

Skills and Strategies | Fake News vs. Real News: Determining the Reliability of Sources

By Katherine Schulten October 2, 2015 10:51 am

Video and a related lesson plan from TEDEd.

How do you know if something you read is true? Why should you care?

We pose these questions this week in honor of News Engagement Day on Oct. 6, and try to answer them with resources from The Times as well as from Edutopia, the Center for News Literacy, TEDEd and the NewseumEd.

Although we doubt we need to convince teachers that this skill is important, we like the way Peter Adams from the News Literacy Project frames it in a post for Edutopia.

As he points out, every teacher is familiar with “digital natives” and the way they seem to have been born with the ability to use technology. But what about “digital naïveté” — when students trust sources of information that are obviously unreliable?

Even though they know how easy it is to create and distribute information online, many young people believe — sometimes passionately — the most dubious rumors, tempting hoaxes (including convincingly staged encounters designed to look raw and unplanned) and implausible theories.

Below, a roundup of tools, questions, activities and case studies we hope can help reduce this digital naïveté. Tell us what you think — or what we missed.

Getting Started: What is News Literacy and Why Do You Need It?

Video and a related lesson plan from TEDEd.

The concept of “media literacy” has been around for decades, but “news literacy” is a new field that is growing as fast as the boundaries around old definitions of journalism are being dismantled.

The Center for News Literacy explains it this way:

The most profound communications revolution since the invention of Gutenberg’s printing press seems to make it harder, not easier, to determine the truth. The digital revolution is characterized by a flood of information and misinformation that news consumers can access from anywhere at any time.

News aggregators, bloggers, pundits, provocateurs, commentators and “citizen journalists” are competing with traditional journalists for public attention. Uninformed opinion masquerades as news. Lines are blurring between legitimate journalism and the propaganda, entertainment, self-promotion and unmediated information on the Internet.

This superabundance of information has made it imperative that citizens learn to judge the reliability of news reports and other sources of information that is passed along their social networks.

Teachers can check out Edutopia’s Five-Minute Film Festival on News Literacy to find more resources on the concept, or, to explore it in much greater depth, visit the Center for News Literacy’s Digital Resource Center to access a comprehensive curriculum series “From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg in 14 Lessons.”

Before you embark on a full unit, however, we suggest two exercises.

First, Ask Your Students to Weigh In

Mashable claims that, in 2015, selfies have killed more people than sharks. The Washington Post’s Intersect says that’s ridiculous. What do you think?

A couple of years ago, we asked students on our blog, *How Do You Know if What You Read Online Is True?*

One of our daily Student Opinion questions, it was inspired by a Times article that week, “If a Story Is Viral, Truth May Be Taking a Beating,” that noted, “viral trumps verified ... as long as the clicks keep coming.”

Here are some of the questions we posed in the course of that discussion. You might invite your own students to talk about them in pairs, small groups or as a whole class before you begin a news literacy curriculum — and then revisit their answers after you finish. And since all of our Student Opinion questions are still open to comment, they can also post their thoughts to our blog:

1. How many viral posts — whether articles, videos or photographs — do you click on each week? How many on average do you share on social media?

2. How often do you check to make sure what you are sharing or commenting on is real? How do you go about finding that out?

3. How much do you care if a story purporting to be real actually is?

4. How much more careful are you with online sources when you are doing work for school than when you are simply surfing the web for fun? How do you decide what is a reliable source for your schoolwork?

5. What sources of news do you usually trust? What sources do you rarely trust? Why?

6. What responsibility do journalists and news outlets who post or link these stories have to make sure they are true? Is it their job to make sure something is not a hoax before they cover or link to it? How do you think they go about verifying information?

7. Can embellished, or outright fake, stories have real-world consequences? What examples can you give?

8. In a world where news can be reported by anyone with a cellphone, how do

you decide what is true? What questions should you ask to find out? What personal rules might you develop to decide what news you post and when you post it? What harm might be done by not following those rules?

Then, Impose a 48-Hour News Blackout

Another introductory exercise that can help students examine their media habits and show them why and how news matters comes from the Center for News Literacy, as described in a 2007 Times article about its work:

At the outset of the course, students are required to impose a 48-hour news blackout on themselves. They are not to watch, read or listen to the news, including weather reports and sports scores. The idea is to emphasize the role that such information plays in their lives, often without students' realizing it.

You can find more about that idea here.

