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A handbook for journalists

**MIS
DIS INFORMATION**

A handbook for journalists

CONTENTS

❖ Foreword	1
❖ Acknowledgments	3
❖ Introduction	5
❖ Definitions	6
❖ Types of Misinformation and Disinformation	7
❖ Tools for Verification	9
◆ Image Verification	
• Search Tools	
Google’s Reverse Image Search	
RevEye Reverse Image Search: Searching using multiple search engines	
• Some Tips	
• Cropping Tools	
Awesome Screenshot	
Greenshot	
• Refining Your Image Search: Time Filter	
• Some Tips	
◆ Video Verification	13
• InVid	
• YouTube Data Viewer	
• Watch Frame by Frame	
• Some Tips	
◆ Geo-location	16
• Google Maps	
• Google Street View	
• Google Earth	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapillary • Some Tips 	
◆ Source Verification	19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying false accounts and websites • Social Auditing • Some Tips 	
◆ Tips for data verification	21
◆ Tips to read news articles	
❖ Misinformation and Disinformation: A Few Observations	23
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Misinformation/Disinformation ◆ Causes of misinformation/disinformation ◆ Nature of newsrooms/news organizations ◆ Relationship between the media and the reader ◆ Role of fact-checking organizations and technology companies 	
❖ Best Practices	28
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Journalists <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sources • Reporting/Writing/Editing • Fact-checking ◆ Media Heads/Organization Heads ◆ Journalists' and Media Coalitions 	
❖ Tackling Disinformation in Newsrooms: Participants' Suggestions	33
❖ Fact-checking Websites	35
❖ Reading Resources	37
❖ References	39

FOREWORD

Dan Shelley

Executive Director

Radio Television Digital News Association

Washington, D.C.

Misinformation and its more dangerous cousin disinformation are scourges on democracies around the globe. People engaged in them have attempted – sometimes successfully – to influence elections, harm the reputations of innocent people and, in the most egregious cases, provoke violence.

Journalists have not just an obligation but a solemn duty to combat misinformation and disinformation by not unwittingly, or even wittingly, disseminating them, and to expose them by seeking and reporting the truth.

In August 2019, it was my privilege to travel to Chennai to speak with South Indian journalists, students, and the public about the dangers of misinformation and disinformation and about their unique roles in the effort to prevent the harm caused by false information. I also met, via video conference, with journalists from Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu.

It was heartening to find the journalism executives, journalists, and students with whom I met receptive to the charge I gave them, specifically, to root out, expose, and debunk misinformation and disinformation so that they may provide the public with factual reporting that informs rather than inflames.

There are those, myself included, who believe that journalism is a sacred calling, that it serves the vital function of helping to create a more informed and educated society. Throughout history, people who are fully informed have made sound decisions about their lives, their communities, and about who should lead their local, regional, and national governments.

This handbook provides valuable guidance and tangible tools that journalists throughout South India can, and should, use in the fight against misinformation and disinformation – that they can, and should, use to fulfil their sacred calling to create a more informed and educated society.

FOREWORD

Nalini Rajan

Dean of Studies

Asian College of Journalism

The journalist cannot always be seen in a salutary role of information disseminator, watchdog, and educator of the public. For a number of reasons, journalists sometimes get their facts wrong, and could introduce disinformation or misinformation in the media. This is the opinion of several participants in the three workshops conducted across South India in the regional languages of Kannada, Malayalam, and Tamil in July-September, 2019. These workshops were conducted by the Media Development Foundation in collaboration with the U.S. Consulate General in Chennai on the topic of “Countering Disinformation in South India: A Regional Media Literacy Initiative.”

Among the several reasons for misinformation in the media is the fact that it can be difficult for a journalist to check the veracity of everything that was said during a press conference; nevertheless, a journalist must make every effort to do so. Furthermore, in a climate of chasing popularity and Target Rating Points (TRPs) where breaking news constitutes a not-so-subtle competition between channels, few journalists want to be slowed down by rigorous fact-checking.

The challenge, then, is to find ways of avoiding misinformation and disinformation using tools in the digital age, among other things, in order to enhance the ethical significance of this noble profession.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Misinformation or disinformation is a serious concern today, particularly for journalists who encounter it on a daily basis. This handbook has been compiled to serve as an introductory guide for journalists, on the topic of misinformation and disinformation.

The handbook comprises three main sections: an introduction to disinformation and misinformation and their several types; tools and techniques to verify and fact-check information, particularly images and videos; and best practices to combat disinformation in the newsroom, both at an individual and institutional level.

The section on tools was compiled from the training sessions conducted for journalists in Kochi, Chennai, and Bengaluru during July-September, 2019. These sessions were conducted by leading fact-checking experts in India and the United States. I would like to thank Google News Initiative and its certified trainers – Bharat Nayak, Sunil Prabhakar, and Sathish Kumar V.; and Pratik Sinha and Pooja Chaudhuri from Alt News for providing the training material and conducting the sessions. I would also like to thank Dan Shelley, Executive Director, Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA), United States, for conducting webinars to train the journalists during the workshops.

The section on best practices has been compiled from panel discussions and conversations among senior journalists, editors, media practitioners, fact-checkers, and participants during the workshops and one-day conference. The comments and observations from these sessions have been condensed in an easy-to-read format, which we hope will serve as a useful guide for practitioners of journalism, student journalists, and new entrants in the field. I thank all the senior journalists, editors, media practitioners, fact-checkers, and participants for their useful suggestions, comments, and discussions. I would also like to thank the news organizations in the regional languages of Malayalam, Tamil, and Kannada for lending their support by participating in this initiative.

Our regional partners from Sacred Heart College, Kochi, led by Babu Joseph and team, and Communication for Development and Learning, Bengaluru, led by Hema Prasanna and team, were instrumental in organizing and conducting the

workshops in these cities. I extend my sincere thanks to them for their efforts. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Research Assistants Ganapati Hegde, Sneha M., Sulthana Salim, and Gowtham Raj R. for their commitment and excellent work throughout the project. My special thanks to Dr. K. Nagaraj for mentoring the teams.

