

Understanding 'Fake News'

Overview

In this lesson, students learn about the phenomenon of “fake news,” how it spreads quickly on the Internet, and how to recognize it and distinguish it from other types of information. First, students discuss what makes news reliable. Next, they read a balanced article on fake news and examples of fake news on the Internet. Then, they learn about using the SMART (standing for Source, Motive, Authority, Review, and Two-source test) Information-Age Checklist to help them use critical thinking in evaluating online information. Finally, students work in small groups to apply SMART to hypothetical examples of news and online information.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify examples of fake news online.
- Explain why fake news is a problem and how people are susceptible to believing it.
- Evaluate online news and information sources to discern what is reliable and trustworthy.

Materials

- **Handout: Understanding 'Fake News'** – 1 per student
- **Handout: Be SMART About Fake News** – 1 per student

Standards Addressed

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.8
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.1
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.9
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.10
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.4
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.6

Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.9
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.10
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.6

California History-Social Science Standards

12.8. Students evaluate and take and defend positions on the influence of the media on American political life. (1) Discuss the meaning and importance of a free and responsible press. (2) Describe the roles of broadcast, print, and electronic media, including the Internet, as means of communication in American politics.

National High School Standards

Civics Standard 19. Understands what is meant by “the public agenda,” how it is set, and how it is influenced by public opinion and the media.

C3 Framework

D1.1.9-12. Explain how a question reflects an enduring issue in the field.

D2.Civ.14.9-12. Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

D3.4.9-12. Refine claims and counterclaims attending to precision, significance, and knowledge conveyed through the claim while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both.

D4.4.9-12. Critique the use of claims and evidence in arguments for credibility.

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National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).

Procedure**Focus Discussion**

1. Ask students, “Where do you get your news from?” Tell them to be as specific as possible. Look for sources that multiple students choose. Possible answers: online websites, blogs, social media feeds, newspapers, television, parents, or friends.
2. Next, ask students, “Do you think everything you read on these news sources is accurate?”
3. Hold a discussion on why students believe everything or disbelieve some things that they read or hear from their preferred news sources.
4. Tell students they will now learn about the phenomenon called “fake news.” Tell them to see if the reasons they have to believe their preferred news sources apply to what they read.

Reading: Understanding ‘Fake News’

1. Distribute Understanding ‘Fake News’ to students. Give them time to read the article. If necessary, have them read it for homework and prepare answers to the Writing & Discussion questions for the next class session.
2. Have students answer the Writing & Discussion questions. Have students discuss answers in small groups or as a whole-class. Be sure to discuss Question 1 as a whole class to check for understanding before the activity.
 1. Compare fake news to other online sources that may contain untrue or exaggerated information, namely satire, advertisements, and opinion. Why is it difficult sometimes to be able to define fake news? *Accept reasonable responses. Mainly, students should look at the different intents behind the varying news online sources of information. Fake news creators have an intent to misinform or to persuade through false or grossly exaggerated information, either to affect elections or to make money from online traffic and advertising.*
 2. Based on the information in the article, what do you think is the best policy government should take in stopping fake news? What should social media sites do? What should Internet users do? *Accept reasonable responses. For government action, make sure students are careful to consider the First Amendment protections of speech and the broad protections for freedom of the press.*
 3. If a state wanted to pass a law making it a crime to publish fake news that affects an election outcome, what challenges would that law face under the First Amendment? *The First Amendment gives broad protections to news publishers, and the practical problem of international publishers of fake news might make it nearly impossible for a state to prosecute a fake news publisher under the hypothetical law. Also, the state would have to determine the harm done (effect on election outcomes), which is difficult to do.*
 4. Have you or someone you know ever believed a fake news story? If so, describe what happened. What can an Internet user do to protect himself or herself from being fooled by fake news? *Accept reasonable and appropriate responses. The article points out that Internet users can apply critical thinking, fact-check sources, and look to news sources from different political slants for balanced views.*

Activity: Be SMART About Fake News

1. Distribute the **Be SMART About Fake News** handout to students.
2. Organize students into small groups of three or four students each. Each group should choose a spokesperson.
3. Read aloud the instructions on the handout. Ask for questions.
4. Be sure to explain to the groups that each group is responsible for all six scenarios.
5. Once students have completed discussing and deciding on all six scenarios, have each spokesperson share at least one scenario decision with the rest of the class.

Debriefing the Lesson

Once all the scenarios have been shared, students can discuss in their groups the following questions:

- What surprised you most about fake news in this lesson?
- What can you do to protect yourself from believing fake news?

