



8 FACT SHEET HOW DISINFORMERS FOOL US

OBJECTIVES OF THE CURRICULUM

DISCIPLINES AND LEVELS CONCERNED

English (Secondary – Cycle 2)

Reading and assessing various texts

- Making a critical judgment: taking a critical distance from the text by relying on cultural and media references that confirm the credibility or acceptability of a source or information.

ERC (Secondary – Cycle 1)

Theme: Autonomy

- Conditions that favour autonomy (e.g. critical judgment, common sense, moral responsibility, ability to choose, authenticity, etc.)

Form of dialogue

- Conversation, discussion, debate.

TARGETED DIMENSIONS OF THE DIGITAL COMPETENCY

- Develop and mobilize information literacy;
- Exploit the potential of digital technology for learning;
- Develop critical thinking regarding digital information;
- Produce content with digital technology;
- Innovate and show creativity with digital technology;
- Communicate by using digital technology.

SUGGESTED DIGITAL TOOLS

- Produce an infographic: Canva;
- Discuss, survey and get students to react: Mentimeter;
- Create a sketch note: Tayasui Sketches.

EDUCATIONAL INTENTION OF THE GUIDE

By the end of these activities, the students will be able to understand that fake news can take several forms and that certain types of information cannot be fact checked as easily as others.

OBJECTIVES OF THE ACTIVITIES

- Demonstrate through an infographic what can make an article fake news;
- Discuss and give their opinion on sharing fake news;
- Get students to react and debate the reliability of different social media;
- Develop a sketch note that makes a concept visible concerning the spread of fake news.

INTRODUCTION

We hear a lot about fake news, but we forget that it can take several forms. Some items are 100% lies while others contain a mixture of half-truths and lies. In some cases, the image accompanying it may be true, but is given a false meaning.

Regardless of whether the authors of fake news acted to do harm or sincerely believed what they communicated, we first have to distinguish what's true and false. Depending on the type of content, some basic characteristics emerge.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FAKE NEWS

Getting an image to say what it doesn't say

It's easy to take an image from the Internet, publish it on Facebook or Instagram and claim it has another meaning. Many people with bad intentions have done this to hurt individuals or causes they don't support. For example, in September 2019, the day after the big Montréal climate march, social media showed a picture of a park full of garbage. The caption claimed this proved how little respect the defenders of the environment had for Mount Royal Park. In reality, the picture came from another city. It had been published a few years earlier, after a concert, and not after a march for the environment.

Of all the fake news mentioned in this fact sheet, this is the easiest to check. Just save the image on your computer or copy its address. Then go to Google Images and tell it what image you're looking for. In many cases, it's very easy to find the image's origin.

Memes

Unfortunately, it isn't so easy to separate truth from falsehood with memes. These are images the author added to the text, but generally without giving details on the origin of the news item, the author, etc. Google Images performs very poorly when looking for the origin of an image containing text.

The image could also be a montage, as in the case of this elephant supposedly carrying a lion cub in its trunk. That makes it very difficult to trace the origin of the different components of the photo.



Questions to ask:

- Does the text accompanying the image contain a hyperlink to the source (the photographer or a credible media outlet)? (See the Fact Sheet *Journalistic Sources*).
- Has a reliable site confirmed this claim? (See the Fact Sheet *How can you recognize a reliable website?*).

If the answer to both questions is no, it's better not to share this meme. For the most viral photos, it's possible that French or English fact checkers have already verified them. (For example, see these texts from [Snopes](http://www.bit.ly/2XRH8Zf) (www.bit.ly/2XRH8Zf) and [Décodeurs](http://www.bit.ly/2AYV9G) (www.bit.ly/2AYV9G) on the elephant photo. In fact, it was an April Fool's prank).

Manipulated videos

If people with bad intentions have the necessary technical skills, they can slow down a video or cut out excerpts. When they post it online, the individual on the screen seems to be doing or saying something compromising.

Run a search on Google or on the social media that published this video and you may discover it's a scam. If it has already circulated widely, it's possible someone had time to denounce it.

You can also do a screenshot of a video excerpt and run a search on Google Images to check its authenticity. But the results are very uncertain and this step can involve a lot of effort.

In the past few years, there's been plenty of talk about "deep fakes". These are videos that make it look like people said things they never said. It's important to mention that the technology still has a long way to go before it's perfected. Software can easily detect the many cuts, the lack of synchronization between the words and the lip movements, etc. If this kind of video is circulated, you can easily find a warning on Google, Facebook or Twitter that it's a scam.

Texts

"Pope endorses Donald Trump". This fake news item was the most shared of the entire 2016 American election campaign. It was "good news" for part of the electorate (American Catholics) and it was surprising. These two characteristics generally explain the success of fake news.

Different studies on how fake news is constructed have shown common features in most texts that are completely invented:

- As sensationalist or surprising headline (for example, "Justin Trudeau has transferred border control to the United Nations by signing the Migration Pact");
- A lot of superlatives (like "miraculous", "extraordinary", etc.);
- The sources of these texts are never cited, or the author settles for vague sources ("scientists have declared", "a Minister affirmed").

Some manipulators go even farther and quote real people, attributing statements they never made. That's why we must return to our basic reflexes before sharing a text, if it seems suspicious. (Refer to the Fact Sheet *How can you recognize a reliable website?*):

- Click on "About Us" to check who is hiding behind this website or what its mandate is;
- Check if the website presents several different opinions or always has the same slant;
- Run a Google search to check if a reliable website has also published this "news".

