

How to avoid disinformation and misinformation on Facebook and Twitter

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

George Floyd is not really dead. Billionaire philanthropist George Soros is supplying bricks to protesters.

Hoaxes, [conspiracy theories](#) and other falsehoods like these are surging on Facebook and Twitter following Floyd's death in police custody in Minneapolis.

Bad actors exploit large-scale events dominating the national conversation to sow chaos and fear and deepen distrust and division, disinformation experts say. In this case, they've seized on America's rawest political division—race—and the growing furor over police brutality to hijack protests across the country.

"We are seeing a rapidly evolving situation, sustained attention and most of all just deep existing divisions that make it a perfect confluence of events for disinformation from a range of actors who are known to spread it," says Graham Brookie, director of the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab.

And these campaigns could intensify following President Donald Trump's threat late Monday to deploy the military to stop "acts of domestic terror."

"No doubt tonight there will be out-of-context images of the military. There will be rumors about military presence that maybe isn't happening. It's very easy for people to do. They just google images of the military near a protest and circulate those pictures and say: "This is whatever city tonight,"" says Peter Adams, senior vice president of education at the News Literacy Project. "They hope some of it will stick and go viral. And it takes time for fact checkers to debunk it."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we are already more susceptible to false claims. So how can we stop falling for and spreading bogus information?

Do your homework before sharing

What's making it tougher to discern fact from fiction: Protests are hyperlocal events.

"Every afternoon and every evening brings different protests and different degrees of unrest in different cities. Because social media collapses those distances and brings those images and those [video clips](#) together, it can be very hard for people to understand what's authentic and what's not," Adams says.

Josh Russell, an independent researcher who tracks foreign and domestic trolling operations, says to be on the lookout for fake antifa or Black Lives Matter accounts. "Right-wing trolls like to create them to scare people," Russell says.

Take a few minutes to research each piece of information before passing it on. Ask yourself: Who is the person publishing this information? Is this person reliable? What else has this person posted? Does the person publishing this information have something to gain? Are the claims in the post being backed up by reputable sources?

Be wary of viral tweets from Twitter accounts that are new and have very little identifying information, Russell says. And check if screenshots of tweets you share on Facebook are authentic.

"Consider the source, which guards you against disinformation, the intentional spread of false information, and consider the source's source, which guards you against the unintentional or inadvertent spread of false information," Brookie advises.

Watch out for posts that make your blood boil

Beware [social media](#) posts that deliberately incite fear, strain credulity or play on your emotions. Ask yourself: Why is someone trying to make me

feel this way?

"People just have to remember to pause and don't react too fast. Don't share something you don't know is authentic, even if it's outrageous to you or strikes a strong emotional cord," Adams says. "Only [share information](#) that you know has been verified in some way."

Check your bias

Disinformation preys on our biases and our behavior to gain traction, especially in a crisis. We are much more likely to share something that fits our world view.

So check your bias, Brookie advises. And remember, he says: "Not everything needs to be tweeted."

Don't trust everything you see

We instinctively trust images and video, but they can be taken out of context, edited or digitally manipulated.

"Avoid [video footage](#) that has not been vetted by a journalist," Russell says. "People like to edit videos to match their political agenda."

And always check with sources you trust.

"What's extra challenging about this situation is that there is a lot of important footage and imagery being shared by folks on the ground who are documenting this," Adams says. "They are producing images and video that are part of the story but they need to be verified."

Be empathetic

Don't forget your—or someone else's—humanity. We tend to dehumanize the person whose political views we reject, especially during periods of heightened tensions.

"Don't make a fight out of being right," Brookie advises. "Give others the space in order to find facts for themselves and come to their own conclusions."

Don't join the crowd

Disinformation needs a crowd—the bigger, the better. Effective campaigns thrive by recruiting unsuspecting members of the public who don't realize they are amplifying and legitimizing posts seeking to inflame tensions or disrupt American life.

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