

Detecting B.S.: Sourcing Accurate Information

Getting it right is what we strive for; it's essential to our craft. With short deadlines and wanting to get the scoop, should we turn the gig down or spend the time interviewing a handful of sources to make sure the info is correct? We know not to trust what we read on Wikipedia. What about peer-reviewed journals? Seems fine, but wait! A number of journals have published false information. What do we do when the subject matter is new to you or if your source provides you with the wrong information? This workshop focuses on how to weed out misinformation and hoaxes.

Moderator: [Michele C. Hollow](#)

Michele was horrified when a source gave her wrong info for a story on autism, a subject she knows well. The source wasn't lying, just misinformed. Still, it was unsettling. Michele writes about health, animals, climate, and lifestyle. Her byline has appeared in The New York Times, Fusion, the Guardian, Parents, and Folks. You can connect with her @MicheleCHollow.

Panelists:

[Laura E. Adkins](#) is the JTA's (Jewish Telegraphic Agency) award-winning Deputy Opinion Editor. She has written for The New York Times, SELF, the Observer, and elsewhere. As a writer covering the often-insular and media-averse Orthodox Jewish community from within, Laura has to carefully research and prepare for interviews on topics ranging from communal dress codes to allegations of sexual abuse against minors. As an editor who often works with passionate activists and intellectuals on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, often from afar, Laura has to work with sources to overcome their own deep-rooted assumptions, perspectives, and biases as they attempt to convince others while maintaining fidelity to the truth. Laura can be found on Twitter @Laura_E_Adkins.

[Madeline Bodin's](#) opinions on sources are informed by the expertise she developed in ten years as a trade magazine staff writer and her later work as a fact checker. Today, she is a journalist covering science and conservation. Her byline has appeared in bioGraphic, Undark, Hakai, and many other publications. Follow Madeline on Twitter @MadelineBodin.

[Richard Eisenberg](#) is Managing Editor of PBS' Nextavenue.org site for people 50+ and editor of the site's Money and Work & Purpose channels, as well as a blogger for the site. He frequently assigns and edits freelance articles for both channels. Previously, he was Executive Editor of Money magazine, Special Projects Editor/Money Editor for Good Housekeeping and Front Page Finance Editor for Yahoo! He also writes book reviews for People magazine and is the author of two books: The Money Book of Personal Finance and How to Avoid a Mid-Life Financial Crisis. He is a graduate from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. Contact Richard at reisenberg@nextavenue.org. Follow him on Twitter @richeis315.

Takeaways from the Panel:

Disinformation versus Misinformation

Disinformation is intentionally false or inaccurate information that is spread deliberately. It is an act of deception and false statements to convince someone of untruths.

Misinformation is information that is unintentionally false or incorrect.

The AP/NORC (American Press/National Opinion Research Center) at the University of Chicago surveyed journalists and the American public about the trustworthiness of journalism today. Here is a link to that survey: <http://www.apnorc.org/news-media/Pages/Poll-Americans-want-more-of-what-journalists-want-to-report.aspx>

Here are a few results from the survey:

In general, do you think the news media is very/somewhat trustworthy?

72% of Journalists responded positively

44% of the Public responded positively

How do you think most Americans view the news?

They think most news reports are fairly inaccurate and they need to check multiple sources to verify information: 36% of journalists said this; 40% of the public said this.

They think most news reports are fairly accurate and they don't need to check multiple sources to verify information: 63% of journalists said this and 59% of the public said this.

Journalists were asked: How well do you think most Americans understand what fact checking journalism means: 62% of journalists said "Not well at all/Not very well."

The public was asked:

How do you view the news?

40% said most news reports are fairly inaccurate; I have to check multiple sources to verify the information.

59% said most news reports are fairly accurate, I don't have to check multiple sources to verify the information.

Resources to check misinformation and disinformation:

Google News Initiative to fight fake news: <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/>

Google serves as a founding partner of [First Draft](#), a nonprofit that brings journalists, academics, and technologists together, to combat misinformation on a larger scale.

Recommended Articles to Read:

Who Shares Fake News? (We Know It Wasn't You)

From NextAvenue.org on “Americans 65 and older share more fake news than other age groups.”

<https://www.nextavenue.org/who-shares-fake-news/>

Father of Fake News story by Sharon McDonnell:

https://s3.amazonaws.com/external_clips/3027557/wdfakenews.pdf?1553816634

During the Cold War, Communist spy Lawrence Martin-Bittman spread disinformation and false facts throughout the Soviet bloc and beyond.

Poynter: Journalists need help covering misinformation

<https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/study-journalists-need-help-covering-misinformation/>

In a study conducted by the Institute for the Future, a California-based nonprofit think tank, researchers found more than 80 percent of journalists admitted to falling for false information online. The data was based on a survey of 1,018 journalists at regional and national publications in the United States. Perhaps more concerning: Only 14.9 percent of journalists surveyed said they had been trained on how to best report on misinformation.

Facebook is taking a page out of Google's playbook to stop fake news from going viral:

From MSN: <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/facebook-is-taking-a-page-out-of-googles-playbook-to-stop-fake-news-from-going-viral/ar-BBVOSgT>

Listen to Beware of Zombie Statistics on NPR's Marketplace:

<https://www.marketplace.org/shows/marketplace-morning-report/beware-of-the-zombie-statistic>

This segment is towards the end of the segment. It's worth hearing.

Treat Every Day as April Fool's Day

The primary question you should ask yourself is whether or not the information is true and relevant.

When you're trying to debunk a rumor, ask yourself:

- A. How many people already know about it?
- B. Is there a public value to reporting on the story?
- C. Who is your audience?
- D. Could my reporting feed into the inherent goals of your source?

Being First

Another key factor is being first. Yes, we all want to scoop the competition. However, often it's best to wait until you have all the facts. Prematurely reporting on misinformation can spread that information further.

From Tania Casselle, ASJA Chair of Member Networking:

“I’ve definitely had “experts” and other sources give me faulty info, from grossly wrong data and interpretations to innocent confusion, to well-intentioned false memory of quite important facts, to just a misleading nuance. Trust your instincts if you think that something stinks.

“With the way rates have dropped, which means the amount of time I can allocate to a story is reduced, I can’t always do such thorough (proper!) reporting, so I tend to turn those kind of pieces down. But I’m pretty damn sure that some of the stuff I read is coming out of exactly that kind of situation, where the writer did NOT turn the gig down and so they are more at risk of just taking whatever the source is ‘dictating’ to them.” You can connect with Tania at TCwriter.com.

Questions to ask yourself:

1. What topics are likely to be the focus of fake news?
2. What persuasive strategies make fake news seem to be true?
3. Why are some topics better than others?
4. What makes a topic a good choice for fake news?
5. What kind of details need to be included?
6. What kind of details would probably be left out?
7. What audiences are likely to believe a fake news story?
8. What circumstances would make a fake news story more believable?
9. How does cultural background effect whether an audience believes fake news?
10. What personal experiences could affect whether an audience believes fake news?

--Info compiled by Michele C. Hollow