

5 expert tips to protect yourself from online misinformation

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The spread of misinformation is a major problem impacting many areas of society from [public health](#), to science and [even democracy itself](#).

But [online misinformation](#) is a problem that is very difficult to address. Policing [social media](#) is like playing an infinite game of whack-a-mole.

Even if we could address one type of misinformation, others quickly spring up in its place. Furthermore, there are valid concerns about how governments and corporations might address this problem and the dangers of censorship.

Talking to experts

We wanted to determine how people could best protect themselves from misinformation online, so in a [recent project](#), we created [a podcast](#) where we interviewed a group of experts from North America and the UK about misinformation.

We found their answers could be grouped into 5 broad themes.

1. Alter your sharing behavior and take more time to consider the source of the information, as [Philip Mai from Toronto Metropolitan University's Social Media Lab suggests](#):

"Don't be so trigger happy with that retweet button or that share, but know your source. So if something is emotionally triggering you before you share it stop and see who's sharing...how did they get that information so it's not just who is sharing it but [how did they get that information before you share it](#)."

Lateral reading can also help people identify the quality of information. Lateral reading involves seeking out additional sources that speak to the trustworthiness of what you're about to share. For example, [cognitive psychology professor Stephan Lewandowsky](#) says,

"Look for other sites that can tell you something about your target. So you know Wikipedia may pop up and say that website is a front for the fossil fuel industry or...it's funded by unknown sources or whatever. [And the moment you know that, then you have the means to dismiss](#)

[sources as being likely untrustworthy.](#)"

2. Seek out a variety of different news sources and consider paying for access to reputable news sources, if you are in a position to do so, to ensure that accurate news is available when you need it. [Timothy Caulfield, Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy at the University of Alberta](#) suggests:

"Read news and commentary from across the ideological spectrum and subscribe to newspapers across the ideological spectrum...so we know you're kind of contributing to the marketplace of ideas and [you're also doing the best to get outside your echo chamber.](#)"

It can be difficult to identify quality news sources when there are so many inaccurate ones out there, but there are tools to help. Philosophy scholar Cailin O'Connor, co-author of the book [The Misinformation Age](#), told us:

"The website [Prop Watch](#) is all about teaching people what different propaganda techniques look like, as used by politicians and members of the media online, [there are things like this that people can use to train themselves.](#)"

Prop Watch is an educational non-profit. It provides a catalog of searchable propaganda that people can access to learn what propaganda looks like so they can better identify it online.

3. Educate yourself and be skeptical of information you encounter. Arming yourself with a critical filter may help protect you against misinformation that you would otherwise accept at face value. [Yochai Benkler, faculty co-director of the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University](#), advises:

"You can prevent yourself from falling into a trap by having an appropriately skeptical view of most everything you hear. Whatever the outlet...The stance is one of skepticism without cynicism. [You don't have to think everyone is lying to understand that everything is prone to error.](#)"

One way to practice healthy skepticism is to look for power in every story you come across. [Journalist and author of the book Spin Doctors, Nora Loreto](#), suggests asking questions like: "Who has power? Who does not have power? Who's challenging power? How is power being employed? And [how is power being protected?](#)."

4. Reconnect with yourself and your communities so you can have better relationships with information and the world around you. We are constantly inundated with information and stimulation in our current [attention economy](#).

As education and technology scholar [Shandell Houlden](#) describes, "the attention economy really is a disconnection economy and it disconnects us from ourselves." [She suggests that we should pay greater attention to our senses and to how things are trying to make us feel.](#)

Social media platforms and online spaces can leave us disconnected. Reconnecting with our communities can help us combat misinformation by encouraging dialogue with people we disagree with. [Communications scholar and artist Geo Takach recommends](#): "Engage with people, listen even if you disagree with them and [try to find common ground based on values.](#)"

5. Advocate for systemic change by, for example, electing politicians that care about misinformation, helping people feel less disenfranchised and supporting reliable sources of information. Misinformation is a symptom of much larger systemic issues, ranging from social

inequalities to inadequate legal infrastructures. As O'Connor says,

"Honestly I would say the most important thing you can do is work to elect politicians who care about it... because again [sweeping changes are going to be more important than anything an individual can do.](#)"

By mobilizing to address the systematic structures that support a healthier information environment, individuals can do more to mitigate misinformation. Overall, it will take action at individual, organizational and systemic levels, but there are meaningful steps we can all take to fight back against [misinformation](#) if we have the will to do so.

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