

A decade of eroding democracy

Imagine for a moment that you just arrived on the shores of America with no prior knowledge of our politics, except that we purport to elect our leaders by popular vote. How might you imagine that process?

If you knew absolutely nothing about modern elections in the United States, you might presume that nearly everyone eligible



Pete Koutoulas

to vote does vote. You might think that all candidates for office operate on a reasonably level playing field. You would suppose that we have some mechanism in place to ensure that each candidate has an equal opportunity to get his or her message to the masses.

You would probably assume that the United States has in place safeguards to limit access to the most powerful and wealthy individuals. To protect the rights of the weakest among her citizens to have the same access to elected officials and candidates for office.

You might think every citizen of this great nation has an equal voice in choosing her leaders and an equal opportunity to influence those leaders once in office.

You'd be dead wrong. American elections — particularly but not exclusively at the national level — are tortuously long, ridiculously expensive and extremely inefficient.

But by far, the most dreadful shortcoming of our current system is the unequal access to the halls of power granted to (or withheld from) voters.

Not surprisingly, every politician, once elected, wishes to remain in power for as long as possible. Elections are lengthy and expensive. Almost as soon as they are elected, they immediately go into fundraising mode.

Think about that for a moment. It's one of those ideas we've lived with so long that we scarcely pause to consider the absurdity of it. Our elected leaders spend more time and energy raising money to stay in office than they do in governing.

The corollary is those same elected leaders are more accountable to moneyed interests than they are to you and me.

A busy congressperson or president has a finite amount of time. They can't afford to

waste any of it. If I were to call the White House switchboard today and ask to speak to the president, or the vice-president, or even his chief of staff, what are the chances I could get through for a 10-minute chat about my concerns?

But what if, instead of me, it was Warren Buffett, Bill Gates or Charles Koch calling? Is there any doubt any of these well-heeled people would get right through?

This is a notion that's not revelatory to anyone. We accept that those with money and power have greater sway with government officials. But is that healthy for democracy? Is it fair? Why do we tolerate it?

Ten years ago this week, the United States Supreme Court ruled on the Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission case. The Court bizarrely held the free speech clause of the First Amendment prohibits the government from restricting campaign expenditures by corporations, including nonprofit corporations, labor unions and other associations.

In short, the Court extended the constitutional protection of free speech held by individuals — to corporations. In that decade, we have watched our democratic institutions erode in their representation of voters.

Citizens United opened the floodgates, making a bad situation worse. Today, there is virtually unlimited spending on political campaigns, and most of it is paid for not by individual campaigns or parties, but by so-called "Super PACs." These shadowy entities are created to promote candidates and funded by corporate interests and billionaire activists.

They are not accountable to anyone and allow candidates to use them to say things they can't or won't say through their own campaigns. They're essentially loose cannons.

How can we take back our elections, and more importantly, our government? Nothing short of radical, comprehensive campaign finance reform will do. We'll be talking more about this soon.

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E-cig tax can help state, reduce youth use

A bill has been filed in the 2020 regular session of the Kentucky General Assembly to impose an excise tax on the sale of e-cigarettes.

A new poll from the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky found the vast majority of Kentucky adults favor such a tax on e-cigarettes, bringing them in line with cigarette taxes in Kentucky.

According to a 2019 Kentucky Health Issues Poll released this month, 75 percent of adults in Kentucky support a tax on e-cigarettes.

Currently, e-cigarettes are the only nicotine-containing product sold in Kentucky not subject to an excise tax.

Support for an excised tax has increased since the Foundation last polled Kentuckians about the issue in 2014. In that poll, 53 percent favored such a tax.

A bill introduced by Rep. Jerry T. Miller would tax e-cigs at 27.5 percent of their wholesale price, which is parallel to Kentucky's \$1.10/pack cigarette tax.

The Coalition for Smoke-Free Tomorrow estimates such a tax would generate an estimated \$34 million its first year. Additionally, the Coalition predicts a 10-percent increase in price would reduce disposable e-cig sales by approximately 12 percent and reusable e-cig sales by 19 percent.

E-cigarette use has surged in recent years, especially among young people.

According to the KHIP, 26 percent of Kentucky adults have tried an e-cigarette and 9 percent reported currently using e-cigarettes every day or some days.

However, e-cigarettes are much more popular among young people, with more than half (53 percent) of high school seniors having tried an e-cigarette in 2019, up from 44 percent in 2015, according to the Kentucky Youth



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Risk Behavior Survey.

