# DO
## ONE BRAVE THING

# CHECK BEFORE YOU SHARE

*Don't lose yourself
in the informational
and emotional streams*

# Where are you now?

We live in an overwhelming digital world, connected to all sorts of information, opinions and perceptions about reality.

When caught in this global unrest **finding, filtering and countering fake news** is not an easy task. And not because we're not good enough, it's just because we're only human. Also, because it is very difficult to make clear distinctions between false and misleading news and false but well-intended or good-faith news.

People and entities that use propaganda are very much aware of these limitations and use false news as a means to distort reality at their own convenience. the more distorted our perceptions on reality are, the higher the chances to develop extremist views, attitudes and behaviors.

**!** We challenge you today to slow down a little bit and to check your own vulnerability to fake news and propaganda.

Checking every piece of news before you share it is extremely important but checking your own emotional state and behavior is crucial.

**We are
only human.**
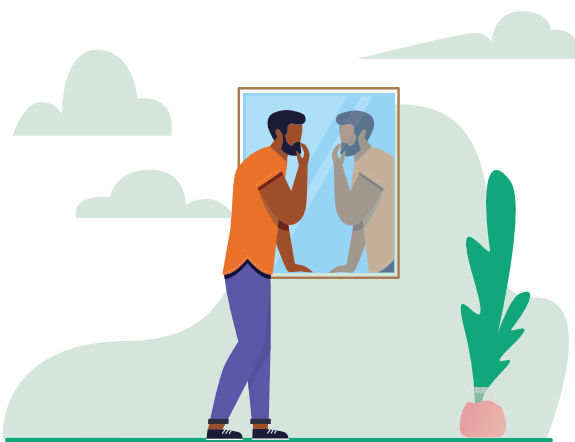
**1. Check your emotional status**

**2. Check the news**

# Check your emotional status before you check the news

We are sensitive human beings that try to cope with stress, but we are also defined by our own biases and our motivations to be socially accepted. Trying to keep a balance between all these factors could generate conflict and discomfort for us and for our peers.

**You**

STRESS

COGNITIVE BIAS

SOCIAL MOTIVATIONS
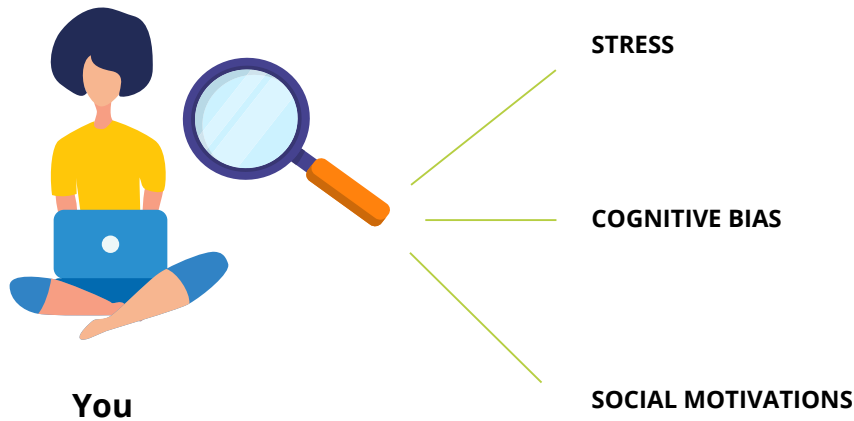
If we educate ourselves to periodically assess the balance between these three, we get the opportunity to improve our decision-making processes and to reach clarity and perspective about specific content.

**READ THE FOLLOWING SCENARIOS AND ASSERTIONS AND TRY TO MEASURE YOUR STRESS LEVEL. NO PRESSURE!**

I'm in a good place, well rested, I have just accomplished some major step in my personal and professional life.

**Stress level – low risk**

Congrats! Most probably your cognitive and decision-making processes are fully functional.

