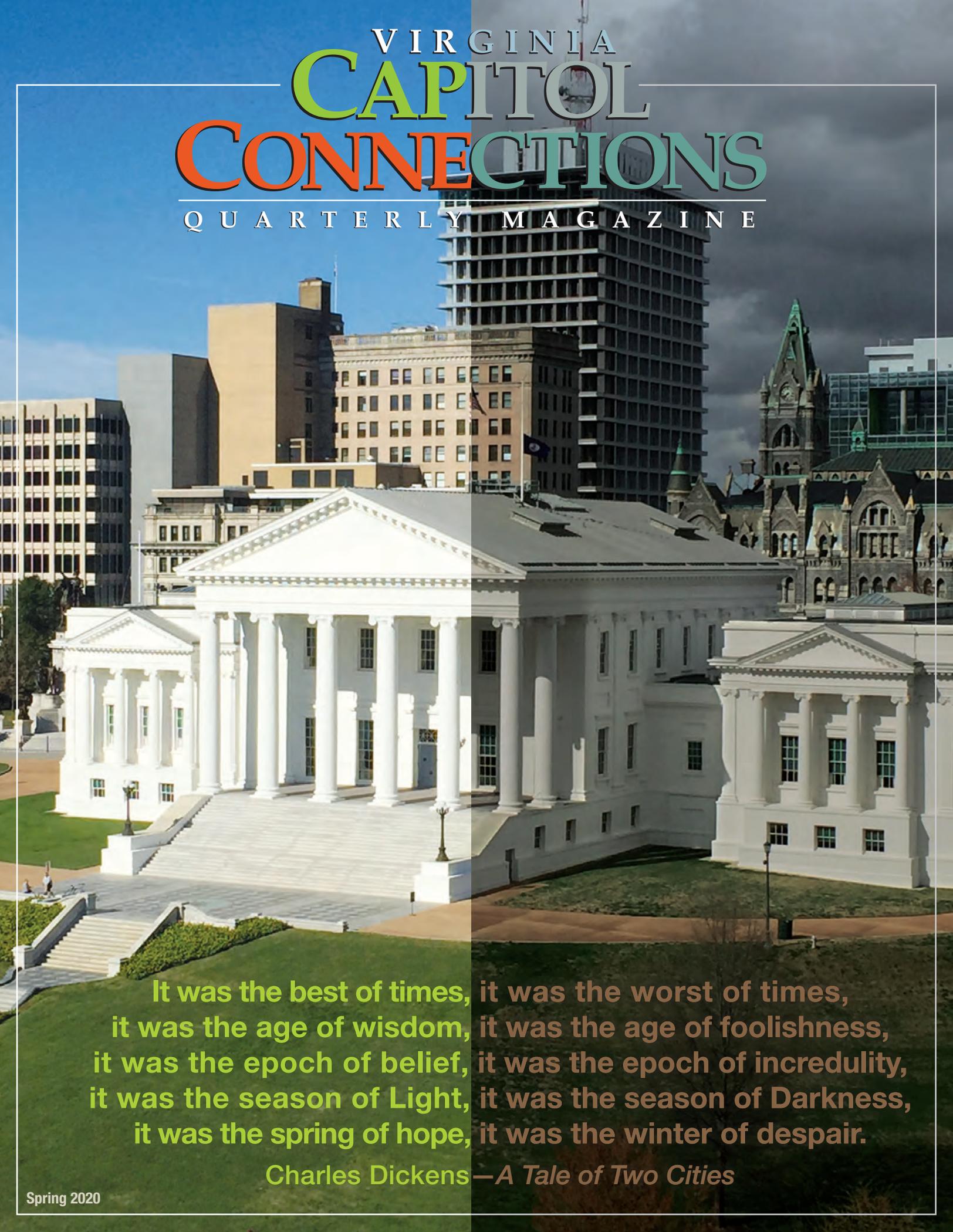


VIRGINIA CAPITOL CONNECTIONS

QUARTERLY MAGAZINE



It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

Charles Dickens — *A Tale of Two Cities*

Use the SMELL test to sniff out ‘fake news’

By JEFF SOUTH

On Fox News, former talk-show host Geraldo Rivera told viewers how to test themselves for COVID-19: “Hold your breath for 10 seconds. If you can hold your breath for 10 seconds, then you don’t have this disease,” [he said](#).

