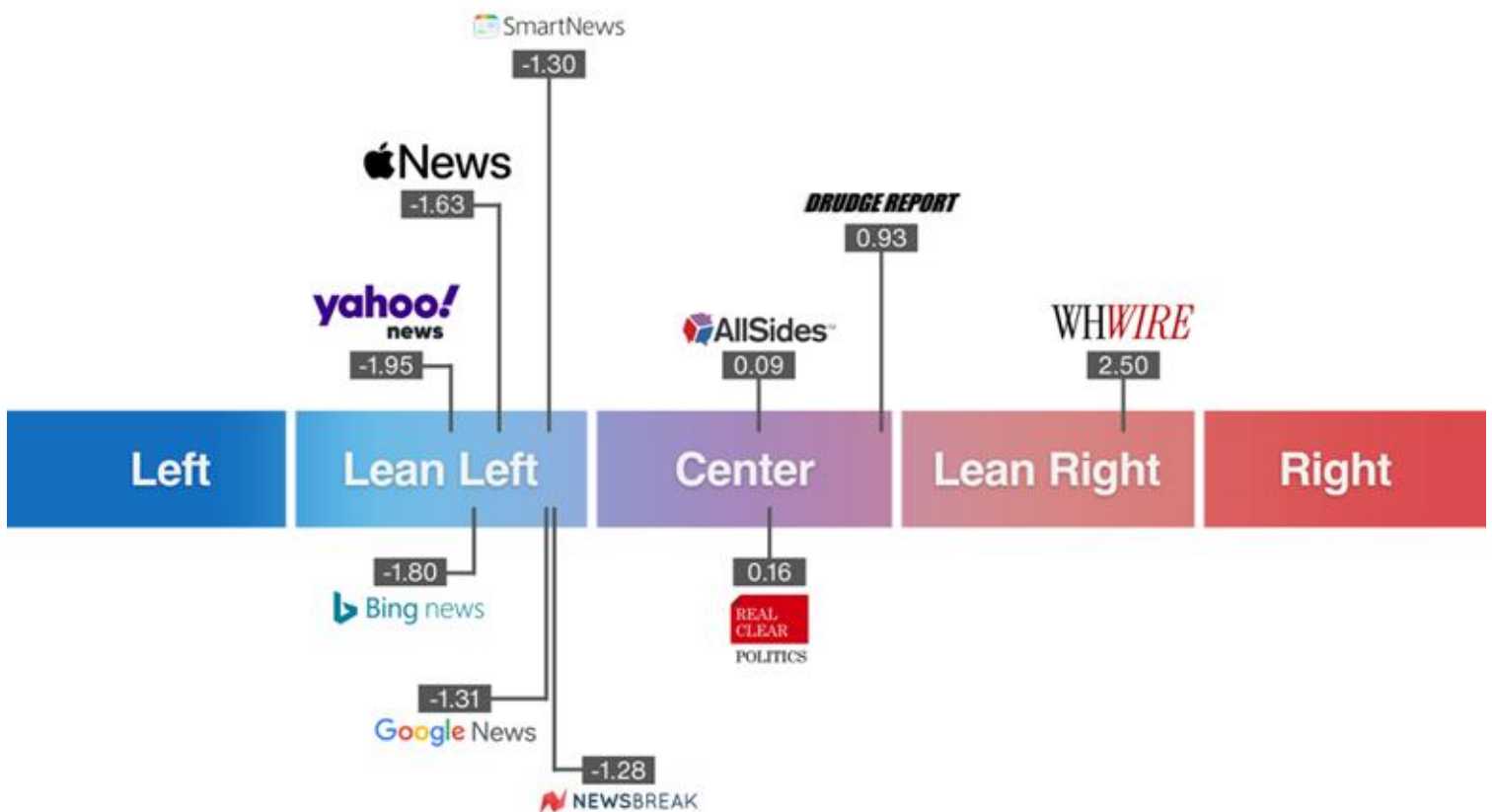
8. **Suggest trusted sources.** Recommend professional journalists or established researchers. While they are not always perfect or correct, they have the training, ethics, and standards to verify facts or try again for better precision.
9. **Have a second serving of pie.** *Holiday pie can bring friends and family together!*

Some Recommended Fact-Checking Sites:

- *PolitiFact*
- *Snopes*
- *FactCheck.org*
- *The Washington Post Fact Checker*
- *FactCheck.me / FactCheck.org*
- *The Poynter Institute*
- *Reuters Fact Check*

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