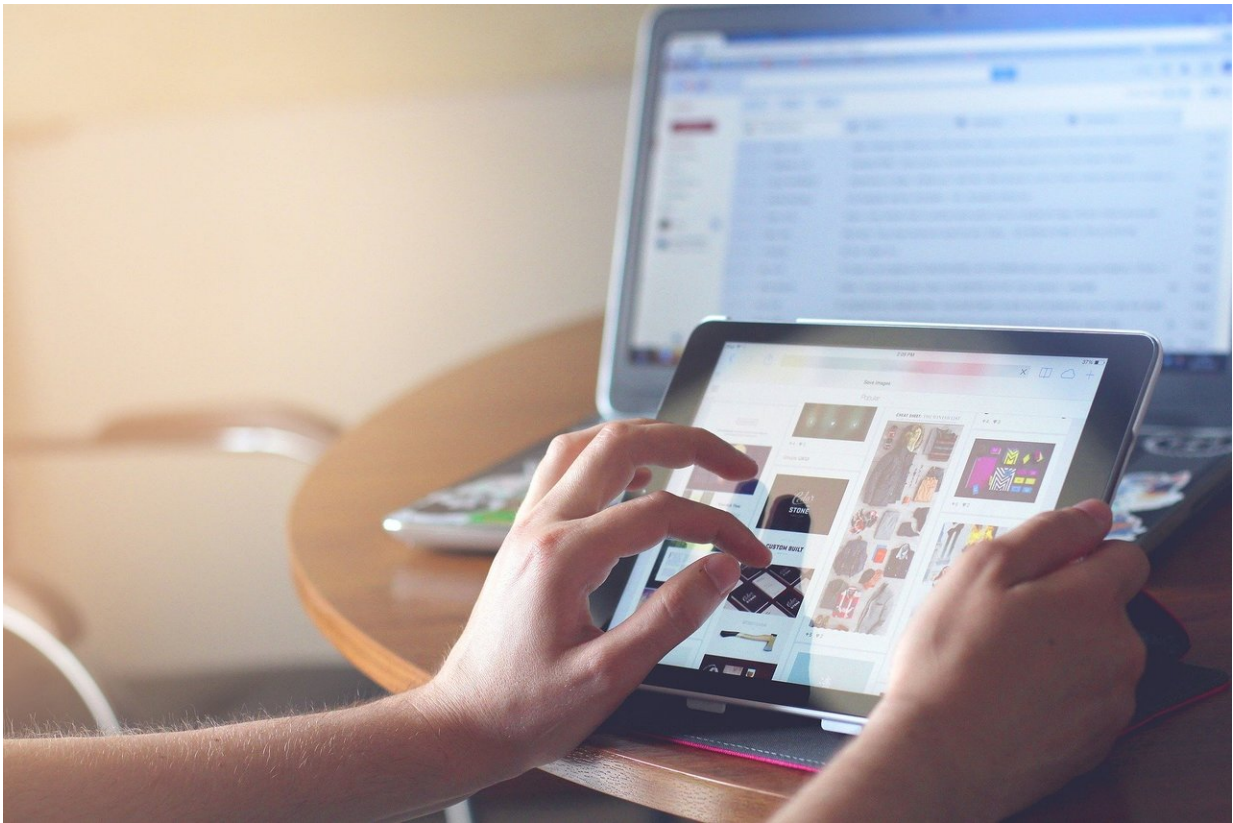


There's so much coronavirus information out there. Here's how to make sense of it.

April 24 2020, by Jonathan Lai



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Wait a minute.

Breathe.

That's the first step, media literacy and digital [information](#) experts said, for dealing with the absolute torrent of information coming at all of us right now during the coronavirus pandemic.

There are an infinite number of articles from [news organizations](#), around-the-clock coverage on TV, a steady stream of info from [public health organizations](#). There are the social media posts from friends. There are studies and charts everywhere you look. There are those emails your family keep forwarding.

"If you think it's hard to navigate the information cycle right now, you're right. It is hard," said Michelle Ciulla Lipkin, executive director of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. "People are really overwhelmed right now."

That means, Lipkin said, that it's not just you.

But there are strategies that can help you make sense of it all.

