

## NAVIGATING TRUTH IN THE NEWS ENVIRONMENT ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS

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**Abstract.** Online media platforms, mainly social media and Google, are often referenced in the crowded digital information environment. However, this has led to increased violations such as ignoring ethical codes, lack of verification, unbalanced reporting, sexual provocation, and slanderous news. The urgency of this research is to find out the subject's experience when the quantity of information is abundant and whether they have balanced it with literacy in navigating to get the truth when consuming news on digital platforms. This study aims to discover and reveal how sceptical audiences experience navigating the truth in the news environment on digital platforms. Using a descriptive phenomenology approach, the qualitative research design was conducted through in-depth interviews with 14 participants from various work professions. The results found that actors who navigate the truth use social media applications such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook by checking the credibility of news sources, considering context, and verifying from other sources. Users chose to wait for the original truth of the event through follow-up posts from multiple sources on WA, Line, and Snapchat. Moreover, search engines are used to confirm news on social media, such as the 2024 elections in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Journalism, Social Media, Digital Platform, Credibility, News Truth

## INTRODUCTION

The digital space creates a cornucopia of information. Navigating this wealth of online resources can be very difficult, due to the threats of misinformation (misinformation but the person sharing it believes the information to be true) and disinformation (misinformation shared with an element of intentionality) (UNESCO, 2019; Murphy, 2023; Gies et al., 2024). Information exists that is intentionally reconfigured with misleading content, incorrect context, manipulated content (Musi & Reed, 2022). Moreover, the digital divide literature demonstrates that inequalities in news media usage related to education do not apply to younger citizens (Geers, 2020).

Digital transformation in the public sphere leads to new forms of media provision, distribution, and use (Fischer & Jarren, 2024). One side of the user has an unambiguous and authoritative source of news. This source they trust to provide accurate information. Moreover, the audience's trust in the news provides what he calls an 'institutional savior'; that is, it eliminates the need for independent verification of information (Coleman, 2012; Rosanvallon, 2010). In the post-truth era, information is harder to trust than ever before. News has become more about entertainment than information (Barton, 2019).

Digital public sphere gives users the freedom to explore digital reality (Chambers & Gastil, 2021). Anyone is free to search and get news. However, news consumers know little about how those who lack trust in most news sources form judgments about which sources to watch and which to ignore. Meanwhile, the digital information environment continues to become more congested; social media platforms and information sources from Google are often referenced. Moreover, this poses a unique

challenge for media organizations or the press that want to maintain trusting relationships with their audiences.

Press Council 2023 data shows that 97% of violations are committed online media with a local media base (Hendriana, 2023). Violations that occur are ignorance of the code of ethics, without verification, unbalanced, sexual provocation, and slanderous news. By implication, the increasing use of digital platforms to access information contributes to declining trust in journalism. Newman et al mentioned that news on digital (Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T., Eddy, K., Nielsen, 2022) platforms is partly the cause of the decline in the level of public trust in news in many places around the world.

Internet users, at all times get a threat of disinformation. Misinformation spreads to personal devices, to social network homepages, to microblogging timelines, or even instant messages that spread in private groups and networks. In February 2022, the CEO of Aptika Kominfo found a total of 2099 scams on various social media (Dudi Rustandi, 2023). That is, internet users are highly vulnerable to fraud problems on a daily basis. If this continues, the impact can be individually and in groups, even becoming a serious threat to the existence of the nation. For example, there has been a slowdown in handling the COVID-19 pandemic due to the spread of fake news about pandemic issues. Hoaxes not only cause negative opinions, but also form opinions en masse so that people take extreme attitudes such as opposing vaccination.

The discussion of trust in news is particularly relevant in the news media landscape. Today's media audiences devote more time and attention to using digital platforms (Toff et al., 2021; McKelvey & Hunt, 2019). This poses a challenge for media organizations around the world, including in Indonesia. Researchers have

observed a major shift in the way people consume news and the sources they rely on. People tend to consume non-mainstream news sourced from social media or digital platforms news outside of mainstream media (Newman *et al.* & Nielsen, 2017).