Just take a second to check if your hype is not making you more indulgent when evaluating the quality and the soundness of the sources and arguments you discover in the news story.

I'm quite busy these days with a lot of tasks on the checklist. But I'm good at multitasking. Nothing to worry about.

## Stress level – moderate risk

Of course, you're good at your job and multitasking is your second nature. Do you really have the time and the attention needed to closely and thoroughly check the nuances and the context of the news you encounter?

When our attention span is limited, we could easily skip some key ingredients in the development of a false narrative or news: the date of the publishing, the identity of the author or the credibility of the sources.

I'm so busy right now and everything is so hectic in my life that I don't even have time to read this nice guideline.

## Stress level – high risk

Most probably you should focus on prioritizing and solving the most critical aspects that got you in this crisis. Reading news and comments in your social media feed might be stressful as well.

Your perceptions and judgment are directly linked to your stress level. Avoid controversies and strong conclusions, as you might be misled by false arguments much easier. Ranting about a controversial topic will not reduce your stress level. At best it will bring more angry and stressed people in your rainy cloud.

Apart from external factors such as stress that have a significant influence in our decisions and judgments, things get a little more complicated when dealing with our own biases.

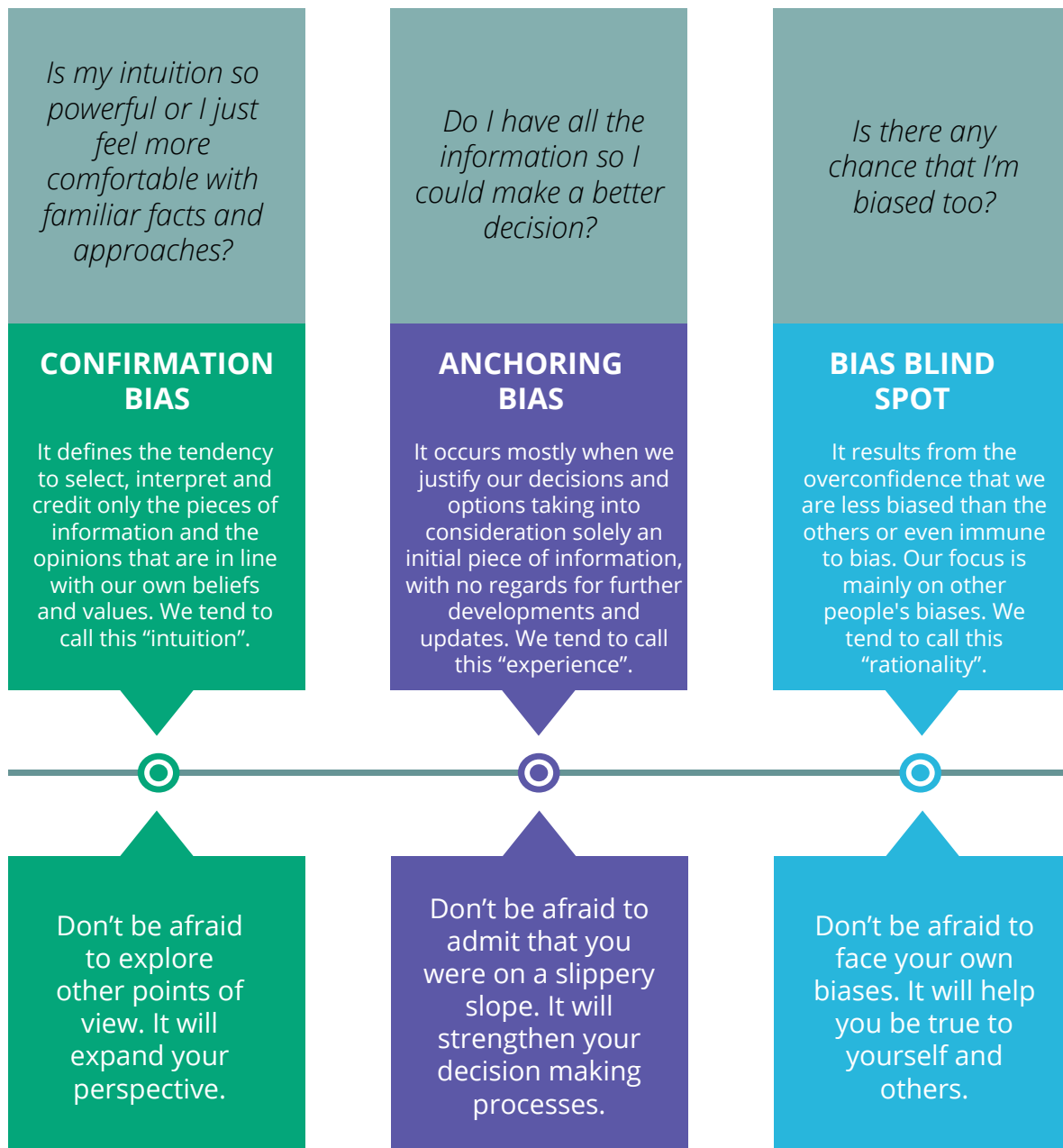These are internal factors that are part of our human nature.

