TO SHARE OR NOT TO SHARE: EVALUATING NEWS & OTHER ONLINE CONTENT

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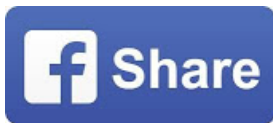
If you're on social media, you've likely had the experience of scrolling through your feed and seeing something you thought was so great, so important, or so awful that you wanted to share it far and wide.

Recently, I watched a fake graphic about a protest inauguration-day concert go viral among many smart people in my news feed.

The same week, I saw someone else share a Breitbart piece about Obama ignoring the fact that violent crime in America is way up, even though real statistics actually show the violent crime rate is way down.

Obama Denies the Murder Wave on his Watch
BREITBART.COM

We tend to get excited when we see things that a) align with our ideas, or b) outrage us, and sometimes, we share those things without checking as well as we should.
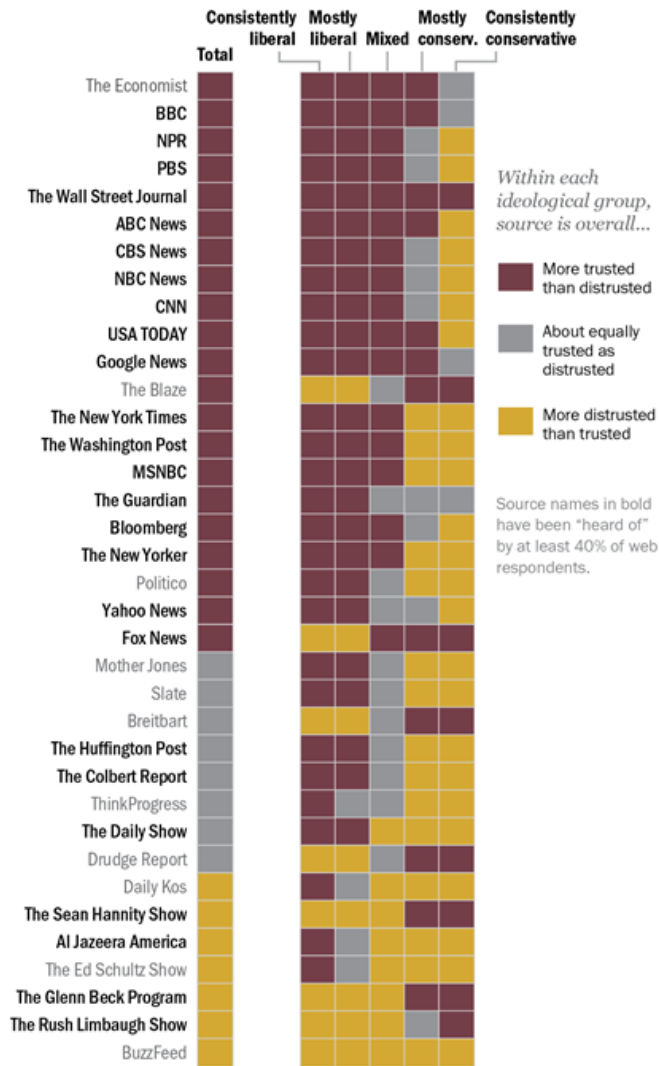
Who cares? Well, it's important to realize that whatever political side you're on, sharing things that are unconfirmed or just plain wrong tends to weaken your positions, rather than strengthen them. If you're interested in curating a social media feed that's respected and thoughtful – and not just in the eyes of people who agree with everything you believe – here are some questions to ask yourself before you hit that Share button.

What's the source for this information?

With links, that's fairly easy to determine. Is the website hosting the information a reputable news source? Real news outlets employ trained professionals with journalism degrees. They're trained in investigative reporting as well as legal issues relating to journalism, and ethics. (That doesn't mean they don't make mistakes from time to time, but when a real journalist does report something in error, you'll see a timely correction and/or apology rather than a doubling down on the incorrect information.)

Which news sources are trusted by most people in America? This chart based on a 2014 study from the Pew Research Center and published in Business Insider offers some guidelines.

Trust Levels of News Sources by Ideological Group

Consistently liberal | Mostly liberal | Mixed | Mostly conserv. | Consistently conservative

Total

Within each ideological group, source is overall...