Meanwhile, news publishers are increasingly relying on platforms to reach segments of society that are not interested in consuming news through old ways. The Indonesian press lives in the midst of a public that is increasingly critical of information. However, the growth of media companies in Indonesia is not accompanied by good and strong press quality, and press freedom actors tend to do interest journalism. Very few presses have a culture of skepticism and criticism. Press Council notes there are 47,000 media, namely press media and non-press media, and 90% are based on digital online (Hendriana, 2023).

The quality of journalism has declined since online news sites increased to clickbait logic, high-level misinformation, hoaxes, etc. News as an information product is in a quality crisis, and the risk of low quality is a decrease in awareness of news. Moreover, digital platforms and online news portals from the beginning have followed the principle that news is free and unpaid (retail or subscription), as is the tradition of print media. This climate makes it difficult for the media to obtain means of production from the public (Masduki, 2023). The following are the results of searching for news truth through landscape visualization of bibliometric databases of publications from ScienceDirect related to topics relevant to this study.

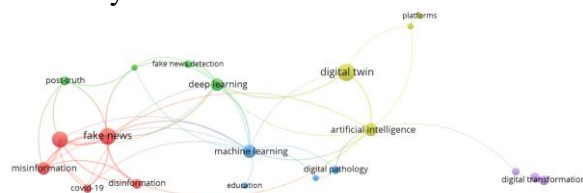


Fig. 1: Visualization of the truth word landscape from the bibliometric database of publications from ScienceDirect

The use of fake news vocabulary is strongly related to the post-truth era term from Steve Tesich (1992). The term then developed massively erratically, causing uncertainty due to (Steve Tesich, 1992) misinformation and disinformation. Confirmed cases in the COVID-19 era circulate fake news daily (Sheehy *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, sources that are considered more credible are more effective in reducing trust in misinformation (Liu *et al.*, 2023). Including graphic design on websites and social media helps stop the spread of disinformation (Murphy, 2023).

This research refers to the results of relevant previous research, such as Manninen's study (Manninen, 2020) *If Only They Knew: Audience Expectations and Actual Sourcing Practices in Online Journalism*. This study found out the expectations of young Finns (aged 18-28 years) in online news search practices. Its findings indicate that some online media outlets do not live up to public expectations, namely more comprehensive investigations and verification. The practice of journalism does not always meet the expectations of the audience. Kalogeropoulos' research, Antonis *et al.* entitled *News Media Trust and News Consumption*, surveyed users in 35 countries, excluding Indonesia, aimed to determine changes in the way people consume news and the emergence of digital news sources on the relationship between news use and trust in news. His findings, using mainstream or alternative news sources increased the level of trust in the news. However, social media as a primary source of news correlates with lower levels of trust in news (Kalogeropoulos, Antonis, 2019).

Other studies that raise the issue of truth and falsehood of news that focus more on the media (Altay *et al.*, 2022; Usher, 2018; Ognyanova, 2019; Zhang & Li, 2020; Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023; Beckett, 2017); the relationship between audience

trust and engagement with news (Nelson & Lewis, 2023). Another German study identified the consequences of the emergence of "fake news and post-truth era narratives" for personal media user epistemology, media trust, and news navigation practices from the perspective of media repertoire (Schwarzenegger, 2020).

The research focuses on how skeptical audiences navigate the truth in a news environment on digital platforms. This is what distinguishes it from previous research, which is generally carried out with a survey approach rather than looking for depth of meaning from digital media users.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Navigating The Truth in Digital Platforms.** We now live in a post-truth world full of alternative facts and fake news (O'Keeffe & Munk, 2017). People often make decisions based on acceptable intuition regardless of facts. The phenomenon continues to occur in the digital age, especially in the political practice of recent years; post-truth has become the keyword of the construction and strategic distortion of all interested parties. Facts are reduced to discursively contested ideological claims, giving rise to ideas such as 'facts' and 'alternative facts'. (Temmerman et al., 2019; Dell, 2019)

Delving into the changing dynamics of communication in the digital age, truth becomes subjective and easily questionable. The media has developed into digital platforms. Therefore, the responsibility of the media to present true, accurate, and honest information becomes very important. The perspective towards journalism increasingly makes audiences and journalists themselves believe that there are no facts; there is only interpretation (Temmerman et al., 2019). Moreover, artificial intelligence has not been fully used by users to ward off false

information. Therefore, we believe, but still verify, that we should think critically in a quick check of gray areas (Musi & Reed, 2022).

