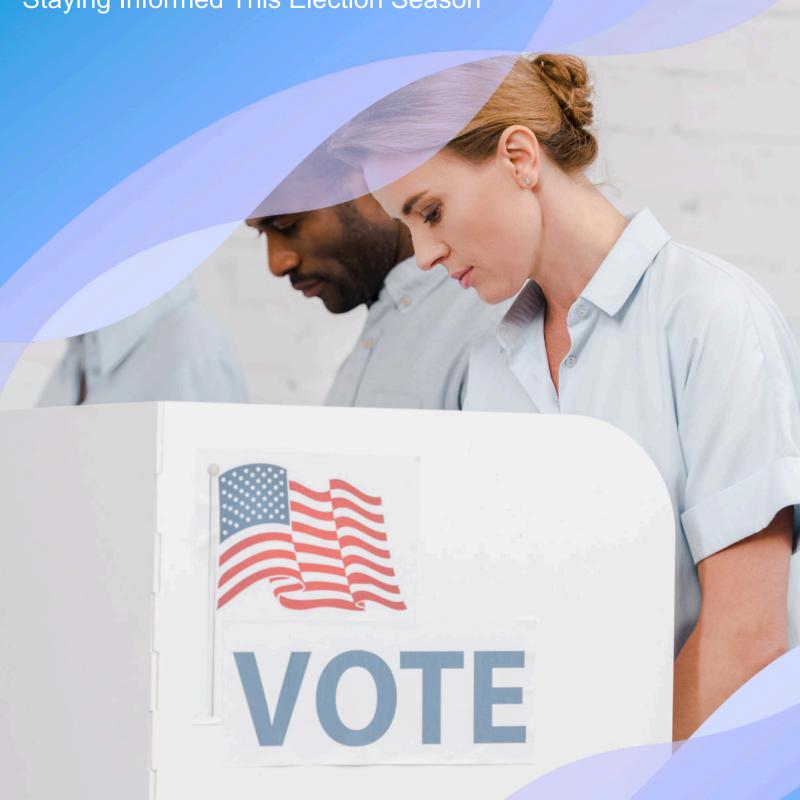# Just the Facts

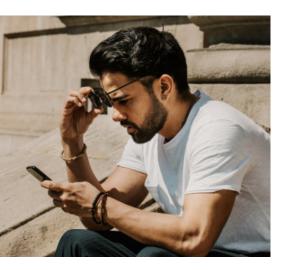Staying Informed This Election Season

DEER BROOK

Everything election-related is ramping up. Television ads, radio spots, pundits breaking down the latest polls, and more. This time of year, everywhere you go there's something to do with the election.

And that just as easily includes the internet, too. Whether you're getting stories recommended to you in a feed, or you see your friends and family sharing posts on their social media pages, the internet is ready to burst with election-related content too.

Unfortunately, a sizeable amount of that election information found online is misleading, deceiving, and simply untrue. There's many stories, posts, and articles circulating online that were created with the intent to spread misinformation and misinform voters.

Some of these are easier to spot than others, and while not all of them were created with malintent, many are the product of deliberate and coordinated campaigns designed to create division under the veil of legitimate news outlets.

In this newsletter, we're going to break down four key issues relating to election misinformation, particularly those found online, and what you can do to stay on top of things and not get caught in the riptide of misinformation.

Don't Use Social Media as a News Source

Over half of U.S. adults say they get some form of news over social media, and that can be problematic if what's on social media isn't approached with caution and introspection. Social media isn't designed to be a source of truth. Social media is meant to connect people and keep them engaged and logged in.

Most social media sites use algorithms that keep track of what content you interact with the most. The algorithm will work to block out everything except that sort of content, populate your feed with more of it, and create a self-reinforcing feedback loop that leaves many of us in an echo chamber.

In that sense, much of what you see on Facebook, X, LinkedIn, and YouTube is a curated, personalized feed for you; what you see on your feed isn't necessarily composed of every perspective and walk of life, and frankly not all of what you see is necessarily true either. What you see is just what's presented to you, and doesn't make up everything that's out there.