A story circulating on Facebook shows Gov. Ralph Northam at a press conference discussing the coronavirus pandemic’s impact on the state’s schools. “All Virginia students will repeat current grade next year,” the article’s [headline declares](#).

A [message reverberating on Twitter](#) says, “Hate to break this to all the stupid ‘journalists’ but COVID-19 stands for Chinese Originated Viral Infectious Disease; Number 19!!”

All of those claims are demonstrably false: You [can’t test for the virus](#) by holding your breath; Virginia [schools aren’t holding everyone back](#); and COVID-19 stands for the “[CO\(rona\) VI\(rus\) D\(isease\)](#)” that surfaced in 2019.

But the outbreak of the new coronavirus has spawned an “[infodemic](#)” of misinformation and disinformation. Just as we all have a responsibility to help prevent the virus from spreading, it’s incumbent on all of us to help prevent false information from propagating.

In today’s health scare, unfounded rumors aren’t just harmless pranks. They could mean the difference between life and death. One [bogus tip](#) ricocheting online, for example, advises people to “take a few sips of water every 15 minutes at least” to kill the virus. Some suggestions—like [gargling with bleach](#)—could kill you.

Moreover, [conspiracy theories](#) unfairly blaming the disease on China have triggered a spate of [assaults and other hate crimes](#) against Asian Americans.

What can we do about the gusher of “fake news” and spurious statements polluting the infosphere? Evaluate information carefully



so you know what to believe and what to discount. Never share a social media posting based solely on a headline or photo; read the entire article. And don’t share postings unless you know they are true.

To separate the informational wheat from the chaff, follow the advice offered by a friend of mine—John McManus, author of “[Detecting Bull: How to Identify Biased, Fake and Junk Journalism in the Digital Age](#)” and “[Don’t Be Fooled: A Citizen’s Guide to News and Information in the Digital Age](#).”

John and I were reporters in the 1980s at The Virginian-Pilot in Norfolk/Virginia Beach. He went on to earn a Ph.D. at Stanford and win awards as a communication professor and media scholar. Among other helpful methods for scrutinizing information, John developed the SMELL test.

John [describes it](#) as “a tool for vetting news and information in the digital age. The SMELL test won’t make you foolproof, but it can help you become a savvy information detective. Apply it to any content purporting to be factual from any source—face-to-face, to Facebook, to Fox, the New York Times and online ‘to infinity and beyond.’”

In this mnemonic device:

- **S stands for Source.** Who is providing the information? If you’re evaluating a news story, for instance, you might consider not only the publication but also the reporter and the people quoted in the article. What is their reputation for truthfulness?
- **M is for Motivation.** Why is someone saying this? Perhaps the purpose is to sway your opinion—to get you to vote a certain way. Or maybe the message is part of a disinformation campaign by a foreign government seeking to sow discord among Americans. Or it could be satire: The phony posting about Virginia students having to repeat the school year was meant as an April Fool’s Day joke.
- **E represents Evidence.** What evidence is provided for generalizations and assertions in a news article or social media posting? Does the message cite—or better yet, link to—supporting facts and authoritative data?
- **L is for Logic.** Do the facts lead logically to the conclusions? Based on everything else you know, do the culminating points of the message make sense? Is the conclusion based on innuendo and anecdotes instead of facts and data? Be suspicious if the information sounds “too good to be true.”
- **L is for Left out.** What’s missing that might change your interpretation of the information? A false report often has a kernel of fact, and that can trick you into believing that the entire report is accurate. In January, for instance, gun rights groups accused Northam of preparing to hire a cadre of state troopers to confiscate people’s firearms. The governor had indeed budgeted for more Virginia State Police positions—but to [process gun permits](#) and registrations.

Online resources can help in applying the SMELL test. Google the keywords of a news report and see which publications are carrying the story. If the article appears only on fringe websites, it’s probably not legit.

Moreover, use reputable fact-checking platforms like [Snopes](#), [PolitiFact](#) and [FactCheck.org](#). They have a track record for unbiased assessments of information.

In these days of social distancing and sheltering in place, we rely more than ever on getting information online. Consequently, we must be more vigilant than ever in vetting that information.

Contrary what you might read online, there’s no vaccine (yet) for COVID-19. But there are ways to protect ourselves against false and misleading information.

Jeff South has been an associate professor of journalism in the Robertson School of Media and Culture at Virginia Commonwealth University since 1997. He previously worked as a newspaper reporter and editor for 20 years in Texas, Arizona and Virginia. ▣

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