This project was done with a grant from the U.S. Consulate General in Chennai. I would like to thank Sujatha Srinivasan, Media Advisor, and her team Elayaperumal P., Hemalatha Harapanahalli, and Nelson K. Paul, for their support and cooperation in conducting the workshops and conference. I would also like to thank Lauren H. Lovelace, the Public Affairs Officer, and Kathleen Hosie, Spokesperson at the U.S. Consulate General, Chennai, for their regular inputs during the project. My special thanks to Susie Alexander, Grants Admin Assistant, and Ratna Mukherjee, Programs and Exchanges Specialist, for assisting us in the grant process.

I would like to convey my sincere thanks to Sashi Kumar, Chairman, Media Development Foundation, for guiding and encouraging us in delivering this project. I would also like to convey my heartfelt thanks to Dr. Nalini Rajan, Dean of Studies, Asian College of Journalism, for her unstinted support and guidance throughout the project. I also thank Ms. Malini K.N., Senior Executive, Chairman's Office, who was the backbone to this project and of immense support to the teams. I would also like to thank the faculty at the Asian College of Journalism for their encouragement and advice at all stages of the project. Finally, my sincere thanks to all the administrative and technical staff at the Asian College of Journalism for helping us conduct the programs successfully.

We hope the conversation on disinformation is given a fillip and sustained with this handbook.

Anjana Krishnan

Research Associate

Asian College of Journalism

INTRODUCTION

Misinformation and disinformation are not new words in the media's lexicon. Political propaganda, rumors, hoaxes, commercial interests, factual errors, and mistakes due to lack of rigorous fact-checking by journalists or media persons have led to misinformation and disinformation in the media. However, the alarming rise in both misinformation and disinformation in recent times is a cause for concern, given its impact on the public and democracy (Ponniah, 2019, BBC News, n.d. & Bathini, 2018). In India, there have been instances of violence unleashed on vulnerable communities or individuals due to misinformation or disinformation, often channeled through digital media (Safi, 2018). There have also been allegations of using social media to deliberately manipulate elections by swaying voter mindsets in favor of specific political parties (Ponniah, 2019). A significant aspect of this increase in misinformation or disinformation in the media today can be attributed to recent technological advances, which have opened up communication channels and allowed widespread access to information. We are now at a point in time where we have too much content and too little time to process and discern facts from false information.

Within the news media, the understanding of what constitutes journalism and what makes news has undergone a rapid change. The internet revolution has democratized not only access to information but also production of information. Today, it is not necessarily a journalist who breaks the news, but anyone with access to the necessary technology. This poses a fundamental challenge to the practice of journalism – what constitutes news? What drives headlines? What is trustworthy news? How can news media organizations maintain credibility and relevance by performing their roles as news bearers within this environment?

In collaboration with the U.S. Consulate General in Chennai, the Media Development Foundation presents this handbook “Misinformation and Disinformation: A handbook for journalists.” It provides an overview of important points made by U.S. and Indian fact-checking experts, discussions among senior journalists, news ombudsmen, and working journalists during a series of workshops conducted across South India in the regional languages of Kannada, Malayalam, and Tamil in July-September 2019.

DEFINITIONS

Information can be distorted at different levels by actors with different motivations. We distinguish information that is deliberately manipulated to misinform people from information that is false and unintentional. UNESCO's handbook "Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training" helps clarify basic definitions (UNESCO, 2018):

Misinformation– *Information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm.*

Disinformation– *Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization, or country.*

While **Fake News** is a term commonly encountered in this context, UNESCO and other international bodies do not use it. For instance, the Council of Europe report "Information Disorder" discourages use of the term, as it is "inadequate" to explain the extent of "information pollution" and because politicians have increasingly used the term to discredit news organizations across the world (Wardle, 2017).

TYPES OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Claire Wardle, the Executive Editor at First Draft News and the co-author of the Council of Europe report “Information Disorder,” classifies seven different types of misinformation and disinformation (Wardle, 2017):

1. Satire or Parody – Information that has the potential to fool but not cause harm
2. Misleading Content – Using information misleadingly to frame a person or an issue
3. Imposter Content – Content where a genuine source is impersonated
4. Fabricated Content – Content that is completely false and causes harm
5. False Connection – Instances where headlines, visuals, or captions do not match the content
6. False Context – Instances when genuine content is shared with false contextual information
7. Manipulated Content – When genuine information, such as an image or video, is manipulated



Source: Seven Types of Misinformation and Disinformation, First Draft News, Claire Wardle (2017)

DEEP FAKES

The above forms of misinformation or disinformation can generally be recognized through continuous and rigorous fact-checking in the newsroom. Domain expertise, as well as potential journalistic experience, helps too.

However, a serious impact of technology-driven manipulation is the spread of false audios and videos. These are popularly referred to as “deep fakes,” where videos or audios are manipulated using artificial intelligence and are therefore very difficult to debunk. Artificial intelligence software can manipulate videos of a person and provide an altered “reality.” Similar technologies mimic voices and generate false audios (BBC, 2018).

TOOLS FOR VERIFICATION

Images and videos are the most common forms of misinformation and disinformation spread through social media. Certain tools help verify whether an image or video is true or false. These are open source tools freely available on the internet. The following section lists some of these tools and ways to use them.

IMAGE VERIFICATION

SEARCH TOOLS

Google's Reverse Image Search

Google's reverse image search is a feature available on the search engine. It can search for visually similar images on the web for a chosen picture and identify the origin and specific details of the image.

The reverse image search can be used to track any image on the internet using a link and any image that a user has saved on his or her electronic device.

HOW TO USE REVERSE IMAGE SEARCH

On Google Chrome

Google Chrome browser has a built-in reverse image search option called "Search Google for image" that will automatically search the image on Google. To use this option, right-click on the image and click "Search Google for image."

On other browsers

1. Go to <https://images.google.com>. Or, go to Google, and click on Images.
2. Click the camera icon "Search by image."
3. Choose either "Paste image URL" or "Upload an Image" depending on the preferred type of search.
4. Click "Search by image." You will find articles, links, and visually similar images to the original image. The search results will lead to websites that list related news stories and other relevant information for that image. Google will also provide relevant search keywords along with the image in the search box.