Every time you come across a news headline, a story, even just a post on social media, keep that algorithm in mind and remember that this content is being actively curated for you in the hopes that you interact and keep scrolling.

You should be approaching anything you see on social media with healthy doses of caution and skepticism.

Don't Fall for Sensationalized Headlines

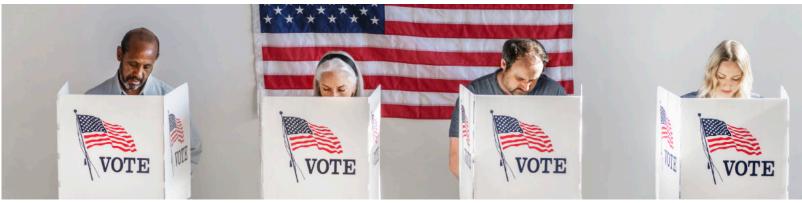Another pitfall of social media news consumption is that many of us fall for sensationalized, emotionally charged headlines. Compelled to action by what we're reading, we often reshare these stories to our feeds where others, in turn, do the same.

Sensationalized headlines and stories are meant to hook into your emotions and shut off the part of your brain that analyzes and exercises critical thinking. Unfortunately these headlines stem from websites and outlets that are willing to do anything to draw clicks to their sites, due to associated revenue models and financial incentives.

These headlines are designed to ignite something within you emotionally and get you to spread the story without thinking twice. Question the rationale involved, and take a step back whenever you read a headline that gives you such a reaction.

Most of these stories come from unreliable sources (bloggers with no expertise, uncredited sources), and can skew the perspective of a real event, inject opinionated language so you think about the story a certain way, and sometimes just make things up.

These kinds of "clickbait" articles also often leave out key parts and perspectives of a story. And that's only if the article is based on a real event;

sometimes you may come across articles and stories that are entirely made up.

Self-awareness is a vital key to recognizing clickbait and not falling victim to its intentions. Learn to recognize your emotions and emotional responses to the content you consume, in an effort to catch yourself before you fall into the trap of reading sensationalized articles and stories, and spreading them to your family and friends too.

Don't Rely on Generative AI for Facts

We're living in an age where generative AI, heavily deployed on search engines, is still very much a work in progress. While a few of these issues will become outdated as AI advances, the main takeaway doesn't change: never consider AI as a source of truth. It should only serve as a launching point, and even then, you need to be approaching it with caution.

In 2024, generative AI tends to hallucinate and make up information. It can be hard to catch because of how confidently it'll be presented, which is why it's important to get into the practice of double-checking the facts that AI presents to you.

But the most important reason why you shouldn't rely on AI is because of what we can't see, and what can best be described as looking at what's under the hood. As the general public, we don't have access to the code and models that generative AI is trained on. We also don't know the directives and motives that AI chatbots and AI-powered search engines have been given.

While we might interact with these services in good faith, believing they're presenting us information that's objective and factual, there could just as easily be something behind the scenes functioning in a manner that is similar to an algorithm trying to tailor content for you.

Leveraging social media feeds and curated search engines is a quick way to get pigeon-holed into only seeing information that these sources think you want to see, instead of getting the entire picture.

Consume News from Multiple Sources

Find multiple reliable sources for your news. News aggregators compile headlines from every online news outlet and will allow you to compare coverage of the same story across the political spectrum. Services like these are effective in giving you the overall picture of a story and limiting the amount of one-sided, clickbait articles that you consume.

The important part here is to choose a couple sources to compare that are spread across the political spectrum. You don't want to choose too many outlets that are similar to each other, otherwise you'll end up limiting yourself just like an algorithm or a feed.

Even if you have your personal opinions about one particular side or another, it's important to see how stories and news are being reported from all sides. That way, you're minimizing the amount of information that passes you by.

Wrapping Up

It's a busy time of year, and whether you embrace it or try to avoid it, election coverage is going to seep into your daily life. It's just a fact.

However, you have the power to take all that noise and filter it. Not just in the sense that you block out one thing over another, but also in that you've got some tips and tricks on how to reliably vet the information you're consuming.

As we await November to cast our ballots, you've got the tools now to stay out of the misinformation riptide.