Additionally, the Kentucky Incentives for Prevention survey reveals 26.7 percent of the state's high-school seniors reported they had vaped in the past 30 days in 2018, up from 12.2 percent in the 2016 survey. Use by sophomores, or 10th graders, increased to 23.2 percent from 11.3 percent; use by eighth graders jumped to 14.2 percent from 7.3 percent; and sixth-grader use increased to 4.2 percent from 2.3 percent over 2016.

A Surgeon General's report indicates raising prices on cigarettes is, "one of the most effective tobacco control interventions," especially among teens.

According to TobaccoFreeKids.org, "The general consensus is that nationally, every 10 percent increase in the real price of cigarettes reduces adult smoking by about two percent, reduces smoking among young adults by about 3.5 percent, reduces the number of kids who smoke by six or seven percent, and reduces overall cigarette consumption by approximately three to five percent."

If taxes and increased prices have proven effective for cigarette use, they will undoubtedly work to curb e-cig use as well. Vaping and e-cigarette use is disproportionately and negatively affecting Kentucky's young people.

According to the CDC, most e-cigarettes contain nicotine — the addictive drug in reg-

ular cigarettes, cigars and other tobacco products. And nicotine can harm the developing adolescent brain, the CDC reports.

In addition to nicotine, e-cigarette aerosol contains other additives that can be dangerous.

The CDC found aerosol vapors could contain "ultrafine particles that can be inhaled deep into the lungs, flavoring such as diacetyl, a chemical linked to lung disease; volatile organic compounds, cancer-causing chemicals and heavy metals such as nickel, tin and lead."

The CDC also reports some defective e-cigarette batteries have caused fires and explosions that have caused serious injuries.

Sadly, most Kentuckians, especially youth, are not aware of the dangers of e-cigs and vaping.

A tax that falls in line with that implemented for other tobacco products only makes sense.

And while a \$35 million addition to the General Fund would be welcome, the ultimate goal would be that people would stop using e-cigarettes. Revenue from the tax could and should go toward educational programs in the schools and a statewide campaign about the dangers of e-cigarettes and vaping. Funding could also be used to research the rapidly-increasing trend.

In conjunction with other legislation aimed at reducing tobacco use in Kentucky, we believe this excise tax will be a critical tool to reducing e-cigarette use among our youth.

Editorials represent the opinion of the newspaper's editorial board. The board is comprised of publisher Michael Caldwell and Bluegrass Newsmedia editors Whitney Leggett and Ben Kleppinger. To inquire about a meeting with the board, contact Caldwell at 759-0095.

Protecting the USPS safeguards information

Facing a fierce public outcry, the U.S. Postal Service is “suspending” its sudden cost-cutting moves — tossing out high-speed sorting machines, uprooting collection boxes, reducing Post Office hours and eliminating carrier overtime — that have slowed mail delivery and threatened the on-time delivery of mail-in ballots for the presidential election.

That’s all to the good, but it’s important to understand that the changes to USPS that Postmaster General Louis DeJoy and the current administration have in mind for after the election could permanently damage this quintessentially American institution — and citizens’ access to far more than ballots for November 3.

Already, the controversy over the go-slow edicts have aroused public alarm about the effects on nearly every household. These effects aren’t just theoretical: Many have experienced delayed or missing deliveries of prescription medication, paper Social Security or payroll checks, legal documents, packages of the wide array of purchases during the pandemic lockdown and more.

To these impeded services, add a vital source of local news for many Americans — the daily or weekly newspaper delivered to their mailboxes by a postal carrier.

In the public imagination, kids on bikes earning a bit of money before or after school still toss the local newspaper to the doorstep of subscribers. They were long ago replaced by adults with cars — but even that has changed at many local newspapers.

Finding the independent contractors willing to deliver before dawn is a challenge for many newspapers, and sometimes the shrinking sizes of their routes make no economic sense for the newspaper or the driver. Newspapers discovered over the years, too, that their “alternative delivery” strategies for distributing advertising materials were becoming prohibitively expensive. The most cost-effective alternative for these newspapers is often the Postal Service.

Newspapers and the USPS over the years have had their “frenemy” moments, with publications ever alert to changes in postage rates — with their arcane distinctions such as “in-county carrier routed sorted” or “Saturation/High Density Plus/High Density flats” — that have their roots going back to 1775 when the Post Office founded by Ben Franklin set purposely low rates so that newspapers could bring information quickly to the Colonies in the throes of revolution.

