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**Columbia  
Journalism  
Review.**



Take a closer look at the newsstand on the northwest corner of 42nd Street and Sixth Avenue.

Every headline and story you see there appeared somewhere on the Internet, was heavily promoted on social media, was among the most-read stories when it appeared, and **is not true**.

## Misinformation

is being created and distributed with the intention to mislead you. Misinformation erodes the public's trust. It makes all news suspect. Even factual, diligent reporting. And it's all around you.

But there's a difference between misinformation and information we don't like. It's important not to dismiss legitimate facts as "fake" simply because we want them to be false.

The Columbia Journalism Review created this guide to help you see what information is real.

Here's how you can stand up to misinformation.



# How to Spot Misinformation

*The News Literacy Project, a nonprofit group that helps students spot misinformation, offers these pointers:*

1

## CHECK YOUR EMOTIONS

Misinformation often tries to hijack our rational minds with emotional appeals. So what's your first reaction to a story? Are you angry? Outraged? Curious? Excited? Think through your feelings carefully.

2

## QUESTION THE SOURCE

Knowing where it's from, what it's for and who produced it will help you decide if it's trustworthy. Is it a news report? An opinion column? An ad? Satire? Does the website have an "About Us" page that offers more information about the publisher's credentials? Does it provide biographical or contact information for its employees and contributors so you can vet them?

3

## BE AWARE OF YOUR BIASES

You're likely to be less critical of information if it feels right. Are you assuming or hoping that it's true or false? Are you allowing yourself to be manipulated?

4

## CONSIDER THE MESSAGE

Intentionally misleading information is often overtly and aggressively partisan. It can use loaded language, excessive punctuation!!! or ALL CAPS FOR EMPHASIS. It may claim to contain a secret, or something "the media" doesn't want you to know.

5

## SEARCH FOR MORE INFORMATION

Try to determine where it first appeared, and check if reputable news outlets are reporting the same thing. See if independent fact-checkers—like factcheck.org—have covered, contested or debunked the story.

6

## QUESTION THE SOURCE AGAIN

Search the name of the news source to vet its reputation, then check its social media presence. Does it post responsibly? Do its tweets appear reliable? Does it correct typos and own up to errors? Also look for any evidence of satire, like silly bylines or section headings, or disclaimers labeling it as satirical or fictional—was the headline you read a joke taken out of context? If you want to be extra diligent, do a WHOIS search on its web domain. What do you find?

7

## QUESTION THE CONTENT

Find the byline—that's the line in an article or post that tells you who wrote it—and do a search on the author's name. Is it a real person? Then check the date the article was published to make sure it's not outdated. Try to confirm key details, like date, time and location; search quotes to verify that they're accurate and presented in context; and do a reverse image search on photos and graphics to see if they've been altered.

# The History of Misinformation

## PROPAGANDA IS AS OLD AS THE NEWS.

In the early 1900s, pamphlets were distributed throughout major cities based on made-up information, prompting the rise of journalism as a profession, with rules and ethics and standards.

For decades, journalism served as a gatekeeper, separating true information from false.

Today, we're basically back to where we started,

except it's Facebook and Twitter that are driving the spread of misinformation.

