



The truth is out there

Parse fact from fiction with smart searching

Did you hear the one about the cabal of deep-state, cannibalistic pedophiles embedded in government and the entertainment industry? How about the one that claims COVID-19 is a hoax to defeat the president and it will disappear the day after the election? Or, how about the latest crazy conspiracy theory to come out of the far-right blogosphere,



KEVIN O'NEILL
InSites

that Osama Bin Laden's killing was faked by Barack Obama and Joe Biden, and they had SEAL Team 6 killed to cover it up?

These are three of the most outrageous, baseless lies that have been perpetuated by far-right websites that have made it into the mainstream. To be fair, I searched for similarly outrageous claims coming from the left but could not find any. Every election produces varying degrees of false claims from both sides, but whoppers like these gain undeserved credence from the internet.

The average American adult spends more than 2 hours a day on social media. A significant number of them get all or most of their news there. Social media companies engineer their sites to maximize the amount of time users

stay on them. Their strategies include feeding users information they want to see and posts that will keep them engaged. Controversial and salacious content is more likely to be viewed and shared, which increases engagement time. All of this makes the internet a brutally efficient mechanism for spreading false information. This is damaging to democracy, which requires an informed and engaged electorate.

The flip side of this is that the internet is also a wonderful tool for finding the truth. The technology itself is not inherently good or bad — it's how you use it that matters. If people would take a half-hour, or even 15 minutes, out of their daily 2-hour social media binge to seek the truth on reputable sites when they see a questionable claim, it might make a difference.

To make an informed decision when picking a candidate you could start by visiting the websites of both contenders, joebiden.com and donaldjtrump.com. These are highly polished propaganda vehicles making many unfounded and exaggerated claims, but they tell you where the candidates stand on issues important to you.

If you are not informed on the issues, there are plenty of online options to educate yourself. Our site, thetimes-tribune.com, provides in-depth coverage and informed opinions of the issues. There are other non-partisan sites, such as ballotpedia.org, dedicated to election-related issues.

Next, you can visit fact-checking sites, such as factcheck.org or politifact.com to see if the candidates' statements are true. These sites will help you separate fact from fiction. Visiting them is both

enlightening and depressing. You will be smugly satisfied when you see how much the candidate you are against lies. But then you will be disappointed when you see how much your champion disregards the truth, often for no discernible benefit.

It can seem overwhelming to dive into these sites and research the issues and candidates. But if you alter your daily internet diet by swapping out a few selfies or images of well-plated meals for some civic research, it's easy. It takes only a little effort and can make a big difference. Both sides claim that this is the most important election in our lifetimes. You owe it to yourself, and your country, to make an informed decision when voting.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a staff artist for The Times-Tribune. Share your favorite websites with him at koneill@timeshamrock.com.