

College students struggle to spot misinformation online as 2020 election approaches

October 19 2020, by Nathan Bomey, Usa Today



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Don't fall for the premise that young people, otherwise known as "digital natives," are immune to misinformation.

That's the message from Stanford University researchers who say their

new research provides further evidence that [college students](#) are prone to being deceived online.

The new study from the Stanford History Education Group shows that 2020's first-time voters often struggle to sort fact from fiction despite their technical prowess on smartphones and social media.

The researchers found that most sophomores, juniors and seniors were easily fooled by misinformation, even when they were given the time and resources to fact-check the material.

The study adds to "a mountain of evidence that students struggle to evaluate the content that streams across their devices," said Joel Breakstone, director of the Stanford History Education Group and co-author of the study.

The study gave two separate tasks to 263 students—a mix of sophomores, juniors and seniors—at a "large state university on the East Coast":

- 1) Assess the trustworthiness of a news story.
- 2) Evaluate the credibility of an informational website.

The students were allowed to use the internet to complete their evaluations.

But they "struggled" with the tasks, the researchers reported. "They employed inefficient strategies that made them vulnerable to forces, whether satirical or malevolent, that threaten informed citizenship."

In the first task, two-thirds of students failed to identify that the story was published on a satirical website and was not reliable.

In the second task, more than 9 in 10 students failed to realize that the website purporting to provide unbiased information on the [minimum wage](#) had actually been established by a [public relations](#) firm funded by an interest group of restaurants that opposes increases to the minimum wage.

In many cases, students attempting to validate the information did not visit any other websites, choosing to trust the material they were presented based on the apparent credibility of the site's design or its unsubstantiated claims.

The Stanford researchers advocated for incorporating lessons on source validation and basic fact-checking skills into regular coursework.

"We've got to do something about this," said Sam Wineburg, the lead researcher on the study, founder of the Stanford History Education Group and author of "Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)."

Nadav Ziv, co-author of the study, said students are too trusting of the information they scroll through on their smartphones.

"People somehow expect these platforms to do the work for them," Ziv said. "We can't rely on [tech companies](#) to do the work of fact-checking for us no matter what platform, whether it's Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, etc., because information spreads faster than any ability to moderate it."

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Citation: College students struggle to spot misinformation online as 2020 election approaches (2020, October 19) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-10-college-students->

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