

Solve the mystery: What's real & fake on the internet?

False and manipulated information is all around us, but you don't have to be afraid of it! Solve the mystery of how to carefully evaluate & navigate what's real or fake online.

Mystery #1: Identifying the problem

- Huge amounts of content are shared online constantly & rapidly. This is a problem because misinformation & disinformation spread quickly.
- Anyone can find, create, & share information. This is a problem because information isn't always accurate or controlled.
- Difference between entertainment vs news & real media vs fake media. This is a problem because it's difficult to tell fact from opinion or manipulation.
- Companies constantly collect personal information about you & use it in unclear ways. This is a problem because personal privacy is at risk & your attention is viewed as a valuable resource to capture & monetize.

Remember: Even though this feels abstract, these factors directly affect your community work! You may become a trusted source and filter for determining what's real for your community.

Mystery #2: Identifying the information

You are probably wondering, "Why do I need to know this?" As a community organizer, being aware of misinformation and disinformation:

- Builds your community's resilience against future misinformation/disinformation
- Prevents manipulation, division, & conflict in your community
- Supports informed decision-making & effective action
- Strengthens informed civic & democratic participation

For more information about the impacts of misinformation and disinformation on communities, see the handout on [GrassrootsDigitalHub.ca](https://www.grassrootsdigitalhub.ca).

Misinformation

- False or inaccurate information spread unintentionally
- Not intended to deceive
- Example: Sharing a news story that is inaccurate because of a mistake or misunderstanding

Disinformation

- False information spread intentionally
- Intended to deceive, manipulate, or cause harm
- Example: A fake news article created to sway public opinion or influence elections

Shared characteristics

- Both involve false or misleading information
- Both can spread quickly in digital spaces
- Both can harm public perception & decision-making
- Both appear in all media types (from printed articles to online blogs)

Uncovering the traps

Becoming aware of epistemic bubbles, echo chambers, and confirmation bias bubbles allows you to understand how community members get exposed to limited or one-sided information and why manipulated and false information spreads easily. By becoming aware, you can improve outreach to community members outside their usual beliefs, encourage being open to different perspectives, and reduce “us vs. them” thinking.

Epistemic bubble

How are epistemic bubbles formed?

- Exclusion of relevant information, evidence, & different views/sources
- Lack of exposure to relevant information
- Insufficient coverage of perspectives
- Often unintentional/accidental

How did I get trapped in an epistemic bubble?

- Your own tendency to seek like-minded sources (Selective Exposure)
- Search engines track your personal data to customize search results based on your interests & preferences (Algorithmic Personal Filtering)
- External factors (e.g., censorship)

Echo chamber

How do I know if I am in an echo chamber?

- Requires agreement with strict core beliefs
- Boosts insider credibility & discredits outsiders
- Actively excludes & limits exposure to other voices/sources
- Isolates members
- Often intentional

Why are echo chambers constructed?

- Social, political, or ideological motivations
- Desire for power
- Distrust of external institutions or voices/sources

- Perceived threat from opposing viewpoints

Confirmation bias bubble

- We look for information that supports our existing beliefs & perspectives
- We ignore conflicting information
- Our views feel validated as facts
- This creates a confirmation bias bubble, especially on social media

Remember: False or manipulated information spreads when opinions are prioritized over factual evidence (opinions are personal views, not facts)

Unmasking the suspects

You don't need to become a tech expert, but understanding how these tools and tactics (listed as suspects) are used is important. All of these affect what people believe, whom they trust, and whether they take action. The harms from these make community building harder.

Suspect #1: Artificial Intelligence (AI)

- Definition: Computer systems that perform complex tasks & mimic human cognitive functions
- Example: ChatGPT provides false facts, statistics, or sources
- Problem: Changes how information is created & spread

Suspect #2: Generative AI & Synthetic Media

- Definition: Generates new content (known as synthetic media) with human-like creativity
- Examples: Synthetic voices, face-swapped videos, automatically generated images
- Problem: Faster, cheaper, & more believable false & manipulated content can be created

Suspect #3: Deepfakes

- Definition: Hyper-realistic, digitally altered videos, images, or recordings
- Example: Falsely places people or objects in situations that never happened to embarrass or impersonate them
- Problem: False events can look real & real evidence can be dismissed as fake

Suspect #4: Bots

- Definition: Automated software that acts like a human online
- Example: Automatically liking or sharing content related to certain topics, products, or hashtags
- Problem: Bots try to drown real facts by flooding the discussion with false & manipulated information

Suspect #5: Trolls

- Definition: Individuals who intentionally post inflammatory, upsetting, or misleading content online
- Example: Coordinates attacks against individuals, organizations, or movements

- Problem: Force their agenda into mainstream news feeds to provoke others, create chaos, or manipulate public opinion

Suspect #6: Algorithms

- Definition: Step-by-step process or set of rules a computer uses to solve a problem or finish a task
- Example: Uses your past searches & interactions to provide personalized responses & content
- Problem: It can cause confirmation bias & create epistemic bubbles & echo chambers

Finding the preventative measures

Now that you have gone through to understand:

- the mystery behind the problem (i.e., volume, speed, accessibility of creating & sharing content, uncertainty around facts & opinions, & data collection)
- the mystery of distinguishing between different types of information, such as misinformation & disinformation
- the traps of epistemic bubbles, echo chambers, & confirmation bias bubbles
- unmasking the suspects of evolving tools & tactics utilized to create & spread false & manipulated information

Here are preventative measures (listed as clues) for you to explore and apply to solving mysteries!