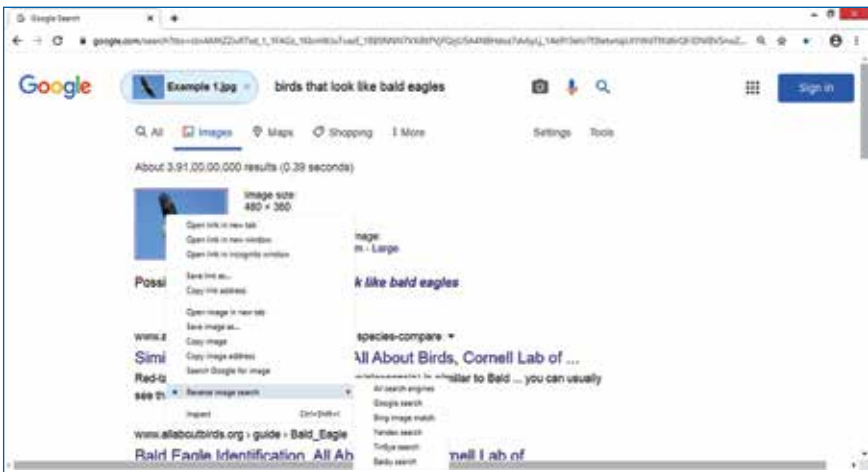


For mobile users

On smart phones, go to images.google.com on your browser and click on the three vertically placed dots on the top-right corner of your screen. In the list of options, check “Desktop version.” This will lead to the images page on Google that is similar to the page users can access from the laptop or desktop.

RevEye Reverse Image Search: Searching using multiple search engines

Apart from Google, there are other search engines that are used for searching images on the web. **RevEye Reverse Image Search** is a Google Chrome Extension available on the Chrome webstore. This lets users search for an image on multiple search engines including Google, Yandex, Bing, Baidu, and TinEye. Users must add the RevEye Reverse Image Search as an extension to the browser before searching for images.



SOME TIPS

1. If similar pictures and links to news articles on the web are found while checking a picture using Google Reverse Image search, then it is understood that the image is not a new one. New pictures can also come up in search results.
2. Following a reverse image search, check the accompanying text with the image on Google search. This can give clues related to the context in which the image appears on the web. You can also change the accompanying text to a keyword of your choice to refine your search.
3. Use double reverse image search to narrow the results for its origin and context.
4. At times, users may find a collage of images that need to be fact-checked. Crop the relevant portion of the image for fact-checking. Images with text written on them, such as memes or collages, can be a challenge. In such cases, crop portions of the image without the text and conduct a reverse image search.

CROPPING TOOLS

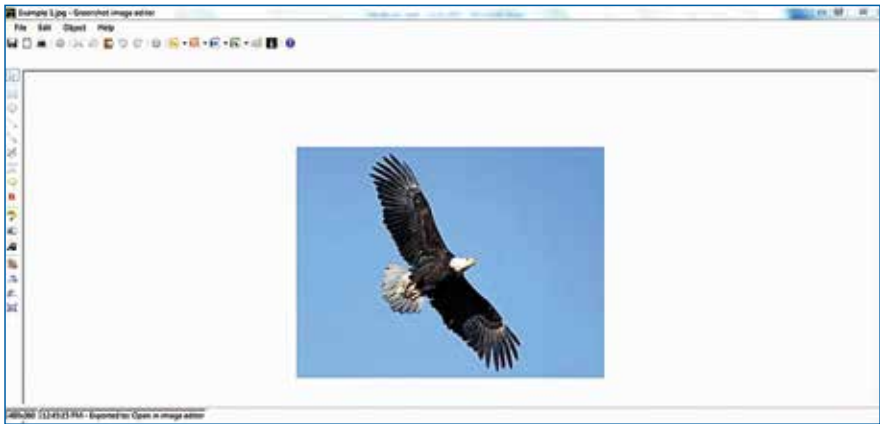
Awesome Screenshot

Awesome Screenshot is a tool that can crop images, annotate images, blur images, and create other interactive features on an image. It can capture the screenshot of a full screen, as well as selected portions of the screen. It is available as an extension of Google Chrome.



Greenshot

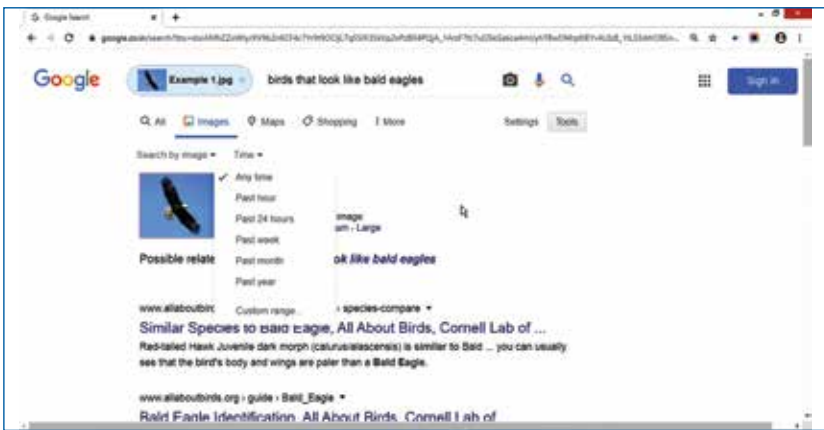
Greenshot is a tool similar to Awesome Screenshot. It can take screenshots, annotate, and crop images. Unlike Awesome Screenshot, you can upload images from your desktop in Greenshot. It is compatible with Microsoft Windows.



Refining Your Image Search: Time Filter

The time filter is applied to search for images within a specific period. This is useful for verifying claims of photos which were said to be taken during a particular event or period.

While searching for an image on Google, users can select the Tools section to refine a search based on Time. To do this, click Tools. From the Time drop-down list, select the time frame to be used to search for the image.



