Based on our historical preferences, we others to guide our access to information every interaction with the internet and report or program, and that shared number from well-known sources, in hindsight, were relatively few in the public on a fixed schedule and, were broadcast and shared with and programs that were produced and current events in our community informed commentary about things.

Back in the days before the internet, Drinking from a firehose conjecture, false facts and blind guesswork? eminently credible when talking about them, even but have you ever noticed how many people sound on topics like those in Jersey isn’t the difficult part – on social media, so the internet is a ‘user beware’ place.

can also access information whenever we can also access information whenever we want from a seemingly infinite number of sources. That sounds like a good thing but we are learning that maybe it’s too much of a good thing. Drinking from a firehose requires some skill if you are to get enough water to slake your thirst and still remain dry, uninjured and standing.

The internet has become an indispensable resource and repository of information for many of us, brilliant for the instant dissemination of information and many people who previously did not have access to knowledge through libraries, research publications, schools, encyclopedias (remember those?), expert commentary and newspapers are now able to do so. But the information both deposited in, and disseminated by, the internet is generally not curated consistently, meaning that it is not checked for veracity or reliability so the internet is a user beware place. This is also the case with social media where individual opinions may be shared and disseminated throughout their user communities almost instantaneously without any balance or basis in verified fact. In today’s world, we need to be information literate.

So, what does it mean to be information literate? Earlier this year in April, the Information Literacy Group committee (ILG) of CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) published an updated definition.

“Information literacy is the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use. It empowers us as citizens to reach and express informed views and to engage fully with society.”

How does this work when we are constantly being bombarded with information in tiny bits? Can we make sense of these bits and gain a true understanding of complex subjects? Can we figure out what is real and what is fake? What is the role of our educational institutions, government, companies, society and media? How has the rapid penetration of social media to supplant more traditional information sources like newspapers, radio and television impacted our critical thinking skills and attention spans? What do parents need to do to help their children or maybe it’s the other way around? What personal responsibility do we each have as individuals to be information literate?

An important clue might be found in an earlier statement. According to the 2005 UNESCO Alexandria Proclamation, information literacy is an important contributor to democratic, inclusive, participatory societies: “Information literacy lies at the core of lifelong learning. It empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals. It is a basic human right in a digital world and promotes social inclusion in all nations.”

Lifelong learning requires us to be more active and discerning in our access to, consumption and use of information. We can also learn by allowing ourselves to be more curious and by training ourselves to ask the right questions. For example, we regularly hear about ‘fake news’ today. This issue is not new, as people have through the centuries been subjected to similar content that many would label as propaganda from non-trusted, or known-to-be-biased, entities. The difference today is that there are many more sources of information and the speed and reach of dissemination makes it difficult if not impossible for counter-arguments and actual facts to be presented in a timely way. In this environment, each of us has a greater responsibility as individuals to question the information we consume before we rely on it or disseminate it further.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has produced a simple infographic based on the work done by FactCheck.org to help people spot fake news. Is there a way to shortcut this laborious process of verification?

The short answer is ‘no’, unless you are willing to trust an information source. But even trusted information sources, like our most trusted friends, can make mistakes and errors in judgement so it makes sense to ask questions when you come across information that doesn’t seem to make sense. And sometimes not making sense is deliberate so taking in the entire context is important too; this approach would help what do you think? Get in touch, participate and share your views with us at contact@jerseypolicyforum.org.