We cannot simply reshape our personalities, but we can adapt it to different contexts and to others.

**ONE BRAVE THING**

## COGNITIVE BIAS

Every action and decision we make is based on previous experiences and perceptions. When these perceptions conflict with the objective and rational reality, we are facing a cognitive bias that might reflect in our attitude and behavior.

If we become aware of our own biases, we develop critical thinking skills and we reduce the risks of being intoxicated by fake news and propaganda.

Here are the three most predominant biases that occur when we navigate the (social) media.

| *Is my intuition so powerful or I just feel more comfortable with familiar facts and approaches?* | *Do I have all the information so I could make a better decision?* | *Is there any chance that I'm biased too?* |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **CONFIRMATION BIAS** | **ANCHORING BIAS** | **BIAS BLIND SPOT** |
| It defines the tendency to select, interpret and credit only the pieces of information and the opinions that are in line with our own beliefs and values. We tend to call this "intuition". | It occurs mostly when we justify our decisions and options taking into consideration solely an initial piece of information, with no regards for further developments and updates. We tend to call this "experience". | It results from the overconfidence that we are less biased than the others or even immune to bias. Our focus is mainly on other people's biases. We tend to call this "rationality". |
| Don't be afraid to explore other points of view. It will expand your perspective. | Don't be afraid to admit that you were on a slippery slope. It will strengthen your decision making processes. | Don't be afraid to face your own biases. It will help you be true to yourself and others. |

Just a kind reminder: we are all biased and there is no need to look for a cure. As long as we are not projecting our biases in intentional deceptive actions.

