Understanding misinformation and disinformation

Bracknell Forest Council

What are misinformation and disinformation?

In today's world, we're constantly exposed to information online. It's important to know what's true and what's not. Here's the difference:

- **Misinformation:** False or inaccurate information that is spread by someone who may believe it's true, but it's still misleading.
- **Disinformation:** False information that is deliberately spread to deceive or manipulate others. It's done on purpose to influence opinions or actions.

Examples:

- **Misinformation:** Someone shares a post saying a celebrity has died, but they're still alive. The person sharing didn't know it was false.
- **Disinformation:** A group deliberately creates fake stories about a politician to damage their reputation or influence voters.

How to spot misinformation and disinformation

Here are some simple ways to help you recognise false information:

1. Check the source
- Trustworthy sources: Reliable news websites, official organisations (government or universities), and recognised experts.
- Red flags: Unknown sources, sites with a history of spreading false claims, or no evidence provided.

2. Look for evidence
- Good stories should have facts, studies, or quotes from reliable experts.
- Red flags: If there are no facts, sources, or the article uses vague terms like 'experts say' without naming who those experts are.

3. Watch out for emotional headlines
- Be cautious if the headline uses strong emotions like fear or anger to grab your attention.
- Red flags: Overly dramatic or extreme headlines that seem too good (or bad) to be true.

4. Verify the date and context
- Make sure the information is current and relevant. Sometimes, old stories get shared again in a misleading way.
- Red flags: Old stories republished without updates or context.

5. Cross-check with other sources
- See if other reliable sources are reporting the same thing.
- Red flags: If only one website or social media account is reporting it, while others are silent, it's worth checking further.

6. Watch out for fake images or videos
- Disinformation campaigns often use fake or edited photos and videos to tell lies.
- Red flags: Images that seem altered or don't match the story, or videos that look too perfect or fake.

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What to think about when reading news online

Before believing or sharing something online, consider these key points:

Does it make sense?
Does the news match what you already know from trusted sources?

Who is sharing this information?
Look at who is posting the news. Are they reliable? Check their background.

What's the point of the story?
Is the news there to inform you, or is it trying to persuade or manipulate you?

Is it based on facts or opinions?
Is the story backed by evidence, or is it just someone's opinion?

Could this be a scam or hoax?
Watch out for offers, giveaways, or sensational claims that ask for personal information or money.

What can you do to stop misinformation and disinformation?

We all have a role in stopping false information from spreading. Here's how you can help:

- **Pause before sharing:** Think twice before sharing something, especially if it seems emotional or extreme. Always check the facts first.

- **Report false content:** If you come across something suspicious or harmful, report it to the platform or relevant authorities.

- **Educate others:** Share what you've learned with friends and family so they can spot misinformation too.

Think before you share: The impact of misinformation

Spreading false or harmful information can have serious consequences for individuals and the wider community.

- False claims that damage someone's reputation can lead to defamation lawsuits and financial penalties.
- Malicious messages or hoaxes, especially those that cause concern, fear or encourage violence, can result in criminal charges.
- During emergencies, misinformation can cause confusion and unsafe behaviour.
- It can also fuel division, mistrust, and anxiety, making it harder for communities to work together and trust important services.

Always check the facts before sharing. Your words matter.

Conclusion

Misinformation and disinformation are serious problems. They can confuse people, affect decisions, and even harm others. By being aware of the signs and taking steps to check the truth of what you see, you can protect yourself and help others avoid false information.

Remember: In today's digital world, it's more important than ever to be careful with what you believe and share online. Your actions can make a big difference in helping create a more informed and responsible online community.