SOME TIPS

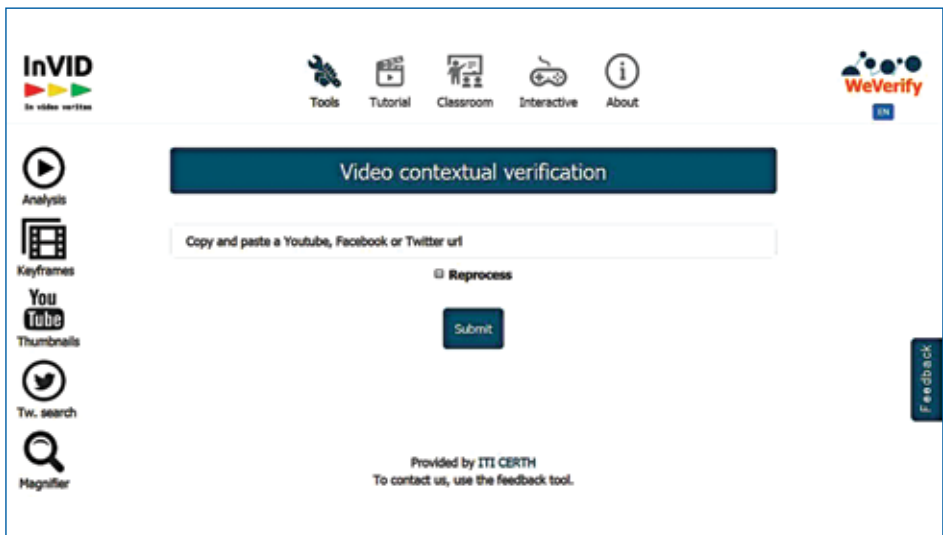
1. It is essential to fact-check all user-generated content.
2. Save a copy of the image or video to be fact-checked. Wayback Machine and archive.is are two online repositories used to archive photos, videos, and links.
3. For better results, change the keyword text associated with a reverse image search on Google.
4. EXIF or Exchangeable Image File Format data is useful to track important information related to an image that is being searched in Google. EXIF data can include the type of camera used to click the photo, the exposure time, shutter speed, and other information. This can be useful to track the original photo.
5. It is important to track the image source to its original uploader such as news websites and image repositories.
6. Users should use their observation skills and judgment to trace the origin or context of an image.

VIDEO VERIFICATION

Videos are a visual representation of movement of images. Therefore, the tools to debunk false videos are essentially the same as debunking false images. However, users need a tool to break down a video into different screenshots or images before the verification process begins. The tools listed below will help in video verification.

InVid

InVid is a video news debunker available on Google Chrome Store for investigating potentially false videos. InVid provides a combination of tools that break down a video into several keyframes, magnify an image, and conduct Advanced Twitter Search. InVid is used primarily for YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter videos. It can be added as an extension on the Chrome browser.



To analyze a video, first break it down into key frames or images. InVid lets users do this by fragmenting videos into images and helping to perform a reverse image search. This can be done on InVid as follows:

1. Install the InVid plugin as an extension to the Chrome browser.
2. The InVid icon will appear next to the URL text field. Open InVid by clicking on the icon.
3. Select Keyframes from the set of options available on the page.
4. In the "Insert the Video URL" text box, paste the link of the video and click Submit. Alternately, users can upload a video stored on a laptop or desktop.
5. The video is broken down into keyframes and displayed below. For each image, users can perform a Google reverse image search. InVid incorporates a Google reverse image search in its functioning. Left click on the image to perform this function.

NOTE: InVid can be used for other Search engines such as Yandex and Baidu.

YouTube Data Viewer

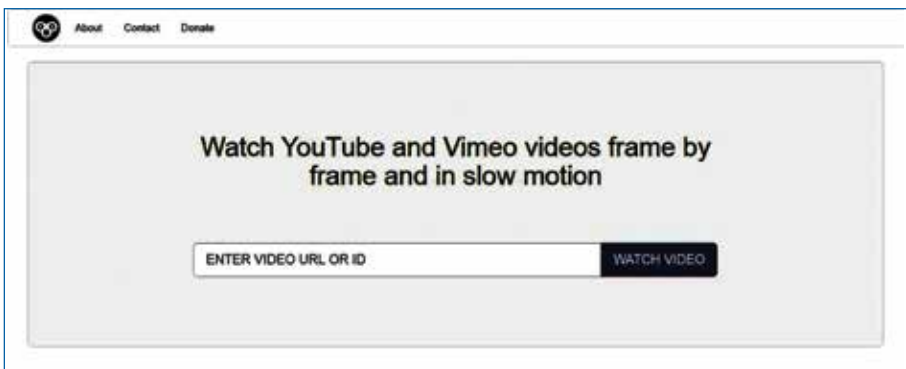
YouTube Data Viewer is powered by Amnesty International and is helpful in retrieving the exact upload time of a YouTube video as well as breaking down a video into several images. This tool automatically provides an option to reverse search the image on Google.



1. To access the tool, log into <https://citizenevidence.amnestyusa.org/>.
2. In the search box, paste the original YouTube link of the video.
3. As soon as the video is broken down into different frames or images, click on the “reverse image search” option next to the image to search it in Google.

Watch Frame by Frame

Watch Frame by Frame is another tool available online that lets users slow down the speed of a video. This process will reveal finer details in a video that could otherwise be missed. The tool is available on watchframebyframe.com.



SOME TIPS

1. Always download and save a copy of the video to be analyzed.
2. Archive the URL links that contain the videos.
3. Use search options in social media websites including Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to find information.
4. Messages accompanying videos on social media most often remain the same. For instance, a false video shared with a specific text on WhatsApp can be found with the same text on Facebook or Twitter.
5. Users can search for a video using the text that accompanies it.
6. If a reverse image search does not yield specific results, change the keywords for better results.
7. YouTube has an in-built option to slow down videos. This option will be useful to analyze the video in detail.

GEO-LOCATION

Geo-location uses tools including maps to identify location in an image or a video. It can be a useful tool in verifying the authenticity of a viral image or video. The most widely used online mapping tools are Google Maps and Google Earth, Bing Maps, Wikimapia, and Yandex maps.

Look for specific details in an image or video to narrow down to the location, for instance:

1. Street Layouts – The visual spread of a street can be unique to a particular place.
2. Statues or monuments – Statues or monuments specific to the socio-cultural history of a place or revered as landmarks are important signs.
3. Architectural details – Buildings' architecture reveals clues about the regional and socio-cultural influences of a place.
4. Street signs/Shopfronts – Signboards can prove useful to identify a particular location. Language used on the signboard can reveal further clues on the location. This is also true of shops specific to a region.
5. License plates – Vehicle license plates offer clues about the region where the video was taken. Number plates can be unique to specific states and countries in the world.

