

The Board has heard from a number of OBVTA members who are concerned about political mailings and articles that they are seeing. To those of you who asked about it, thank you. It's good to see that you are trying to verify information before embracing it wholeheartedly. Reaching out and trying to verify what you read, see or hear is one of the most important responses to misinformation.

I spent more than 40 years in the news business in New York and New Jersey. I have taught, and continue to teach journalism. I have been preparing a lesson for high school students who I will be teaching this summer about 'how to spot misinformation,' and the Board asked if I would share a few tips. So here goes.

There are several different types of misinformation:

Pure disinformation: Unverified and perhaps manufactured information with no basis in fact or truth that could be tucked into an article or a TV or radio news report – or spread about on social media.

Sloppy or bad information, which even the best news organizations can be guilty of on a bad day. It can be facts that were not adequately vetted or verified; incomplete information that does not provide enough facts or the proper context to allow the reader or viewer to be able to interpret the information; unfairness. And there are just plain mistakes, like misunderstandings or mis-hearings, which no one is immune from. Even the best news organizations can be guilty of spreading sloppy or bad information when reporters and editors don't follow basic tenets of journalism like accuracy, verification, fairness, thoroughness, or when they allow themselves to be manipulated by a news source. Sometimes they are simply rushed by deadline pressure.

Then there's Fake News, a politically loaded term that politicians often use when they can't control the flow of information – which, by the way, is something that every politician tries to do. Fake News is the deliberate and wholesale production of stories or story lines, with no basis in fact, no attempt at accuracy, verification, fairness, thoroughness. Quotes, if included, are one-sided. There is no attempt to get a response from the target of the lies. These are things that often can be easily disputed by fact checking. Unfortunately, they are spread around on social media and most people don't bother to even try to find out if they are true – especially if the information plays into a view already held by the reader or viewer. We want to believe things that support "our side."

So below are a few tips to help you judge the veracity of information you receive in the mail, through emails, on the web or on social media:

First, ask yourself:

Who is telling me this?

How do they know it?

What are they trying to sell me?

To break it down further:

Be skeptical. As I said, we tend to accept the information that we agree with and discount information that does not confirm our established values or views. Everyone does it, from every angle of the political landscape. I would say if it confirms something you already believe, I would be **more** skeptical. Having a critical mindset won't hurt you – and won't you feel even better if you verify that the information actually does support something you believe?

Consider: Why am I being provided with this information? Are they trying to sell me something or get me to think in a certain way? Is the source of the information trying to rile me up or excite me for the source's benefit?

That brings me to the next tip:

Consider the source. Is the article or information coming from a source that you have never heard of before? Is it coming from one who is known for a certain political bias or who might have an incentive to tell you something to get you to buy or do something? Are there legitimate, trustworthy sources that can verify the information?

Ask yourself: What does the overall website or news source cover and why? What is its other content? Who is behind it? And one more hint: Spelling errors in company names; unusual extensions like ".infont" and ".offer," rather than ".com" or ".net;" and poor grammar and spelling within an article may signal a suspect source. (The latter is a good sign the information came from a foreign source, likely for the purpose of deliberately spreading lies.)

'Consider the source' applies to information within an article, as well as the source of the article. Just the other day, a prominent news organization published an article quoting information from a diamond mining company. Essentially, the company said surveys showed that people remained devoted to natural diamonds, countering the effort by some jewelry chains to move away from mined diamonds to manufactured diamonds. The news organization took a lot of heat on Twitter and elsewhere for quoting the survey without providing context. It did not cite the survey methods or sample size, or the means for the survey (online, by phone, in person?). It did not say when it was done. Doing those things are all part of the normal verification process that news organizations are supposed to apply to things they are told. So "consider the source" applies to information within an article, as well as an entire article.

And let me say this: I know there's a lot of controversy about the "mainstream media." And though it hurts my feelings, I get it. But do know that legitimate news organizations work very hard at verifying and authenticating. Most importantly, they will acknowledge and correct errors – not differences of opinion, but errors – and experience repercussions for egregious violations of journalism values. Many editors have fallen on their swords for blunders by their news organizations. If there are no repercussions for spreading misinformation when the information is proven deliberately false, I would not consider that a credible source.

What is the context for the information? In other words, is there a political, philosophical, personal or business-related reason for this particular article or information to appear at this particular time? If it's too convenient or coincidental that something is being shared at that time, be skeptical. The information landscape should trigger your B.S. detector and at least prompt you to dig a bit more before accepting the information as real.

Is anyone else reporting this information? Scoops are hard to come by, and they rarely last. Other news organizations quickly catch up. If no one else has that information – or if the only other sources of the information are like-minded organizations or your best friend's Facebook post – I would be skeptical. If someone says a government body or business is considering or is doing a certain thing, I would go to the website of that body or business and look for any evidence that that is so. If it's not said at a public meeting or in court or in documents or can't be traced to a specific source – be skeptical.

Lastly,

Look closely at the article. Are all the sources unnamed? Are there multiple sources or just one? Are there any verifiable facts related to the premise – or many, signaling that real reporting was done? Does it say things like “rumor has it” or “supposedly” or “people are saying”? Is the article completely one-sided? Is the subject of the article denying the claim? (Not all denials are lies.) Is the allegation so outlandish and outrageous that it's impossible to verify, or so egregious that surely there would already have been a public response from sources you trust?

Activate that little voice in your head. Ask questions. Dig. And approach information shared on social media with a healthy dose of skepticism. It boils down to common sense and a saying that we were taught as kids: ‘If it sounds too good to be true’