Fake websites and fake accounts

In extreme cases, well-organized or well-financed groups have created fake websites and dozens or even hundreds of fake Facebook and Twitter accounts. Their sole purpose is to share the same false information and give the illusion that it's very popular. (The Russian Internet Research Agency is best known for this approach.) Students can't be expected to detect such an organization on their own, when it's taken days of work for journalists to produce reports. However, two basic fact-checking tips are essential:

- A Twitter account created only for a disinformation campaign generally has few subscribers;
- If you have doubts about the website or the author, click on the "About Us" section. Often it's anonymous.

Nothing in the way the Internet operates prevents these fake websites and fake accounts from existing. Social media have rules that prevent the creation of fake accounts. But journalists regularly reveal the existence of such networks, and the platforms shut them down after their reports. At most, after the 2016 American elections, Google, Facebook and other social media tightened the rules applying to election advertising.

We must also remember that:

It's easy to fabricate fake news. Unlike real news, there's no need to check the facts, conduct interviews or do research. A journalist's reputation depends on the quality of his fact checking. But authors of fake news don't want credibility. They want clicks.

If this works so well, that's because many of us haven't developed enough of a reflex to do some basic checking of a news item before sharing it. Especially when the news tells us what we want to hear! (See the Fact Sheet Confirmation bias).

A mixture of truth and falsehood helps. Even an unlikely conspiracy theory will contain some partial truths. For example, it will cite a politician who really lied or a suspicious coincidence between two events.

It takes emotion to work. That's why divisive subjects, like immigration are used so often by disinformers. They touch a sensitive chord in part of the public.

EXERCISES

EXERCISE 1

In teams or individually, the students will have to work on a news item the teacher knows is false. Then they'll have to explain how to prove it's false.

To avoid using news already debunked by local fact checkers, the teacher could draw on fake news checked by the American website Snopes (which has operated since the 1990s). Or, in relation to the coronavirus crisis, the teacher could draw on the [database](http://www.bit.ly/3e5rCib) (www.bit.ly/3e5rCib) constituted by the fact-checking media of several countries. The goal of the exercise shouldn't be to get the students to prove why the item is false, but to describe their approach.

Suggestion: This activity can take the form of an infographic. On a platform like Canva, the learners will have to develop the approach that allowed them to decipher the articles provided by the teachers. Each step must be accompanied by an image and an example taken from the fake news in question.

EXERCISE 2

Discussion or practical work on circulation of fake news:

- a) What explains why a person publishes fake news?
- b) Is it illegal to publish fake news?
- c) What role should platforms like Facebook and YouTube play regarding fake news?
- d) What distinguishes these platforms from the media on whether or not fake news is published?

Suggestion: This activity is the opportunity to use Mentimeter to discuss and get the students to react. Write each question in a document on Mentimeter. Each time, propose a different way to give the answers. For example, a) will take the form of an "open question", b) will be "multiple choice", c) will be a scale with a choice of answers, and d) will be a "word cloud".

EXERCISE 3

Discussion or practical work on the reliability of the different social media they use

Depending on the students' level of use of social media, start a debate on "which social media outlet is the most reliable, which is the least reliable and why?" Use a survey (anonymized or not) to inquire in advance about their 2 or 3 favourite social media.

Suggestion: Use Mentimeter to survey the students about their favourite social media. You can use "ranking" mode to recover the students' answers. Then, based on the results obtained, question the students on the most reliable and least reliable social media outlets. To display their answers, propose the "open question" form so that they have enough space to justify their choices. Is there a difference between their favourite social media outlet and the one they consider most reliable? Finally, you can redo a document on Mentimeter in "ranking" mode. This will present the most reliable social media and compare the results with the ranking done in advance (on favourite social media).

EXERCISES

EXERCISE 4

Discussion or practical work on the students' involuntary role as disseminators of fake news

- How do you check a person's identity on Instagram? On TikTok? On WhatsApp? On Reddit? On your favourite social media?
- Have you already shared a news item, a message, a photo or a video that may have contained false information, without knowing the author or the website hiding behind it?
- If so, what is your contribution to disseminating fake news?

Suggestion: This activity is the opportunity to create a sketch note that summarizes the best practices to adopt to avoid spreading fake news. Using an electronic tablet and a drawing tool like Tayasui Sketches can make it easier to design the sketch note. The students must therefore choose a concept, such as proper use of TikTok, and make their thinking on the subject visible through the drawing and the writing.



Here's a sample sketch note regarding digital identity on Twitter.
Source: Pinterest

ANSWER KEY

1.

N/A

2.

Possible answers:

- a) Defend an ideology or a cause they care about; harm someone (a political opponent, for example); cause part of the population to doubt the legitimacy or honesty of a candidate, a company, an organization, a cause, etc.; earn money (the more clicks they attract, the more advertising revenue they can expect).
 - b) No, except in cases of defamation or hate propaganda.
 - c) Open question: should they impose more regulation of false information that circulate or allow their users total freedom of speech?
 - d) Among other possible answers: the serious media are subject to rules of ethics and codes of conduct that forbid them to publish falsehoods (see the Fact Sheet *What are information media?*); the media can also be held liable in court if they authorized the publication of fake news that harmed a person's reputation.
-

3.

N/A

4.

- a) Same formula every time: click on the author's name or on another option offered by the platform to direct us to the author's bio, "Contact" page or "Who are we?" section.
- b) If students did this without knowing who the author is, but shared this news because they liked it, this is an opportunity to return to the Fact Sheet *Confirmation bias*.
- c) Useful reminder: most people who share fake news do it because it tells them what they want to hear. Students mustn't feel incompetent: we all first read or listen to what confirms our opinions or our preconceived ideas. The statistics show that everyone is at risk of sharing false or dubious information, and young students aren't immune.