

The Needle of Truth in a Haystack of Information
By LeRoy Nosker Tanner
Programming and Technology Services Librarian

When the world wide web of the internet was beginning to expand in the mid-1990s, many people grasped onto the idea of how it could be used to spread information and misinformation as the case could be. Remember email chain letters? Just forward it to 10 people to get your wish! Or perhaps someone shared with you an urban legend once spread only in gossip columns but now able to spread even faster. Just look up the origins of eating spiders in your sleep. Things like these are still around by constantly reinventing the method of their delivery even though the content is very much the same.

Social media is filled with posts about political, non-profit, religious, and cultural causes and ideas. Even more confusing, companies and even governments create artificial intelligence programs to run fake accounts creating positive or negative buzz about a topic or idea. People, companies, and governments also pay money to have their advertisements and social media posts be preferred for viewing or searching. This means that you might see their posts or ads first as well as 2 or 3 times for every time you see 1 from another company or entity.

The internet is an amazing technological achievement, and like all technology is neither good nor bad. It all depends on how people use it. Unfortunately there are people who use the internet to commit crimes or illicitly sway public opinions for their own selfish gain. It is important for everyone to be prepared with the right tools and skills to recognize when information is misleading, biased, or just plain false.

Everyone has their own biases and perspectives. For instance, I don't like tapioca. When I see an article touting the health benefits of tapioca, I am predisposed to ignore it. My example is innocuous, but all people have opinions about more important things that affect our society and our ability to make informed decisions. As you utilize the internet, these questions will help you recognize misleading or biased information that- even if you are inclined to agree with it- may obscure or omit some or all the facts.

Does the author have credentials to speak authoritatively on the subject and can you check those credentials? Is the author using judgmental language such as good, bad, should, ought to, etc.? Are there a lot of superlative or sensational phrases such as most, best, shocking, amazing, can't miss, need to know, etc.? Does the author cite sources and can you readily check those sources? If the information is persuasive instead of informative in purpose, are all sides of the debate presented equally and are compelling reasons given to refute the claims of other viewpoints?

As librarians, we want you to be empowered with correct information about science, technology, medicine, history, and current events among other things. During this pandemic, be thoughtful and proactive about your internet use. Be open to asking tough questions about everything you read, listen to, or watch. When things get murky, we're happy to light your way to help you find the truth.