Trusts involve an informal social contract in which the principal authorizes agents to act on their behalf with the expectation that they will fulfill their responsibilities with competence, integrity, and impartiality, regardless of conditions of risk and uncertainty (Norris, 2022). The post-truth world emerged as a result of major societal trends such as declining social capital, rising economic inequality, increasing polarization, declining trust in science, and an increasingly fragmented media landscape (Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

Post-truth is an era where lies can masquerade as truth. You do this by playing with emotions and feelings of netizens. Indonesia has experienced and is still experiencing until now. One example during the 2019 and 2024 presidential elections was the moment of massive proliferation of post-truth (Mahmud Ashari, 2021). The public sphere has changed due to increasing social differentiation, accelerating the process of digitization and institutionalization of digital platforms (Fischer & Jarren, 2024; Mahmud Ashari, 2021). The platformization of the digital public sphere, such as on social media, makes information noisy and noisy. Every minute, some new photos or statuses are updated, and the latest or updated news or tips are circulated, even news that is multiplying.

Through social media that crosses borders, any video can "circulate" on our platform account. One hour after our account is signed out, when we sign in, we are immediately filled with the latest videos. So, the current round of information moves very fast. This round of information is then exploited by artificial lies that lead the public to assume that the lie is the truth. Remember, truth is the mortal enemy of lies. As Goebbels

(1941) said, "If you tell a big enough lie and keep repeating it, people will eventually believe it". The truth is not important and is completely under tactics and psychology (Reuters, 2020).

**Digital Literacy.** Humans interact with content through interfaces that can include touchscreens, voice commands, eye movements, and hand movements, often even interacting with non-human agents (Knight et al., 2023). Digital literacy is a very important skill in the contemporary era, which includes technical proficiency, information and media literacy, data literacy, and more (Phippen, 2024). One of the efforts is to develop a conceptual framework for digital platform literacy. Where digital platforms are important tools in people's lives and form a digital ecosystem, the ability to utilize these platforms effectively becomes crucial (Ha & Kim, 2024).

Information comes to our gadgets all the time without us asking. Therefore, in this discussion, the perspective of the digital literacy landscape includes forms of social media and online media. Digital literacy is the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create and communicate information, which requires cognitive and technical skills (Yugay Evgeniya Viktorovna, 2022). However, news literacy does not always mean that knowledge and skills are applied in practice (Swart, 2023).

Someone who has good literacy skills can help fight fake news, alternative facts, and the spread of disinformation in society. Media literacy teaches critical thinking skills (Kozyreva et al., 2023; (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2021). A number of solutions are already underway to address concerns about online misinformation, including engaging experts in correcting misinformation and improving media literacy (Vraga et al., 2022). In addition, consciously understanding aspects

of communication can strengthen individual and media literacy education (Mushk Umar, 2022; Schneider et al., 2020).

Fostering communication and interaction skills is essential to limit the risk of mis/disinformation (Vissenberg et al., 2023; Schulz et al., 2022). Many people still trust the media they consume by developing tactics and practices to deal with what they perceive as misinformation. While disinformation is described as the manipulation of information, it is most often to deceive (Kyriakidou et al., 2023; Kozyreva et al., 2020).

## METHOD

This research paradigm is interpretive, using qualitative approaches and descriptive phenomenological methods that focus on something experienced in an individual's consciousness, referred to as intentionality. Every act of consciousness we perform, every experience we have, is intentional. Its basis is the "consciousness" or "experience" of something or another (Drummond, 2015). Descriptive phenomenology is a subset of phenomenological research in which the subject's perception is stimulated through the richness, depth, and breadth of the informant's life (Streubert, 2011). The descriptive phenomenology research process has four steps: bracketing, intuiting, analyzing, and describing (Polit, 2010; Rohayati et al., 2023).

Experience or consciousness is awareness of something, seeing is seeing something, remembering is remembering something, judging is judging something. It is an object of consciousness that has been stimulated by the perception of a "real" object or through the act of remembering or inventiveness (Jonathan A. Smith, 2021). The information provided and received by researchers is information that occurs in their own lives and is meaningful (meaningful

social action). So, it is not the view of the researcher as an outsider, but according to the meaning of the informant himself (emic) as the perpetrator or subject of research. The research focuses on the use of social media (Facebook, Instagram, Youtube), messaging media (Whatsapp, Line, Snapchat), and search (Google).

