

# SOCIAL MEDIA & COMMUNICATION



By ROBYN BLACK



## FAKE NEWS

# How to spot misinformation online

I hate the term Fake News. But it seems that even with the end of the Trump presidency, his favourite (if often misused) phrase is not going anywhere soon; and this year has been the perfect storm for fake news to spread as we all look for information, online, about COVID-19 whilst stuck at home. First came the pandemic – swiftly followed by the infodemic.

We all received the WhatsApp message back in March. You know the one – forwarded from someone's friend whose husband's brother is a Guard and he had been told that the army would be patrolling the streets by the weekend. There was no identifiable source, but the message added fuel to the fire of fear, already

spreading through the country, as big events like St. Patrick's Day were cancelled and people began to panic buy. I like to think I know better, but when I received that message I distinctly remember the split second of fear I felt, because 'what if' it was true?

The simple truth is that the internet is full of bots, trolls and outright liars. As a famous movie quote says, "Some men just want to watch the world burn". Some people have an agenda, and some people just enjoy provoking a reaction. WhatsApp is particularly attractive for this – it has the feel of something personal and intimate; like you're getting privileged information. When the internet first came into our homes we were

warned about clicking virus pop-ups and giving out our bank details online, but now the real danger is misinformation – and we're willingly sending it on to our friends and family.

So whether you're 16 or 60, here are some tips to help you navigate whether something is true, false, or somewhere in between:

### 1. PRESS PAUSE

If you read something online and it provokes an immediate emotion (anger, fear etc.), it is time to slow down and think carefully. Emotion is the biggest tool people on the internet use to get a reaction. Always read the full story, not just the headline. Other red flags include posts

that ask you to share, photos or videos that are shared with no context or source, or if there is a headline that doesn't quite seem to match with the full story.

## 2. DIG A LITTLE DEEPER

Think about what the information presented to you – ask yourself, was this created to inform, entertain or persuade? Look at the style, tone and source to judge how reliable it is.

Who has written the post? Are they qualified, or do they have a verifiable source for their claims? It takes less than two minutes to quickly search on Google and seek out a more qualified view. That being said, just because a person is 'verified' on social media or has many followers, it does not mean they are a trustworthy source. In fact, you can easily purchase thousands of fake followers! It's also important to note that so-called 'influencers' are paid to promote things online, and this can include things that aren't reliable!

## 3. CONSIDER YOURSELF

We all have biases, even if we don't like to admit them. Ask yourself, does this information challenge or match your views? We are more likely to believe information that supports our own views, even if it is unverifiable. Social media algorithms are very clever and they will deliver recommendations to you based on what you read, see and say online already – this means the

information you get can be very personalised and not reflect a fully rounded view of the situation.

## 4. TAKE IT TO THE TOP

Look at official publications like newspapers or news websites. If you can't find it anywhere like this, it is likely it is inaccurate, unreliable or dated. This is especially true if it is something that would be very newsworthy!

There are a few independent organisations that fact check claims being made online. You can turn to them as a final resort, as they may already have published findings on the post you are seeing.

Irish fact checkers include [www.thejournal.ie](http://www.thejournal.ie) and [www.factcheckni.org](http://www.factcheckni.org), or you can view a glossary of them at [www.reporterslab.org/fact-checking](http://www.reporterslab.org/fact-checking).

## 5. TO SHARE OR NOT TO SHARE?

If you have followed all these steps and still can't be sure, I would always err on the side of caution. I understand that everyone loves rumours and gossip and being 'in the know', but the damage the flow of fake news is doing is untold. Do your research, ask yourself if you really know enough to click share, and be safe in the knowledge that you are doing more than most to help with one of society's newest big issues.

## GLOSSARY

**Trolls** – People who intentionally provoke and upset others online.

**Bots** – Automated computer software. They mass-share information much faster than real people can – bot controlled social media accounts are a big problem.

**Influencers** – People with lots of social media followers who are paid to promote products, services and ideas.

**Algorithm** – A mathematical set of rules used to solve a problem. On social media, this means using data about you (your profiles and behaviours) to deliver content to you that it 'thinks' you will like.

**Verified** – This means that a social media platform has, to the best of their ability, verified that an account does belong to a celebrity, public figure, company etc. This is done in a couple of ways, including submitting photo ID and completing paperwork. On most social media platforms, this appears as a blue tick next to their name.

**Click-bait** – An article or video that has a headline or title that does not match the content. It is a way to drive up engagement, as many people will share things without reading the full story or watching the full video!

We recently hit a huge **30,000** followers on Facebook! Our Digital Media Coordinator Robyn marked the occasion with the biggest balloons available, because we think any reason to be cheerful this year should be grabbed with both hands.

In case you didn't know, we're on all the major social media platforms – follow us and say hi!



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