NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION
THREAT INTELLIGENCE CONSORTIUM
Misinformation and Disinformation During Disasters

False information[1] spread on the Internet during disasters can cause confusion, inundate government resources, be used by malicious actors to scam/steal, and even create physical threats. During 2017, as the United States prepared for Hurricane Irma, an array of false information spread online. This included a Facebook post which falsely claimed the storm would hit Houston with a map showing a 14-day forecast—nine days longer than official forecasts. Within 24 hours, the National Weather Service publicly debunked the forecast on Twitter, but the post had already been shared over 36,000 times on Facebook. The following tips, tricks, and tools are crucial to help determine the accuracy, reliability, and bias of information posted online, particularly during disasters.

False map shared during Hurricane Irma on Facebook (Source: PolitiFact)

What is the source?

VERIFY

Understand the source of the information. Take time to identify information as accurate or inaccurate. To do this:
- Investigate the site containing the article or information—including its purpose and contact information—for inconsistent information.
- Use a media bias fact check extension like Mozilla Firefox or Google Chrome to denote the bias that may be present in the information.
- Check the URL to determine if the domain name has been altered to look similar to an official site, such as changing washingtonpost.com to wash*j*ngtonpost.com.

RED FLAGS

Unreliable and false sources can include the following red flags:
- Incorrect logos for the news agency, company, or government agency;
- Stock photo images to represent information provided—do a reverse image search if you suspect this;
- The URL appears to be an altered domain name; or
- Vague "contact us" or "about us" sections.

Altered domain name (Source: PBS)

Who is the author?

VERIFY

Explore the credibility of an author. Some methods to do this include:
- Locate the authors credentials and research claims the author makes about their accomplishments or organization memberships.
- If the information has been shared on social media, determine if the author has been verified or marked as official.
- Review other content published by the author for discrepancies in writing style.

RED FLAGS

Unreliable and uninformed authors may include the following red flags:
- Profiles claiming to be someone else, such as a popular reporter or author;
- Authors who lack credential information or appear to be hiding their identities; or
- Unverified social media accounts who follow few accounts but have large numbers of followers.

Verified account alerting to false draft text (Source: BuzzFeed)

[1] False information spread unintentionally is called misinformation, while disinformation is the spread of false information intended to deliberately mislead or deceive.

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Is this the full story?

VERIFY

Reading all the information provides opportunities to identify signals of false information. Do the following to get the full story:

- Check if other news sources or government agencies have covered the story and compare the information.
- If the information has been shared in an abbreviated version on social media, search for further information or read the full article.
- Confirm the publication date of the information to ensure the information is not out of date.

RED FLAGS

Incomplete or inaccurate information may include the following red flags:

- No other sources cover the same information or contain conflicting information;
- Lack of a publishing date or outdated information; or
- Misleading headlines with different information from the overall content.

Website using an old image from to describe the Iran missile strikes (Source: BuzzFeed)

Do you need more information?

RESOURCES

In addition to asking these questions, outside resources are available to learn more about mis- and disinformation and protect yourself.

- Learn the NTIC's tips for How to Detect Disinformation Campaigns.
- Download a media bias fact check extension on Mozilla Firefox or Google Chrome.
- Follow verified government accounts for reliable information.
- Understand how to evaluate real or fake news.
- Consult DHS resources to learn more about how government agencies are working to combat mis- and disinformation during disasters.
- During a natural disaster, FEMA may create a webpage to debunk false information such as this one created during Hurricane Florence.
- When viewing images online that seem suspect, do a reverse image search to determine if the same image has been used previously. Using Google Chrome, right-click and select "search Google for image." For other web browsers, upload or paste the image using Google's image search after selecting the camera icon.

During Hurricane Florence, FEMA used a central website to debunk rumors (Source: FEMA)