- More trusted than distrusted
- About equally trusted as distrusted
- More distrusted than trusted

Source names in bold have been "heard of" by at least 40% of web respondents.

The Economist
BBC
NPR
PBS
The Wall Street Journal
ABC News
CBS News
NBC News
CNN
USA TODAY
Google News
The Blaze
The New York Times
The Washington Post
MSNBC
The Guardian
Bloomberg
The New Yorker
Politico
Yahoo News
Fox News
Mother Jones
Slate
Breitbart
The Huffington Post
The Colbert Report
ThinkProgress
The Daily Show
Drudge Report
Daily Kos
The Sean Hannity Show
Al Jazeera America
The Ed Schultz Show
The Glenn Beck Program
The Rush Limbaugh Show
BuzzFeed

American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q21a-21b. Based on web respondents. Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see about the survey). Grouping of outlets is determined by whether the percent who trust each source is significantly different from the percent who distrust each source. Outlets are then ranked by the proportion of those who trust more than distrust each.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

If your hope is to have people across the political spectrum view your social media feed as reliable and reasonable, you'll probably want to stick to sharing information from sources that are more maroon than yellow.

You might also choose to make a special note of that source. Donalyn Miller, an author & educator I respect a lot, has taken to posting something like this each time she shares a piece on Facebook:

**Please read the article before commenting or sharing. PBS is a legitimate, credible news source.

I think this is a great idea. It's helpful to identify what you're sharing, whether that's news, a persuasive piece written to promote one point of view, or something intended to be humorous. (More on that when we talk about satire…)

Is this particular piece NEWS or OPINION/COMMENTARY?

Reputable news sources such as those identified above offer both objective news and opinion

or commentary pieces. Sometimes, they're labeled clearly in the headline, but often they're not. You may need to take a close look at the piece to determine what you're reading.

How can I check to verify the information shared here?

Google is your friend, especially if you really want to share something being reported on a less consistently reliable source like BuzzFeed or HuffPost. Find out if similar information is also being shared via some of the more reputable, trusted new sources listed above.

Sometimes, there may be other ways to check out information, too. If the piece is about what someone said on Twitter or on a website, go directly to the source. But also realize that tweets can be deleted, so the fact that something isn't there now doesn't mean it never was. Sometimes people have screen shots of these deleted tweets, and you can look for that as well. It's important to look very carefully at the Twitter account, too. There are many, many fake Donald Trump accounts, with the same profile picture and very similar Twitter handles. Go to the person's actual Twitter home page to check the account name and look for the "verified" checkmark in their profile in situations like this.

For example, this is a real tweet from Trump:

This is not:

Sometimes it's difficult to tell the difference between real tweets & the parody tweets, so checking the profile is helpful.

One more note about Twitter: Keep in mind that unless an account is verified or you know the person who owns it, you have no way of knowing who's tweeting. The fact that a Twitter account is named "Democrats for Trump" or "Conservatives Against Trump" doesn't mean that the account is run by people who fit that description. Since KellyAnne Conway's "alternative facts" interview on Meet the Press and bans on social media from government agencies like the EPA and National Parks Service, several apparently subversive Twitter accounts have sprung up with names like AltUSEPA and RogueNASA. While it makes good sense that someone defying a gag order would need to protect themselves with an anonymous account, there's no way to guarantee that those accounts are run by people from those agencies. Even if they are, before long, we'll probably see similar accounts that are not. So follow & read if you'd like, but be wary.

It's also important to look carefully and use tools to evaluate websites. One example: Since the inauguration, I've seen shared articles about the WhiteHouse.gov website, including some that criticized Melania Trump's biography for promoting her jewelry line's availability on QVC.

In situations like this, it's important to visit the website to check the article's accuracy. It's also important to remember that websites get updated all the time. It's common for someone who

receives criticism to edit in response to that criticism. If all you see is the "right now" version of the website, it might look like the criticism was based on "fake news."