The study participants totaled 14 individuals selected by purposive sampling. The criteria for participants from various occupational professions are productive age (15-64 years), various education and willing to share their experiences. Participants in this study used the P-code to replace naming while describing the sequence of interviews that had been conducted. P1 (50 years old / Sports Teacher at High School), P2 (44 years old / Self-employed), P3 (53 years old / Librarian at Private University), P4 (51 years old / Navy Officer), P5 (56 years old / Manager), P6 (48 years old / Lecturer at Private University), P7 (20 years old / Entrepreneur / Student), P8 (44 years old / Laboratory at Private University), P9 (52 years old / Lecturer at Private University), P10 (43 years old/ Private Driver), P11 (45 years old/ Lawyer), P12 (32 years old/ Private Employee), P13 (31 years old/ Head of Library at Private High School), P14 (48 years/ Interior Design Administration).

Data will be collected through in-depth interviews using research tools to record conversations between researchers and participants. Field notes will be included to record other data during the interview process. The interview questions focused on participants' experiences in searching, evaluating, and verifying information on digital platforms. Data analysis using the Colaizzi technique (Praveena K.R & Sasikumar S, 2021) goes through the stages of extracting significant statements, categorizing, and understanding the essential meanings of the phenomenon. Finally, the

descriptive phase occurs when the researcher understands and defines the phenomenon.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Participants participating in the study were from various occupational and professional backgrounds (self-employed, private employees, soldiers, lawyers, sports teachers, lecturers, librarians, marketers, private drivers, interior design administration), age, education, and experience, given the general nature of this research topic related to people's skepticism in navigating the truth of news on digital platforms. This study does not seek generalization but seeks to explore the meaning of the truth of news from each participant who lives in Surabaya and its surroundings. Fourteen participants consisted of 9 women and five men. In-depth interviews were conducted in offices, factories, canteens, and homes.

**Theme Findings.** This section specifically describes the themes identified in the research results, which are grouped into several categories.

**Table 1.** Themes of Research Findings

No	Theme
1	Navigating the Truth: a. Checking the credibility of a source b. Considering Context c. Seeking Verification from Other Sources
2	Barriers to Navigating the Truth a. Misleading Information b. Lack of Digital Literacy

**1a. Navigating the Truth: Checking the Credibility of News Sources.** The result of the study with the first theme related to participants navigating the truth in news on digital platforms is to check the credibility of sources. P8 knows essential events not only from YouTube and WhatsApp and searches deeper information from Google search

engines. This is to ensure the truth through the credibility of sources and information. If there is doubtful information, P8 will look further through other reliable sources. He said, "For information that is not credible, I will look for truth and facts on accurate websites, such as Kompas.com, Detik.com even YouTube".

According to him, the benefit of checking digital news is that we can quickly find information about something. When compared to the past, which was only through radio or newspapers, which was slow and could not be ascertained. P11 said: "Usually when I find news that concerns one particular party, I immediately become suspicious. So immediately find who is viral and cross-check through Google or websites that are guaranteed credibility ". According to him, the information on social media is not all true there are many hoaxes on social media. So, you must look at the source, which must be valid and cross-checked first.

The first indicator, usually regarding one name or on behalf of a particular group, is doubtful information. Whether or not the information is accurate, one must still cross-check the origin of the news. As long as there is no news source, it is likely fake news. Second, "they usually tell to viralize information, go viral . . . go viral". This is worth watching out for the truth of the news. We should not readily participate in virtualizing news without cross-checking whether it is true".

Added again according to P3 when he reads dubious news, the analogy is as follows. "For example, just give the hair with Coca-Cola for information related to hair loss. If people do not understand, this is probably true. That is stupid. So now we have to examine information like this ourselves so as not to miscapture the information. So, only sometimes, immediately, all information is welcome. Sometimes, sharing information in groups is also wrong. Although the news is

that the event is old and untrue, it still seems valid. So, it must be cross-checked so that others can correctly inform informed.

The P13 said: "We will see the information through several credible references. In addition, it can also be through the comments of the post. If you are not satisfied, you will usually see references from the Twitter application as well." Personally, dubious information will be ignored unless it concerns or impacts those closest to you. For example, when his parents panicked to read information about an accident on Toll Road, only then did Nimas inform them that the information was a hoax.