Google Maps

Google's map service provides several options that can be useful in geo-location. Some of these are its aerial views, satellite imagery of locations, 360-degree views of streets, traffic routes, and notifications about public transportation. Google Maps also serves as an archive of images of places that have been updated over the years. This helps in tracking historical imagery of particular places in the world.

Google Street View

Google Street View is a feature of Google Maps that provides a virtual representation of images taken by Google and contributors to the street view. The images are presented in a panoramic view that helps the user virtually explore places in the world.

To access street view in Google Maps, do the following:

1. Go to Google Maps on [google.com/maps](https://www.google.com/maps).
2. In the left-hand corner of the screen, click the Menu button.
3. Click the Street View option from the menu. Blue dots on the map indicate locations that allow street view on Google. There is also a yellow human icon, called pegman, at the bottom-right corner of the screen.
4. By dragging the pegman and dropping him on any of the blue spots on the map, users can view the street view for that particular location. Users can zoom in and get a panoramic view of the location once users have landed in that place.



Google Earth

Google Earth is a high-resolution view of the Earth through satellite imagery. It renders images of the globe in 3D view. It can be accessed on your mobile phone, desktop, and on the web.

Mapillary

Mapillary is another mapping platform that enables street-level imagery by collating images from contributors. Mapillary uses specialized technology to map places from contributions and render 3D street views. Mapillary is a crowd-sourced platform and covers parts of India. However, being a crowd-sourced platform, sourcing of pictures depends on the interest of the public involved in it. Mapillary also does not allow panning or tilting of images.



SOME TIPS

1. Always play the video completely to look for finer details for geo-location.
2. Look out for changes in the camera angles and the manner in which the camera is held and operated. Tilting, zooming, panning, or pausing the camera can reveal visual clues.

3. Searches aimed at identifying monuments or landmarks in a particular area can also help identify places in a video. For instance, search items such as “Bengaluru monuments” or “Chennai churches” can produce results specific to landmarks and places.
4. Listen to the audio carefully. Languages, dialects, names, places, and other important information can be gleaned by listening to the audio.
5. Certain locations in videos or images may not be supported by street views. In such a case look for options that will provide a bird’s eye view from the top.

NOTE: Often, metadata of images uploaded on crowd-sourced mapping platforms can reveal important information. This is possible only when a user has the locations setting turned on at the time of uploading the image. However, geo-tagged photos and EXIF data of images can be tampered with and can mislead. At best, geo-tagged photos and images can be looked at as good leads to trace the location of the image.

SOURCE VERIFICATION

For a journalist, sources are extremely important. They need to be reliable, credible, and trustworthy. In this digital age, journalists often rely on digital and social media platforms for information. It is essential to be vigilant given the abundance of misinformation and disinformation on such platforms.

Identifying false accounts and websites

Here are a few questions to ask in order to verify websites and accounts on the web and social media.

1. Nature of the account/website

- * Does the account or website look real? When was the account or website created?
- * How often is information uploaded in the account or website? Where do they post from?
- * Does the account holder have other online presences?

2. Connection to the story being pursued

- * What is the account's or website's connection with the story?
- * What does the upload history of the account reveal that has a connection to the story?
- * Is the upload content consistent in quality and content over time?
- * Is the description and content uploaded consistent with reports in other media?

Whois.com

Whois.com is an online domain registration service that also contains a database of registered websites on the internet. While identifying false accounts or websites, use the "whois" website to find out when the website was registered and under whose name or phone number.

NOTE: Beware of scrapers!

Often, there are websites or accounts that just "scrape" information from other sources and post it on their website or account. This is done to attract more traffic and viewership. Moreover, this is often visible in the manner in which information is shared. These accounts have dramatic images and videos along with dramatic text. The accounts also come with an appeal to push people into action or contribute to some cause, with messages insisting to subscribe, share, or like. They also host information that is inconsistent and is compiled across different locations and time. These accounts and websites are completely unreliable.

Social Auditing

People leave digital footprints when accessing the internet. A rich profile of a person can be created based on an individual's internet activity and the use of a variety of social media platforms and services. Users can verify the credibility of an individual on the internet by auditing this information. This can be helpful in avoiding or blocking particular users who are known to circulate misinformation or disinformation on the internet.

SOME TIPS

1. Check for different variations of the name of the user across different platforms. The same can be done for usernames given in different accounts on social media or particular services used by the person.
2. Perform Google reverse image search of the user's profile photo to identify if it is the same user across different platforms. Most often, false accounts can have multiple usernames and different pictures in different accounts.
3. Use visual clues from pictures posted on the account such as logos, headers, and graphics to verify the user.
4. Conduct searches by combining information available about the user such as school name, location, workplace, etc. from their posts.
5. Check with known sources among friends and family groups to verify the authenticity of the person or the account.

TIPS FOR DATA VERIFICATION

1. Always look at the source of the data and verify whether it is real and unbiased.
2. Investigate whether there are vested interests in sponsoring the research.
3. Verify if the opinions given in the research are biased.
4. Verify if the sample of the study is representative.
5. It is important to question every minute aspect of the research study.

TIPS TO READ NEWS ARTICLES

1. Read the article completely.
2. Look for the lead and make sure the reporter has not buried the lead.
3. Identify if credible sources and quotes have been used in the story to back the claims made.
4. In online platforms, follow the comments and read them. These may reveal clues related to mistakes in the stories.

5. Look out for sloppy writing or presentation of the story.
6. Crosscheck the URL to make sure that the content does not belong to a manipulated news website.
7. Learn to differentiate between satire and real news. Certain news websites provide satirical content but provide disclaimers for the same. Do thorough background checks of the news website.
8. Refer to media literacy websites.
9. Double-check on the author of the article to ensure credibility.
10. If there are supporting links in the story, crosscheck if these are true and credible.
11. Check the date of the news story to ensure that it is not reposted from a prior date.
12. Journalists must be aware of their own biases, including ideological leanings, before they make judgments about news stories.
13. In cases of doubt, it is better to consult an expert related to the topic.

MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION: A FEW OBSERVATIONS

During the workshops for regional language media, there were discussions among senior editors and journalists, media practitioners, media entrepreneurs, news ombudsmen, practicing journalists, and journalism students on factors that result in misinformation and disinformation in the regional language media in India. Here are a few observations:

Misinformation/Disinformation

1. Misinformation or disinformation is not a new phenomenon. Journalists have grappled with the issue for years. However, it has been exacerbated in recent times.
2. An overabundance of information on digital platforms causes information distortion. The lack of verification and fact-checking of information from digital media can lead to misinformation or disinformation.
3. Disinformation can have economic, commercial, political, and/or social intent. Journalists can be used to further the agenda of nefarious actors.
4. Misinformation or disinformation can be picked up from social media and amplified by mainstream news media.
5. Misinformation or disinformation can break down entire state systems, particularly during disaster periods.

Causes of misinformation/disinformation

1. In times of crisis, such as a war or a disaster, the scope for distortion of information is very high. This is particularly true in the case of regional or local media, which are at the center of the situation.
2. Misinformation can arise when journalists feel compelled to create news, rather than let news stories evolve organically.
3. Misinformation also arises when journalists feel compelled to look for different news stories, or to present news stories in a unique fashion. They are driven by the need to get appreciation and credit for their stories.

4. Time constraints because of competition to report first on a story can prevent news channels from verifying information.
5. News, not necessarily false but exaggerated, can also lead to misinformation. This is often done in situations where you need to boost the morale of a particular group, such as in the case of rescue operations.
6. Statistics and numbers can often be misreported (exaggerated or underreported) depending on the situation in which they are given. A main factor here is “information lock-up,” where credible sources of information, particularly the government, do not give data or updates. When this happens, the reporter is forced to conduct his/her own investigation and in the absence of data, he/she may resort to underestimating or overestimating the final figures.
7. The tone and language of reporting, particularly on sensitive issues and headlines, can lead to sensationalism and misreporting.
8. Off-the-record views or opinions can be treated as gossip material. This goes against the ethics of journalism and can be sensationalized to result in misinformation.
9. Often, crime stories rely entirely on police records for source and information. News organizations do not rely on alternative sources.
10. Journalists’ potential prejudices can lead to sensationalism, exaggeration, or misreporting certain events.
11. A lack of regulation among social media platforms, unlike mainstream news organizations, contributes to the problem.

Nature of newsrooms/news organizations

1. There is a rush to produce more stories or news every day. This pressure differs across platforms.
2. Business models and top leadership of media organizations have a big say in the nature of news that is published. News organizations and editors depend on circulation and some tend to sensationalize news to increase circulation numbers.

3. Review the ownership and business models of news organizations. These factors may influence the objectivity and editorial decisions of the media outlet.
4. Mainstream Indian media organizations do not invest enough resources in fact-checking and verifying the credibility of a story.
5. Media organizations are competing with more entities today than ever before. The pressure to publish news stories ahead of the rest may not give them the time or space to fact-check. In addition, if media organizations are committed to fact-checking their stories before publishing them, they may lose out to the competition.
6. News organizations, journalists, and the public must consume news from a variety of sources and not restrict consumption to one source.
7. Print media has more time to verify and crosscheck information, compared to electronic and digital media.
8. Media can pander to majoritarian expectations and misreport issues.
9. Conflation of opinion media with responsible journalism reduces trust and credibility in the media.
10. Merely “curating” information from various sources, without confirming its veracity, is not journalism.
11. Sensitization about disinformation is of primary importance in the media. Prevention comes next.
12. There must be a change in the approach as to how we consume information. Mere changes in the approach of producing news within the newsroom will not address the issue of disinformation.
13. Newsroom culture today relies heavily on getting a quote from a person in authority, without verifying it, and building a narrative around it.
14. An editor’s role is important to ensure that the newsroom pursues active, assertive, and ethical journalism.

15. An editor's role is also to champion free press and is more important than ever before.
16. Reporters need good editors who support and stand by them in difficult situations.

Relationship between the media and the reader

1. There is, in many cases, a credibility gap between the media and the public.
2. The relationship between journalists and citizens is a two-way process. The journalist must report the "best available version of the truth" and engage in educating the public. On the part of consumers, it is their responsibility to ensure that the information they read is verified and true.
3. Apart from journalists, consumers have equal responsibilities to check the veracity of the information they consume.
4. Illiteracy does not necessarily contribute to people spreading misinformation or disinformation. Even educated people who act without social commitment, social responsibility, and want to retain power among a social group can contribute to misinformation.
5. A free press with a variety of voices, offering a variety of points of views expressed on a variety of platforms, is essential for the public to learn to get the most accurate information possible.
6. Satire is essential to the fabric of democracy. However, journalism needs to use it responsibly, and the public as well as journalists must have media literacy to distinguish between satire and actual news.

Role of fact-checking organizations and technology companies

1. Technology organizations are incentivizing fact-checking websites and news organizations by providing alerts about the veracity of the news and promoting the links to the top of the search results.
2. Fact-checking organizations can act as pressure lobbies on mainstream media to expose false information that is promoted as news.
3. Fact-checking and debunking efforts must be a combination of domain knowledge, technological expertise, and journalistic skills.
4. Fact-checking teams have been integral to news media organizations over time.
5. Consider the role of big technology companies and the roles they play in providing information to the people and their technological knowledge in accessing information. They can play a role in distorting democracies.
6. Technology companies have the wherewithal to invest in debunking and verifying false information, particularly images and videos.
7. Technology companies need to have policies that are more transparent.

BEST PRACTICES

To avoid misinformation or disinformation, journalists and newsrooms can subscribe to certain best practices. The following best practices were shared by senior journalists, media practitioners, and fact-checking experts during a series of workshops in South India from July to September 2019.

JOURNALISTS

Sources

1. Verify all sources of information. In particular, verify information from sources associated with political parties or with political affiliations. Even sources within the public can have vested interests.
2. Have multiple sources to verify information. If all sources, supporting sources, and documents do not provide a clear picture, do not publish the story.
3. Investigate the source thoroughly, particularly online sources such as Wikipedia. In the case of websites, it is essential to investigate the missions, objectives, and contact information.
4. Check frequently for information available on social media. However, expose information that is false, even if posted by a prominent political figure. Only report information that can be independently confirmed as fact.
5. Check for comments, particularly in social media accounts. These can reveal clues to help verify the veracity of information.
6. Check supporting sources to identify if the information given in them is credible or not.
7. Fact-check information, no matter how reliable or trustworthy the source is. Do not jump to conclusions.
8. Be wary of a source that has provided false information in the past.
9. When possible, visit the field and report from the ground.
10. Be wary of the coverage of events by social media. Social media can sensationalize or reveal sensitive information in certain cases.