Assessment

Have students write a short essay (three paragraphs) on whether they agree or disagree with this statement:

Internet users like me have the most responsibility to end the problem of fake news.

In their essay, students should state their claim (agreement or disagreement); explain their claim using information from the article, activity, discussions, as well as their own knowledge; and address counterclaims.

Sources

Agrawal, Nina. "Where fake news came from – and why some readers believe it." *Los Angeles Times*. 12/20/16. URL: latimes.com/nation/la-na-fake-news-guide-2016-story.html. * Alderman, Julie. "Trump Has Called Dozens of Things Fake News. None of Them Are." *Media Matters for America*. 2/13/17. URL: mediamatters.org/research/2017/02/13/trump-has-called-dozens-things-fake-news-none-them-are/215326. * Borchers, Callum. "'Fake news' has now lost all meaning." *The Washington Post*. 2/9/17. URL: washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/09/fake-news-has-now-lost-all-meaning/?utm_term=.5c2e1fddd426. * Bruinius, Harry. "Why 'fake news' is now ensnaring liberals." *The Christian Science Monitor*. 2/7/17. URL: csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2017/0207/Why-fake-news-is-now-ensnaring-liberals. * Croddy, Marshall, Charles Degelman, and Bill Hayes. *The Challenge of Information*. Constitutional Rights Foundation, 1998. * Dewey, Caitlin. "Facebook fake-news writer: 'I think Donald Trump is in the White House because of me.'" *The Washington Post*. 11/17/16. URL: adweek.com/digital/nearly-half-of-social-media-users-trust-facebook-friends-for-financial-advice-infographic/. * Friedman, Ann. "Op-Ed: It's not just Trump supporters who spread fake news. Liberals do it too." *Los Angeles Times*. 2/28/17. URL: latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-friedman-fake-news-liberals-20170228-story.html. * Maheshwari, Sapna. "How Fake News Goes Viral: A Case Study." *The New York Times*. 11/20/16. URL: nytimes.com/2016/11/20/business/media/how-fake-news-spreads.html?_r=0. * NPR Staff. "What Legal Recourse Do Victims of Fake News Stories Have?" National Public Radio. 12/7/16. URL: cbsnews.com/news/whats-fake-news-60-minutes-producers-investigate/. * Pierson, David and Melissa Etehad. "Facebook is working to stop fake news by tapping human fact-checkers." *Los Angeles Times*. 12/15/16. URL: latimes.com/business/la-fi-tn-facebook-fake-news-20161215-story.html. * Sutton, Kelsey. "Poll: 6 in 10 Americans think traditional news outlets report fake news." *Politico*. 3/29/17. URL: politico.com/story/2017/03/fake-news-monmouth-poll-media-236639. * "What's 'Fake News'? 60 Minutes Producers Investigate." CBS Interactive Inc. 3/26/17. URL: cbsnews.com/news/whats-fake-news-60-minutes-producers-investigate/.

Understanding 'Fake News'

Today, there are vast amounts of information readily available online. It can be hard to decide between what is real and what is fake or a hoax. All users of digital media need to be aware of the phenomenon of “fake news” and how to recognize it.



(Wikimedia Commons)

During the hotly contested presidential election of 2016, there was an overwhelming amount of news on social media that turned out to be false. Some fake-news stories that were widely shared included the following:

- On November 3, 2016, someone began an online discussion topic alleging — without any evidence — that a pizzeria in Washington, D.C., was the site of a child sex-trade ring connected with the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign. On December 4, 2016, apparently believing the information on-line to be true, a man drove from North Carolina and walked into the pizzeria with an AR-15 rifle, firing three shots. Fortunately, no one was injured. Upon finding that there were no children in need of rescue, the shooter surrendered to police. The fake news story about the pizzeria is now known as “Pizzagate.” The shooter pleaded guilty in March 2017 to two felonies: illegally transporting firearms and assault with a deadly weapon.
- On November 9, Eric Tucker, with a Twitter following of about 40 people, tweeted a picture of a large number of Coach USA buses and wrote, “*Anti-trump protestors in Austin today are not as organic as they seem. Here are the busses they came in. #fakeprotests #trump2016 #austin.*” Tucker knew there were protests in the city. After a Google search did not yield any information on other major events, he concluded that the buses were for paid protestors. Within hours, Facebook users shared the Tucker tweet thousands of times. Less than a day later, Coach USA denied involvement with the protests. On November 11, a company named Tableau issued a statement confirming that the buses had been used for the company’s conference and had no connection to the protests. Before Tucker’s original tweet was deleted, however, it had been shared more than 16,000 times on Twitter and 350,000 times on Facebook.
- On December 12, 2016, a website closely resembling the trademarked official site of ABC News network, a traditional news media outlet, published an article claiming that President Obama had signed an executive order calling for a full recount of the 2016 presidential election. But the article, like all the articles on the fake-ABC site, was not factually accurate -- it was an imagined story. Obama never signed such an executive order. As of March 2017, the article has been viewed on the fake news site over 35,000 times.

