

The Upside of “Fake News”: Renewed Calls for Media Literacy

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The term “fake news” rocketed into the public consciousness about two years ago—and it’s been about that long since it stopped meaning much of anything at all.

What began as a way to describe a specific type of misinformation—opportunistic fictions designed to look like standards-based journalism—has been weaponized by politicians and pundits seeking to discredit news reports they disagree with and, sometimes, to delegitimize the press itself. The term has also been seized as a careless shortcut by headline writers and commentators seeking a catch-all for anything false. This misuse hasn’t just rendered the phrase meaningless; it has spread confusion and disrupted a unique opportunity for the public to come to terms with the wholesale upheaval of the information ecosystem in the twenty-first century.

Much of this confusion stems from the unprecedented complexity of that ecosystem, but it’s also driven by a failure to recognize one simple fact: All information is *not* created equal.

That may seem obvious—but it’s a truth easily lost as we scroll through our social media feeds, where individual pieces of “content” all appear in standardized formats. This can lead us, without thinking, to lump dissimilar things together: sensational stories that turn out to be intentionally false, viral rumors that are actually misperceived satire, images that are repurposed from their original context, and legitimate news reports that contain inadvertent errors. But if we do that—if we lump all these together as equally “fake”—it suggests that the intentions behind a piece of false information don’t matter.

That, of course, is not true; in fact, it’s the very essence of the “post-truth”¹ condition, in which there are no fundamental differences between *any* kinds of information and everything you see and read is equally suspect—equally likely to be driven by some agenda or systematic bias and, therefore, equally likely to be something you can (or cannot) trust. But adopting this cynical posture robs us of our civic agency, of our ability to base decisions and actions on credible information.

This isn’t only a form of profound civic disempowerment for individuals, it’s also bad for democracy.

Five Guiding Principles for Teaching “How to Know What to Believe”

For all the confusion surrounding the “fake news” phenomenon,

one positive outcome has been an increase in calls for teaching media literacy—the term people most often use to refer to an area of instruction that also includes information literacy and, more recently, news literacy. But too often, educators are left to sort out what these “literacies” mean and what they look like in actual practice. What counts as “media literacy”? What assumptions and precepts should shape the “critical thinking” about news and information that media literacy calls for? And where can teachers find resources to address the array of challenges students face in today’s constantly shifting and unrelentingly connected information universe?

There is no shortage of answers to these questions. But here are five guiding principles that I think are essential to effectively teaching students how to know what to believe, while also empowering their voices and closing the gap between news organizations and the communities they serve:

1. All information is not designed to manipulate.

Sometimes the attempt to instill healthy skepticism in students can leave them with the impression that no piece of information is what it seems—that everything they encounter is tactical and is intended to deceive or manipulate. As educators, we need to guide students away from such cynicism, even as we teach them not to be overly credulous.

- **Tip:** Yes, it’s important to examine inaccurate or otherwise flawed news coverage. But it’s equally important (if not more so) to study exemplary journalism. If we ask students to use “critical thinking” only to criticize reporting, we may inadvertently lead them to believe that bad journalism is the rule, rather than the exception. And if we don’t highlight journalism that has a positive impact, students won’t be able to recognize—much less appreciate—quality reporting when they see it.
- **Idea:** Contact journalists whose work prompts significant student discussion, whether positive or negative,

and ask if they would be willing to answer your students' questions, through a written response, a videoconference, or in person. (You might be surprised how many will be happy to do so.)

2. News is distinct from most other forms of information.

Of all the kinds of information we encounter on a daily basis, standards-based reporting is generally the most accurate. This is because the standards of quality journalism aspire to the highest possible levels of accuracy and credibility. So analyzing news reports from established news organizations requires a different approach—a set of higher expectations, more nuanced questions and finely calibrated skills—from that required to check the accuracy of things like raw images and video, viral quotes, or social media rants from unknown individuals.

This doesn't mean we should teach students that institutional media are perfect—that news organizations don't make errors, that the practice of journalism may fall short of standards, that individual biases don't sometimes make their way into reports and, yes, that every once in a while a reporter is caught—often by another news organization—making things up. But it *does* mean that we need to help students recognize when they are in this distinct “information enclave” called news, and teach them what rules and aspirations apply there.

- **Tip:** Exploring the standards of quality journalism not only helps students evaluate the credibility of *all* information; it also empowers them to respond to news coverage with nuance, in terms more likely to be heard by journalists.
- **Idea:** Have students research debates about the use of controversial or polarizing terms—such as “lie,” “torture,” “riot” and “terrorist”—in news coverage. What standards exist to guide the use of these terms? What standards do the news organizations in your community have for those terms? Do you agree with those standards?

3. People tend to see what they want in “the media.”

As humans, we're all vulnerable to something called “confirmation bias”: the tendency to under-scrutinize—or look for reasons to accept—claims and ideas with which we agree, and to over-scrutinize—or look for reasons to dismiss—claims and ideas that conflict with our existing beliefs.

