

## insights

TYPES NOT MAPPED YET August 31, 2020 | TTR not mapped yet | Mark Sableman

# Muting Misinformation: Only you can prevent the spread of political untruths

Political misinformation on the Internet is likely to continue, and our previous posts on [laws](#), [business practices](#) and [reforms](#) have made it apparent that it is up to you, the Web User, to navigate truth and falsity on your own.

Yes, on the one side we have sophisticated campaign organizations, with professional copywriters, pollsters, data analysts and voter psychological profiles, creating their own ads and social media posts, some of which come close to the line, or cross it, on truthfulness. Then there are an array of independent and dark-money political organizations, with less accountability and often narrower views—they, too, are creating and placing posts that may take liberties with the truth. And finally there are rogue players, like the Russians of 2016, who are just out to deceive and disrupt.

On the other side — just you, the Web User. It's your job, alone, to ferret out the truth in what you see and hear in the next few months of 2020. Our law won't help very much, and we can't expect much help from the social media companies who make money off of your clicks and eyeballs.

How do you go about this daunting task?

### Rely on credible media

Professional news organizations provide some check on misinformation, which most often appears in non-traditional sources such as social media, blogs, and extremist sites. Even in our polarized society, public opinion surveys show that organizations like NPR and local TV stations are considered much more reliable than social media.

### Consult fact checkers

When you hear a piece of important but startling information from a social media site, a friend, or a politician, it often pays to see what professional fact-checkers have to say. Even when there is no bright line of truth or falsity, reviewing what fact checkers say can make you better informed. For political news, the “big three” fact checking organizations are [PolitiFact](#), [FactCheck.org](#) and the [Washington Post's Fact Checker](#).

### Follow media literacy techniques of careful and skeptical reading

Take a look at our interviews with media literacy professors [Don Corrigan](#) and [Julie Smith](#). Media literacy is a relatively new discipline, which trains readers and viewers of media to better understand each medium's techniques, benefits and concerns. Corrigan suggests that a media user apply the SMELL test to everything he or she sees, examining closely every news item for its Source, Motivation, Evidence, Logic and what was Left out.

### Examine a mix of sources

Today's multiplicity of news and information sources misleads us into thinking that we are getting all points of view, when in fact most people attend only to a narrow set of sources. As Professor Corrigan points out, in the old days of two newspapers in town, with different points of view, readers more often got all sides of the story. Today, it takes an effort to find the other side.

### Look at original sources

One of the great benefits of the Internet is the way it makes original sources available. You don't need to rely on someone else to tell you what the government did – you can read the agency report, watch the governor's press conference, or read the court decision yourself. But take care, too, because fake information is posted, too. Watch out especially for [deepfake videos](#), in which computer-assisted editing shows real people seeming to say or do things that they never, in fact, said or did.

### Bone up on psychology

If you learned in school that people are rational, you may want to check out modern research by experts like [Daniel Kahneman](#). Modern psychology and neuroscience teach that the human brain is highly vulnerable to misinformation, and that we use many heuristics (mental shortcuts) that often steer us astray. Our minds are most vulnerable when presented with threats and immediate dangers. Understanding these mental realities may teach you to brush off those “happening right now” alerts, and think twice about fears posted on social media.

### Tend your garden?

There's one last technique that can perhaps shield you from misinformation: retreat into your personal life and turn off the outside world, somewhat like Voltaire's *Candide*, who, in at the end of his story, says simply, “I shall tend to my garden.”

But those who care deeply about the world needn't retreat to their gardens. Self-help resources are available for combatting Internet misinformation. Some people may even wish to join what media scholar [Siva Vaidhyanathan](#) calls “the long, slow process of changing minds, cultures and ideologies,” leading to strengthened science, scholarship and professional journalism, as a means of combatting social media's superficiality and misinformation.

In our next (and last) [post](#) in this series, we'll identify specific resources that can help you ferret out better and more reliable information on the Internet, and some of the organizations that are assisting in that effort.

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### authorsTest

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