While P14 said, "if I get inconclusive information, I will look at the comments on the post. If necessary, check through other applications that have evidence of such information". He chose to wait for the original truth of the events through follow-up posts from several sources on WA, Line, and Snapchat. The same answer from P6 as a lecturer said, "I will ensure the information is on the web or other applications. Like the Bromo case that went viral ago, I looked for information about the incident or events on various applications or news websites. In addition, I also avoid various news sources that are inconclusive or uncertain. By accessing the web or trusted applications such as kompas.com, detik.com, CNN, and so on". Likewise, P7, an entrepreneur said, "will look at the source of the news. Also, waiting for the truth of the news to be revealed through news updates after a lapse of time".

**1b. Navigating the Truth: Considering Context.** Participants shared that digital platforms provide benefits such as sharing information about product discounts, learning cooking recipes, seeing business opportunities, addressing participants, and navigating the truth with the context in mind. As stated by P7, an entrepreneur "usually

sharing news / information with friends using social media. As we know, Instagram and TikTok provide chat features in the form of direct messages. It makes it easier for us to send messages when we want to share videos or posts that we want to discuss further in the context of work". According to him, he got many benefits from using social media. Assist in promoting products on social media pages used. Information should look for valid sources through Google when there is a doubt.

Considering context is crucial when P13 wants to create content. He will look for references on Instagram and then apply them according to the idealism of his place of work at the High School Library. "Truth must look at context by looking for references to its content. I use WA's messaging app to contact certain personalities in order to consult about content." P13 also uses it to find references for content ideas. P3's experience as a digital platform user becomes more critical in receiving news, not consuming news as is.

### **1c. Navigating the Truth: Seeking Verification from Other Sources.**

Participants who wanted to know more about the event by accessing information from social media. Especially public figures who have social media and are seen as having validity on YouTube and Instagram. P11 asserts, "In navigating the truth of well-known news sites, it is common to use Google. However, I often look for news information through Detikcom because this site also has an application. Then, I often verify the truth on the hoaxbuster.id site"

According to P5, "I have bookmarked Kompas.com, Liputan6.com, Antara.com, and Seword.com websites. So it is straightforward because it is just a click away". When Indonesia is busy campaigning for the 2024 election, browsing is mandatory for P3 to get certainty about the truth of the news. Google is a place to ensure the news

obtained whether it matches the facts or not. To verify the truth, P12 opens another application. "Looking for other references to double-check the news he reads, whether it is really trustworthy or not. Usually match the truth by reading netizens' comments. For example, I read that information about vote fraud in the 2024 election is consistent across all news channels, so I consider the election information to be true, not a hoax."

According to P9, consuming news on digital platforms benefits from faster updating of recent events, while the drawback is that you do not need to check and re-check with other news sources. The information we get may be incorrect or a hoax because often social media needs to include more references. Then, it is different from P10, a private driver interested in things related to his work. "I read and looked for comparisons from several news sources (at least 3 sources) so that I could find out the truth from the news of the increase in fuel prices by the government. So know the reasons for the government to increase fuel prices, such as due to inflation / oil prices abroad rise".

### **2a. Barriers to Navigating the Truth: Misleading Information.**

The study's results with the second theme related to obstacles to navigating the truth because of the amount of misleading information. P11 statement, "I think a lot of digital information is misleading. Therefore, to be more trusted, don't just read from social media. Especially if the social media is from people we don't know the background of, or it could be that the social media accounts are fake so they are unclear and invalid." Unlike P1, if there is information entered into the WhatsApp account, then to find out whether or not misleading information is accurate, you will ask friends if hoaxes do blocking. He said, "now it's a challenge in digital media everyone can put information there".



P14 said that it ignored misleading information. "I ignore the information in Whataspp regarding the truth of the 2024 election fraud which can be misleading and provoking. In addition, if the information on a website, blog or Google is misleading, I will see a number of other websites that are more convincing. I use google to make sure misleading news doesn't match the facts."