But just as the newspaper is a local business, the local Post Offices and distribution centers are staffed not by faceless bureaucrats but neighbors and community residents. Newspapers’ partnership with the USPS has so far ensured that readers usually get their copies the same day that’s printed on the front page.

Delivering newspapers is just one of the important services of an institution that has “service” in its very name.

Unfortunately, the USPS is being treated as if it is a commercial enterprise that now “loses” money, a standard never applied to the Department of Defense, say, or FEMA. Nor has another agency, or private enterprise for that matter, been forced by law to pay upfront the cost of post-retirement health benefits going 75 years into the future. The Institute for Policy Studies, a non-partisan think tank, figures this mandate costs the USPS more than \$4 billion a year.

Delivering the mail, including delivering newspapers, throughout the nascent and soon to be sprawling United States was so important to the framers of the Constitution that in its Article I they empowered Congress “To establish Post Offices and Post Roads.”

With this crisis that’s been forced upon an already wounded United States Postal Service, it’s time to remind Congress that it also has a duty to sustain this vital wellspring of democracy and American identity.

On behalf of its approximately 1,500 newspaper and associate member companies, America’s Newspapers is committed to explaining, defending and advancing the vital role of newspapers in democracy and civil life. We put an emphasis on educating the public on all the ways newspapers contribute to building a community identity and the success of local businesses. Learn more: www.newspapers.org

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Dean Ridings

No perfect answer when it comes to returning to school

Clark County students are set to return to school Sept. 8, but that will look drastically different than any year in the past.

Rather than loading up on buses and walking through crowded hallways to classrooms full of other eager young minds, students will wake up and remain in the comfort of their homes for at least the first nine weeks of the school.

The Clark County Board of Education voted earlier this month for the first part of the school year to be conducted virtually, and we know that had to be a hard decision to make.

That decision is so difficult because there really is no ideal solution to the problem that is a global pandemic.

These are unprecedented times, and that means no one truly knows what the future holds or what exactly is the best course of action at this time.

Virtual learning has its benefits. The goal is to limit the spread of the potentially deadly coronavirus among the students in our community, who can then take it home and spread it among their families, who then spread it at their workplaces and in public places such as grocery stores or restaurants. Virtual learning ensures that no students in the Clark County school system catch the virus while at school, and that likely will prevent some community spread, too.

However, learning from home has its challenges as well.

Families are left scrambling to fig-



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ure out how parents and guardians will be able to work to support their households while their children are not at school. Child care is a huge concern among parents, especially those of younger children.

All parents are likely concerned about how capable they are of helping their children navigate their assignments and the technology needed to do them.

As expressed by some parents at a recent school board meeting, many are also worried about their children’s mental health and the lack of socialization that comes with virtual learning.

We sympathize with both sides of the argument.

The main area we think the school district could have improved is in communicating to families just exactly what virtual learning will look like and doing it sooner. We have seen many parents stressed because of the uncertainty that comes with virtual learning.

Will students be on a schedule and required to log in at certain times? If that’s the case, how can I make sure my child is doing his or her work while I’m also at work? Can students do their work in the evenings while their parents are home from work?