11. Avoid personal gestures, favors, or acknowledgements from political leaders. Their intent may be to misinform.
12. Do not make immediate conclusions when it comes to images or videos found online. It is essential to verify the source and examine the image/video in detail before concluding it to be true or false. For videos or images, zoom into the picture or slow down the video for finer details.
13. Look at all possible news angles in a story.

Reporting/Writing/Editing

1. Do not unnecessarily alarm the reader. Provide the best version of the truth in your reports.
2. Be aware of echo chambers that provide a singular narrative.
3. Be aware of the people who will be affected by the story.
4. Do not fictionalize stories. Report facts as they are.
5. In general, provide attribution to all sources in the story.
6. Report on calamities and disasters sensitively and objectively. Special teams must be trained and dedicated in news organizations for this purpose.
7. Write balanced headlines. Avoid derogatory, provocative, and biased words.
8. Do not add hype and other sensationalist characteristics to the story to enhance viewership or readership, especially if the story is sensational by its very nature. A well-reported, well-sourced story told well is sensational and compelling enough on its own.
9. Go back to the basics of journalism – precise, fair, and evidence- or fact-based reporting.
10. Support claims or theories in news stories or articles with adequate research, facts, and figures.
11. Do not resort to “false balancing” of news stories. A balanced story does not necessarily mean including quotes from people from opposite ideological camps.

12. Use basic logic to counter false or exaggerated claims.
13. Exercise caution while reporting on sensitive issues. News organizations and reporters can play divisive roles when reporting on sensitive issues if they are not cautious.
14. Read beyond the headline to investigate outrageous claims made in it. Stories can be more than just the headlines.
15. Always check the bona fides of the author of the story to find out if they are real and credible.
16. Check the date. At times, old stories may be reposted but may not be relevant to current events.
17. Check your own biases as they may affect your judgment.
18. Consult an expert or a fact-checking website when in doubt.
19. Provide critical and educative stories on a topic.
20. Provide a good mix of news and opinions but be transparent and clear in distinguishing between the two. This will help bridge disconnect between ground reality and news provided by media organisations and prevent false narratives. This will also reduce disconnect between the public and the media.
21. Implement the policy of “first with the right story” instead of “first with the story.”
22. Do not resort to the “bandwagon effect” where a journalist is forced to report a story just because a competitor has reported it.
23. Follow up on news stories reported by other news organizations, particularly in situations when they have uncovered a big story.
24. Trust and stand by your reporters.

Fact-checking

1. Give special attention to viral news stories and fact-check before publishing them.
2. Take up initiatives at an individual level to counter disinformation.

3. Accept genuine mistakes in news stories and correct them immediately. However, do not accept deliberate acts of false information that enter reporting.
4. Set up internal mechanisms to educate journalists about disinformation and how to fight it.
5. Include fact-checking components in the regular news production cycles. Dedicate time each day in the newsroom to fact-check a minimum number of stories that require less time. This is specifically required in the regional-language media and online portals that have high viewership.
6. Invest in investigative reporting, forming explanatory reporting units, improving domain expertise, and placing journalists in communities to improve the depth and granular reporting of news.
7. Implement multiple levels of fact-checking at an organizational level.
8. Invest in training and media literacy programs for journalists.
9. Appoint full-time social media editors to fact-check, verify, and ensure the credibility of information posted on social media accounts. Also, dedicate a person to act as a gatekeeper of information from social media.
10. Provide space in regional media for journalists to share and publish their experiences regularly. An initiative like a “Reporter’s Notebook” can reveal the multiple dimensions and challenges of the profession and help the public better understand not just what journalists report, but the process through which they go to report stories.
11. Provide opportunities for young journalists and new entrants in the field to voice their opinions and views regarding media practices. This will infuse fresh thoughts and a critical look at the functioning of the news media.

MEDIA HEADS/ORGANIZATION HEADS

1. Evolve a business model by identifying audiences and empathizing with viewers and readers.
2. Create a self-sustaining revenue model. An advertisement-based revenue model increases dependence on the funding sources and could make news organizations more vulnerable to misinformation or disinformation.

3. Clearly identify advertisements to differentiate them from news stories.
4. Enact policies that are transparent to the public, the reader, and the viewer. Clarify with the public the nature of the errors, the errors, and steps taken to rectify them. Rebuild trust with the public.
5. Mainstream news organizations must adapt to social media to tackle disinformation in a systematic manner.

JOURNALISTS' AND MEDIA COALITIONS

1. Solidarity and coalition of news organizations and journalists can help overcome pressures exerted by powerful lobbies.
2. Create a formal policy to prevent disinformation and misinformation.
3. Enact policies to regulate the broadcaster to air news and public affairs programs for a specified period.
4. Enact policies to restrict cross-media ownership to prevent amplification of misinformation and disinformation.
5. Encourage credible government organizations to provide data and statistics periodically.
6. Cancel the credentials of journalists who spread misinformation or disinformation.
7. Incorporate mentoring programs for young and new journalists.
8. Collaborative efforts among media organizations must recognize good reporting as well as point out mistakes made by their competitors.
9. Devise guidelines to report on sensitive aspects of a news story, such as death counts following a disaster or an accident. The media must report only officially confirmed numbers. Death counts must be based on the number of dead bodies and follow with a statement from close relatives or sources confirming the death whenever possible.
10. Establish alternative platforms for the public to express views and opinions of daily relevance.
11. Interact more with the public. This will help foster trust and credibility.
12. Collaborate with technological organizations to verify and fact-check information. This is important in regional media organizations.