What is Fake News?

Not everyone agrees on the definition of “fake news.” Originally, “fake news” meant fabricated news stories, like those shown above, presented without any credible evidence and for the apparent purpose to misinform or to persuade through misinformation. Fake news stories include hoaxes and conspiracy theories that are based on unprovable claims.

Often, however, people will use the term to simply describe a news story from a traditional source that contains a mistake. But traditional news sources generally correct errors and notify readers of factual mistakes. Sometimes, too, people use the term to refer to news that seems to contradict their own point of view. President Donald Trump himself regularly refers to traditional news outlets, particularly CNN and the *New York Times*, as “fake news” in his tweets. He has even tweeted, “Any negative polls are fake news.”

Conservatives and liberals alike are susceptible to believing fake news. Seventeen of the 20 most-shared fake-news stories in the run-up to the November 2016 election favored Donald Trump. But since the election, many liberal critics of Trump have increasingly shared fake-news stories. In February 2017, for example, a story on AlternativeMediaSyndicate.com claimed that police had burned down the camps of protestors against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, North Dakota. Then-President-elect Trump supported the pipeline. The article showed a picture of burning tipis. Facebook users shared the article 300,000 times. But the picture was actually from a 2007 HBO movie, and the story of burning camps was false.

Many Americans seem to have lost faith in traditional news media, including newspapers, news magazines, nonpartisan polls, and broadcast television. A Monmouth University poll found in March 2017 that 60 percent of adult Americans believe that traditional news media regularly or occasionally publishes fake news. Forty percent of those polled also believe that traditional news media publish fake news to push “an agenda.”

Fake news does not include satire, such as *The Onion*, a site that bills itself on Google as “a farcical newspaper.” Nonetheless, people frequently share *Onion* stories as if they were real, including “news” stories such as “Wolf Attacks Still Leading Cause of Death in U.S.” or “Taylor Swift Now Dating Senator Joseph McCarthy.”

Fake news also does not include opinion articles or editorials. Unlike opinion pieces or advocacy which clearly indicate they are the writer's own perspective, fake news presents itself as fact. However, readers should be skeptical of opinion writers who do not refer to provably true facts in their writing.

How Is Fake News Spread?

The examples listed above appear to be politically motivated. But fake news can be economically driven, too. Creators of fake news post articles on their websites and then share them on Facebook to generate a lot of web traffic, which earns them money.



(LoboStudioHamburg)

And audiences today are ready to consume the news from a variety of sources. In 2016, the Pew Research Center found that 18 percent of adult Americans often get news from social media. Pew

also reported that as many as 44 percent of adult Americans get at least some news from Facebook, where people can find stories from news pages they like, as well as through articles shared by friends and family.

In choosing what to believe, people commonly trust peer recommendations. This is true in advertising, financial advice, and news on social media. When a friend or family member shares articles or reposts a tweet, we perceive the information as coming from a reliable source. We therefore tend to believe it must be true.

Young people are particularly susceptible. In a study by Stanford's Graduate School of Education, researchers found that students of different ages have difficulty evaluating information they encounter online.

In one example, high school students were shown a picture of unusual flowers that had been posted on Imgur, a meme-making site, as if they were mutated as a result of radiation from the Fukushima nuclear power plant. When shown to the students without any source information, over 80 percent of them had a hard time determining whether or not the image provided "proof" that the flowers were really a result of a nuclear disaster.

High school students were also asked to assess the trustworthiness of two Facebook posts announcing that Donald Trump was running for president. One was a Fox News account with a blue checkmark to signify it was a verified account. The other was a fake that only looked like a Fox News account. Over 30 percent of the students chose the fake account as more trustworthy. Only 25 percent recognized the blue checkmark on the verified Fox News account and were able to explain its meaning.

During the Stanford study, over 80 percent of middle school students believed that advertisements were news articles, even though the articles were labeled "sponsored content." The researchers believe that the students simply did not know that "sponsored content" is paid for by advertisers.

