

Twitter blue ticks: Five ways to spot misinformation without verified accounts

April 26 2023, by Mikey Biddlestone, Jon Roozenbeek and Sander van der Linden



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

After months of [chaotic policies](#), [backtracks](#) on said policies and [mass layoffs](#), Elon Musk has made good on his vow to fully replace Twitter's "blue tick" verification with a paid subscription service.

In place since 2009, Twitter gave blue ticks to accounts of celebrities, professional journalists, news organizations, and other influential entities. Simply put, it was an easy way to tell if information was coming from a person who is who they say they are.

But soon after purchasing Twitter, Musk said he would end this "[lords and peasants system](#)," and introduce paid verification. Twitter users can [simply pay](#) a monthly fee of US\$8 (£6.44) for the privilege of being verified. This was fully implemented as of last week, resulting in the disappearance of most remaining blue ticks from "legacy" verified accounts.

The ability to now pay to legitimize your account status makes the platform more vulnerable to those seeking to impersonate others and present a false sense of authority. Recently, [Musk appears to have backtracked](#) on this approach somewhat, restoring blue ticks to some celebrities.

Identity [impersonation in the context of misinformation](#) is a very real concern. When Musk first introduced opt-in paid verification in November 2022, users with verified accounts caused [pharmaceutical companies](#) to lose billions in stocks by tweeting false announcements that insulin would now be free.

Now, any company, government or other organization willing to spend enough money on bots can also exploit this by artificially amplifying dubious claims or positions.

Unfortunately, impersonation is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the [manipulation tactics](#) used to spread misinformation online. Here are five things to watch for.

1. Fake experts

Even with Twitter's past approach to account verification, being able to accurately identify a snake oil salesman does not stop them being one. People will [flash their supposed credentials](#) to lull readers into a false sense of legitimacy so they don't have to bolster their claims with evidence.

When someone makes a sweeping claim based on their "expert opinion," look into their credentials: is their area of expertise relevant to this topic? Have they previously used these credentials to support questionable claims?

2. Dividers and conquerors

We all have differences in opinion, but it's important to pick your battles carefully. Even if you're a master of persuasion, in the pantomime of online debate you're likely to spend most of your time arguing with a brick wall.

Bad actors on [social media](#) will often [spread misinformation that turns people against each other](#) by painting each side as unreasonable and incompatible, in the hopes of achieving some financial, social or political objective.

While immersing yourself in owning people online may earn you short-term satisfaction and kudos from other posters, take a step back before responding to rage bait. If you find yourself charging the machine guns in the culture wars, you might want to ask yourself whether you're just being used as cannon fodder.

3. Whataboutism and straw men

Some people who spread false information are simply clever with words.

[Whataboutism](#) describes a technique used to deflect or dodge criticism by raising a different issue: "What about X?" It can also be an attempt to highlight hypocrisy, heroically stating "people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

However, a murderer pointing out another murderer doesn't make either one of them any less of a murderer.

Similar rhetorical pizzazz can be found in the use of straw man arguments, where someone intentionally misrepresents their opponent's position. They can score an easy win by shutting down an opinion that doesn't really exist.

[Research shows](#) that being able to recognize manipulative arguments like this can prevent people from falling for fake news and dubious claims.

Don't just become a cheerleader for someone who is great at dunking on others, scrutinize how they argue.

4. Conspiracy theories

It is now easier than ever to [spread conspiracy theories online](#). This is particularly worrying considering their link with the acceptance of [violence](#).

Conspiracy theories draw us in because they are [entertaining](#) and present answers when people feel [unsafe and uncertain](#). People might also spread [conspiracy theories](#) when trying to seek social validation and find common ground [with other people](#). However, evidence suggests that attempting to address unpleasant feelings by endorsing conspiracy narratives may actually [further exacerbate existential dread](#).

While some real conspiracies have happened, most are completely

[implausible](#). Many seemingly "unexplained" events have a straightforward, non-conspiratorial answer, so stay wary of alternative narratives that sound like the plot to a blockbuster thriller.

5. Trolls

Ever been derailed from making a logical argument by someone provoking you with a thinly veiled insult or offensive comment? Sounds like you've been trolled.

Social media can be a great way to bridge the gap between information and audience, but trolls—those who intentionally post disinformation or offensive content to anger or upset others—[can distract](#) you from reliable information.

Keyboard warriors have a knack for ticking you off with [emotional language](#) and launching smear campaigns to discredit public figures or organizations. When trying to play a constructive role in public debate, don't get sidetracked by some weirdo you've never met insulting your mother—and don't, under any circumstances, feed the trolls.

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