

Crisis informatics expert offers three tips to avoid misinformation during COVID-19

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Amanda Hughes, assistant professor in the School of Technology, researches crisis informatics. Credit: Jaren Wilkey/BYU

School of Technology professor Amanda Hughes has spent her career studying social media during disasters and crises. Her work looks at how members of the public turn to social media during a crisis and how they find trustworthy information.

That research has become increasingly important during the coronavirus pandemic, as [misinformation](#) about the deadly virus has spread rapidly online. A lot of that misinformation on social media is clouding people's judgment and causing confusion.

"Because the COVID-19 crisis is a global event, we are seeing large volumes of social [media](#) data about it," Hughes said. "We've studied some big events in the past, but because this is a global pandemic, it is even more important that you have systems to sift through information to find what is really critical and trustworthy."

Hughes suggests three things we can do to find relevant and trustworthy information online during

these uncertain times:

1. **Solid sources:** Look at information from sources where it is their job to be on top of a global pandemic. For example, The World Health Organization or local county health departments who are monitoring your local conditions are good sources.
2. **Be skeptical:** Take the messages you see on your social network with a grain of salt, especially if they evoke an [emotional reaction](#), and fact check them with official sources. Many messages that contain misinformation are designed to make you angry, upset, or emotional in some way, which makes you more likely to share them.
3. **Dig a little to verify:** Trustworthy accounts often have a complete profile and have a professional look and tone, though these things can be faked. So, in addition, look for features that are harder to fake, such as the credibility of an account's past messages, or who follows the account (Are they followed by reliable sources?).

Misinformation often spreads when well-intentioned people hear things from friends of friends and share it as truth. While a lot of misinformation is currently being spread, there is something different about the COVID-19 pandemic from previous disasters: many people are also helping to search out misinformation and replace it with the truth.

"Because this event is slow moving and people are at home with resources, more individuals have the ability to digitally volunteer and be involved in finding [relevant information](#) for the public and [emergency responders](#)," Hughes said.

Hughes is currently working with professors from multiple universities and an official emergency responder in a digital volunteer team to perform different online tasks during the coronavirus crisis. These volunteers are doing a variety of jobs to sort

through [social media](#) and find information or misinformation that official responders may need to address.

Hughes' students are also getting involved in different digital volunteer efforts to help stop the spread of the coronavirus and misinformation about it. As they look at how people share information and what kind of information they are sharing, they are able to code for what is relevant and help correct misinformation.

While Hughes and many others are searching out misinformation, individuals can also distinguish the truth by following Hughes' three suggestions to help determine what is accurate and helpful during this time.

Provided by Brigham Young University

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