An [Internet Archive tool called the Wayback Machine](#) allows interested citizens to check on things like this. It's an online archive that allows you to paste in the website's URL and look at what was posted there at specific times on specific dates. As an example, here's what the Melania Trump bio paragraph in question looked like Friday afternoon after the inauguration (on the top) vs. Sunday, after the critical articles were published (on the bottom).
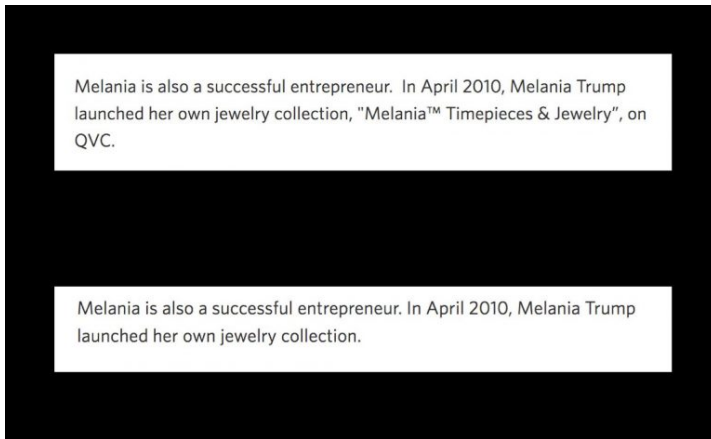
Regardless of whether you care about Melania's jewelry line, this is a helpful tool for evaluating information about what was or wasn't on any website. It's also interesting for students to see how websites change over time.

Be careful with photos.

If you want to share a photo that's not connected to a legitimate news article, find the ORIGINAL source to determine its origin. Photos get repurposed sometimes, and pictures being shared on social media don't always show what the caption says they show or what is implied. During the campaign (September 2016), Eric Trump tweeted this.
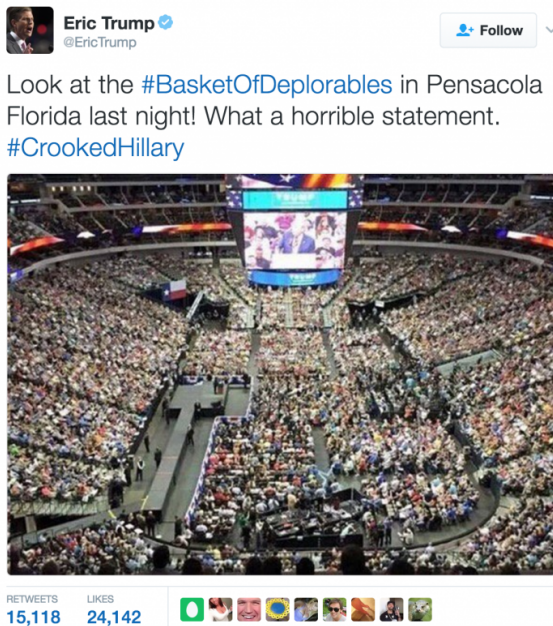
Whether or not you agree with Eric Trump's sentiment, this photo wasn't taken at the Pensacola rally. It was a year-old photo of a larger crowd from a Trump rally in Dallas. (Note the Texas flag to the bottom-left of the big screen. That might have been a clue for careful

photo sharers.)

Just after the November election, another photo circulated on social media showed hooded Ku Klux Klan members marching with a caption saying it was KKK members celebrating. This wasn't true either. The Klan did hold a victory parade in North Carolina, but the particular photo being shared in this case was an old one that had nothing to do with the election. Unless you check the original source of the photo, you have no way of knowing where it came from, who took it, or when it was taken.

Check the date for news articles and tweets

And highlight it in your post if you choose to share something that's not current. This is an easy mistake to make when sharing everything from politics to astronomical events. Just yesterday, this tweet from Vice President Mike Pence was making the rounds.

> **Governor Mike Pence** ✔
> @GovPenceIN
>
> Calls to ban Muslims from entering the U.S. are offensive and unconstitutional.
>
> 9:30 AM · Dec 8, 2015
>
> **31,377** RETWEETS   **26,396** LIKES

This came as the Trump administration was [reportedly preparing to issue an executive order banning immigration from a list of mostly Muslim countries](#). This Pence tweet could give the impression that the Vice President is critical of that policy. But check the date. This was Mike Pence of December 2015, before Trump had won the Republican nomination and tapped Pence to be his VP. The current order is also expected to modify the ban so it's no longer "a complete and total ban on Muslims" as Trump promised during his campaign but a ban that lists mostly Muslim countries the administration says are "terror prone."