Once aware of our dominant biases, we could improve our social skills and try to cover our social motivations in a positive and constructive manner.
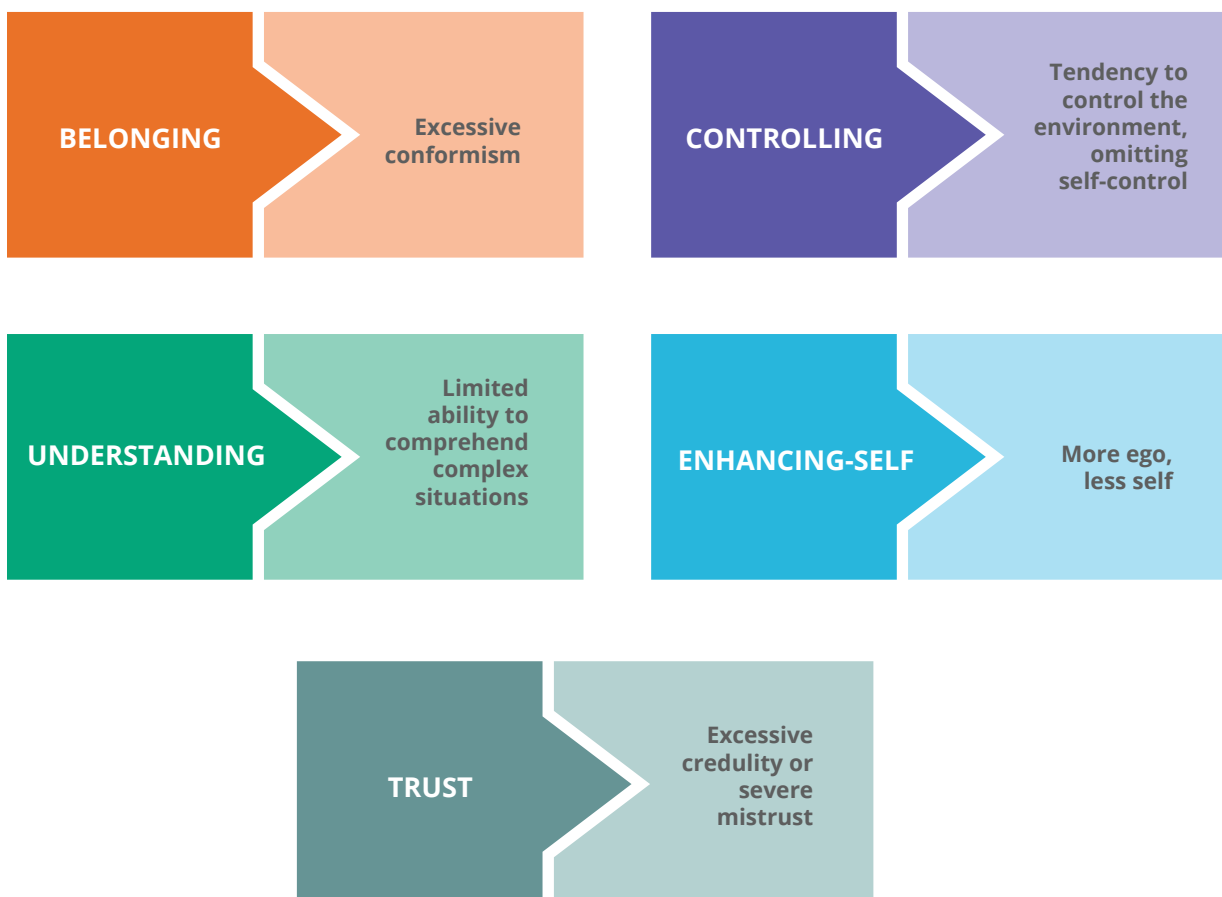
More importantly, we reduce the risk of developing extremist views!

## SOCIAL MOTIVATIONS

According to Susan Fiske (2010) – author of BUC(k)ET model – in order to fit socially, people are driven by five major social motivations.

**B**elonging, **U**nderstanding, **C**ontrolling, **E**nhancing-self, **T**rust

We share information and opinions in order to fit and to be socially accepted. And for that purpose, we tend to engage mainly within bubbles that preserve our social motivations and do not challenge our opinions and perceptions. Although our core motivations remain strong, the side effects are not to be neglected.

| BELONGING | Excessive conformism | | CONTROLLING | Tendency to control the environment, omitting self-control |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| UNDERSTANDING | Limited ability to comprehend complex situations | | ENHANCING-SELF | More ego, less self |
| TRUST | Excessive credulity or severe mistrust | | | |

**TIPS FOR ONLINE AND OFFLINE SELF-IMPROVEMENT**

1. Try to reduce your screen time especially during a (social) media frenzy. It will immediately reduce your stress levels!

2. Be patient with yourself and others. Admit that we all have biases and misconceptions, but don't use this to replicate neglectful behaviours. Try to redress them.

3. Make a Top 3 trusted information sources and a Top 3 shady information sources. Update them every month and look for newcomers. Things are not carved in stone, right?