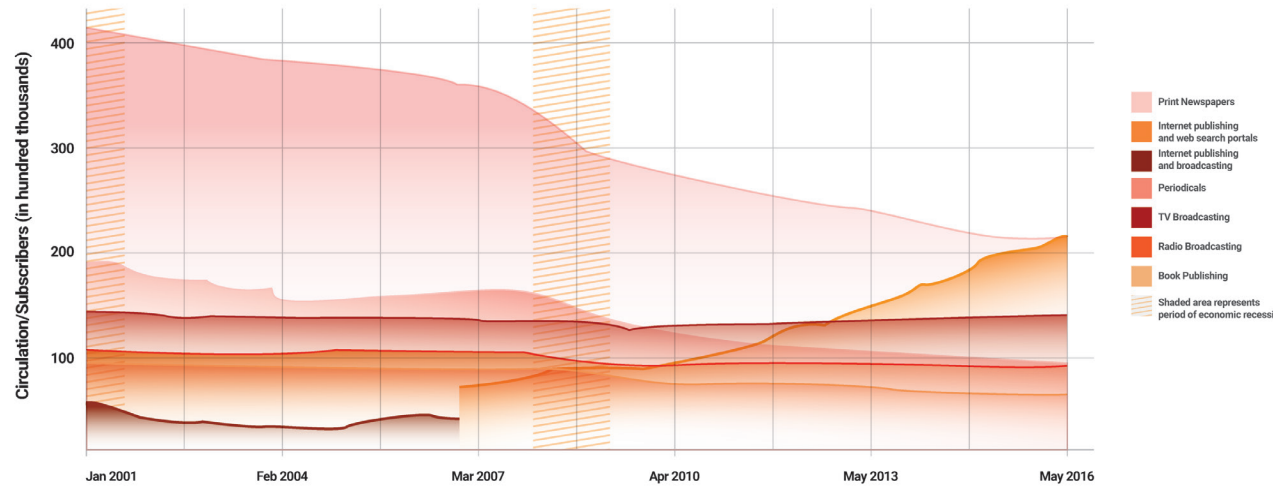
As news has multiplied and the number of consumers on social media has soared, so has the spread of misinformation. The challenge for consumers and for the news business is knowing how to spot it.

# Where have all the journalists gone?

American print newspapers lost more than half their workforce in just 15 years, from 412,000 people in January 2001 to 174,000 in September 2016. That's about the same as the drop in US coal mining jobs from 1986–2000, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Digital journalism jobs have grown, but not fast enough to offset losses in print.

The decline of traditional journalism made us vulnerable to the rise of unverified news.

## EMPLOYMENT IN SELECTED INFORMATION INDUSTRIES JANUARY 2001 TO SEPTEMBER 2016



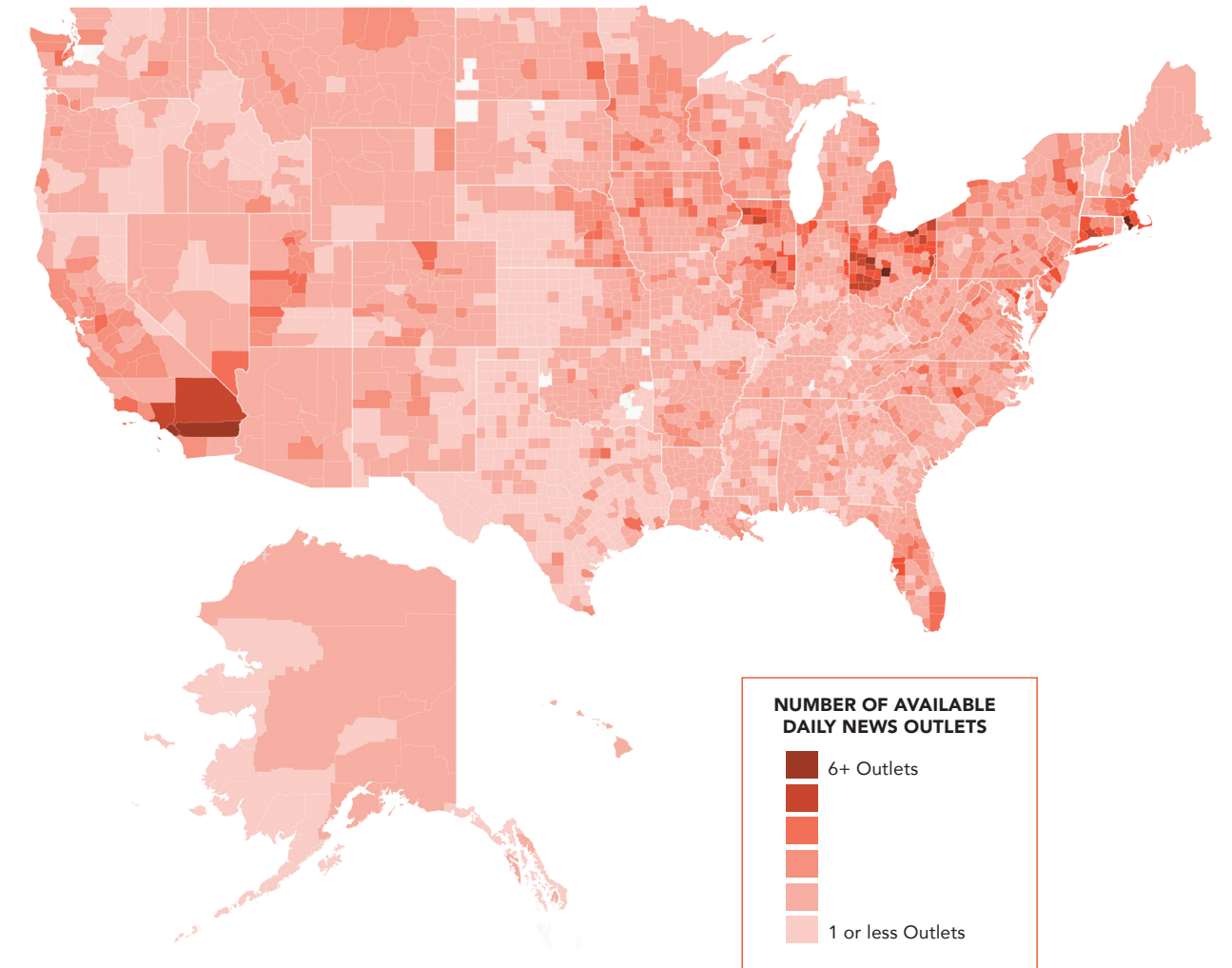
Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Newspaper publishers lose over half their employment from January 2001 to September 2016," April 2017.