This "old news" situation also happens sometimes with articles about bills urgently described as "currently being voted on." Check the date so you're not sharing bad information that results in a flood of calls to a politician's office about something that happened a month ago.

Checking the date doesn't just apply to political articles. A while back, I saw a Facebook post about a meteor shower that would be "Lighting Up the Skies Tonight." I love meteor showers! My first impulse was to share, but before I did, I wanted to find out the exact date & time. When I clicked through to the article, I found out that it was old – about a meteor shower that had happened a couple years earlier. If I'd shared, I'd have been that person who sent 4500 of her closest friends out into their yards in the cold to stare at an empty, dark sky.

Check to see if the piece is satire.

Satire is defined by Merriam Webster as "a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn." If the piece you're sharing is satire, you might want to consider making that clear in your post. The Onion is a well-known satire site that posts pieces like this.

Mike Pence Disappointed In The 200,000 Husbands And Fathers Who Permitted Women To Attend March

NEWS IN BRIEF
January 21, 2017
VOL 53 ISSUE 02
Politics · Politicians ·
Activism · Mike Pence

Most people know that The Onion is a satire site, in which all of the articles are made up, including the details, the quotes…everything. Still, you'll sometimes see a piece like this shared with a heartfelt comment about how upset the person is that the Vice President would be so sexist in his language. That happens even more often when the piece comes from a magazine like *The New Yorker*, which offers both real, in-depth news articles *and* satirical pieces, often by the writer Andy Borowitz.

SATIRE FROM THE BOROWITZ REPORT

SANDERS VOWS TO KEEP FIGHTING FOR NOMINATION EVEN IF HILLARY IS ELECTED PRESIDENT

By Andy Borowitz   June 7, 2016

These pieces, if you look closely, are labeled as "Satire from the Borowitz Report." It's helpful if you label them in your social media feeds, too. This is especially important in our current climate where some real news may feel like satire to readers, given the unprecedented nature of some things being tweeted or said by those in power.

Pay extra attention before sharing something that you feel passionate about, either way.

Propaganda is designed to produce strong emotions – patriotism, fear, love, disgust, identity. When something you read gives you a surge of one of those feelings, that doesn't mean it's automatically not true or worth sharing, but it *does* mean that you'll need to be diligent to make sure you're sharing news and not propaganda that will cause others to view all of your posts as less trustworthy. Strong, emotional language in a headline is another clue that what you're reading might be written to influence more than to inform.

Don't make assumptions.

I participated in the March for Civil Rights and Women in Atlanta recently and saw this when the march passed by the Ferris wheel by Centennial Park.

I immediately connected it with the tens of thousands of people demonstrating, and I shared this photo along with some other march pictures on social media. I was just visiting Atlanta and am not a football fan, so I didn't know that aside from being a beloved and revolutionary line from the musical *Hamilton*, Rise Up! is also a rallying cry for the Atlanta Falcons, who were about to play the game that ended up sending them to the Super Bowl. It was an excellent lesson for me on how we all see things through our own lenses, and I appreciated the people online who kindly let me know that I'd misinterpreted the message. The people who jumped into my Twitter mentions to call me names and make thinly veiled misogynistic threats were another story. Which brings me to the next topic…

How to Help a Friend Who's Shared Something Untrue or Unreliable

I appreciated the friends & strangers alike who replied to me on Twitter, saying things like "Hey, not to be a bummer, but I'm pretty sure that sign is for the Falcons," or even "That awkward moment when you think the Falcons sign is for your demonstration…" Those posts allowed me to realize my mistake and make a note on the photo so other people weren't under the false impression that the Ferris wheel was lit up for the march. I got other replies, too – the usual, misogynistic, name-calling tweets that appears in most women's social media feeds when they've said something a man doesn't like. Those just make the person tweeting look like a jerk.

If a friend posts something on social media that's just plain false and you can find the reliable information that shows that, it's often helpful to share a link to a *reliable,* trusted news source with a friendly note that says, "Hey…just so you know, I think this might be inaccurate. Look what (source xyz) has today."