4. Expand your bubble – subscribe and connect with people that do not necessarily share your opinions and values.

5. Whenever you get excited by a piece of information or an opinion, try to look for the opposite views and critics too. Most probably you will not change your mind, but you get the opportunity to see other perspectives.

**Now that you somehow know your place and your intentions, let's move on to the next challenge: spotting news and propaganda.**

# Check the context

False news mostly occur during high interest or controversial events: elections, public health crisis, massive protests or any other incident that would fit under the generous concept of "state of emergency".

Also, fake news is ongoing and not necessarily linked to the breaking news of the day. They are used to legitimate conspiracy theories or other false news, so people get the false feeling that some stories are soundly documented and also have a long history.

The bigger the **BREAKING NEWS** fonts, the easier it is for false news to spread between the lines.

Bear in mind that the perceived intensity of an event is directly influenced by media and influencers' framing.

# Question the context

| | |
|---|---|
| *Is this event so important that I must share the news and alert everybody about its consequences?* | Evaluating the importance of an event could be subjective and could be influenced by your experience or sensibility to the environment. |
| *If I share this news will it bring more clarity to my network or it would just fuel negative emotions?* | Clarity could also be a subjective criterion. For instance, one could consider that sharing an unofficial information would bring more clarity to the bigger picture. |
| *Are there any official or trusted sources involved in the event?* | The concept of trusted source could be tricky, because trust is a very personal feeling and it implies both internal and external validation. One could dismiss a trusted source, validated by others, if she/he perceives the source as unreliable or biased. |
| *Is this event thoroughly documented by the media and the authorities or is it just some news in the spur of the moment?* | This question could lead to an objective answer, because it is time related. For obvious reasons, a breaking news event is lacking much context information, as the media and authorities did not have the time to investigate it. |
| *Is it just one side of the story – how many perspectives are reflected in the news?* | This can be objectively observed by looking for the presented opinions or explanations in a piece of news. |

In recent years we have become so preoccupied with dismantling fake news that we might have forgotten what news is.

If a piece of news meets the following criteria, chances are that we are dealing with a legitimate news:

1. It's up to date, both chronologically and content wise

2. It's useful for a large community

3. It's fact based and the facts are clear and easy relatable to the characters of the news

4. It provides expert answers, insights and solutions

5. It's fairly balanced both in tone and in separating facts from opinions

# Check the fake news

**1** **Phase 1**

Although fake news tends to mimic news structure and manage to slip in our news feed, there are some indications that we need to be more careful:

1. the content is triggering a high emotional response (anger, shock, discontent, fear)

2. the information is supported by anonymous or generic sources, and cannot be attributed to identifiable people

3. the information is promoted as classified, top secret or exclusive

**2** **Phase 2**

Sometimes, fake news is so seductive that we get stuck into a "what if" moment. *What if it is true?* In order to overcome doubts, we should expand our check-up and engage in news forensics.

Beware, this process is time consuming, it requires investigation tools and it might get you to inconclusive results.

Luckily, there are plenty of free online investigation tools (starting with Google search engine) and you get the chance to double check your intuition.

# Question the fake news

*Who is signing the news article? If the author is not identifiable, you might consider reading the article with caution.*

Use search engines (Google, Yahoo, Ask, Bing, etc) to find more references on the author's editorial activity. Beware of fake identities!

*When was it initially published and how current are the presented events?*

Some fake news never disappears and is revived either by publishers or users right in the peak of high intensity events. They are not up to date, but they contribute to confirm people biases and to mislead them. Use search engines to verify if the context is accurate.

*Who are the sources, are they identifiable? Is the citation accurate?*

Some fake news do quote identifiable individuals and only a background check is recommended – who are they, how legitimate are they, what is their affiliation or contribution to the story? Beware, validating one's credibility is a matter of perception and could be subjective.