**2b. Barriers to Navigating the Truth: Lack of Digital Literacy.** Users accessing digital information need the skills to assess information and critically verify its veracity. As stated by P13, "Literacy is very important in understanding a news story so that it can be more critical. With good literacy skills and an open-minded attitude, make yourself more open. It is not easy to be pitted by anyone. Digital media can be a means to train our interests and measure our Literacy. When reading doubtful information, the solution is to use reasonable netizen assumptions as a reference to find the truth, and conduct research from theories and trusted figures".

Moreover, the work will also be helped by new insights from the news. P3 reiterated that "we can quickly search for anything. There are risks. However, to search properly, we need the skill of finding that information so as not to be misinformed. We are very facilitated if we need something, there is no need to look anywhere. We can find what we are looking for with gadgets. However, you have to be careful in looking for the information".

"In today's digital era, everyone can spread news by listening to the news at a glance and writing their opinions on social media applications. From there, there can be positive and negative influences. Often, digital news cannot be fully trusted because we do not know where the author got the source from. There is even news that is clickbait," P4 agrees with P7.

**Discussion.** In the vast age of digital information, it is essential to check the credibility of information sources. This involves not only considering the source's reputation but also evaluating the presence of biases or hidden agendas that might affect the accuracy of the information. Social media is increasingly integrated into media routines as a channel for gaining access, verifying, and disseminating information (Vázquez-Herrero *et al.*, 2019). Social media platforms often spread false or distorted information, so users should carefully consider the source of information before assuming it as a definite truth. Digital skills and knowledge are often put forward as potential solutions to protect young people from misinformation on social media. However, digital knowledge does not significantly predict the risk of mis/disinformation (Vissenberg *et al.*, 2023).

Truth in the view of deliberative communication still prioritizes accuracy. However, with the rise of fake news, is it destroying the public sphere? We should not expect or seek deliberation on social media. Social media performs the function of information in the deliberative system, and it is this function that is threatened by fake news (Chambers & Gastil, 2021). Several steps can be taken to verify the truth of the news. The first step is to find the truth of the news. Second, look for the basis and sources of the news. Third, knowing the author, including finding out whether there is a tendency behind the news. The fourth filter is whether the news has elements of provocation or propaganda (Bramantoro, 2017).

Context is critical in interpreting the truth of information. Context includes the time, place, and background of that information. For example, an event uploaded directly on social media needs to be considered context, whether the video has been cut or edited to convey a particular narrative. Through understanding context,

individuals can gain deeper insight into the truth behind information. Likewise, along with mobile news consumption standards, media are experimenting with native formats for these platforms (Vázquez-Herrero *et al.*, 2019)

It is essential to seek verification from other sources while navigating the truth (Strömbäck *et al.*, 2020). This means relying on one source of information and seeking perspectives and data from several different sources. It is increasingly challenging to distinguish between entertainment, advertising, and misinformation on digital platforms on digital platforms. Particularly in visual social media, where many different forms, topics, and tones circulate, so-called "news feeds" offer a blend of content that only partially matches traditional journalistic concepts. (Swart & Broersma, 2023)

In this way, individuals can get a more complete picture and ensure the correctness of the information they receive. Deliberately biased or distorted information can easily mislead individuals, especially if they lack vigilance or skills in verifying the veracity of information. Therefore, education and awareness of the importance of criticizing the information received are key to overcoming this obstacle.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion that can be drawn from this study is the importance of checking the credibility of sources by critically evaluating sources of information. In a digital age filled with varied and often unverified information, awareness of the importance of checking the reputation and intent of information sources is critical to avoiding the spread of misinformation or manipulation.

Users understand the proper context when interpreting the truth to avoid misunderstandings or inaccurate information judgments. Context plays a significant role in

determining the veracity of information to avoid the pitfalls of inaccurate interpretation. Therefore, verifying information from other sources can help ensure its accuracy. For example, by comparing information from several sources, individuals can confirm the veracity of information and reduce the risk of receiving incorrect or distorted information.

The barriers to navigating the truth are the spread of misleading information and a lack of digital literacy. Misleading information can affect an individual's perception of truth, while a lack of digital literacy increases the risk of misinformation spreading.

Source Truth identification requires verifying facts and evaluating sources of information. Collaboration between users, platforms, and online communities is critical to ensuring the accuracy of information disseminated. A concerted effort is needed to develop effective truth-telling strategies and minimize the impact of disinformation in the digital information ecosystem.

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