

What to Know: *Evaluating Credibility in Social Media Posts*

Key strategies to assess the trustworthiness of social media sources and their content



In the United States (U.S.), the average person spends more than two hours a day on social media¹, and more than half of U.S. adults occasionally use social media to get their news.² However, the quality of information shared on social media varies greatly. Sometimes, it's difficult to know which posts and profiles are credible. This guide is designed to help you with that.

SIFT through the credibility challenge of social media

The SIFT^{3,4} method, developed by digital literacy expert Mike Caulfield, is one way to engage with social media and help ensure that the content you read and share is credible. SIFT has four parts or movements:

1. Stop
2. Investigate the source
3. Find better coverage
4. Trace claims, quotes, and media to the original context



1. Stop

One of the best things to do as you start to read a social media post is to **Stop**. Stopping before reading too deeply into a social media post allows you to:

- **Determine what you know** about the source of a social media post.
- **Evaluate the reputation** of the information source.

This will give you important context that you can use to determine if the post is credible.

As you move into the other parts of SIFT, you'll want to remember how important it can be to Stop. Exploring the source, considering better coverage, and tracing its claims can take up a lot of time. If it does, stop again, consider what value the post has to you, and adjust the amount of attention you give to it.



2. Investigate the Source

Just as you might when considering a book by a new author, it can be useful to learn about a social media post's source, including how it is viewed by other trusted sources. This can

help you understand the source's experience with a topic, the depth of their topic knowledge, and uncover potential biases, which can help you determine if the source is credible. When you investigate a source of a social media post, ask yourself:

- What is their expertise or special area of knowledge?
- What cause could they be trying to advance?
- What is their motivation for posting the content?



3. Find Better Coverage

Even if you trust the source of a social media post, there may be times when you feel uncertain about its claim. If that is the case, don't rely on only one source. Explore multiple perspectives about a claim to determine if it is credible. To do that, look for:

- General agreement or major disagreements with the claim made by the original source.
- Additional information or evidence related to the claim.
- Sources with more detailed analyses of the claim.



4. Trace claims, quotes, and media to the original context

Social media posts are often designed to attract attention and engagement. That can lead content creators to be selective with the information they share or to represent it in a way that could be misleading. That's why it's important to question what is presented in social media and be willing to ask yourself:

- Could context be missing from a message, image, or video?
- Does the data support the headline or message?
- Can the information be traced back to its source?

The anatomy of a credible social media post

A November 13th, 2024, post on social media platform X by Trust for America's Health is a useful example of SIFT in action. Review the post and explore how the various parts of SIFT work together to determine the source's credibility as well as the credibility of its message.



STOP

Before engaging with a social media post like this, Stop and consider what you know about the source—the organization making the post—and its reputation. In this case, knowing about Trust for America's Health and how they are perceived in public health would give important context about the information in their post.



INVESTIGATE THE SOURCE

It's important to learn more about an organization from a third-party source. In this case, a search of Trust for America's Health reveals a summary of the organization by *Philanthropy News Digest*. The summary describes Trust for America's Health as a nearly 25-year-old organization and offers details about its mission, background, programs, and funding sources. A third-party assessment like this can help determine whether the organization is trustworthy.



FIND BETTER COVERAGE

Even when the source of a post is found to be credible, it is important to assess if their claims are credible, too. In this case, a search of the claim by Trust for America's Health that "vaccines provide an effective means of protection against the most severe effects of many infectious diseases" can be validated by highly regarded organizations such as the World Health Organization, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology.



TRACE CLAIMS, QUOTES, AND MEDIA TO THE ORIGINAL CONTEXT

It's important to go deeper than a headline to understand the full context of a message. In this example, Trust for America's Health intentionally invites the audience to two locations, the CDC website and the CDCGov X account, for more information about updated vaccine recommendations. Directing the audience to source information strengthens the credibility of its message.

Resources used in the creation of this content:

- 1 [How Many People Use Social Media \(2025 Statistics\)](#)
- 2 [Social Media and News Fact Sheet, 2024 | Pew Research Center](#)
- 3 [The SIFT Method - Evaluating Resources and Misinformation - Library Guides at UChicago](#)
- 4 [SIFT \(The Four Moves\) - Hapgood](#)

(The SIFT method is an evaluation strategy developed by digital literacy expert, Mike Caulfield, to help determine whether online content can be trusted for credible or reliable sources of information. All SIFT information in this resource is adapted from his materials with a [CC BY 4.0](#) license.)