Supporting Handout: For a summary of these measures, see the worksheet on the website, where you can add your own strategies!

Clue #1: SIFT the Information

1. Stop
2. Investigate
3. Find
4. Trace

Stop before you read or share

- Notice your emotional reaction to headlines since they're designed to attract clicks
- Ask yourself if you know the website, author, or their reputation

Investigate the source

- Verify the source's credibility before assessing their claim
- Search the source & review their social media (if applicable) to confirm legitimacy
- Question all suspicious information
- Remember: A verified account on social media does not mean it's trustworthy. Even some traditional news outlets blur the line between facts and opinions.
- Ask: Who are the creators? What are their values, interests, or potential biases? Are they experts in this field? Why should I believe it? Who benefits from it? What is the supporting evidence?

Find better or other coverage

- Check for other coverage on the topic
- Choose reliable & credible sources
- Use fact-checkers
 - <https://www.snopes.com/>
 - <https://www.factcheck.org/>
 - <https://www.politifact.com/>
 - <https://www.propublica.org/>
- Remember: Fact-checkers examine claims to determine whether they're factual, biased, or unsupported, to improve public understanding.
- Ask: What other coverage is available on the topic?

Trace claims to the original context

- Go to the original source when something cites an expert or study
- Check the references for primary sources
- Ensure the original context wasn't misrepresented
- Remember: Sensational headlines and posts can change facts. Re-reporting can remove context or support bias.
- Ask: Is information selectively used to support a bias or an agenda? Is information misrepresented by removing context?

Clue #2: Look for visual cues on websites

- Does the website look fishy?
- Is the web address odd? (ABCNews.com.co imitates ABC News; the .co ending is often used by fake websites)
- Is the website authenticated & secure? (Authenticated & secure websites start with https:// instead of http://)
- Is it an old article being reposted? Is the information outdated?
- Are there exaggerated "facts"?
- Are there fake sources & references?
- Are there a lot of spelling & grammar mistakes?
- Is the text emotionless, formal, & robotic?
- Are there words or phrases that are overused?

Clue #3: Consider multiple perspectives

- Consider diverse perspectives
- Listen to & respect others' viewpoints
- Check opposing evidence & counterarguments
- Question your assumptions & sources
- Confront information that challenges your beliefs rather than only seeking confirmation

“We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.”
— Robert Jones Jr.

Clue #4: Look for visual cues to spot deepfakes and AI-generated images and videos

- Are there extra/missing fingers?
- Is there a mismatch in the speech & mouth movements?
- Do their teeth shift around when they're speaking?
- Is the person blinking?
- Are there unrealistic textures for skin & fabric?
- Do the humans appear glossy or have unusual, smooth skin or clothing?
- Is the image smooth, crisp, with a heavily blurred background?
- Are there any incorrect shadows & lighting?
- Are the reflective surfaces accurate?
- Are there glitches or flickering in the footage?
- Are there missing or misplaced objects?
- Is there a credit for a photographer/videographer?
- What happens when you do a reverse image search?
- Is the audio unnatural & with a flat tone?
- Are there unexpected background noises?
- Are there choppy sentences?

Clue #5: Understand and manage your emotions

- Media often appeals to our feelings to influence our beliefs & actions
- Recognize your emotional triggers
- Notice when content is designed to provoke strong reactions
- Notice when emotional words are being used
- Embrace discomfort & explore what you've missed with openness & trust
- Remember: Harmful content often spreads by triggering strong emotions, such as fear or anger. If you feel these, it may be misinformation or disinformation.

Clue #6: Identify manipulative language

If you learn to identify manipulative or confusing language, you can resist manipulation and avoid being misled! You'll be resilient against bias and disinformation.

Doublespeak

- Uses euphemisms & vague or softened language to hide negative meaning
- Twists meanings to make them sound better. For example: "Climate change" instead of "global warming"

Euphemisms

- Replaces offensive or unpleasant words with neutral ones to push certain political or cultural views
- For example: coded “dog whistle” language

Dog whistle language

- Subtly communicates messages to specific audiences
- For example: "Family values" to imply only traditional heterosexual families

Jargon

- Uses specialized terms (e.g., medical or legal language)
- Can be used to confuse you or hide meaning
- Information with lots of jargon is often repetitive & unclear

Clue #7: Burst the bubble

- Epistemic bubbles are relatively fragile
- Expose members to new information or arguments they haven't encountered to burst the bubble

Clue #8: Escape the echo chamber

To limit an echo chamber

- Verify information by checking multiple sources
- Consult sources that represent different political, cultural, or ideological viewpoints

To escape an echo chamber

- Realize you are in a chamber
- Temporarily pause your beliefs & start fresh
- Consider other perspectives, even if you're unsure
- Reconsider sources with an open mind & without prior judgments
- Trust that things are as they seem

To support someone in an echo chamber

Do:

- Build trust
- Offer a community to prevent isolation & abandonment for those reconsidering their beliefs
- Recognize that people are open to new ideas from trusted sources
- Use books to introduce new ideas for the individual to process at their own pace

Don't:

- Rely on presenting neutral facts because they don't change minds
- Expect someone to change their mind & leave them without support
- Force conversations or debates to change beliefs
- Attack bad ideas directly because they can strengthen opposition

Solving more mysteries

Now that you have gone through the clues, it's time for you to solve more mysteries!

1. To solve Mystery #1: [Practice Fact-Checking](#)
2. To solve Mystery #2: [Practice Identifying What's Real & Fake](#)

Congratulations! You are now better equipped to support community members as they navigate the online world.

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