Tools and Strategies: How to Tell Fake News From Real News

Pig Rescues Goat

Worst Twerk Fail EVER — Girl Catches Fire

Mexican Red Rump Tarantula Missing in Brooklyn

Post a Facebook Copyright Status to Protect Your Information

These stories all went viral on social media, but if you click the links, you'll see all of them turned out to be hoaxes. And yet, sometimes something that sounds fake — like this story about West Point cadets who “weaponized” a pillow fight — isn't.

How can you tell? Before you hit “share,” what questions should you ask?

First, suggests Chad Lorenz in a piece for Slate that explores the need for news literacy curriculums, consider the places from which you routinely get information:

Today a tour through your social media news feed might take you to Mental Floss, Dadaviz, Colossal, Cracked, Dangerous Minds, Uproxx. How is a reader to know what from this assortment of blogs and webzines can be trusted? What about a site like Inquisitr? (Approach with caution.) What about Before It's News? (Trick question: That one is definitely not to be trusted.) While it might seem easy to distinguish real news from fake news, many people, including experienced journalists, get suckered more often than you would think. Students, as heavy users of social media, where fake news and hoaxes proliferate, should think about their own responsibility to share reliable information and not perpetuate misinformation.

Once you've done that, you might next consult the Newseum's popular Believe It Or Not? lesson plan that walks teachers and students through basic news literacy. Students learn to ask these six "consumer questions" when vetting a story:

Who made this?

How was this made?

Why was this made?

When was this made?

What is this missing?

Where do I go from here?

Another method for questioning sources of information is the mnemonic the students at Intermediate School 303 in Coney Island use: IMVAIN.

Independent sources are preferable to self-interested sources.

Multiple sources are preferable to a report based on a single source.

Sources who **V**erify or provide verifiable information are preferable to those who merely assert.

Authoritative and/or **I**nformed sources are preferable to sources who are uninformed or lack authoritative background.

Named sources are better than anonymous ones.

Watch a video and learn more about how they use this technique, from the Center for News Literacy, [here](#), then try it yourself with this checklist.

Finally, here are some guidelines specifically about breaking news from NPR's On The Media:

More Sites and Tools for Fact-Checking What You Read

FactCheck.org

Snopes.com

PolitiFact.com

The Washington Post Intersect | What Was Fake on the Internet This Week

Gizmodo | Six Easy Ways to Tell if That Viral Story Is a Hoax

Going Further: Applying Your Skills, Reading Case Studies and More

Practice With Content From *Your* News Feeds

Go through your social media feeds or your daily newspaper or both, and choose one news story, then try asking the six questions the Newseum suggests. (To learn more about how to apply each individual question, consult this resource.)

Or, compare two or more news reports on the same topic but from different news outlets to see how the same story is covered in each. You might compare lead stories or, via the Newseum's daily gallery, compare newspaper front pages from around the world, whether from that day or from big news events of years past. Or, pick a divisive or controversial topic and look at how different news sources have handled the subject.

Remember as you read that news outlets feature both straight news reporting as well as opinion about the news, and that sometimes those distinctions can blur. How can you tell the difference?

If you are a teacher doing this with an entire class, you and your students might eventually create a full classroom gallery walk of news items that highlight some of the issues raised in this post.

Learn From Some Famous Case Studies

So far most of the examples we've provided have been fairly silly — pigs rescuing

goats, twerking problems — but there can be serious consequences to inaccurate news reporting, and to contributing to viral stories by sharing them yourself.

And sometimes, even generally reliable sources will make mistakes.

For instance, just after the **Boston Marathon bombings** in 2013, the F.B.I. released pictures and video of two young men who officials believed may have been responsible for the explosions, and the Internet quickly offered to help find them. Nick Bilton writes about what happened next:

In a scene metaphorically reminiscent of a movie in which vigilantes swarm the streets with pitchforks and lanterns, people took to Reddit, the popular community and social news Web site, and started scouring images posted online from the bombings.

One Reddit forum told users to search for “people carrying black bags,” and noted that “if they look suspicious, then post them. Then people will try and follow their movements using all the images.”

In the process, each time a scrap of information was discovered — the color of a hat, the type of straps on a backpack, the weighted droop of a bag — it was passed out on Twitter like “Wanted” posters tacked to lampposts. It didn’t matter whether it was right, wrong or even completely made up (some images posted to forums had been manipulated) — off it went, fiction and fact indistinguishable.

