Don't feed the trolls

Handout

Tips for dealing with conspiracy theories and misinformation

It is not unusual to find online posts, comments, blogs or images that contain in part or in whole, conspiracies, untruths or bad information. When such posts make a clear signal of their identity (such as their political party, ideology or group), misinformation can be hard to uproot or challenge. Sharing or promoting such posts will only reinforce a person's commitment to the community that they received this bad information. It also shows that they are willing to sacrifice 'outside' relationships, whether they are right or wrong. Consider how information can reinforce bias:

- Nothing drives online traffic as effectively as stories that vindicate and/or inflame the biases of their readers.
- Fear mongering drives traffic.
- Institutional distrust is so high right now, and cognitive bias so strong, that the people who fall for hoax news stories are frequently only interested in consuming information that conforms with their views — even when it's obviously fake.

Three tips

1. **Follow the now-old adage, "Don't feed the trolls**." If someone posts a fake story and you think they have simply been duped, certainly it is useful to point out the error with a more reliable source. Please do so graciously. No one likes to be publicly humiliated. Sometimes a private message is better. But if you think the posting is really about proclaiming identity, ignore it. Don't amplify its value by arguing. And if you must say something, send a private message.

2. **Help promote a culture that respects truth**. Check your sources before you post anything. Support newspapers and other organisations that do good, reliable reporting. Discourage people in your own community when they promote stories that are untrue.

3. **Appreciate humour**. Like fake news, jokes and satire are markers of identity -- funny to insiders, and often incomprehensible or offensive to outsiders. They may be tasteless, they may be divisive but unlike fake news, they are not an assault on truth.