6.8 FAKE NEWS AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

Essential Question(s): What is 'fake news' and how can we identify it on social media? What is our role and responsibility to identify and stop the spread of fake news?

Overview

The term "fake news" refers to misinformation that presents false, inaccurate, or intentionally misleading information in news stories, current events and other issues. Many of these stories are spread through online sites and social media platforms that deliberately cause confusion about basic facts, particularly when it comes to scientific and political news.

The ability to assess the validity of a news story is critical for making informed decisions regarding health, finances and during an election season—voting. And yet many people are lacking the skills to assess the validity of information they encounter. In a 2018–2019 study from Stanford University, with more than 3,000 high school students, the majority struggled to complete tasks related to evaluating digital news stories. For example, students couldn't distinguish advertisements labeled "sponsored content" from a legitimate news story.

Snapshot

What Students Will Learn:
During this lesson students will learn about fake news, develop strategies for differentiating between inaccurate, misleading news stories and fact-based news from legitimate sources. Students are also encouraged not to use the term fake news because there are those who use the term to discredit real news stories with which they disagree.

Standard(s):
D2.Civ.10.9-12

Time: 50 minutes each 0 minutes

Objectives

▰ Students will reflect on their own experiences with and preferences of their news sources.

▰ Students will understand what "fake news" is and identify strategies for differentiating real and fake news.

▰ Students will explore what can be done to be better consumers of news and what else they can do for their school, community and society about fake news.

Differentiation

Check in with students.

What's Needed

☐ Writing utensil and paper or 1:1 technology

☐ WiFi, internet, computer, screen or projector, speakers, board/smart board

☐ Prepare the definition of "news" in step #2 to be posted or projected for whole class viewing.

☐ Prepare to project three examples of news stories, one real and two fake, for whole-class viewing or make copies of each example for each student. Fake news sites include National Report (http://nationalreport.net) and World News Daily Report (https://worldnewsdailyreport.com). See "List of Fake News Sites" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fake_news_websites) for others.

☐ (Optional) Make copies of the "Background Information on Fake News" for students.

☐ Make enough copies of "How to Spot Fake News," one for each student.

Classroom Setup

Students will be working independently. Desks should be set up for independent work time.

Direct Teaching

1. Welcome students to class. Ask students, "What is news?" Create an identity web or word cloud as students share.

2. Post or project a definition of **news** as a printed, broadcast or digital report of factual information about important events in the world, country or local area.

3. Ask students to popcorn out (taking turns sharing aloud) where they get information about current events and news. (Answers might be: social media, tv, internet, friends, family, other)

Key Vocabulary

bogus
byline
confirmation bias
debunk
deceptive
distortion evidence
fact-checked
legitimate
misleading
predisposed
provocative resurgence
satire
skeptical
sources
tabloid
unreliable

4. Explain to students that there has been a lot of talk lately about "fake news."

5. Ask students, "What is 'fake news'?

   Elicit and explain that **fake news** is untrue information written to deliberately mislead, misinform or deceive readers in order to damage an agency, entity, or person and/or gain financially, politically or increased readership. Fake news is generally spread in print, news media or social media. Also, explain that sometimes fake news contains some factual information or other news stories to cover up the fact that the news is untrue and fake.

6. You can ask students to consider, "For what purpose might an individual or organization publish and spread fake news?"

   Note: You may want to share, if it doesn't come up from students, that sometimes "fake news" is a term used by politicians against information that isn't necessarily false, but that goes against their stated positions or goals.

7. Share examples of (fake) false news and real news by projecting three examples of news stories, one real and two fake. You can also download and print them for students to reference.

   For each example, have students jot down the title of the news story, whether or not they think it's real, and 2–3 reasons for how they decided. As you share the website, make sure to scroll around the website and highlight the web address, logo, contact information, etc. to give students a sense of where they should be looking to best assess the source of an online news article.

8. After going through each example, have students turn to the person sitting next to them and together, come up with a general list of how they know a news story is real and why they might suspect a news story is fake. They can create a chart for recording their answers as follows:

How You Know It's Real	Why You Suspect/Know It's Not Real

   After the turn and talk, tell students which are fake and which are real. Some of the indicators include: the logo, the web address, the contact information and website, the links.

