



Assessing Truth in the Age of Disinformation

Issued April 2022

"You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." "What is truth?" retorted Pilate. John 17:37-38

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 1 John 1:8

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6

The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy. Psalm 12:22

Christians believe that Jesus Christ shows us the truth about God, the world, and ourselves. In worship and confession the church makes a number of significant truth claims. As the biblical texts above make clear, Christian faith is fundamentally concerned with questions of truth.

We live in a time of increasing disinformation, where others try to manipulate us with false information to shape our views and actions. Manipulation through misinformation is especially evident around elections, where political parties and candidates may resort to unethical tactics to try and win more votes. The OECD has correctly pointed out that false and misleading information can cause or aggravate the erosion of meaningful public conversations. It contributes to paralysis in our political system that prevents positive reforms. Fraudulent and deceptive information also harms public engagement in democracy and causes distrust in the system.

Many of us would like to believe that we are immune to such manipulation. Only others around us are susceptible. However, studies in behavioural science show we are all vulnerable, particularly to 'confirmation bias' and 'desirability bias'.

Confirmation bias is seeing what we expect to see. We readily accept information that fits our current understanding and filter out any evidence that contradicts that understanding.

Desirability bias is seeing what we want to see. We interpret information to fit with what we already want to believe. If a story feeds into an existing set of beliefs, it is far more likely to be accepted without questioning.

Research has found that the more intelligent people are, the more likely they will be trapped by these biases. As humans, we have an emotional relationship with information. We then share information that reinforces our world view and says something about who we want to be.

None of us has the time to check every piece of information we are presented with for its factual accuracy. The following sheet provides you with tools and references to assist you in spotting misinformation and disinformation when you sense something is not quite right.

What are Disinformation and Misinformation?

The Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) defines common forms of misinformation as:

- made-up news articles;
- doctored images and videos;
- false information shared on social media;
- scam advertisements.

Misinformation can pose a risk to people's health and safety.



"I just feel fortunate to live in a world with so much disinformation at my fingertips."

CartoonStock.com



Some misinformation is *deliberately* spread – this is called disinformation – to cause confusion and undermine trust in governments or institutions. It is also used to attract users to web pages for financial gain, where they may click on ads or be lured into financial scams.

But not all misinformation is deliberately spread to cause harm, particularly where the inaccuracy is intentionally subtle. Sometimes users share misinformation without realising it due to this kind of manipulation.

Tips for spotting misinformation and disinformation

The ACMA offers the following tips for spotting misinformation and disinformation:



Check the source. Does the story come from a credible website or a verified account? Check if other credible sources are covering the story.



Look for the facts. Is the story factual, or is it someone's opinion or personal experience? Is the story plausible? Be extra careful if the material is related to an emotionally charged or divisive issue.



Read the full story. Headlines and images can be misleading and may only give part of the story. Check the date of publication to see if the story is current.



Verify the information. Check official sources or visit a fact-checking website. For example, try [RMIT ABC Fact Check](https://www.abc.net.au/news/factcheck/) (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/factcheck/>) and [AFP Fact Check](https://factcheck.afp.com/) (<https://factcheck.afp.com/>).



Look at images and videos closely. See if they have been or could have been manipulated.



If in doubt, don't share it. You can also contact the platform directly if you have concerns.

Useful sites to assist you in identifying disinformation

Here are some helpful links in identifying misinformation and disinformation and responding to them:

<https://firstdraftnews.org/>

<https://theconversation.com/how-to-spot-fake-news-this-election-128413>

<https://www.lib.sfu.ca/help/research-assistance/fake-news>

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/voters-vs-disinformation>