TACKLING DISINFORMATION IN NEWSROOMS: PARTICIPANTS' SUGGESTIONS

1. News organizations should have mechanisms such as news ombudsmen to fact-check information.
2. It is essential to fact-check images, videos, and regular news every day in the newsroom. Journalists themselves can carry this out. This would empower newsrooms from holding back a news story and instead support them to verify the content and publish it with confidence in the veracity of the report.
3. Investigative journalism is essential to understand and report an issue in-depth.
4. Journalists must ask for time to verify and validate a news story, even if the newsroom culture emphasizes publishing a story immediately.
5. Journalists should look at all possible angles to cover a news story and not restrict themselves to a single narrative. Newsrooms and journalists should spend more time to verify the information in stories.
6. It is important to read reports and press releases in depth to interpret grey areas in the text.
7. Journalists should bring more viewpoints into their reporting.
8. It is preferable, if not essential, for a journalist to specialize in a beat and gain domain knowledge and expertise.
9. Discussions on disinformation and misinformation must be carried out in newsrooms and other platforms relevant to journalists.
10. Journalists must be empowered to question and cross-check government sources.
11. Media outlets should admit mistakes in reports that have been published or broadcast.
12. Similar to the Readers' Editor in the print media, television channels can explore the option of having a Viewer's Editor.
13. News media should publish more information related to the issue of misinformation and disinformation.

14. Journalists must learn to balance between newsroom culture, work pressures, and an organization's expectations.
15. Stringers working for regional news organizations must be empowered and strengthened to fight disinformation and misinformation through proper training in tools and techniques to verify images and videos.
16. It is essential to provide background and contextual information for stories on sensitive issues.
17. Establish special fact-checking teams to verify information in each newsroom. Experts with the technical expertise necessary for fact-checking must lead these.
18. Collaborative efforts among journalists on social media and other platforms will help fight disinformation together.
19. Media organizations must conduct systematic training for journalists in fact-checking and verification. There can also be collaborations between different media organizations, press clubs, and media unions. The government could also play an active role in this aspect.
20. More workshops and programs could be planned to train and discuss disinformation and misinformation, particularly in the regional media. These workshops could be organized for the heads of media organizations and students of journalism. Journalism schools and colleges should develop curriculum to implement fact-checking. Workshops and programs can be conducted in media academies, press clubs, and public relations departments.
21. Tackling disinformation must begin at the source, particularly social media platforms.

FACT-CHECKING WEBSITES

International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)

Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network founded in September 2015, is a collective of fact-checking organizations around the world. IFCN has a code of principles and verified signatories that actively conduct fact-checks. IFCN provides training, enacts policies, and provides fellowships and grants to support fact-checking.

Alt News

Alt News is an Indian fact-checking website launched in 2017. Alt News monitors and debunks misinformation on the social media as well as the mainstream media. It does this in the form of extensive stories following in-depth research. Alt News fact-checks information in English and Hindi. The Alt News app, launched in 2019, allows users to request fact checks by letting them upload images or videos for verification.

Boom Live

Boom Live is an India-based fact-checking website founded in 2016. Apart from fact-checking viral claims on social media and mainstream media, Boom Live has a section called "Fact File" listing important facts on relevant news. The website does fact checks in three languages: English, Hindi, and Bengali. The website runs a WhatsApp helpline number for users to request fact-checks directly.

SMHoax Slayer

SMHoax Slayer is an independent fact-checking website run by Pankaj Jain in India. It started as an individual initiative with a Facebook page in 2015 and is now fully dedicated to fact-checking.

Snopes

Snopes is one of the oldest U.S.-based fact-checking websites founded in 1994. It started as a website investigating folklores, myths, and hoaxes on the internet and is now widely regarded as one of the leading fact-checking organizations online. Snopes gives ratings such as True, Mostly True, Mixture, Mostly False, False, Unproven, Outdated, Labelled Satire, etc., to its fact-checks to project the severity of the misinformation.

Factchecker.in

Factchecker.in is part of The Spending and Policy Research Foundation, Mumbai. It was started in 2013 to verify statements made by leading public figures and to provide data-based analysis for key issues. For instance, it runs a section called “Constituency Check” that evaluates flagship government programs and provides constituency-wise information on various indicators.

Factly

Factly is a data journalism and public information portal in India that advocates for an open data policy for government information. It conducts fact checks and data journalism initiatives to simplify public data and information. It also provides tools to make access to public data easier.

PolitiFact

PolitiFact is a fact-checking website currently run by the Poynter Institute. It was started in 2007 as part of the election-year coverage of the Tampa Bay Times in Florida to verify claims made by public figures. PolitiFact applies multiple ratings to the accuracy of claims made by public officials in the form of a Truth-O-Meter. Readers can also send suggestions for fact-checks. PolitiFact was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting in 2009 for its fact-checking initiative during the U.S. presidential election campaign in 2008.

READING RESOURCES

1. Duty, Identity, Credibility: ‘Fake news’ and the ordinary citizen in India – BBC

The study looks at the fake news narratives prevalent in the Indian context, the motivations to spread fake news, and the need to fact-check information.

<https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/duty-identity-credibility.pdf>

2. Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation – University of Oxford

The study talks of the use of social media to manipulate and misinform the public, especially by political parties.

<http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/07/ct2018.pdf>

3. India Digital News Report – Reuters Institute and University of Oxford

The study looks at how digital news is consumed in India, with an emphasis on raising concerns over disinformation and hyper partisan content in online news.

https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-03/India_DNR_FINAL.pdf

4. Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training - UNESCO

The handbook explains the phenomenon of disinformation/misinformation in the media today, their spread through digital platforms, and efforts and tools to debunk them. It also focuses on the need for media literacy to tackle this phenomenon.

https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0.pdf

5. **“News you don’t believe”: Audience perspectives on fake news - Reuters Institute and University of Oxford**

This Reuters Institute Study for Journalism factsheet details findings on audience’s perspective of what constitutes fake news.

https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-10/Nielsen&Graves_factsheet_1710v3_FINAL_download.pdf

6. **Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking - By Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan**

This report looks at the issue of “information pollution,” in large part due to technology. The report defines the processes, the type of content, and the complex nature of this phenomenon.

<https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c>

7. **The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online – By Whitney Phillips**

The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online draws on in-depth interviews by scholar Whitney Phillips to showcase how news media was hijacked from 2016 to 2018 to amplify the messages of hate groups.

https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/FULLREPORT_Oxygen_of_Amplification_DS.pdf

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