What Can Be Done?

After the presidential election, many social-media users demanded that tech companies take action to prevent the wide circulation of fake news stories. In response, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg announced the company would make it easier for users to report and flag fake stories. Additionally, unpaid third party organizations indicated they were going to start fact-checking articles flagged by users.

Google announced that it would ban fake news sites from using Google's advertising services. Fake-news writer Paul Horner, for example, said he can make up to \$10,000 a month on his website through Google AdSense. If Google and Facebook curtail fake news, he said that he would simply work under different names and sites. "Nobody fact-checks anything anymore," Horner said.

Some Internet users have demanded that Facebook simply ban fake news on its platform. Many users, however, oppose bans on posting content as a form of censorship.

Television and radio stations must have broadcast licenses to operate and must follow regulations set by the Federal Communications Commission. For companies like Facebook and Twitter, however, there currently is no such regulation or licensing. Accuracy and any liability over what is posted rest with the users. Readers must be aware of the risks and assess the reliability of the information for themselves.

First Amendment Protections & Libel Risk

The First Amendment protects the right to free speech. Any law enacted to stop people from publishing or spreading fake news could trigger a challenge that the law infringes on First Amendment free-speech rights.

Neither newspapers nor television and radio stations may commit defamation, which is the use of false statements that tend to harm a person's reputation or make that person a victim of public ridicule or harm. In print, defamation is called libel. Like newspapers, a fake-news publisher could face a civil lawsuit for libel.

Under the First Amendment, news sources are allowed in certain specific circumstances to publish false stories. In 1964, the Supreme Court ruled in *New York Times Company v. Sullivan* that publication of false stories without actual malice is protected speech (in other words does not create liability). *Actual malice* means the publisher knows the story is false or has reckless disregard for its truth or falsity. Monetary damages may be awarded where actual malice is involved.

The effectiveness of any law against fake news also faces practical challenges. Many fake news articles are published on websites in other countries. For example, a website in Macedonia published an article in early November 2016 claiming Hillary Clinton would be indicted on charges connected to her use of a private email server when she was secretary of state. No such indictment was actually going to happen, but a U.S. law against fake news would not have restricted a Macedonian website.

In the past, editors and other professionals generally curated accurate information delivered to the public. They still do on credible news websites and in print journalism. But information is not similarly vetted on all websites and social media platforms. In fact, many fake news websites are deliberately designed to look like actual news websites so as to draw in readership traffic. It is up to individuals to evaluate whether or not the information is reliable.

Protecting Yourself in the Post-Truth Era

Largely because of widespread fake news, many call the age we live in the “post-truth era.” In 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary declared *post-truth* as its “word of the year.” Online users of all ages frequently do not have the tools to distinguish between truth and falsehood on the Internet.

As an online user, you can strengthen your digital citizenship with a few simple tools. One is to consult reliable fact-checking websites, like snopes.com or factcheck.org. Another is to balance your news intake: Seek out news from sources that may have a different political slant than your own.

Most importantly, as a consumer of news, you need to evaluate each article, post, and tweet that you read. You can use the following “SMART” information-age checklist for everything you read online.¹ Not every question in the SMART checklist applies to everything you read. But most of the questions apply to most news articles.

¹ The SMART Information Age Checklist has been adapted from *The Challenge of Information* (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 1998).

S M A R T: The Information-Age Checklist

Like journalists. You depend on sources for information. You may read a story on a website, on television, in a magazine, or even in an email. A friend or relative may tell you a story or share it on social media. To judge the reliability of the story, you should always consider the source. Use the following **SMART** tests to check your sources.

S **ource.** For you to evaluate a source, you have to know who or what the source is. Where does the story come from? Is the person reporting the story an eyewitness to the story? Did the person get the story from others? From eyewitnesses? From a book? Track the source down. If the source is unclear, be skeptical about the story.

M **otive.** Why do they say so? Sources often have a special interest or particular point of view that may cause them to slant information. Biased sources can be accurate, but you need to check them carefully. Get all sides to a story.

A **uthority.** How good is the source? Eyewitnesses can be wrong. Was the witness in a good position? If the source isn't an eyewitness, make sure it's a source you can trust — e.g., an expert on the subject, a newspaper's website with good fact-checking. Be wary of any source that is repeating hearsay and rumors as actual facts. They are not facts.