# No Local News is Bad News

When reliable news sources go away, it creates what's called a "news desert"—meaning the streams of information have dried up. Local news outlets have been some of the hardest hit by cuts and layoffs in the journalism business,

which in turn created vast news deserts across the US. More parts of the country currently have no local news outlets at all, opening the door for misinformation to thrive.

## COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW'S MAP OF NEWS DESERTS ACROSS AMERICA





## How big is this problem?

**A SURVEY** by the Pew Research Center found that two-thirds of Americans believe misinformation caused a great deal of confusion during the 2016 presidential election. Nearly one out of four admitted to sharing intentionally misleading political news on social media.

In the runup to the 2016 presidential election, The Knight Foundation found more than 6.6 million tweets by misinformation publishers. The problem persisted after the election, with 4 million tweets.

More than 80% of the accounts that intentionally distributed misinformation two years ago are still active today. Unverified news comes from accounts affiliated with both US political parties.

Studies show that intentionally misleading information is more often shared than fact-checked news. According to one study, unverified stories were 70% more likely to be retweeted than verified stories.

## How Trust Works

**DO PEOPLE TRUST THE NEWS?** It's hard to generalize. Many people have lost faith in "the media" but still depend on specific members working within it for information. A person may trust just a few individual news outlets and nothing else. So whether or not people trust the news depends on what you mean by "news."