9. Engage students in a discussion by asking some of the following questions:
   — How easy or difficult was it to determine whether the news was real or not? Please explain.
   — What were some clues that the news was not true?
   — How did you feel when you found out that a news story was fake when you originally thought it was real?
   — Why might we want to find a different term for fake news, even when talking about a news story that is not real?

10. Share some or all of the "Background Information on Fake News" with students.

    Optional: Distribute the background information and go over it with students.

11. After sharing, you can make the point that there are many times when politicians and other people have claimed something to be "fake news" when in fact, it may be fact-based news that the person doesn't like, casts them in a particular (negative) light, or they think has a bias that they don't agree with.

12. Distribute the article "How to Spot Fake News" to each student and give them 10–15 minutes to read it silently.

13. Have themThanks do a 3-2-1 to capture important information from the article:

    3: What are three important facts from the article?

    2: What are two strategies the article suggests?

    1: What is one question this article raises for you?

14. After students have read the article, engage them in a class discussion by asking some of the following questions:

    — What did you learn that you didn't know before?

    — Have you ever used any of the strategies discussed in the article? Please explain.

    — Why do you think fake news is created?

    — What are the dangers of fake news?

    — How might you think differently about news after reading the article?

15. Ask students, "What can we do about fake news? What can we do individually and what might we do with others in our school or larger community?"

16. Brainstorm and create a list that divides the following types of ideas into two categories—"What I can do to spot 'fake' news?" and "What I can do to educate my school, community and society about 'fake' news?"

    Below are some examples:

    — Triple check news sources

    — Look for clues

    — Teach others how to spot fake news

    — Use only certain news sources

    — Google the news story and see if it is included on other news sources that I know

    — Don't get news only from social media

    — Write letters to social media sites to get them to crack down on fake news

    — Use fact-checking websites such as Snopes.com, FactCheck.org, *The Washington Post* Fact Checker and PolitiFact.com

17. Have students make a social media-friendly visual representation, including a short written synopsis, highlighting an action step or one important thing they learned about fake news, including one or more of the following:

    — What's important to know about fake news.

    — Best strategies for spotting fake news.

    — What we can do as individuals or as a community/society about fake news.

    Students should write their piece as either an Instagram post (that they are sharing with their followers, to inform them) or as a short blog post (which then you could publish later on a class blog). Have students complete their writing as a homework assignment.

Closing

Have students share their writing with the class and if not completed, share the first few sentences or main ideas.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON FAKE NEWS

Fake News defined: Untrue information written to deliberately mislead, misinform or deceive readers in order to damage an agency, entity, or person and/or gain financially, politically or increased readership. Fake news is generally spread in print, news media or social media. Also, explain that sometimes fake news contains some factual information or other news stories to cover up the fact that the news is untrue and fake.

- There is a difference between fake news and other types of false news. (1) **Misleading news** often contains some truth, including a fact, event or quote that has been taken out of context; these can be difficult to debunk. (2) **Satirical news** often covers current events and then satirizes the tone and content of traditional news, using humor, sarcasm and falsities. Satirical news does not intend to mislead and profit from readers believing the stories as true. A good example of satirical news is *The Onion.* (3) **Tabloid news** is a style of news that emphasizes sensational crime stories, gossip columns about celebrities.

- According to News Use Across Social Media Platforms, a Pew Research Center Study, 68% of Americans get their news from social media. Of those, 43% get their news from Facebook specifically and 28% get their news on two or more social media sites. More than half (57%) of Americans say they expect the news they see on social media to be largely inaccurate.

- A news consumption and trust survey report found that 50% of Millennials (born 1981-1996) and 49% of Generation Z (born 1997-2012) equally get their news from social media but there are major differences in the platforms they use to get news. Millennials are more likely to use Facebook (71%), Instagram (59%) and YouTube (59%) to get their news. Generation Z is more likely to get their news on Instagram (71%), YouTube (71%) and TikTok (51%) followed closely behind by Snapchat (49%) and Twitter (46%).