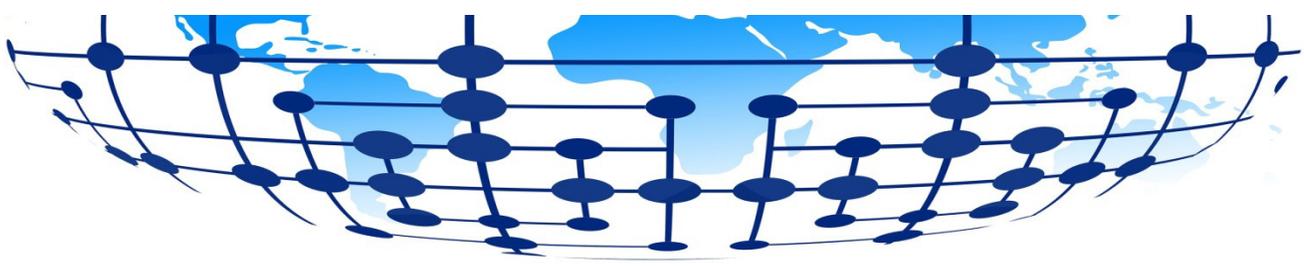
R **eview.** Go over the story carefully. Does it make sense? Is it logically consistent? Are there any notable errors in facts or conclusions? Make a list of questionable facts. Develop answers about the story.

T **wo-source test.** Double-check everything, if possible. Talk to a second party. Research the subject in the library, by interviewing others, and search on the Internet for credible news sites. Does your two-source test confirm the story or contradict it?

Writing & Discussion

1. Compare fake news to other online sources that may contain untrue or exaggerated information, namely satire, advertisements, and opinion. Why is it difficult sometimes to be able to define fake news?
2. Based on the information in the article, what do you think is the best policy government should take in stopping fake news? What should social media sites do? What should Internet users do?
3. If a state wanted to pass a law making it a crime to publish fake news that affects an election outcome, what challenges would that law face under the First Amendment?
4. Have you or someone you know ever believed a fake news story? If so, describe what happened. What can an Internet user do to protect himself or herself from being fooled by fake news?

Cite as: Leon, Esmeralda, and Damon Huss. "Understanding 'Fake News'." *Civics on Call*. Constitutional Rights Foundation. 3/30/17.



Be SMART About Fake News

In small groups, examine each of the following scenarios describing an online news article or news item. Apply the SMART information-age checklist to determine if the article or item described seems trustworthy or not. For any scenario that your group determines to contain fake news, decide what consequence, if any, the publisher should face. Be prepared to explain to the class your group's conclusions about the article scenarios.

Scenario #1

A news website called *The Rutabaga* publishes an article entitled "President Signs Executive Order Making Planet Mars the 51st State." The article contains quotes from scientists claiming they've learned how to extract water from Martian rocks and are already growing apple orchards on Mars. The co-writers of the article are Rock Etts and Ailey Uhn.

Scenario #2

A tweet from a friend states "The Islamic State is losing ground." The tweet links to a *New York Times* article stating that U.S. soldiers in Iraq have helped retake a city from the Islamic State. You click on the link and are taken to the *New York Times* website. The article seems to support your friend's statement. (Apply SMART to both the tweet and the article.)

Scenario #3

A news blog publishes an article stating that a local politician beat up a critical newspaper reporter during an interview. The article cites "an unnamed person close to the politician's campaign" who said the politician wanted to prove how tough he is to his constituents. A photo of a person with bruises on his face accompanies the article but provides no information about who is pictured or where or when the photo was taken. It is shared on Facebook 100,000 times. The blog contains ads for the blogger's new book.

Scenario # 4

A photo of a famous retired politician appears at the bottom of the home page of your favorite news site. Under the photo is the headline "Politician Warns of Imminent Financial Meltdown." Above the photo is the term "sponsored content." When you click on the headline, you are taken to an article in which the politician recommends you trade in all your cash for gold. There is a link in the article to a website asking for your credit card information.

Scenario #5

A family member posts a link on Facebook to an article claiming that eating raw almonds also boosts powers of telepathy (mind-reading). The article appears to be written by a person who identifies as a "health wizard." The "health wizard" states that she eats six ounces of raw almonds every day and can now predict what celebrities are going to do.

Scenario #6

A well-known liberal political blog runs an article claiming that a state representative's proposed bill is bad for union workers. The representative has introduced a bill to limit workers' rights. The author refers to the politician as "ghoulish." The article cites *The State* (a real South Carolina newspaper) and the BBC (the real British Broadcasting Corporation) for facts. The blog site has no ads.

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