

Seven Tips for Vetting COVID-19 Information

COVID-19 news is everywhere, and the volume of information can sometimes be overwhelming. However, the most difficult challenge is separating the useful information from the fake news. The pandemic has substantially raised the stakes of fake news and false information, as incorrect information during a public health crisis can directly affect your health and well-being. In light of these circumstances, each of us has a responsibility to consume and share information with others carefully and skeptically.

In the current environment, many overwhelmed Americans are less able to devote time and energy to scrutinizing news and online information. Simultaneously, news sources are attempting to present information as rapidly as possible to meet demands, sometimes inadvertently presenting erroneous or distorted information. Considering the circumstances, it is inevitable that we might come across information that does not tell the entire truth.

Fake news exists in a variety of forms:

- Misinformation is plainly incorrect information which leaves an audience with factually incorrect information.
- Disinformation is presented with a desire to mislead or deceive an audience to gain sympathy for a particular agenda. And finally,
- Missing information entails when important circumstances or contexts are omitted from a story. Missing information can ignore invaluable context or circumstances and can completely distort a narrative, without ever presenting inherently false information.

Unfortunately, whether we mindlessly share a misguided Facebook meme or an out-of-context statistic from the nightly news, we are all susceptible to sharing and accepting fake news.

For example, many commentators have argued that COVID-19 compares to the common flu. This premise has been disproven by both the simple lack of effective treatments or vaccines associated with coronavirus, as well as by research on the difference in death rate, captured in a [recent paper published in May by JAMA Internal Medicine](#). The paper found the weekly death rate of COVID-19 to be about 20 times greater than that of seasonal influenza. However, if these crucial pieces of information are missing, a person could erroneously conclude that COVID-19 and the flu are similar, and therefore, that they do not need to practice extra caution. This conclusion leads its proponents to put themselves in greater danger of contracting the disease.

Meanwhile, as the country has largely reopened and media narratives steer away from the pandemic, many Americans have abandoned recommended public health precautions like social distancing and mask wearing, despite [sharp increases in case occurrences and hospitalizations](#) across the country. This could be thanks to the sharp [divide in opinion](#) among commentators and public figures, despite [epidemiological expertise](#) indicating the effectiveness in widespread mask wearing. Although we are craving a return to normality, it remains crucial that people have access to guidelines that reflect the constantly evolving scientific knowledge of the virus.

Some individuals have gone even further in their skepticism of the pandemic. For example, the notorious [“Plandemic”](#) video, in which biochemist Judy Mikovitz claims that a global cabal

spread the virus to benefit from the “money-making enterprise” of vaccines, racked up 1.8 million Facebook views and trended on Twitter. This claim, among with others that Mikovitz offered in the video, including one that the coronavirus is “activated” by face masks, have all been [debunked](#) or are flatly unsubstantiated. Nevertheless, the extensive misinformation in the video, presented as expert advice, convinced some viewers that precautionary health measures were instead dangerous and that the pandemic itself was a conspiracy.

Social media platforms, the primary mediums for the spread of fake news, have struggled to deal with these problems. The Center for Countering Digital Hate found that of a sample of online posts reported for misinformation, [90% remained visible](#) without disclaimers attached. Facebook and Twitter have faced criticism for allegedly failing on their responsibility to protect their users from false and potentially dangerous information during a public health crisis, while [other commentators](#) have worried about private companies serving as “arbiters of truth”.

In the midst of deep uncertainty, how can we ensure that we are able to decipher real from fake?

The [International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions \(IFLA\)](#) lists several practices for scrutinization in information consumption. They offer this advice:

1. Consider the mission and legitimacy of the source and read beyond attractive headlines. A [2016 study](#) by computer scientists at Columbia University and the French National Institute revealed that 59 percent of links shared on social media had never been clicked on. Basically, they concluded that the majority of people do not read articles before sharing them.
2. Click on embedded links of supporting sources to confirm informational accuracy.
3. Check an article or video’s date. It is very easy to find an attractive headline that obscures the current context with a months or years-old article.
4. Consider whether or not an article is satirical.
5. Beware of impersonator accounts on social media that could post misleading information.
6. Consult sites like [PolitiFact](#) and [Snopes](#), which offer nonpartisan and objective fact-checking information. Twitter has also recently undertaken [fact-checking efforts](#) on tweets. They are focusing particular attention on claims that could cause people the most immediate harm, especially within contexts around the coronavirus and other topics.
7. Read a variety of sources to get a fuller picture of complex issues. One of the most important lessons during a crisis is to acknowledge how many reputable news sources sometimes get things wrong amidst rapid change. Try not to rush to quick judgment in the earliest stages of a major development in a crisis.

As we continue to weather an unprecedented public health crisis, it is essential that we practice careful information consumption and distribution to do our part in ensuring ourselves and our communities have access to accurate information.