



DOMINIC BUGATTO FOR WSJ



Your Key Survival Skill For 2026: Critical Ignoring

KEYWORDS |

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In an age of endless low-quality information, it's time to fight our instinct to seek out and absorb all we can. It takes practice.

If social media were a literal ecosystem, it would be about as healthy as Cleveland's Cuyahoga River in the 1960s—when it was so polluted it repeatedly caught fire.

Those conflagrations inspired the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the Clean Water Act. But in 2026, nothing comparable exists for our befouled media landscape.

Which means it's up to us, as individuals, to stop ingesting the pink slime of AI slop, the forever chemicals of outrage bait and the microplastics of misinformation-for-profit. In an age in which information on the internet is so abundant and so low-quality that it's essentially noise, job number one is to fight our evolutionary instinct to absorb all available information, and instead filter out unreliable sources and bad data.

Fortunately, there's a way: critical ignoring.

"It's not total ignoring," says Sam Wineburg, who coined the term in 2021. "It's ignoring after you've checked out some initial signals. We think of it as constant vigilance over our own vulnerability."

Critical ignoring was born of research that Wineburg, an emeritus professor of education at Stanford University, and others did on how the skills of professional fact-checkers could be taught to young people in school. Kids and adults alike need the ability to quickly evaluate the truth of a statement and the reliability of its source, they argued. Since then, the term has taken on a life of its own. It's become an umbrella for a whole set of skills, some of which might seem counterintuitive.

Here's the quick-and-dirty on how to start practicing critical ignoring in the year ahead:

Realize that critical thinking has become a liability. Smart people tend to engage deeply with what little information is available, a process called critical thinking. In the age of the internet, it has become a trap.

For most of human history, information was in short supply. A snatch of traveler's gossip could have meant the difference between staying alive and losing your head to marauding Vikings. Good information remained hard to come by, right up to the invention of the internet—as anyone who remembers card catalogs can tell you. Our innate curiosity, our instinct for gossip and our addiction to messy drama drive us to spend way more time consuming internet nonsense than we should.

"Investing critical thinking in sources that should have been ignored in the first place means that attention merchants and malicious actors have been gifted what they wanted, our attention," wrote Wineburg and three other researchers in a 2023 essay.

Remember that your attention is a scarce resource. How draining is the use of social media? A pioneering 2021 study found that just 30 minutes of phone scrolling tires us out psychologically, actually reducing our ability to exercise. One 2022 paper concluded that a halfhour of social-media use before training caused enough mental fatigue to affect the hand-eye coordination of elite volleyball players.

Problems managing our attention in the face of a never-ending media onslaught are so widespread they've spawned high-tech remedies, including dumbed-down phones and e-ink gadgets.

But the simplest fixes are often the best, says Matthew Facciani, a researcher at the Georgetown-Lancet Commission on Faith, Trust and Health at Georgetown University who studies misinformation and media literacy. He recommends self-nudging, deliberately tuning our media inputs and scrolling practices to reduce time spent mentally fending off the internet's flotsam and jetsam.

One easy tactic: Decide how much time you want to spend on screens in advance, then set a timer.

Recognize that 'true enough' is dangerous. The tendency of chatbots to lie to us—known as hallucinations— might seem AI-specific, but it's part of a much bigger and potentially more dangerous phenomenon, says Walter Quattrociocchi, a professor of computer science at the Sapienza University of Rome.

The generative-AI large language models powering chatbots have been trained to produce convincing results. This is very different from being able to confirm whether something is actually true. Note

"LLMs make this shift visible in a particularly clean way, but the same logic has been operating for years," says Quattrociocchi, notably when some human-made posts are amplified over others by algorithms that respond to likes and engagement, not accuracy.

"Social media already trained users to rely on fluency, coherence and social endorsement as proxies for credibility," says Quattrociocchi. So in both AI and social media, "plausibility becomes a sufficient stopping condition for judgment," he adds.

His point: We are being lulled into accepting "true enough" as a proxy for actual truth—while losing the habit of verifying information for ourselves.

Use the internet against itself. Finding truth in our media landscape requires tools that didn't exist even a few years ago. Consider lateral reading, in some ways the opposite of critical thinking. When encountering a new claim, rather

than engage deeply with it, take a step back and use a quick search to discover what others are saying about it. A tool—built into every Chrome web browser—allows you to quickly assess the credibility of a given website. Buried under the icon next to every URL at the top of the browser, “About this page” was a product of a direct collaboration between Wineburg and engineers at Google. It’s also possible to use AI to check claims made by humans—and other AIs—on the internet. Results can vary if you just ask a free chatbot to do it. Paid tiers tend to allocate the processing power to give you better answers, says Mike Caulfield, a digital literacy expert at the University of Washington Bothell. Caulfield developed Deep Background, a 3,500-word prompt anyone can feed into a bot. Essentially a program, it initializes a multistep session of identifying, researching and fact-checking a set of claims. He recommends using it only with paid versions of Claude or Chat-GPT.

Note

Deep Background first researches a claim, then engages in multiple rounds of stress-testing its own conclusions. This is especially important, because chatbots rely on the same polluted internet we’re all trying to wade through in the first place. Even many apparent hallucinations are actually chatbots’ faithful summaries of bad source information.

It might sound paradoxical to use AI to combat AI. But then, using technology to clean up messes made by earlier technologies is precisely what we’ve always done—even on the Cuyahoga River.

Techniques for cleaning up our media environment are still in their infancy. Even as they get better, one thing won’t change: We’ll all still have to ensure we’re not hypnotized by the algorithms—and that we think for ourselves.

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