Some misinformation online landed on the front page of The New York Post, incorrectly identifying an innocent high school student as a suspect.

Later in the week, the Web wrongly identified one of the suspects as a student from Brown University who went missing earlier this month.

Read Mr. Bilton’s article, as well as “The Pressure to Be the TV News Leader Tarnishes a Big Brand” and “Should Reddit Be Blamed for the Spreading of a Smear?” to understand the real-life consequences of the race to be first with news.

During **Hurricane Sandy**, news and images circulated quickly via social media. (Poynter reported, for instance, that Instagram users were posting 10 Hurricane Sandy pictures every second at one point.)

Reports that the New York Stock Exchange was underwater and that sharks were swimming in front yards in New Jersey spread widely.

This article from The Atlantic, “InstaSnopes: Sorting the Real Sandy Photos From the Fakes,” explores the stories and photos that circulated, helping readers understand which were real and which weren’t.

Why might it be dangerous to rely on social media during a crisis or disaster? What did we learn about social media from Hurricane Sandy?

Finally, you might also consider The Times’s Retro Report series, documentaries exploring major news stories of the past and their lasting impact. This one looks at “a moment in 1999 so searing that it is still instantly evoked with a single word: **Columbine.**”

As the related article says, “much of what the public came to believe about Columbine was flat-out wrong. Myths took root from the start, nurtured by frightened and confused students and amplified by news outlets running hard with rumor and conjecture” — and the way the media reports on school shootings today is still affected by those early reports.

To find many more examples of news reporting gone awry, and to consider questions of accuracy and bias in far more depth than this post has room for, we again recommend the Center for News Literacy’s 14 lesson series.

News or Satire?

If you spend a lot of time on social media, you’ve most likely been tricked, or nearly tricked, by taking at face value a story from The Onion or some other satirical news site. In fact, in 2012 the Chinese Communist Party’s news outlet may have fallen for an Onion story calling Kim Jong-un, the young, chubby North Korean ruler, the “Sexiest Man Alive for 2012.”

Every week in our News Quiz, we save the 10th question for news literacy. Each lists four recent news headlines — three from The Times and one from The Onion — and asks which is which. Though we often feature wacky news as “distractors,” these are not trick questions: Close reading should reveal fairly quickly which headline just *can’t* be true.

Try it. Here are two from recent quizzes. You’ll notice that not only is the “news” from The Onion improbable, the humor in it is almost always a riff on real news, so keeping up with what’s going on in the world in general should make the exercise even easier:

-
- 1** News about Pope Francis and his visit dominated headlines during his visit to the U.S. Three of these appeared in The Times. One is from the satirical paper The Onion. Which is the fake news story?

[Congress Cheers Pope, Then Quarrels Resume](#)

[Next Up From Pope Francis? An Album, of Course](#)

[Pope Francis Reverses Position on Capitalism After Seeing Wide Variety of American Oreos](#)

[Who Needs a Limo? Pope Francis Opts for a More Modest Fiat](#)

-
- 2** Three of the education-related headlines below appeared in The Times this August. One is from the satirical paper The Onion. Which is the fake news story?

[20% of New York State Students Opted Out of Standardized Tests This Year](#)

[Board Says Players at Northwestern Can’t Unionize](#)

[Online University Allows Students to Amass Crippling Debt at Own Pace](#)

What About The New York Times?

Though most people consider The New York Times, with its reporters, editors, fact-checkers, and ethical reporting guidelines, to be among the most reliable news sources, the paper can still make mistakes — sometimes very important ones.

In 2003, after the Jayson Blair scandal rocked the institution, The Times added more safeguards, including a public editor. This person writes about The Times and its journalism, investigates matters of journalistic integrity and works independently, outside of the reporting and editing structure of the newspaper. The position is now held by Margaret Sullivan.

In her column, you can read her take on everything from the paper’s coverage of Iraq in 2003 to its current use of anonymous sources and recent dubious reporting on hipster trends like “man buns.” Anyone who has a concern about The Times can write to her at public@nytimes.com.

Related Learning Network Resources

50 Ways to Teach With Current Events

News and ‘News Analysis’: Navigating Fact and Opinion in The Times

Three Teacher-Tested Ways to Encourage Your Students to Follow Current Events This School Year

Skills Practice | Distinguishing Between Fact and Opinion

Guest Post | Practical Tools for Teaching News Literacy

Guest Post | News Literacy Is Not Optional if You Need to Be Well-Informed