*Again, with the sources. Are they whistleblowers or just some revenge or attention seekers?*

When dealing with potential disclosure of controversial information we need extra caution. Is he/she a former employee, a retired expert, an individual that insists on revealing global conspiracies? If the source is a whistleblower, there are limited chances to find public information on his/her activity.

*Is there an invasion of numbers and figures? Numbers are tricky and could induce the false perception that the news is solid.*

Numbers are quite difficult to check – one should be a professional fact checker. But, if you're lucky, you can find the original studies or reports. Make sure that they are up to date and peer reviewed.

*Does the news article include various references to other media reports? Extra caution is recommended as we might be tricked by a circular reporting scheme.*

Usually, fake news is shared within a network of alleged media outlets that legitimize their news stories. Most of the time, fake news has a high rate of similarity. You could check how many media outlets have distributed the news and what media sources they credit.

## THINGS TO DO WHEN YOU SPOT FAKE NEWS

1. If you accidentally shared fake news, consider deleting the post or updating it;

2. If one of your friends has shared fake news, consider warning him in private so he/she could redress the situation;

3. If you want to alert your friends about potential fake news, consider making the story public, but with clear arguments;

4. If you want the content to be removed from social media, consider reporting it – each platform has its own policies in this concern;

## PREVENTING FAKE NEWS EPIDEMICS

In February 2020, in the context of new COVID – 19 (coronavirus) developments across the globe, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General of the World Health Organization, has made a call to counter false news and conspiracy theories that have polarized public opinion in recent weeks.

In Ghebreyesus' opinion, along with the strange new virus we are all confronting with an infodemic that should be countered with facts and not with fear.

Yet false and alarming news still challenge our vigilance and inoculate doubt within the general public. Similar to viruses, false news suffers mutations and it takes some time to find the proper response to prevent potential outbreaks.

**Let's take a look at the context**

*What?* We are dealing with an international health emergency, that involves a new virus that seems to severely affect the elderly and people with chronic diseases and a poor immune system.

*When?* The first official and media reports date from December 2019, so the events are quite recent and are developing.

*Who?* Governments and public health bodies across the globe are working at national levels or together to find the proper response to this challenge.

*Where?* It started in China, but currently COVID-19 is being reported in more than 100 countries.

**Why is COVID-19 subject to fake news and conspiracy theories?**

It is a public health crisis officially recognized by all governments and independent bodies. In theory, it would have an impact on the entire population of the planet.

*Potential threats to personal wellbeing can fuel panic among large populations.*

Researchers and health experts are still compiling data and are trying to deal with this challenge and its potential implications

*Information scarcity stimulates people's imagination, because they need to understand and to feel in control.*

It has political and ideological connotations, that involve governments, corporations from the pharmaceutical industry or eccentric philanthropes

*If people do not trust these actors, they will seek information and alleviation in alternative sources.*

Talking about and understanding medicine is not for everyone

*When information is too specialized, we tend to trivialize it, or we simply cannot assimilate it.*

**Proper response to limit fake news dispersal**

Access and share only official information, that is fact based and is confirmed and assumed by relevant authorities

Avoid clicking and sharing sensationalistic headlines and stories. Yes, some people get paid for posting false and misleading news

Do not engage in any online dispute unless you have up to date, solid and official arguments

If you are not a professional, avoid giving medical advice.

# Investigative tools for fake news disclosure

In recent years, various fact checking platforms have developed across the world, professional platforms that engage journalists, academia and NGOs.

For individuals that are not necessarily fake news detectives, there are free online tools that could ease the process of fake news dismantling.

Due to objective technological limitations, these tools cannot replace human intuition, decision making processes, ethical and moral values or even the trustworthiness of a piece of information.

But these tools can provide some early warning signs that some of the news might be false.

The final call in establishing the truth within news is on each and every one of us!