- Stanford's study Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online revealed that teenagers may have some difficulty analyzing the news. More than 80% of middle school students surveyed couldn't tell the difference between an ad labeled "sponsored content" and a legitimate news story. Nearly 40% of high school students relied on photographs as evidence in evaluating the trustworthiness of a post instead of evaluating the source.

- Fake news was prevalent during the 2016 Presidential election campaign. The top Google news link for "final election results" was from a fake-news site called "70 News" which "reported" that Donald Trump had won both the electoral and popular vote. *The Washington Post* pointed out that it isn't true. New websites designed to trick and mislead people pop up every day.

- Fake news creators make money in ways that are similar to how traditional news companies make money. They have display advertising for which they receive a small portion (i.e., a few cents) for every person who visits that page. Their goal is to get the news to go viral so a lot of people will visit; more social shares mean more page views which result in more money. Among a growing group of Macedonian teenagers, the most successful of those creating fake news sites can earn up to $5,000 a month.

- Because a lot of the fake news appears and is shared through Google and Facebook, these platforms are being urged to do something about it. Google announced that it will prohibit "misrepresentative content" from appearing on its advertising network. Facebook says it will not place ads from fake news publishers on third party apps or websites, because the content falls under the broader category of "illegal, misleading or deceptive" content.

HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS

By Eugene Kiely and Lori Robertson

November 18, 2016

Fake news is nothing new. But bogus stories can reach more people more quickly via social media than what good old-fashioned viral emails could accomplish in years past.

Concern about the phenomenon led Facebook and Google to announce that they'll crack down on fake news sites, restricting their ability to garner ad revenue. Perhaps that could dissipate the amount of malarkey online, though news consumers themselves are the best defense against the spread of misinformation.

Not all of the misinformation being passed along online is complete fiction, though some of it is. Snopes.com has been exposing false viral claims since the mid 1990s, whether that's fabricated messages, distortions containing bits of truth and everything in between. Founder David Mikkelson warned in a Nov. 17 article not to lump everything into the "fake news" category. "The fictions and fabrications that comprise fake news are but a subset of the larger *bad news* phenomenon, which also encompasses many forms of shoddy, unresearched, error-filled, and deliberately misleading reporting that do a disservice to everyone," he wrote.

A lot of these viral claims aren't "news" at all, but fiction, satire and efforts to fool readers into thinking they're for real.

We've long encouraged readers to be skeptical of viral claims, and make good use of the delete key when a chain email hits their inboxes. In December 2007, we launched our Ask FactCheck feature, where we answer readers' questions, the vast majority of which concern viral emails, social media memes and the like. Our first story was about a made-up email that claimed then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi wanted to put a "windfall" tax on all stock profits of 100 percent and give the money to, the email claimed, "the 12 Million Illegal Immigrants and other unemployed minorities." We called it "a malicious fabrication"—that's "fake news" in today's parlance.

In 2008, we tried to get readers to rid their inboxes of this kind of garbage. We described a list of red flags—we called them Key Characteristics of Bogusness—that were clear tip-offs that a chain email wasn't legitimate. Among them: an anonymous author; excessive exclamation points, capital letters and misspellings; entreaties that "This is NOT a hoax!"; and links to sourcing that does not support or completely contradicts the claims being made.

Those all still hold true, but fake stories—as in, completely made-up "news"—has grown more sophisticated, often presented on a site designed to look (sort of) like a legitimate news organization. Still, we find it's easy to figure out what's real and what's imaginary if you're armed with some critical thinking and fact-checking tools of the trade.

Here's our advice on how to spot a fake:

Consider the source. In recent months, we've fact-checked fake news from abcnews.com.co (not the actual URL for ABC News), WTOE 5 News (whose "about" page says it's "a fantasy news website"), and the Boston Tribune

(whose "contact us" page lists only a gmail address). Earlier this year, we debunked the claim that the Obamas were buying a vacation home in Dubai, a made-up missive that came from WhatDoesItMean.com, which describes itself as "One Of The Top Ranked Websites In The World for New World Order, Conspiracy Theories and Alternative News" and further says on its site that most of what it publishes is fiction.

