

News can be hard:

How to protect your mental health while navigating the news on social media

We, #GoodforMedia, have found that teens need support with processing the sheer amount of news (and disinformation) we are exposed to on social media. We created this guide to help teens like us interact with news on social media through a critical lens in order to protect our mental health.

Context: The Rise of News Consumption on Social Media

- Nearly **3 in 10 teens** rely on Instagram as their primary news source (BBC, 2022).
- TikTok and YouTube trail close behind in popularity, as **28% of teens** get news from these platforms, respectively (BBC, 2022).
- **77% of teens** use at least one form of social media daily, so this surge in news consumption through social media is not unexpected (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Pros and Cons: Social Media News Consumption

Pros:

- Social media can be used to uplift current events and issues that are not covered by the mainstream news media
- Youth can easily view news from multiple sources on social media
- Many social media platforms do not have a paywall to access news
- Social media can provide youth with access to real-time updates on breaking news stories

Cons:

- Journalistic integrity is not guaranteed on social media: users can easily spread disinformation online
- Social media algorithms tend to promote sensationalized headlines that are more likely to incite a reaction in the viewer
- Navigating the sheer amount of news on social media can be overwhelming and stressful

Managing Overwhelm:

1. What emotions does this post or headline evoke?



We feel first when taking in new information. Does this headline make you feel optimistic and happy? Or, do you feel scared, shocked, and sad? Perhaps you feel a mix of positive and negative emotions. These emotions might linger even after you have scrolled past the post.

2. What can I do to deal with my feelings?

If the post brings up feelings of anxiety, stress, or fear, **honor your emotions and immediately take some time to destress.** First, turn off your phone – you don't have to keep scrolling or investigate the news further right away. Then, use your preferred destressing strategies; we recommend trying the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding method:

- 5: Acknowledge FIVE things you see around you
- 4: Acknowledge FOUR things you can touch around you
- 3: Acknowledge THREE things you hear
- 2: Acknowledge TWO things you can smell
- 1: Acknowledge ONE thing you feel grateful for

Next, **consider where/whom you can go to for support.** The news can be scary, overwhelming, and anxiety-inducing. Talking to someone else can help you evaluate the news and process the emotions stirred by current events. Try reaching out to a friend, counselor, or trusted adult to unpack the headlines together.

Apply a critical lens to the post you have viewed. Considering posts with a critical lens can also help you protect your mental health while reading news online. Gaining context about the news report can reduce any anxiety that comes from uncertainty about the news' credibility and veracity.

Critical Lens Questions

1. Who/what is the source of this piece of content?

If the source is a **social media news outlet** or **traditional news outlet**, consider researching the following questions:

- What is the political bias of this group?
- What types of news does this source share?
- What sources does this account list for each post, if any?
- Does this outlet have a history of promoting sensationalized headlines or disinformation?



If the source is an **individual and/or anonymous social media user**, consider researching the following questions:

- How is the user related to the news event they are covering in the post (ex: are they a firsthand witness)?
- If the user is not a firsthand witness, what sources does this user list for each post, if any?

2. Why am I seeing this piece of content?

- What is the source's goal in sharing it?
- Is it on my feed or did I search for it?

The content that shows up on your social media feed is largely controlled by personalized algorithms, which suggest new posts for you to view based on what content you engaged the most with in the past. These types of algorithms are designed to maximize your engagement through liking, commenting, and/or watching a piece of content online.

Two potential effects of personalized algorithms:

1. The Echo Chamber Effect

- **Echo chamber:** an environment where you only encounter information that reinforces or agrees with your own opinions.
- **Confirmation bias:** humans' tendency to favor information that reinforces one's existing beliefs.



Personalized algorithms can turn social media into a digital echo chamber for news. For example, if you prefer to engage with news sources which fall on one particular side of the political spectrum, a social media algorithm will likely continue showing you content from this type of source to maximize your engagement. In this manner, your social media feed becomes an echo chamber when it comes to current events as you lack politically diverse news sources on your social media home page.

2. Fostering Polarization



Users are more likely to share or comment on a post with a shocking headline than news that appears less so. So, personalized algorithms can inadvertently promote sensationalized news or disinformation, as these types of articles result in the most user engagement.

Critical Lens Questions, continued:

3. Is the source fact, opinion, or misinformation?

- **Fact:** the logistical details of a current event (ex: who, what, where, when)
- **Opinion:** someone's personal views about a current event and its causes (hopefully, this will be presented as an "opinion" or "editorial")
- **Misinformation:** information that is presented as fact but is actually false.

4. What else is there to know in terms of this topic?

Consider branching out beyond social media to print, radio, or news website sources to gain additional information about this current event.



Next Steps

What would I hope to achieve by sharing this news item with others?

If you reshare the post, be sure to include whether it is a fact, opinion, or instance of misinformation. You may also find it helpful to reflect on the following questions:

- If the post describes **facts**, do you want to spread awareness about this news event?
- If the post is an **opinion**, do you hope to learn about others' perspectives on this current event?
- If the post is **disinformation**, do you want to illustrate the prevalence of disinformation online to your followers?
- Could resharing this post lead to **unintended consequences**?
 - Does the post contain **sensitive content**, or could the news event be triggering to any of your followers? If so, consider including a content warning when you reshare it.
 - Are there certain communities who are **most impacted** by this headline? If so, are there any tangible actions you or others can take to aid these communities?

Next Steps, continued:

Do I want to see more or fewer stories like this? What can I do to make that happen?



You can take advantage of the algorithm by clicking the “not interested” button on YouTube or Instagram posts that include news events you do not want to see on your feed.

Conclusion:

Social media is a powerful platform for youth to share their stories and learn about current events. However, news content on social media has the potential to be sensationalized, unreliable, and overwhelming.

We can decide whether and how to engage with the news online. To protect our mental health and avoid being swayed by disinformation, we should practice self-care while catching up on current events and apply a critical lens to the news we consume on social media.

About #GoodforMEdia:

#GoodforMEdia is a peer mentoring campaign for older teens and young adults to share their personal stories, insights and strategies with younger teens and tweens to support their healthy engagement with social media. We are part of Stanford Psychiatry's Center for Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing.



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