Voting: Recognizing Misinformation

A successful democracy depends on citizens taking responsibility to thoroughly evaluate the news they receive, whether through print media, social media, television, or radio. Currently, social media inundates us with ads and articles through algorithms that target personal interests and beliefs.

The ability of artificial intelligence to create fake videos which look remarkably real, the use of bots to push disinformation to the top of our feeds, and not-for-profits created solely to legitimize their disinformation or propaganda create a daunting environment for the survival of democracy. What follows are some basic tips for evaluating the news.

First, read past the headline. Headlines are generally composed by someone other than the article's author and may be misleading. Read far enough into the piece to access its details. Beware of "clickbait" where a sensational headline is created that doesn't match the content of the article.

Second, look for the source of the information. An article, in print or online, should display the author and the date of publication. If the information is not current, it may no longer be relevant. As a further step, you can check if the source is reputable and legitimate. You can also find some information about any website by clicking on the icon to the left of the URL web address in the search bar. Reliable online resources will be up-to-date, secure, and well established.

Third, be alert to obvious favoritism or bias. When watching a TV news show or listening to a radio station or podcast, note whether the hosts are presenting news in a factual, unbiased manner, or if they have an angry or scornful demeanor, appealing to emotion rather than to reason. If the presentation is emotional, beware and look for a full explanation of the situation from another trusted source. The hosts may have good reason to display anger, shock, or contempt, but it is also possible that they are trying to increase viewership with their over-the-top rhetoric.

Fourth, learn to detect misinformation on social media. We regularly see and hear stories about rumors or video clips "going viral" only to find out later that the information was not true or accurate. Difficult as it may be, the best way individuals can combat such inflammatory or misleading posts is to refrain from interacting with them at all and resisting the temptation to share or repeat any of their rhetoric or catch phrases, since that just further spreads the post. If you are uncertain about the truth, you can visit a respected fact-checking website such as FactCheck.org. Also beware of accepting the opinions of "influencers," who may be great cooks or woodworkers, but who may have scant knowledge of politics.

Finally, be skeptical of video clips. There are numerous individuals, organizations and even foreign countries trying to influence voters in the US with unfavorable snippets taken out of context, altered, or created solely for spreading lies or disinformation. A 10-second clip of a candidate doesn't have enough context to inform you sufficiently on any issue.

Our democracy depends on voters investing their time in order to make informed choices. The League of Women Voters of DeKalb County provides nonpartisan information on voting, elections, and the candidates. You will find resources at our website: LWVDKC.org/vote.