### PEOPLE HAVE MORE TRUST IN THE MEDIA THEY USE THAN THE MEDIA IN GENERAL

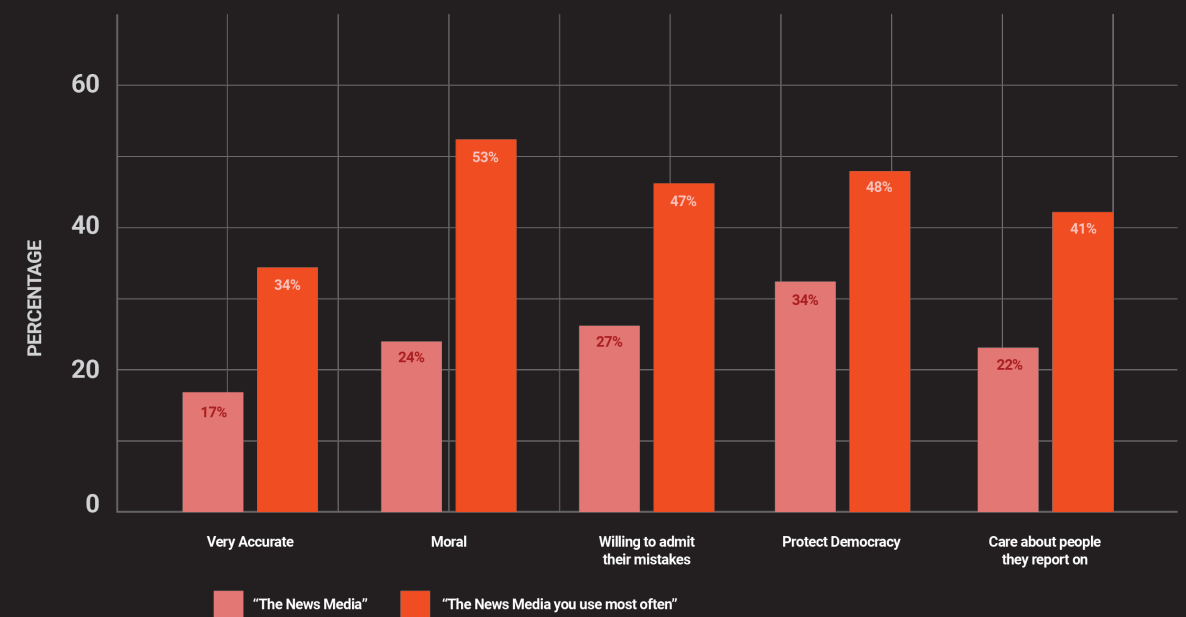


Chart: American Press Institute, "My Media versus 'the Media,' 2017" Analysis: Levi and Stoker, "Political Trust and Trustworthiness," Annual Review of Political Science, 2000



## What Can the News Industry Do?

Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs offers these suggestions.

### 1. REJECT FAKE NEWS

The term “fake news” means different things to different people. To avoid confusion, use the term “misinformation” to describe news that is intentionally misleading.

### 2. LABEL MISINFORMATION

Hire fact-checkers to label misinformation, and encourage readers to reject it.

### 3. EMPOWER YOUR AUDIENCE

Encourage the use of browser software that would insulate Internet users from misinformation.

### 4. CHANGE YOUR ALGORITHM

Give readers the option to see articles they might not normally read because they're written from a different political perspective.

### 5. DEPLOY THE PEACE POLICE

Adapt techniques from campaigns to counter violent extremism, such as deploying “good” bots to counteract trolling and junk content spread by “bad” bots.

### 6. SHARE INFO ABOUT MISINFORMATION

Bolster media literacy efforts by telling your readers, friends and followers what you learned here.

## Do the Right Thing

Restoring trust in the news may go hand in hand with restoring trust in the government. **But trust must be earned.** The media must take responsibility for its contributions to the misinformation crisis and learn from its mistakes.

Having a healthy free press is critical for a democracy to function. When people lose faith in the media, they also lose faith in other institutions, from Congress

to churches to schools. Without trust, outlets and institutions that prey on our biases and emotions will have an ever-increasing influence.

Media consumption is like a diet. Readers, viewers and followers need to take responsibility for what they consume, and for what they serve others.

## Remember

**INFORMATION IS THE BASIS FOR DECISIONS AND ACTIONS.**

So help debunk examples of misinformation whenever you see them—because even if you're not fooled by it, someone else may be.

**PEOPLE INSTINCTIVELY TRUST IMAGES MORE THAN WORDS,**

and visual misinformation—like images that have been altered or taken out of context—can be convincing. Misinformation publishers often try to use this against us.

**FAKES ARE EASY TO MAKE.** Digital tools—like Photoshop and Squarespace—enable anyone to fabricate just about anything, including social media posts, news reports, images and videos.

**ON SOCIAL MEDIA, BOTS AND TROLLS ARE EVERYWHERE.**

Not every account represents a real person, and not all real people express what they really think.

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