This kind of motivated reasoning also affects the way people perceive “the media” (which, of course, doesn't really exist in any coherent sense). But it's easy for people to find “evidence” to support their ideas about such an impossibly broad concept, especially when they approach news coverage with a theory in hand.

This, in part, explains how so many people with differ-

ent beliefs, values and politics can all perceive different and conflicting problems with “the media”—how conservatives and liberals can—in the same headline, the same image or the same story—find bias against their views. We simply tend to see what we want in news coverage and forget about our own subjectivity, which is why we also tend to never see any evidence of media bias that supports our positions.

This doesn't mean all perceptions of bias and other problems with coverage are flawed or moot; it just means we have to test our perceptions about “the media” against actual reporting. The best way to do this is to work against our own biases—to seek to disprove, rather than confirm, our hypotheses about coverage. Battle-testing our criticism of news reporting eliminates false positives and strengthens our ability to help news organizations improve their coverage.

- **Tip:** When your students believe they perceive bias in a news report, that is the beginning, not the end, of inquiry. Also, be careful not to set up a loaded scenario yourself: If you tell students to “find the bias” in a news report, they will find bias—just as they might see an elephant in a sky of puffy clouds if you told them one was there.
- **Idea:** Ask students to write down one statement that they're confident is true of local news coverage. Then have them test their statement against a representative sample of actual news coverage—or reassign their statements for other students to check. If they find that their hypothesis about coverage is correct, have them present or publish their findings.

4. Misinformation is pollution.

Helping students to recognize the effect of misinformation in the real world can be a challenge. But as Mike Caulfield, director of Blended and Networked Learning at Washington State University Vancouver, has pointed out,² describing misinformation as “information pollution” (a term that dates back at least to 2003³) allows you to position their work against it as “information environmentalism.”

A key point in this analogy is the fact that, like pollution, other people's vulnerability to misinformation can affect you—even if you're savvy enough not to fall for it. This means that cleaning up the information environment is everyone's job.

Note: The term “information environmentalism” was the title of a 2014 book by Robert Cunningham, who was then a law professor at the University of Western Australia.⁴

- **Tip:** The “information pollution” concept applies to a classroom exercise commonly suggested by teachers: to have students create and share their own pieces of misinformation as a learning experience. In my opinion, this is like teaching students about pollution by dumping chemicals into a local river: Yes, they would learn a lot, but we’d never want them to do it. There is enough misinformation out there to take up as teachable moments; debunking that misinformation actually helps to clean things up—which, in turn, makes our communities and country better.
- **Idea:** Have student teams study different types of misinformation, such as disinformation or engagement bait or fake images.⁵ Then design a “cleanup campaign” that targets one of them.

5. Digital forensics skills are obligatory.

In today’s online world, it’s essential that everyone know how to investigate the authenticity of images, video and social media posts; to look into the ownership of websites; and to conduct advanced searches of the web and social media platforms. Even as members of a generation of “digital natives,” many of today’s teens haven’t heard of even the most basic digital forensics methods, such as reverse image searching.⁶ Not teaching students the fundamentals of digital forensics puts them at an unfair disadvantage as they contend with a misinformation landscape that is increasingly tricky to navigate.

- **Tip:** Teaching digital forensics can be a highly engaging “side door” to conversations about current events.
- **Idea:** You can build compelling digital forensics learning experiences out of viral rumors. Start by selecting a rumor that has been proven false by a reputable fact-checking organization, then create a pathway of questions for students that requires different digital forensics tools and skills. (You can see examples of such pathways in my Twitter feed at https://twitter.com/PeterD_Adams/status/975853614571941889 and https://twitter.com/PeterD_Adams/status/998694858037628929.)

These five principles, and the ideas and resources I’ve offered, are far from comprehensive, but I hope they provide educators with a framework to evaluate, adapt and create meaningful learning experiences that prepare their students to be news- and information-literate.

It’s our best hope of getting back to what’s real. 🌐

Notes

1. Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year (2016): *post-truth*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>.
2. Michael Caulfield, “Info-Environmentalism: An Introduction,” EDUCAUSE (Oct. 23, 2017) <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2017/10/info-environmentalism-an-introduction>
3. Jo Twist, “Web Guru Fights Info Pollution,” BBC News (Oct. 13, 2003) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/3171376.stm>
4. Robert Cunningham, *Information Environmentalism* (Northampton, Mass.: Edward Elgar Publishing Inc., 2014), www.e-elgar.com/shop/eep/preview/book/isbn/9780857938442/.
5. <https://vimeo.com/207119252>; <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/12/news-feed-fyi-fighting-engage-ment-bait-on-facebook/>; <https://www.snopes.com/tag/fake-photos/>.
6. First Draft, a project of the Harvard Kennedy School’s Shorenstein Center. Google Reverse Image Search, <https://firstdraftnews.org/en/education/curriculum-resource/google-reverse-search/>



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