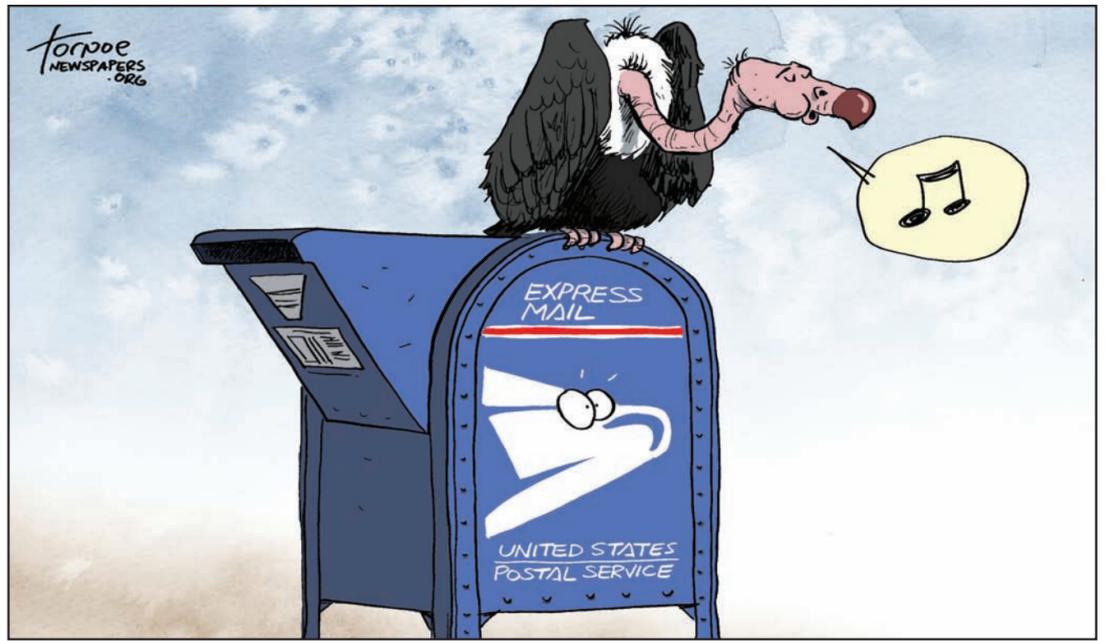
We understand that this process is fluid, though, and trust that the schools, teachers and administrators are truly doing the best they can with the information they have and the tools they’ve been given.

We ask that the community not blame those who needed to make tough decisions and especially not those who had no say in the matter at all, including teachers, for the circumstances.

This virus is at fault. These well-meaning individuals are just trying to do what they think is safest for the children and the community as a whole.

Keep in mind that the district not only had to consider the safety of its students, but also of its staff. By returning to in-person learning, the district would be putting its teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria works, janitors and all other staff at risk of contracting the virus, too.

While no one truly knows what it might have looked like for students to return to in-person learning immediately, the question comes down to whether we want to risk the lives of our young people, our valuable school employees and the others in the community to find out.



Re-districting needs not be politicized in order to ensure equal representation

Beginning next year, the process of redistricting in Kentucky will begin, as it has every 10 years following the decennial census.

Regrettably, this process will most likely be completely immersed in politics, devoid of its primary goal of creating balanced congressional districts.

There are numerous clues about how this process has been politicized and usurped. Not least of these indicators is the layout of the districting map for Kentucky.

A quick glance at the current map will show that only District 3 and District 6 come even close to meeting the mandate of “equal representation.”

Oh, the districts may be laid out to come close to meeting the requirement of equal population representation, but that belies the real intent of the districts to maintain control by one party or another.

District 3 encompasses most of Jefferson County; District 6 is central Kentucky anchored by Fayette County. But the remaining four districts are a hodgepodge of shapes with no apparent logic with Districts 1 and 4 stretching across half the length of the state.

Kentucky has a population (2019) of 4.4 million. This population produces a representation of one representative for each 745,000 residents.

As of 2015, the sixth district had the largest population: 753,170; the fifth district had the smallest population:

707,534, a difference of 6.45 percent. Moving one county from the sixth to the fifth (congruent districts) would have nearly balanced the two districts.

Jefferson county has a population of 766,000 which means a portion of that county should be allocated to an adjacent district. The map suggests that this is in effect with the eastern portion of Jefferson residing in the fourth district.

Another factor that suggests the districts are not arranged solely on population is that in 2016, every Kentucky representative won his (Kentucky has no women representatives) district by a margin greater than 20 percent as follows: first, 45.2 percent; second, 100 percent (unopposed); third, 27 percent; fourth, 42.6 percent; fifth, 100 percent (unopposed); sixth, 22.2 percent.

A competitive race is assumed to have a vote margin not greater than 5 percent, so it is easy to conclude that the current district map is skewed to provide advantage to a single party.

Following the 2010 census and the subsequent re-districting, the Kentucky Supreme Court ruled that the districts that had been established at that time were unconstitutional and they were re-drawn in 2013 to comply (allegedly) with the mandate for equal representation.

Some states have taken re-districting authority away from their legislatures and given it over to commissions with the intent of finding neutrality in the process.

Some of those commissions are delegated according to state law, which prohibits politicians, lobbyists and those intricately associated with party activities from membership.

The current situation regarding congressional districting in many states can be accurately described as the “politicians selecting the voters” rather than the normal assumption that voters select their representatives because so many districts are configured to deliberately advantage one party or the other.