# Meet BRAVE – the Web Plug-in and the Investigation Service

BRAVE is a free web browser plugin for Chrome that could be helpful in spotting fake news and could ease your sharing decision. For those who do not use Chrome as the primary Web browser, check our website www. onebravething.eu, the Share Wisely menu, to access the Investigation Service. It will allow you to check any online article even if you use another Web Browser for your day to day Internet navigation.

The BRAVE plug-in and the BRAVE Investigation Service is available in English, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish and Romanian languages.

# INVESTIGATION CRITERIA. CONTENT QUALITY REPORT.

**Context analysis** – The BRAVE plugin and the Investigation Service scan for author identity, publisher's website and for references about who, when and where (something that we name "context setting"). Good news is clear and transparent!

**Sentiment analysis** – The BRAVE plugin and the Investigation Service scan the general tone of a text, weighting the negative and positive words and phrases that might influence the readers' attitude. Good news is neutral and is not trying to trigger emotional responses!

**Clickbait probability** – The BRAVE plugin and the Investigation Service scan headlines styling and semantic and compare it to the body of the article in order to estimate clickbait probability. Good news is not misleading!

## SHARE PROBABILITY

After analyzing all qualitative criteria, the BRAVE plugin and Investigation Service will generate an overall share worthiness score.

Bear in mind that this score is indicative. It is up to you to question and to assess to which extent a piece of news is worth sharing!

## INVESTIGATION CRITERIA. PATIENT ZERO.

The BRAVE plugin and the Investigation Service will scan the internet to identify if a piece of news is original or is part of a replication and alteration process. Once identified the Patient Zero the report will show which was the information route and even the copy-paste ratio! Patient Zero (P0) is the initial source of information that you are currently reading. Following the path from P0 to your article could give you valuable insights about how the information has changed until it reached you, insights that are really valuable when you are facing propaganda or fake news. These tend to give you a tone of factual information (thus, they will have a very good context setting), but you should look closely to the tone, clickbait level and also check all connected articles.

The BRAVE plugin and the Investigation Service will also automatically generate a summary of the article. Reading the summary could help you quickly understand what it is all about and also, in most cases, could help you to assess the clickbait level by comparing the title claims to the summary.

# Counter fake news with BRAVEry!
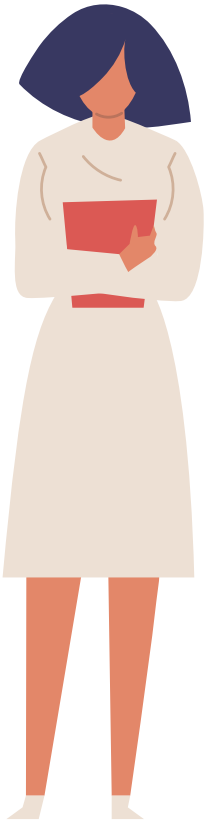
**Be true to yourself** – check your own biases and try to spot the most predominant one that is affecting your judgement and your relationships.

**Be true to others** – make your voice heard but not at any cost, especially if you have to lie for a spotlight moment.

**Be alert** – when things get hectic around you, stay informed and updated until you get the full picture.

**Be BRAVE** - if you were tricked by false news and you shared it, acknowledge your error and try to correct it.

**Use our BRAVE plugin and / or our BRAVE Investigation Service** – it's the quickest and easiest way to get valuable information that will help you to assess to which extent a piece of news if share worthy.

## THE PARTNERSHIP

***Coordinator:***
Peace Action Training and Research Institute of Romania (PATRIR) – Romania
*patrir.ro*

ActiveWatch – Romania
*activewatch.ro*

CESIE – Italy
*cesie.org*

Instytutu Bezpieczeństwa Społecznego (IBS) – Poland
*fundacjaibs.pl*

Political Capital Policy Research and Consulting Institute – Hungary
*politicalcapital.hu*

ZA CLOUD SRL (Zetta Cloud) – Romania
*zettacloud.ro*

Budapest Centre for Mass Atrocities Prevention (BCMAP) – Hungary
*genocideprevention.eu*

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