

## From Sensationalism to Misinformation: Journalism's Challenge in the Age of Social Media

Due to our growing reliance on social media today, misinformation has blurred the line between truth and fabrication, fundamentally diminishing journalism's credibility. According to a 2022 study with over 1,000 reporters and editors, more than 90% agreed that disinformation has impacted their work in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Public trust has thus eroded considerably – in 2025, only 56% of U.S. adults stated that they trust national news organizations, a drop of 20% since 2016.<sup>2</sup>

And when trust diminishes, people turn to other sources for information. Mainly, social media platforms that directly cater towards user engagement. However, most digital consumers aren't looking to be challenged by opposing viewpoints; people want to hear their own beliefs affirmed.<sup>3</sup> As a result, users are often trapped in echo chambers, where their pre-existing beliefs are continuously reinforced in a never-ending cycle.<sup>4</sup> This confirmation bias can increase susceptibility for misinformation and disinformation.

To further abet this harmful propagation, social media algorithms capitalize on an individual's innate craving for sensation, pushing exaggerated, flashy stories onto users' feeds. Alas, apps like TikTok, the most addictive platform,<sup>5</sup> cannot distinguish between lies and truth –

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<sup>1</sup> "Facts Forward: A Journalist's Guide to Combating Disinformation," Pen America, February 22, 2026, <https://pen.org/disinformation/facts-forward/>.

<sup>2</sup> Kirsten Eddy and Elisa Shearer, "How Americans' trust in information from news organizations and social media sites has changed over time," Pew Research Center, October 29, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/29/how-americans-trust-in-information-from-news-organizations-and-social-media-sites-has-changed-over-time/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Confirmation Bias," Catalogue of Bias, 2018, <https://catalogofbias.org/biases/confirmation-bias/>.

<sup>4</sup> R, Alagar, "Impact of Social Media Algorithms on User Behavior," SkillFloor, July 19, 2024, <https://skillfloor.com/blog/impact-of-social-media-algorithms-on-user-behavior>.

<sup>5</sup> Farrington, Abram, "Baylor Study Shows TikTok Is More Addictive than You Think," Baylor Lariat, November 20, 2025, <https://baylorlariat.com/2025/11/20/baylor-study-shows-tiktok-is-more-addictive-than-you-think/>.

they simply push the most “viral” content to the forefront. Consequently, factual, well-researched news that may lack the same sensationalism is ignored.

And once a story starts spreading, it’s all too easy for that content to twist into fabricated fallacies. Today, false news spreads six times faster than factual information,<sup>6</sup> making it nearly impossible to debunk every myth and disclose the real truth. Part of this is due to the illusory truth effect, or the psychological tendency for repeated statements to seem more plausible.<sup>7</sup> Over time, familiarity breeds false credibility, a dangerous alternative to the truth.

In the face of this new digital age, journalism needs to undergo significant changes. First, implementing preemptive measures such as pre-bunking prepares audiences against manipulation. Rather than trying to uncover the original narrative after rapid circulation, pre-bunking equips people with the necessary tools to spot and refute false news.<sup>8</sup> Organizations such as the American Press Institute and Our.News have already implemented media literacy programs along with tools rating the credibility of articles.<sup>9</sup> These kinds of measures serve as a crucial reminder to take any news with a healthy dose of salt, ultimately strengthening journalism’s resistance to misinformation as a whole.

While lowering the naivety of an audience is crucial, reporting must also enforce rigorous verification processes. Properly vetting sources is not a procedure that can be glossed over. With

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<sup>6</sup> Ahmed, Sahin, "Are You Really in Control of What You See Online, or Are Algorithms Controlling It for You?" Medium, September 22, 2024, <https://medium.com/@sahin.samia/are-you-really-in-control-of-what-you-see-online-or-are-algorithms-controlling-it-for-you-40fa5dcb4ade>.

<sup>7</sup> "Illusory Truth Effect," Psychology Today, February 22, 2026, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/illusory-truth-effect>.

<sup>8</sup> "Prebunking," UNHCR, March 10, 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/handbooks/informationintegrity/practical-tools/prebunking>.

<sup>9</sup> "Top 14 Organizations Restoring Trust by Tackling Disinformation," *Omdena* (blog), August 8, 2024, <https://www.omdena.com/blog/top-organizations-restoring-trust-by-tackling-disinformation>.

the development of uncannily realistic deep fakes and AI-generated media,<sup>10</sup> prioritizing accuracy over speed must be considered as a key tenet for journalists.

We are entering a new age, one governed by the questionable credibility of social media platforms and their voracity for sensationalism. With audience trust wavering, journalism cannot afford to stagnate as well. Evolution is necessary – to flush out false news is to advocate for the truth, an adaptation that must come one article at a time.

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<sup>10</sup> Gray, Audrey, "Feeling More and Believing Less: How Deepfakes Are Shaping Our Perceptions," UT San Antonio Today, December 9, 2025, <https://news.utsa.edu/2025/12/feeling-more-and-believing-less-how-deepfakes-are-shaping-our-perceptions/>.

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