



20 questions

Finding a News Source You Can Trust

DICK PRYOR

BELIEVE WHO OR WHAT YOU WANT, but remember there is danger in living inside a news and information bubble. People who reside in the bubble risk being isolated, misinformed, and unaware of reality. The truth is essential to a functioning democracy, but when citizens limit their sources of news to just a few and don't question news sources' accuracy and trustworthiness, informed discourse suffers. News bubbles can easily become echo chambers that lead to polarized thought.

An echo chamber is a group situation where information, beliefs, and ideas are amplified or reinforced by transmission and repetition, while different or competing views are censored, disallowed, or underrepresented. In an echo chamber, it takes just a few unreliable or untrustworthy sources to taint the conversation.

For news consumers, it has become increasingly important to determine what is real, what is fake, and who can be trusted. That is especially critical in this age of expanding

numbers of "news" sources and ubiquitous social media.

Becoming a discerning news consumer requires some work—active participation in the communication process. When evaluating a source of news and information, professionalism, ethics, accuracy, reliability, transparency, fairness, objectivity, and honesty matter. Here are twenty questions (in no particular order) that I recommend news consumers ask when choosing a trustworthy news source. No one question is determinative; news consumers need to weigh several to reach their own, personal conclusions.

1 **How long has the news entity been in business?** Organizations that have stood the test of time are more likely to be reliable.

2 **Who is their audience?** Organizations that are intended to appeal to broad audiences are generally more likely to be fair than those targeting specific audiences and appealing to special interests.

So the next time you are tempted to make a snarky 'fake news' quip, instead look up the number of journalists who are killed every year in the quest for the truth. And maybe be big enough to admit that perhaps you simply do not like some of those truths.—Greg Milam, "Time to Spike the 'Fake News' Defense," *Sky News*



3 Do they belong to a professional association? Trustworthy news organizations typically do.

4 Do they subscribe to and operate under a code of ethics? Professional news organizations and reporters are upfront about their commitment to ethics and take it seriously. Real journalists commonly adhere to codes of ethics from the Society of Professional Journalists, Radio Television Digital News Association, and ethical standards developed by their own governing organizations and professional membership associations.

5 What do they do when their reporters make a mistake? Professional news organizations promptly retract or correct mistakes and discipline reporters and editors who make egregious or consistent mistakes and violate rules of ethics.

6 Do their stories use multiple sources? Use of anonymous sources is not unprofessional. In fact, it is often the only way stories can be developed. But, trustworthy news organizations go to great lengths to confirm facts and statements through multiple sources. Their stories will prove that dedication.

7 Are photos identified and attributed? Proper identification of people in photos and disclosure of the source of images are critical to providing accuracy and context.

8 Do they disclose their parent organization and/or governing board? Transparency illustrates values that guide editorial decision-making. “Reporting” supported by advocacy groups and political special interests (or undisclosed groups) is less likely to be accurate, fair, and trustworthy.

9 Do they employ professional journalists with relevant newsgathering, editing, and presentation experience? Trustworthy news organizations are more likely to hire journalists and commentators with appropriate education, skills, and work experience.

10 Do they produce “news” or “opinion”? Do they label opinion? Blurring news and opinion confuses news consumers. Part of a journalist’s job is to interpret facts, but trustworthy organizations try to be clear about when their journalists are providing their own personal opinion, commentary, or opinions of others.

11 Are they advocates for causes, issues, candidates, or parties? Trustworthy news organizations and reporters avoid conflicts of interest. Ethics codes are clear about the necessity of professional journalists to avoid actual or perceived conflicts of interest that may lead to bias.

12 Do they have access to newsmakers, thought leaders, and government decision makers? If so, that suggests important news sources view them as credible and trustworthy. Access reinforces journalists’ professional status.

13 Do they use “loaded” words? Pay attention to the words news sources use. Journalists who are not commentators, analysts, or opinion writers take great pains to avoid loaded words that inflame emotions or suggest advocacy for a position.

14 Do they brand themselves as a professional organization? Mission statements and core values suggest a news entity supports the search for truth and practice of journalistic integrity.

15 Do they have a “real” office? Even in today’s virtual workplace world, news organizations that can be trusted have a public-facing office and can easily be contacted. Fair, public-service-minded organizations encourage citizen input and feedback and are responsive to criticism.

16 Do they provide a forum for competing viewpoints? News organizations that can be trusted provide an opportunity for differing opinions on matters of public interest. Stacking the deck in quality or quantity suggests bias and an editorial agenda.

17 Over time, do they seem to operate ethically and fairly? Consistent quality and professionalism matters and should be judged over an extended period of time, rather than through a brief snapshot.

18 Do other journalists view them as “journalists”? Journalists are a picky bunch. If they shun a reporter or an organization, take note.

19 Do they enter and receive awards in professional competitions? Real news organizations and reporters do this.

20 Is their “interpretative reporting” supported by commonly accepted facts and/or professionally obtained information? This one requires some work on the part of news consumers. Check out sources listed (or linked) and whether other news organizations are reporting similar stories. Lack of attributed sources, use of questionable data, and failure of other organizations to develop or repeat the story suggests it may not be credible.

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- “ASU Cronkite Professor: Mistakes Don’t Equal Fake News,” *Arizona State University News*, July 6, 2017. Interview-profile of ASU Innovation Chief Eric Newton on fake news and its threat to democracy. asunow.asu.edu
- “Ten Journalism Brands Where You Find Real Facts Rather Than Alternative Facts,” Paul Glader, *Forbes*, Feb. 1, 2017. A list of credible news and information entities. forbes.com