No, you're not that good at detecting fake videos—two misinformation experts explain how to recognize them

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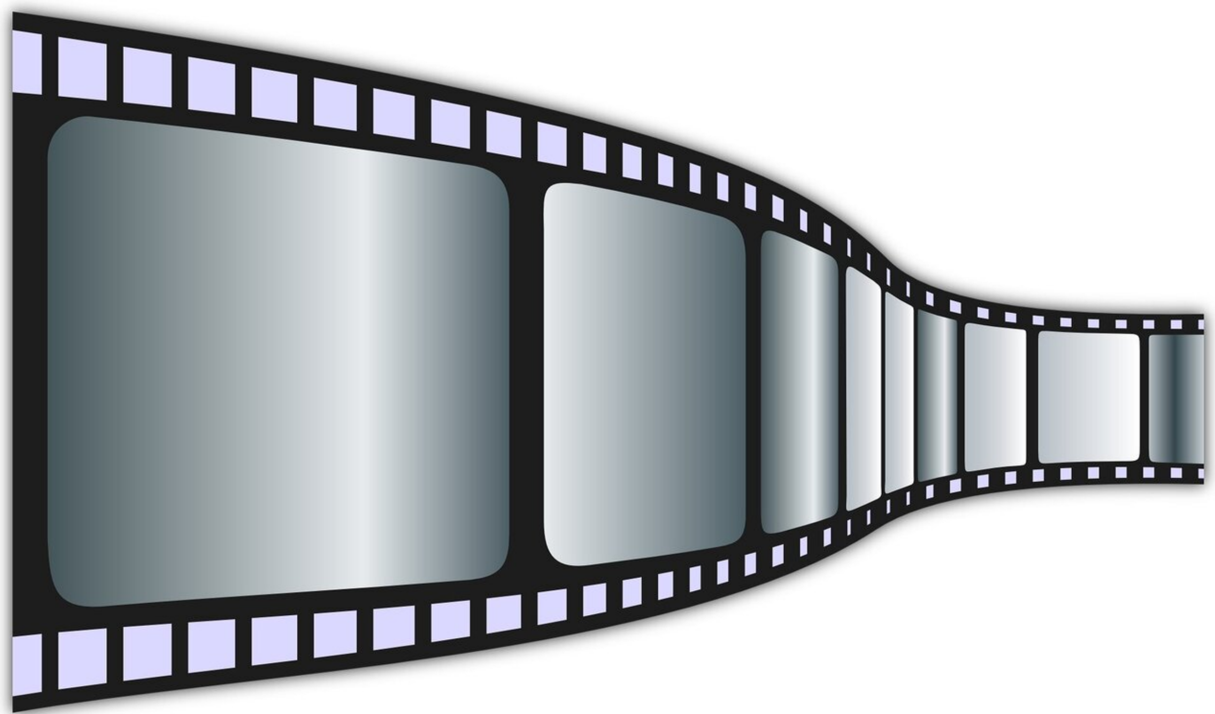

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Someone tracking the conflict raging in the Middle East could have seen the following two videos on social media. The first shows a little boy

hovering over his father's dead body, whimpering in Arabic, "Don't leave me." The second purports to show a pregnant woman with her stomach slashed open and claims to document the testimony of a paramedic who handled victims' bodies after Hamas' attack in Israel on Oct. 7, 2023.

Even though these videos come from different sides of the Israel-Hamas war, what they share far exceeds what separates them. Because both videos, though real, have nothing to do with the events they claim to represent. The clip of the boy is from Syria in 2016; the one of the woman is from Mexico in 2018.

Cheap but effective fakes

Recent headlines warn of sophisticated, AI-driven deepfakes. But it is low-tech cheap fakes like these that fuel the latest round of disinformation. Cheap fakes are the Swiss army knife in the propagandist's tool belt. Changing a date, altering a location or even repurposing a clip from a video game and passing it off as battlefield combat require little know-how yet effectively sow confusion.

The good news is that you can avoid being taken in by these ruses—not by examining the evidence closely, which is liable to mislead you, but by waiting until trusted sources verify what you're looking at. This is often hard to do, however.

Most people are ill-equipped to detect this kind of trickery. Research that we review in our new book, "Verified: How to Think Straight, Get Duped Less, and Make Better Decisions about What to Believe Online," shows that almost everyone falls for it.

In the largest survey of its kind, 3,446 high school students evaluated a video on social media that purported to show election fraud in the 2016 Democratic primary. Students could view the whole video, part of it or

leave the footage to search the internet for information about it. Typing a few keywords into their browsers would have led students to articles from Snopes and the BBC debunking the video. Only three students—less than one-tenth of 1%—located the true source of the video, which had, in fact, been shot in Russia.

Your lying eyes

Why were students so consistently duped? The problem, we've found, is that many people, young and old alike, think they can look at something online and tell what it is. You don't realize how easily your eyes can be deceived—especially by footage that triggers your emotions.

When an incendiary video dodges your prefrontal cortex and lands in your solar plexus, the first impulse is to share your outrage with others. What's a better course of action? You might assume that it is to ask whether the clip is true or false. But a different question—rather, a set of related questions—is a better starting place.

- Do you really know what you're looking at?
- Can you really tell whether the footage is from atrocities committed by Russian forces in the Donbas just because the headline blares it and you're sympathetic to the Ukrainian cause?
- Is the person who posted the footage an established reporter, someone who risks their status and prestige if it turns out to be fake, or some random person?
- Is there a link to a longer video—the shorter the clip, the more you should be wary—or does it claim to speak for itself, even though the headline and caption leave little room for how to connect the dots?

These questions require no advanced knowledge of video forensics. They require you only to be honest with yourself. Your inability to

answer these questions should be enough to make you realize that, no, you don't really know what you're looking at.

Patience is a powerful tool

Social media reports of "late-breaking news" are not likely to be reporting at all, but they are often pushed by rage merchants wrapping an interpretation around a YouTube video accompanied by lightning bolt emojis and strings of exclamation points. Reliable reporters need time to establish what happened. Rage merchants don't. The con artist and the propagandist feed on the impatient. Your greatest information literacy superpower is learning to wait.

If there are legs to the video, rest assured you're not the only one viewing it. There are many people, some of whom have mastered advanced techniques of video analysis, who are likely already analyzing it and trying to get to the bottom of it.

You won't have to wait long to learn what they've found.

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