# Motives and Methods:
## Building Resilience to Online Misinformation in Canada

**Key Findings and Recommendations**

MediaSmarts

# Key Findings and Recommendations

MediaSmarts designed the Motives and Methods project to better understand Canadians' fact-checking and sharing behaviours and to determine best practices for building resilience to online misinformation in Canada. This project builds on MediaSmarts' successful Break the Fake (BTF) program, which encourages Canadians to think critically and fact-check information before they share it online. We developed five new BTF videos for this study, including new developments in misinformation (such as visual misinformation) and different kinds of intervention messaging: motivation (why it is important to verify information online) and methods (how to verify information). Using a mixed-methods study conducted over two phases (a survey and interactive focus groups), we then evaluated the effect these interventions had on participants' ability to recognize and respond to online misinformation.

The first phase of the study involved a survey of 5,000 Canadians divided into six groups. Each of the five groups watched a different BTF video, while one control group received no video. The survey aimed to evaluate:

- Changes in participants' information verification processes before, and after, watching a BTF video;
- Participants' perceptions of the intervention, including accessibility and the relevance and impact of the video message; and
- Participants' fact-checking attitudes and aptitudes, such as what motivates people to share information and why, how often they fact-check, and whether they are confident in their abilities to do so.

The second phase consisted of interactive focus groups with 30 participants who had taken the survey. This rich, qualitative data allowed us to gain a nuanced understanding of key patterns, themes, and demographic differences that surfaced in the survey. For example, participants were assigned to one of five small groups, one of which consisted of older adults (55+). We positioned older adults as a community of focus for this project as research shows they are often more vulnerable to believing and sharing online misinformation.

Based on this study, we highlight key findings and share recommendations on how to design successful video interventions targeting misinformation.

# Key Findings

Key findings follow the themes emerging from our research: discernment, assessing information, sharing habits, fact-checking aptitudes and attitudes, visual misinformation, and community of focus: older adults.

## Discernment:

- Most participants struggled to discern between true and false information.
- Participants were most successful in discerning hyper-realistic and 'fake-looking' images, but less successful when discerning an image that was linked to a true claim.
- In general, **most participants had a false bias**, meaning they were more likely to say something was false, regardless of whether it was actually false.
- **Nudging** (or prompting people to check the accuracy of information) **may reduce false bias**. Focus group participants, who engaged with the BTF videos and study activities over a six-week period, demonstrated a slight truth bias.
- There was little variation in discernment success between the control group (who did not see any intervention video) and the groups who watched BTF videos.
    - This demonstrates the **impact of accuracy prompts broadly**: simply by participating in the study (regardless of whether they saw a video or not) participants were successfully prompted to think critically about the importance of authenticating and verifying information.

## Assessing Information:

- When judging the accuracy of information most participants relied on mental models, or information processing shortcuts, including guessing or their perception of the reliability/ unreliability of information.
- Participants who watched a BTF video on how to fact-check information were slightly more likely to 'look up' information when discerning the accuracy of information.
- Focus groups confirmed that **participants rely on unreliable mental models** (e.g. guessing or relying on prior knowledge) **to assess information**. The same mental models (or shortcuts) used by different participants caused them to arrive at opposite conclusions.
- Over half of focus group participants assessed a fake news outlet as real based solely on their ability to find its website through an online search. Those who correctly identified the example as fake used critical thinking skills in their investigation (e.g. they read the content on the site and found it implausible).
- For most participants, **reliability depended on who published or posted information**. If they checked the source and it was either a well-known publication, a source they already know to be reliable or expert-reviewed, or posted by a trusted friend, then they considered the information reliable.
- For some participants, **reliability depended on whether information was supported by different sources**.

## Sharing Habits:




- Participants were **more likely** to share misinformation that contained **elements of truth.**
- Participants were **less likely** to share information they **believed to be false**.
- Most participants said they **do not regularly share information online**. Of those who do, most **check for accuracy before sharing**.
- Participants who watched a BTF video were slightly less likely to share a false image than those who didn't watch a video. Our findings align with research that confirms misinformation interventions reduce the likelihood of sharing false information online.

- Focus groups participants primarily shared:
  - causes they care about and calls to action (e.g., petitions);
  - issues affecting them or their community;
  - political content;
  - entertainment or humorous content; and
  - posts to express frustration at misinformation or dissuade others from believing false information.
- In contrast, participants were less likely to share information that they considered irrelevant, unfunny, and/or uninteresting.



## Fact-Checking Aptitudes and Attitudes:

- Participants held a set of **inconsistent beliefs about their fact-checking abilities**: most participants believe it is impossible to fact-check everything they see online, yet they also believe they are good at determining what is real or fake online.
- Many participants thought **fact-checking tools are hard to find**, with most not knowing about relatively popular tools like Snopes.
- Findings reveal a **misinformation paradox**: Participants got most of their news online, relied on guessing and intuition to authenticate information, and expressed overwhelm and limited knowledge when
  it came to fact-checking processes and tools, while still believing that they were good at determining the authenticity of online information.
- Participants' motivations for fact-checking were influenced by factors including time constraints; personal relevance; humour; potential reputational harm; safety concerns; prior knowledge of the topic; trust in platforms; and awareness of common misinformation topics.
- Focus group participants identified three main motivators for fact-checking information before sharing: personal experience with misinformation; concern for their reputation; and perceived impacts of the information.

