SIX TIPS, TRICKS AND TOOLS FOR VERIFYING INFORMATION AND SOURCES ONLINE

Hotsheets

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In the age of viral hoaxes, attacks on the free press and foreign disinformation attempts, sometimes the best defence is getting the facts right.

Over the past few years, politicians have spun the facts in their favour to score points with voters. Networks of websites have published dubious claims while posing as legitimate sources. On social media, bad actors and trolls on websites like 4chan and Reddit have deliberately tried to feed journalists false information with the hope that they will pick it up.

At PolitiFact, we spend a lot of time verifying online information. But in such a fraught media environment, how can magazine publishers learn to verify the tips, sources and other information they receive on a daily basis — and do so on a meagre budget?

Below are six tips, tricks and tools to help verify what you see online and guard yourself from deceptive disinformation. For more resources, check out some of Poynter's tip sheets.

1. LEARN EVERYTHING YOU CAN ABOUT A WEBSITE

Some websites try to hide their identities in order to pass off shoddy facts or reporting as the truth and it can be hard to tell which to trust. The easiest way to avoid falling for bunk websites is to learn as much as you can about them.

The first, most obvious tip is to simply look at the URL and logo. Fake news sites **often try to pose** as legitimate media organizations, so they'll use URLs like abcnews.com.co or snopes.com.co in order to trick people into believing they're the real deal. Then, they create a logo that's similar to the organization that they're impersonating. To verify you're looking at a real news site, always do a quick Google search for the news organization in question and make sure the URLs and logos match.

Second, find out when a website was created and, possibly, who owns it? **Whois.com** pulls publicly available domain registration data so you can learn more about the nuts and bolts of a website. Sometimes, if the registrant hasn't opted into certain privacy settings, you can even find names and contact information.

To learn more about the funding, transparency or affiliation of a media website, use **NewsGuard**. This tool publicly grades news outlets on their trustworthiness by looking at whether they publish false content or disclosure their sources of funding. While it's not perfect, it gives you a good sense of a website's track record in terms or reliability.

Finally, browse old editions of websites using **the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine**. This tool leverages both volunteers and automation to save and preserve interactive snapshots of webpages throughout time. This is really useful if you're trying to find something that was previously deleted or altered, or if you simply want to learn more about what a website used to look like.

2. GOOGLE LIKE A PRO

Back to Google for a moment. Most people are not using the search engine to its full potential; there are a variety of tricks and tools you can leverage to make your queries more specific.

Try a **Google Advanced Search** if you're trying to narrow your results to a specific set of keywords and potentially exclude some terms. The tool also lets you surface results in specific languages, regions, domains, times or file types so you can cut through the noise.

Short on time? Try using some shortcuts in a standard Google search to narrow your results. For instance, putting quotation marks around a term or phrase will only deliver results that include it, while putting a minus sign in front will exclude them. To search for keywords on a specific domain, use "site:" before the website you're interested in perusing. Finally, find words in specific kinds of documents by using "filetype:" followed by something like "PDF."

3. DO SOME SOCIAL MEDIA INVESTIGATING

There are a lot of bogus social media accounts out there. But telling the real from the fake ones doesn't have to be more than a few clicks.

Verify the age of the social media profile before you amplify its content. Bots and bogus accounts are usually created and taken down quickly so as to avoid detection by the company. If an account was created within the past month or only has a few posts and claims to be producing news content, steer clear.

If you can't tell based on a Twitter profile alone, try using a tool like Account Analysis. This tool, developed by Luca Hammer, lets you see key details like how often an account posts, what kind of content they most frequently share and what language they tweet in. If someone is tweeting a lot about a bunch of random topics in several different languages, chances are it's a bot.

Another useful tool is Botometer. Developed by researchers at Indiana University, this tool uses machine learning to determine whether an account is a bot based on thousands of other examples. Botometer gives users a score for how likely an account is to be fake.

On Facebook, there are a few easy things you can do to learn more about the origin of the page. Use the information in the Page Transparency box to learn when a page was created, how many times it has changed its name and the countries where its operators reside. If you find a page that has changed its name a lot, is very young that should be a signal that it's not authentic.

Finally, if you want to verify an image on Instagram, screenshot it and upload it to a reverse image search service, such as Google or TinEye. If an account is publishing a lot of manipulated or out-of-context photos, it's best not to trust it.

4. CROSS-REFERENCE YOUR FINDINGS

If you've done the bulk of your digital verification work and you think you're on the right track, it's time to find more evidence. You can never have too much.

If you think you've found a potential misinforming website and its WhoIs information looks sketchy, try cross-referencing it with SecurityTrails. This service lets you see how many other domains are connecting to a specific URL. Sometimes that can elucidate the size of a disinformation network or perhaps get you closer to finding out who's behind it.

If your newsroom has some money to spend, consider getting a Nexis subscription. This powerful tool lets you search for news articles, public records, press releases, journals, company filings, video transcripts — you name it. If you're trying to dig up as much information as possible about a person or organization, this is the tool to use.

When in doubt, see what fact-checking organizations like PolitiFact and Factcheck.org have written about the subject you're investigating. Google has a handy tool to search all major fact-checkers' websites at once. Remember to use quotation marks around the terms you really want to surface in the search results.

5. FIND A HUMAN SOURCE

Sometimes you can't verify something unless you speak to the people who created it or are implicated in the claim. But finding contact information for spokespeople online is often challenging because many companies make it hard to surface direct email addresses and phone numbers.

Not to worry — there are a variety of free tools that help you find the contacts you're looking for.

First up in Hunter.io. This free browser extension scrapes websites for the publicly available contact information of people connected to it. For example, if you were to visit PolitiFact.com and user Hunter, you'd find the email addresses for three of our top editors in less than five seconds.

Second is Lusha. This browser extension (also free) works similarly to Hunter, but for LinkedIn. So, if you find someone's profile but you can't locate their contact information, just click the Lusha icon in your browser and their email or phone number might pop up.

These tools aren't foolproof and there are more advanced ways to dig up someone's contact information, but they're among the easiest ways to find sources quickly and effectively.

6. DOUBLE-CHECK EVERYTHING. THEN DO IT AGAIN

There are a lot of fancy verification tools out there. But if you want to fully bulletproof your reporting, sometimes there's no better tool than a simple highlighter. For every article you publish, go old-school and highlight every single fact in the piece. Then, check them one by one.

If it's an enterprise story, considering printing your article out and doing this by hand. This is a lost art and it forces you to slow down and consider what you're writing and editing.

I've been using this process since I started working at Poynter as a reporter in 2017. I have never not found at least one fact that had to be corrected or phrase that needed some clarification. The simple act of circling facts and manually looking them up prevents you from overlooking erroneous details, small or large, that could undermine your entire piece.

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