This “gerrymandering” has been around since 1812, and the courts, while occasionally addressing it and occasionally remedying it, seem, for the most part, to ignore it.

As long as legislators are the ones who do the districting, there will be unfairness built into the process. An independent commission composed of equal representation from Democrats, Republicans and independents, with included legal guidance, would do a great deal to make the process more of what it should be: equal representation to all.

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Chuck Witt

The Our View editorials represent the opinion of the newspaper’s editorial board. The board is comprised of Bluegrass Newsmedia editors Jeff Moreland and Whitney Leggett. We encourage you to share your opinion on this or other topics. Submit your letter to the editor to The Sun by: E-MAIL: letters@winchestersun.com, FAX: (859) 745-0638, MAIL OR IN PERSON: 20 Wall St., Winchester, KY, 40391.

All letters must be signed by the author and must include a telephone number for verification purposes. We reserve the right to edit submitted information. Letters should not be longer than 500 words. Only three letters per author will be published per month. For more information, call (859) 744-3123.

COMMENTARY

Conservatives need balanced perspective on election results

Former University of Louisville basketball coach Rick Pitino once complained about Wildcat fans who were “consumed by (the University of) Louisville,” meaning a loss to their rivals in November leaves a permanent asterisk next to an entirely otherwise successful 30-win season culminating in a championship in March.

It’s not that the UK-U of L matchup doesn’t count, but so do the other 29 wins.

Conservatives should transfer that perspective from the basketball hardwood to the political arena when assessing what happened on election night in the races for Kentucky’s six statewide constitutional offices.



Jim Waters

Republican incumbent Gov. Matt Bevin’s loss — barring resurrection-by-recount — to Democrat Andy Beshear matters, but should be tempered with the realization that this is no big sweep for the political left.

It was the equivalent of a hugely successful season for center-right candidates who ran largely as happy conservative warriors and won big —

and often — on championship night.

Daniel Cameron beat former Attorney General Greg Stumbo by 16 points to become the first conservative to hold the Commonwealth’s chief law enforcement position since World War II.

Incumbents Allison Ball, Mike Harmon and Ryan Quarles all won reelection to the offices of state treasurer, auditor and agriculture commissioner, respectively, with large majorities.

Plus, on a night when the newest version of the UK basketball gods brought down top-ranked Michigan State, election-law attorney Michael Adams was beating former Miss America Heather French Henry to become Kentucky’s next secretary of state.

These important GOP victories mean Gov.-elect Beshear will not have the same partisan advantages enjoyed by his father.

Old-line Democrats like Stumbo and Bowling Green’s Jody Richards — both of whom served tenures as House Speaker and spent a combined 72 years in the legislature — are no longer around to play backup for a left-leaning governor.

Beshear also might soon be stepping on constitutionally ensconced separation of powers.

He spoke during the campaign of replacing state Board of Education members “on day one” who would then be expected to “select a new commissioner on day two.”

This may seem like political mumbo jumbo designed to pander to teachers’ unions, which adamantly oppose the school choice and accountability measures endorsed by the current board and its commissioner, Wayne Lewis.

After all, I thought, these board members are appointed for four-year terms and no one can come in and force his ideological views on an established board.

But could Beshear skirt the rules with executive orders to undo Bevin’s policies and reconfigure the state education board?

Beshear wants to push out Lewis, the first black education commissioner in Kentucky’s history, primarily because the governor-elect’s union-masters’ ideology clashes with the commissioner’s support for giving parents more school choice options.

The possibility of (mis)using executive-order power to expand gambling and legalize — and tax — medical marijuana seems to energize Beshear much more than, say, dealing with the tough issues Lewis has taken on, including closing Kentucky’s education-achievement gaps and strengthening graduation standards so that high-school graduates don’t find out too late their diplomas aren’t worth the paper on which they’re printed.

Beshear’s default answer for these tough problems is to tritely characterize them in terms of inadequate funding.

Yet despite the fact that \$10 billion of the current General Fund budget’s \$23.4 billion will get spent on K-12 education alone, fewer than one in three of Kentucky’s high-school students who qualify for free-and-reduced cost lunches read proficiently.

If Beshear does get rid of the state board and Lewis, will the new governor’s playbook contain a viable plan for getting our students reading proficiently and graduating with meaningful diplomas?

Doing so would mean Beshear has, indeed, found something worth releasing at least by “day two” that will be worth the paper on which it’s printed.