## Visual Misinformation:

- Visual misinformation combining a false image with a true claim is more likely to be incorrectly accepted as true and more likely to be shared.
- Overtly 'fake-looking' or **hard-to-believe images tend to provoke cynicism**, leading people to label them as false even when they are real.
- Just under half of participants were aware of, and have come across, a deepfake online. The same number believed they could identify AI-generated images and consider reverse-image searching easy to do.
- While some participants were confident navigating visual misinformation, many struggled in practice, incorrectly identifying a deepfake as a real image.
- Focus groups revealed that participants found **verifying visual information more challenging than textual information**. They expressed concerns about the growing sophistication of artificial intelligence and other forms of visual misinformation that are becoming increasingly difficult to detect and authenticate.

## Community of Focus: Older Adults (55+):

- Older adults (55+) were less likely to correctly identify true and false information compared to their younger counterparts (18-29).
- Older adults were more likely to rely on guessing and less likely to look up information when assessing authenticity.
- Older adults were generally **less likely to share information** compared to younger adults. However, when they did share, they were **more prone to sharing misinformation**, particularly visual misinformation like deepfakes.
- Older adults were more likely to believe fact-checking everything online is impossible and **less likely to feel confident** in their ability to identify misinformation specifically visual misinformation.

# Recommendations

Our evidence-based recommendations focus on designing effective (video) interventions to counter online misinformation based on the following themes: visual misinformation, accessibility, motivational messaging, long-term effects, building trust and confidence, and addressing systemic factors.

## Visual Misinformation:

- Focus on **visual misinformation as distinct**; avoid positioning it as an extension of text-based misinformation.
- **Use positive messaging**: reassure individuals that they do not need to be experts. Provide them with examples of, and how to use, simple tools to fact-check visuals.
- **Avoid including 'hacks'** to identify visual misinformation (e.g., zooming in on an image to examine detail, or measuring how often someone blinks in a video). These can quickly become outdated.

## Accessibility:

- Videos should be **short**, approximately 60 seconds or less.
- Videos should be **easy to understand** – use straightforward vocabulary, be direct, and focus on a single message. This is especially useful for older adults.
- Videos should be relevant, **applicable to daily life**, and use real-life examples where possible.
- Test-run an early version of your video for feedback. Ask individuals about its accessibility, comprehension, and relevance.

## Motivational Messaging:

- **Acknowledge the perceived difficulty in fact-checking**, especially visuals:
  - Use scenarios and personal anecdotes to help reassure people that they are not alone. Scenarios work especially well for older adults.
- **Foster intellectual humility** by gently encouraging people to evaluate their perceived ability to discern true from false information:
  - Explain the role bias plays in forming opinions and in different contexts.
  - Highlight the limitations of knowledge and relying on intuition.
  - Address the misinformation paradox: many people are confident in their fact-checking ability yet also find fact-checking difficult.
- Demonstrate the interconnected nature of online information ecosystems. Emphasize how shares within private circles can have far-reaching consequences.
- **Highlight information triage:** teach individuals how to prioritise information to fact-check based on relevance, sense of importance, urgency, and impacts.

## Long-term Effects:

- **Use a diverse set of approaches;** vary interventions' styles, forms, and messaging.
- Focus on discerning between true and false information, not just what's false.
- Provide individuals with **simple, easy-to-follow steps to fact-check** information they see in their daily lives. This is also effective with older adults.
- Nudge people to pause to reflect on information they come across online.

## Building Trust and Credibility:

- Mitigating cynicism of online information can be difficult but ultimately involves building trust and increasing people's confidence that they can determine what is true and false online.
  - Avoid preachy or partisan language, focusing instead on **practical and reliable information and tools**.
  - **Point to reliable sources:** teach people how to judge the reliability of a source and provide clear examples.
  - **Be transparent** about your organization's work, the interventions' goals, and its source of funding.

## Addressing Systemic Factors:

- **Research:** Conduct consistent research to match the pace at which the online information landscape, and misinformation, evolves.
- **Platforms:** Hold platforms accountable for improving the quality of information circulated online (including in the development and use of fact-checking tools).
- **Government:** Develop and implement a national action plan for digital media literacy education, which is crucial to the life-long learning needed for building resilience to misinformation.
- **Cross-sector collaboration:** Foster knowledge exchange and collaboration amongst community organizations and other key stakeholders (researchers, industry, policymakers, etc.) that serve the needs of a diverse Canadian population to amplify the impact of digital media literacy interventions.as they navigate online information.

# Summary

This project moves beyond individualized solutions to foster collective resilience to misinformation in Canada. Our study demonstrates that **digital media literacy education works** and encourages a diverse group of participants to check the accuracy of online content, especially before sharing it. Interventions grounded in digital media literacy provide Canadians with the tools, skills, and critical thinking to move out of information overwhelm, false biases, and dependence on unreliable mental models, towards fact-checking practices that will better serve them in discerning true and false information.

While there is still a lot of work to do, this project offers researchers, educators, policymakers, industry, and community organizations with practical, effective, and evidence-based strategies for designing interventions to address misinformation. It is our hope that through our collective efforts we will build the resilience of all people in Canada as they navigate online information.



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