If your friend posts something that's circulating but that you can't find confirmed anywhere, a question might be helpful. "Were you able to confirm this anywhere else? I read this piece with interest but haven't been able to find the information anywhere else, so I'm wondering how accurate it is. Thanks!" That's a kind way to ask the question and is likely to result in a good conversation in which your friend either shares more sources or realizes that the information might not be confirmed.

What Happens When You Make a Mistake

If you discover that you've posted something that turns out to be inaccurate, unconfirmed, or badly dated, you might feel embarrassed. But the reality is, mistakes happen. Try to be open to listening and researching, rather than feeling defensive. Read what people are saying, whether they agree with your position or not (this is admittedly easier with meteor showers than it is with politics) and then defer to common-sense guidelines and decide if what you shared is really news or not. If you've posted satire that people thought was real, that's easy to fix with a quick

edit identifying it as such. Same story if you've posted an opinion piece that people are taking as fact. But I'd advocate for a different approach if you come to realize that what you've posted is just incorrect or misleading.

Standard social media protocol is often *not* to delete tweets/posts that have become controversial because it can look like you're trying to cover up your mistake. But personally, I think sharing bad information should be an exception to that rule. If you share an article that turns out to be false or misleading, it's not enough to add a note at the bottom of the comments thread saying, "Please note: This is not confirmed and is from a questionable source." Those articles – especially the emotionally charged ones – get shared at lightning speed with one click, so it's probably best to delete the bad information entirely and offer a new, separate post that says something like "Earlier today, I posted an article about a meteor shower that I then deleted because it was brought to my attention that the article was from two years ago. I apologize for the mistake & appreciate the friends who pointed out the date."

Why is all of this important?

We're living in an age where facts are under attack and where information spreads more quickly than it ever has, whether it's reliable information or not. Being part of the solution means doubling down on our efforts to make sure what we share on social media is clear. I've decided that for me, that means sharing news that comes from reliable sources, double checking those sources, and clearly identifying essays and satirical pieces I choose to share so that they're not mistaken as news.

Here are some great resources for reading, thinking about, and sharing with students.

Politifact is a nonpartisan, Pulitzer Prize winning fact check website for political issues.

http://www.politifact.com/

Snopes is a reliable website for determining the validity of almost anything going viral on social media, from politics to warnings about going to your car at the mall.

http://www.snopes.com/

Snopes gets attacked sometimes by people who don't like their ideas challenged. Here's an article about who runs it & its background so you can make your own decisions about that.

https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/25/technology/for-fact-checking-website-snopes-a-bigger-role-brings-more-attacks.html

Here's the *Business Insider* article on trusted news sources in America:

http://www.businessinsider.com/here-are-the-most-and-least-trusted-news-outlets-in-america-2014-10

A Finders Guide to Facts from NPR has another good list of questions to ask yourself before hitting that Share button.

http://www.npr.org/2016/12/11/505154631/a-finders-guide-to-facts

The News Literacy Project is a nonpartisan national education nonprofit working with educators & journalists to teach students about information literacy.

http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/

An article from the *NY Times* on How Fake News Spreads

https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/business/media/how-fake-news-spreads.html?_r=0

A piece from the journal *Psychology Today* on the manipulation tactic known as gaslighting

https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/here-there-and-everywhere/201701/gaslighting-know-it-and-identify-it-protect-yourself

Blogger's note: Given that this post is all about checking and evaluating sources, here's some information about me. Aside from being a children's author, I spent fifteen years teaching middle school English and earned National Board Certification in Early Adolescent English Language Arts in 2006. Before that, I worked in television newsrooms for seven years and have a degree in Broadcast Journalism from Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communication. The common ground with all three of these jobs is that facts matter.

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11 Comments

1. **Mona**
   Posted January 26, 2017 at 11:10 am | *Permalink*

   Thank you dear, Kate.
   You are a queen of research so I appreciate what you've said and shown us here. I am gullible, so I don't research "news" or tweets, if they look right. I don't however share this crap, so that's in my favor.
   From now on though, I will try to get to the source of posts before they drill into my mind as being for real!!!
   Mona

2. **Tabatha**
   Posted January 26, 2017 at 3:00 pm | *Permalink*

   Great post. Have you seen Randy Rainbow's song "Alternative Facts"? It has been going through my head a lot today.

3. **Linda Mitchell**