

Spotting online propaganda

What is propaganda?

Propaganda is any form of communication that is designed to influence your opinions or beliefs, or to change the way you think about something. It sometimes uses facts, and often uses misinformation, exaggeration, or lies.

Propaganda is used by people and groups on all sides of most political and social issues. Sometimes you might agree with the point a piece of propaganda is making; sometimes you might disagree. You may encounter harmless or positive propaganda (for example, a post encouraging you to vote in an upcoming election). You may also encounter harmful propaganda, that is designed to make you think negatively about a particular person, group, or issue.

How can I tell if something I've seen online is propaganda?

1. Check how much of the post is information or facts, and how much is emotional language, insults or praise for a particular person or group, and/or calls to act or think in a certain way.

2. Check if any facts included in the post are true. Do they line up with your experiences? Do they fit with your knowledge of the world? If you're not sure, check an online source you know is credible, or ask someone you trust. If you are on Facebook or X/Twitter, you can also see whether the post has been fact-checked by the platform.

3. Check where the person posting got their information from. Did it come from an unbiased source like a mainstream news article, a research paper, or a trusted website? Did it come from a commonly biased source like a personal blog or a website with a clear bias?

4. Check whether the post is trying to make you feel angry, guilty, or upset. Some people online will do this because they think it's fun to upset people; others will do this because they are trying to make you react quickly and emotionally instead of using your brain, and may be trying to push you into doing something you wouldn't do if you thought about it for too long.

Some common phrases to watch out for

“Do your own research”

This phrase is most commonly used in healthcare contexts – you may have encountered it from people trying to convince you not to get vaccinated, or not to vaccinate your children; or from people selling some form of alternative medicine. It is also sometimes used by people promoting racist or anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

Think about what the post means by “research”. Does it mean conducting rigorous academic studies, that are then peer-reviewed by other professionals? Or does it mean reading a blog and watching some YouTube videos? Someone telling you to do your own research into something like vaccines or immigration usually wants you to read blogs or watch videos that align with their point of view, not conduct any sort of unbiased study.

“I’m just asking questions”

This is often used as a way to introduce misinformation or bias without firmly taking a stand. A post might say something like “Does anyone else think it’s strange that immigrants have more money than people who were born here? I’m just asking questions!”. It’s difficult to argue against because the poster can always say that they didn’t make any concrete claims, they were just asking questions – but it introduces misinformation.

Some other similar phrases: “Does anyone else think this is odd?” “Isn’t it weird that...” “Has anyone else seen...”

Think about what the person posting wants you to take away. Are they genuinely asking whether you also find something strange? Or do they want you to believe that their claim is factual, without having to defend it?

Some common phrases to watch out for

“No one in the media is willing to talk about this”

Claiming that the media (or the mainstream media) is refusing to report on something is an easy way to make it seem like there’s a conspiracy, without having to back up your claims.

There are two main variations:

1. Disguising a lie by technically telling the truth. “No one in the media is talking about the plague of werewolves”. It’s true that the media isn’t talking about werewolves, but that’s because there are no werewolves.

2. Hinting at a conspiracy. “No one in the media is talking about the rising cost of living”. It’s true that the cost of living is rising, but it’s not true that the media isn’t talking about it, and checking any mainstream media source will show you that. This sort of propaganda is designed to reduce your trust in mainstream media sources, and push you towards trusting alternative, often biased, sources.

Think about both of the post’s claims: something is happening, and the media isn’t reporting on it. Are either of them true? If one or both of them is false, what is the person trying to achieve by posting this?