Clearly, some of these sites do provide a "fantasy news" or satire warning, like WTOE 5, which published the bogus headline, "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement." Others aren't so upfront, like the Boston Tribune, which doesn't provide any information on its mission, staff members or physical location—further signs that maybe this site isn't a legitimate news organization. The site, in fact, changed its name from Associated Media Coverage, after its work had been debunked by fact-checking organizations.

Snopes.com, which has been writing about viral claims and online rumors since the mid-1990s, maintains a list of known fake news websites, several of which have emerged in the past two years.

Read beyond the headline. If a provocative headline drew your attention, read a little further before you decide to pass along the shocking information. Even in legitimate news stories, the headline doesn't always tell the whole story. But fake news, particularly efforts to be satirical, can include several revealing signs in the text. That abcnews.com.co story that we checked, headlined "Obama Signs Executive Order Banning The Pledge Of Allegiance In Schools Nationwide," went on to quote "Fappy the Anti-Masturbation Dolphin." We have to assume that the many readers who asked us whether this viral rumor was true hadn't read the full story.

Check the author. Another tell-tale sign of a fake story is often the byline. The pledge of allegiance story on abcnews.com.co was supposedly written by "Jimmy Rustling." Who is he? Well, his author page claims he is a "doctor" who won "fourteen Peabody awards and a handful of Pulitzer Prizes." Pretty impressive, if true. But it's not. No one by the name of "Rustling" has won a Pulitzer or Peabody award. The photo accompanying Rustling's bio is also displayed on another bogus story on a different site, but this time under the byline "Darius Rubics." The Dubai story was written by "Sorcha Faal, and as reported to her Western Subscribers." The Pope Francis story has no byline at all.

What's the support? Many times these bogus stories will cite official—or official-sounding—sources, but once you look into it, the source doesn't back up the claim. For instance, the Boston Tribune site wrongly claimed that President Obama's mother-in-law was going to get a lifetime government pension for having babysat her granddaughters in the White House, citing "the Civil Service Retirement Act" and providing a link. But the link to a government benefits website doesn't support the claim at all.

The banning-the-pledge story cites the number of an actual executive order—you can look it up. It doesn't have anything to do with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Another viral claim we checked a year ago was a graphic purporting to show crime statistics on the percentage of whites killed by blacks and other murder statistics by race. Then-presidential candidate Donald Trump retweeted it, telling Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly that it came "from sources that are very credible." But almost every figure in the image was wrong—FBI crime data is publicly available—and the supposed source given for the data, "Crime Statistics Bureau – San Francisco," doesn't exist.

Recently, we've received several questions about a fake news story on the admittedly satirical site Nevada County Scooper, which wrote that Vice President-elect Mike Pence, in a "surprise announcement," credited gay conversion therapy for saving his marriage. Clearly such a "surprise announcement" would garner media coverage beyond a website you've never heard of. In fact, if you Google this, the first link that comes up is a Snopes.com article revealing that this is fake news.

Check the date. Some false stories aren't completely fake, but rather distortions of real events. These mendacious claims can take a legitimate news story and twist what it says—or even claim that something that happened long ago is related to current events.

Since Trump was elected president, we've received many inquiries from readers wanting to know whether Ford had moved car production from Mexico to Ohio, because of Trump's election. Readers cited various blog items that quoted from and linked to a CNN Money article titled "Ford shifts truck production from Mexico to Ohio." But that story is from August 2015, clearly not evidence of Ford making any move due to the outcome of the election. (A reminder again to check the support for these claims.)

One deceptive website didn't credit CNN, but instead took CNN's 2015 story and slapped a new headline and publication date on it, claiming, "Since Donald Trump Won The Presidency… Ford Shifts Truck Production From Mexico To Ohio." Not only is that a bogus headline, but the deception involves copyright infringement.

If this Ford story sounds familiar, that's because the CNN article has been distorted before.

In October 2015, Trump wrongly boasted that Ford had changed its plans to build new plants in Mexico, and instead would build a plant in Ohio. Trump took credit for Ford's alleged change of heart and tweeted a link to a story on a blog called Prntly.com, which cited the CNN Money story. But Ford hadn't changed its plans at all, and Trump deserved no credit.