Jim Waters is president and CEO of the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions, Kentucky’s free-market think tank. Read previous columns at www.bipps.org. He can be reached at jwaters@freedomkentucky.com and @bipps on Twitter.



Do we believe what we want to believe?

According to a new study, even those who are most social media savvy have a difficult time discerning “fake news” from reliable content.

“We all believe that we are better than the average person at detecting fake news, but that’s simply not possible,” said lead author Patricia Moravec. “The environment of social media and our own biases make us all much worse than we think.”

The study from the McCombs School of Business at The University of Texas at Austin, titled “Fake News on Social Media: People Believe What They Want to Believe When it Makes No Sense At All,” finds the average person is most likely to believe news found on social media that aligns with their political beliefs, even if it is sensational and inaccurate.

Researchers started by asking 83 social media-proficient undergraduate students 10 questions about their own political beliefs. Each participant was then attached to an EEG headset and asked to read 50 political news headlines as they would appear on a Facebook news feed. Each participant was asked to assess the credibility of the headlines they read.

UT News reports, “Forty of the headlines were evenly divided between true and false, with 10 headlines that were clearly true included as controls: ‘Trump Signs New Executive Order on Immigration’ (clearly true), ‘Nominee to Lead EPA Testifies He’ll Enforce Environmental Laws’ (true), ‘Russian Spies Present at Trump’s Inauguration — Seated on Inauguration Platform’ (false).”

The students rated each headline’s believability, credibility and truthfulness.

The study found even with a flag indicating the news could be fake, users were only able to accurately assess 44 percent of the news they were presented in the study.

According to the authors, “We found that the presence of a fake news flag triggered increased cognitive activity and users spent more time considering the headline. However, the flag had no effect on judgments about truth; flagging headlines as false did not influence users’ beliefs.

“A post hoc analysis shows that confirmation bias is per-



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vasive, with users more likely to believe news headlines that align with their political opinions. Headlines that challenge their opinions receive little cognitive attention (i.e., they are ignored) and users are less likely to believe them.”

Political affiliation made no difference in their ability to determine what was true or false, UT News reports.

“People’s self-reported identity as Democrat or Republican didn’t influence their ability to detect fake news,” Moravec said. “And it didn’t determine how skeptical they were about what’s news and what’s not.”

The findings indicate people are most likely to believe what they want to believe — information and news that aligns with their political ideas and beliefs — even if it isn’t true.

When people are swayed by fake news, they are unable to make well-informed decisions about what’s happening in our world.

Especially as we approach a major election, social media users will begin to see more and more information that is not factual on their news feeds.

According to a Buzzfeed News report, during the last three months of the 2016 presidential campaign, the 20 top fake news stories on Facebook generated more engagement — shares, likes and comments — than the 20 top stories from real news websites.

“The fact that social media perpetuates and feeds this bias complicates people’s ability to make evidence-based decisions,” Moravec said. “But if the facts that you do have are polluted by fake news that you truly believe, then the decisions you make are going to be much worse.”

So how can we better discern fake news from real news?

FactCheck.org offers some helpful tips to spot fake news (<https://youtu.be/AkwWcHekMdo>):

— Consider the source: Are you familiar with the source? Is it legitimate? Has it been reliable in the past?

— Read beyond the headline: If a provocative headline drew your attention, read a little further before you decide to share it. The headline doesn’t always tell the whole story, even in a real news story.

— Check the author.

— What’s the support? Many times these bogus stories will cite official — or official-sounding — sources. But once you check into it, the information doesn’t back-up the source.

— Check the date.

— Is this some kind of joke?

There is such a thing as satire. It could be funny, but it’s not news.

— Check your biases: Confirmation bias leads people to put more stock into information that confirms their beliefs and discount information that doesn’t.

The digital world — social media platforms and the Internet — has become a blessing and a curse. We have the chance to communicate and connect on a level most other generations could have only dreamed. With that ability comes a certain responsibility, though.

There are other practical ways to make sure the news you’re consuming and sharing is reliable. Think about what you are reading. Verify the source before you share it. Seek a second opinion.

As users become more aware of how to discern between reliable and unreliable news, social media platforms need to continue to do their parts to reduce the spread of inaccurate or fake news.

If both parties — users and developers — are setting their targets on eliminating fake news, we can ensure a better-informed society.

Be a responsible news-gatherer and do your research. If it seems too good (or bad) to be true, it probably is.

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