

Unveiling Deception: Navigating the Digital Landscape

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Authors: Monika Hanley and Krista Luīze Priedīte

We are living in times when there is much more information gathered, structured, created, and shared than ever before. Even the most cautious of us can fall for a fake ad. Today, technologies, social media and artificial intelligence tools can bring positive change to individuals and communities, but they can also destroy them. How can people protect themselves from misleading content? This series of four articles, produced in cooperation with the Baltic Media Centre of Excellence, will remind you of the basics of media literacy skills that you cannot do without in the digital environment.



Subtly hidden promotions, straight up fake products that promise solutions to all your problems and hidden agendas embedded in seemingly neutral (might be even a cute puppy video!) content. It's not too much to say that separating fact from fiction has become an art form on its own, requiring not only critical thinking skills, but also the understanding of the endless opportunities the technologies give us, and as of lately – the awareness of the good, the bad and the ugly that AI powered tools can bring.

Before delving into the often-deceiving world of ads and algorithms, let's remember the basics – how to make sure you can trust this information.

Source Reliability: 6 Steps for Evaluating Information

Check the Authority: Picture relying on information from an unreliable source. It can sometimes be tempting to believe someone who just sounds persuasive, but you must always dig deeper. A good image someone has created doesn't necessarily equal their knowledge. Ensure your sources are well-qualified and possess the expertise needed to speak on the subject. Look for credentials, qualifications, or a reputable background that establishes the source's authority on the topic.

Check the Protection: Imagine trusting a source with undisclosed interest. It might be harmless when choosing a bar of soap on someone's Instagram shop, but even then it's better to know that the seller has no hidden agenda and they are not misleading their audience. Always verify that your source protects its information and remains free from potential conflicts of interest. Investigate if the source has a transparent policy regarding how they handle and safeguard information.

Check the Accuracy: Visualize the consequences of relying on inaccurate information. This applies to all fields in life – starting from nutrition to political views. Evaluate the source’s track record for providing reliable and accurate information. Cross-reference information from the source with other reputable sources to ensure accuracy.

Check Source Transparency: Imagine being told that you must believe something “just because we said so”. It would be like navigating a sea of information without a compass. Ensure your sources are transparent, disclosing their working methods and sources. A credible source is open about how the information is gathered and presented. If a source is hesitant to disclose its methods, it raises a red flag.

Check the Impartiality: Picture information skewed by bias. Always think of how something might play out if a certain fact important to you was kept from you, or an emphasis in a matter dear to you was put on something trivial. Verify that your source maintains impartiality and doesn’t take sides. Look for signs of bias, whether it’s in language, tone, or overall presentation. A reliable source presents information objectively without pushing a particular agenda.

Check the Relevance: Imagine relying on outdated information. We wouldn’t be as advanced as a society if we blindly trusted beliefs and research from decades ago. Confirm that your sources provide current and pertinent information on the given topic. Check for publication dates, and ensure the information is up-to-date and relevant to your specific needs.

This is a reminder of the very basics of media literacy that allow you to confidently assess the credibility of your sources, fostering media literacy and

critical thinking. Moreover – armed with these skills you can make more informed decisions that can shape your presence and future.

Decoding Deception: Hidden Ads and Algorithms

We have all seen some hidden ads. Be it a conveniently placed lemonade bottle in our favorite TV show or an influencer announcing their newest purchase. Sometimes we are able to recognize these methods, but sometimes – not so much. How to be sure you are not being deceived and persuaded at the same time? Here we go over some of the most widely used tactics of hiding promotional messages and give you tips on how to avoid being misled.

Sponsored Posts: Imagine your social media feed as a stage for paid content. Sponsored posts are the headliners. Despite governments across the world trying to regulate the sponsoring practices by requiring influencers and content creators to disclose their partnerships, sponsored posts subtly infiltrate your feed, appearing almost indistinguishable from genuine posts. To navigate this, pay close attention to posts marked with disclosures like “Paid partnership with” or “Sponsored by” – these are signals that what you’re seeing is a paid promotion.

Influencer Marketing: Influencers seamlessly endorse products for a living and their financial gain. Having mastered the content creation skills, their posts blend seamlessly with your everyday feed. To unveil these hidden promotions, become a critical consumer by following the 6 steps for evaluating the information. Investigate the authenticity of an influencer’s enthusiasm and look for telltale signs of undisclosed sponsorships.

Product Placement: Some content creators use product placements. This is something that we can also see in the movies and TV shows – products strategically placed on set (or in posts or videos), subtly endorsing a brand without overtly appearing as an ad. To spot these instances, be vigilant about posts that suspiciously highlight a product. A deeper dive into the brand's history can often reveal patterns of product placement.

Ad Hiding Tactics: Tactics like disguising ads as real news, undisclosed sponsorships, and use of misleading hashtags has become prominent on social media over the years. To protect yourself from falling into these traps, improve your ability to identify different messages and content types. If something feels overly promotional or misleading, investigate further before accepting it as the truth.

Tips for Identifying Hidden Ads: Searching for disclosure statements, analysing content styles, researching brands and their ambassadors, as well as looking for subtle hints that suggest promotional value to the content, will give you enough information to unmask hidden ads and make informed choices.

How Social Media Algorithms Use Your Data

Visualize your online presence as a blank sheet of paper, where every click and interaction contribute to a digital diary of your life online – this is one of the purposes of algorithms. Algorithms analyze your behavior to curate a personalized experience, influencing the ads you see, and potentially contributing to your decisions. Platforms offer transparency features, allowing you to shape your digital experience. Take advantage of these tools. Review and adjust your privacy settings to control how your data is used. This ensures that your online experience aligns with your preferences. You will still see ads, but those ads will not be tailored for you.

By applying these insights and tips in your everyday digital existence, you become more resilient, and also contribute to fostering a culture of transparency, authenticity, and reliability in the digital space. In a world where many of us often say “it’s too much information” it sometimes really is “too much information”. This critical knowledge on how to avoid being manipulated is empowering, and allows you to lead a more informed, conscious, and confident digital life.