How to get through the coronavirus pandemic:

Dos and don'ts

1. Be intentional about what you read.

During a crisis, especially one that affects our lives and livelihoods, it makes sense that we want to know everything. But the quality of information is more important than the quantity.

Be active in deciding what information you're looking for, instead of just reading what's in your social feed, Lipkin said. Think about what you're trying to do: Do you want to find out about the latest research on the coronavirus? Are you trying to understand what government orders are

in effect? Are you trying to figure out what's safe to do? Those are all different questions that could lead to seeking out different sources of information.

And when you're not intentionally setting out to get information, she said, it's OK—even healthy—to disconnect. "It is better to consume 30, 35 minutes of quality information," Lipkin said, "than having (the television) on the entire day or notifications on your phone.

2. Take a breath.

Disinformation, which is shared intentionally, is often meant to provoke an emotional response that leads to being shared. When you come across a piece of information, especially one that triggers an emotion, don't just share it or otherwise act on it: Pause first.

"Take a breath and think, "Do I actually know what I'm doing with that?" said Mike Caulfield, a digital literacy expert at Washington State University's Vancouver campus.

3. Stick with trustworthy sources.

Try to determine how trustworthy a source is, which can be as simple as looking an institution up on Wikipedia, Caulfield said. That can help you understand, for example, whether a website really does belong to an established organization, who they are, what they cover, and how they frame things.

Different sources are experts on different things, and no one is an expert on everything. Consider whether a source has the appropriate background and expertise on a topic, and what motivations they may have for giving you information. Public health officials, for example, are tasked with understanding the science and helping you understand what

it means and issuing guidance for how you should act. News organizations are tasked with sifting through information to provide the most verified, reliable news and information possible. Remember that you don't have to be the expert yourself.

4. Check the original source.

Sure, that guy on Twitter may have told you what a chart meant, but where is it actually from and what did the original source say? This is perhaps the most difficult thing: Just like a game of broken telephone, meaning can change as it is passed through different hands. Try to figure out where information came from and how credible it is.

Tracing back the source of a quotation or meme or chart, for example, will help put it into context.

5. Confirm the information

Even if you think a source is trustworthy, you should do some reading to see whether other reliable sources are saying similar things. Take some of the keywords around a piece of information and search for it, doing what experts call "lateral reading."

"Find out what other sources are, find out what else is out there, because there might be even more to the story than what's in that one thing that you find: There might be more research, there might be caveats that didn't make it into that particular article that you need to know," said Kristyn Wellesley, editorial director at the MediaWise news literacy project at the Poynter Institute. "Go and read what other sources are saying. Get the full scope of the story and the information."

6. Remember: Things change fast.

The [coronavirus](#) is so new, and our understanding of it and how to fight it changing so quickly, that information can quickly become outdated. Even when something comes from a reliable source such as the CDC or WHO, even if it was the best information available at the time, new information is coming out constantly. So even after you've determined that a piece of information seems true and comes from good sources—and you understand its context—you should check when it was released.

"Always check the date and the time that something is posted," Wellesley said, "and if it was more than three or four days old, try to find something that's newer." The constantly changing nature of things also means that a lot of information isn't simply true or false. There are a lot of gray areas right now. When in doubt, the experts said, err on the side of caution and wait for consensus to emerge.

7. Share information thoughtfully.

So you've gotten the context, you've checked your sources, and now you want to share some information. That's great, the experts said, especially if you can help promote good information at a time like this.

But recognize that when you share something, you're co-signing it, said Kristy Roschke, a professor at Arizona State University and director of its News Co/Lab media literacy initiative. Instead of simply sharing information widely, she said, you might consider sending to specific people. And adding some context in your message.

"It's important to [share information](#). It's important in these times, this is part of how we're helping each other get through this," Roschke said.

"But I don't think we need to share everything we come across."

All the work you did to confirm that something was true? You can add

that when you share something. Tell your friends and family that you cross-checked some information, show them where it came from.

It won't just help fight bad information, Roschke said. It could help others approach their news consumption more thoughtfully, too. And recognizing how quickly things change, it might be nice to just step out of it. Contribute when you have something meaningful to add.

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