In fact, the CNN article was about the transfer of some pickup assembly work from Mexico to Ohio, a move that was announced by Ford in March 2014. The plans for new plants in Mexico were still on, Ford said. "Ford has not spoken with Mr. Trump, nor have we made any changes to our plans," Ford said in a statement.

Is this some kind of joke? Remember, there is such thing as satire. Normally, it's clearly labeled as such, and sometimes it's even funny. Andy Borowitz has been writing a satirical news column, the Borowitz Report, since 2001, and it has appeared in the New Yorker since 2012. But not everyone gets the jokes. We've fielded several questions on whether Borowitz's work is true.

Among the headlines our readers have flagged: "Putin Appears with Trump in Flurry of Swing-State Rallies" and "Trump Threatens to Skip Remaining Debates If Hillary Is There." When we told readers these were satirical columns, some indicated that they suspected the details were far-fetched but wanted to be sure.
And then there's the more debatable forms of satire, designed to pull one over on the reader. That "Fappy the Anti-Masturbation Dolphin" story? That's the work of online hoaxer Paul Horner, whose "greatest coup," as described by the *Washington Post* in 2014, was when Fox News mentioned, as fact, a fake piece titled, "Obama uses own money to open Muslim museum amid government shutdown." Horner told the *Post* after the election that he was concerned his hoaxes aimed at Trump supporters may have helped the campaign.

The posts by Horner and others—whether termed satire or simply "fake news"—are designed to encourage clicks, and generate money for the creator through ad revenue. Horner told the *Washington Post* he makes a living off his posts. Asked why his material gets so many views, Horner responded, "They just keep passing stuff around. Nobody fact-checks anything anymore.

Check your biases. We know this is difficult. Confirmation bias leads people to put more stock in information that confirms their beliefs and discount information that doesn't. But the next time you're automatically appalled at some Facebook post concerning, say, a politician you oppose, take a moment to check it out.

Try this simple test: What other stories have been posted to the "news" website that is the source of the story that just popped up in your Facebook feed? You may be predisposed to believe that Obama bought a house in Dubai, but how about a story on the same site that carries this headline: "Antarctica 'Guardians' Retaliate Against America With Massive New Zealand Earthquake." That, too, was written by the prolific "Sorcha Faal, and as reported to her Western Subscribers."

We're encouraged by some of the responses we get from readers, who—like the ones uncertain of Borowitz's columns—express doubt in the outrageous, and just want to be sure their skepticism is justified. But we are equally discouraged when we see debunked claims gain new life.

We've seen the resurgence of a fake quote from Donald Trump since the election—a viral image that circulated last year claims Trump told *People* magazine in 1998: "If I were to run, I'd run as a Republican. They're the dumbest group of voters in the country. They believe anything on Fox News. I could lie and they'd still eat it up. I bet my numbers would be terrific." We found no such quote in *People's* archives from 1998, or any other year. And a public relations representative for the magazine confirmed that. *People's* Julie Farin told us in an email last year: "We combed through every Trump story in our archive. We couldn't find anything remotely like this quote—and no interview at all in 1998."

Comedian Amy Schumer may have contributed to the revival of this fake meme. She put it on Instagram, adding at the end of a lengthy message, "Yes this quote is fake but it doesn't matter."

Consult the experts. We know you're busy, and some of this debunking takes time. But we get paid to do this kind of work. Between FactCheck.org, Snopes.com, the *Washington Post* Fact Checker and PolitiFact.com, it's likely at least one has already fact-checked the latest viral claim to pop up in your news feed.

FactCheck.org was among a network of independent fact-checkers who signed an open letter to Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg suggesting that Facebook "start an open conversation on the principles that could underpin a more accurate news ecosystem on its News Feed." We hope that conversation happens, but news readers themselves remain the first line of defense against fake news.

On our Viral Spiral page, we list some of the claims we get asked about the most; all of our Ask FactChecks can be found here. And if you encounter a new claim you'd like us to investigate, email us at editor@factcheck.org.

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