

Media Literacy & Fake News

A QUICK-GUIDE FOR PARENTS & EDUCATORS

ConnectSafely

➔ What is media literacy and why is it important?



In short, media literacy is the ability to think critically about the information you consume and create. It includes the ability to distinguish fact from opinion or even false information, and to understand how media can sometimes be used to persuade people. A 2016 study by Stanford Graduate School of Education found that more than 80% of middle and high school students surveyed were unable to distinguish between advertisements and real news stories. As parents and educators, it's our job to help our students become more savvy consumers—and creators—of content.

What is fake news and why do people create it? ⬅

Fake news is any information that is deliberately meant to be wholly or largely false or misleading. Motivations for creating fake news include financial gain—by getting people to click on sites so they're exposed to advertising—or to persuade others to take an action, purchase a product, or support or oppose a cause or political candidate. Some people perpetuate fake news just for the sake of deceiving people or as a prank. Honest mistakes happen and they are not fake news. But those who publish or say something that they later find out to be untrue have an obligation to correct the record.



➔ How do we explain the difference between facts and opinions?



Both fact and opinion help us understand the world around us. Facts are accurate reports of what happened or what exists, while opinions are an interpretation of the meaning or impact, usually from an individual's perspective. It's legitimate for an opinion to be influenced by a person's world view, but even those who express an opinion should back them up with facts.

How do you spot fake news? ⬅

Consider the source and other stories coming from that source. Do they ring true? Is the URL legitimate? Does the "news story" seem one-sided or biased toward a particular point of view? Also, consider the article's author. Is there evidence that it's a real person? Search for the source and author to see what else they've published and what others are saying about them. While it's never OK to spread fake news, it is OK to comment on links to fake stories with your own correction, to help set the record straight.



A little (more) context.

Until fairly recently, media were concentrated in the hands of a few organizations, but now it's all around us. In addition to the so-called "mainstream media" outlets, there are now many online blogs, podcasts, and videos from a wide variety of providers from all walks of life, as well as social media where anyone can be a "citizen journalist." While this has created a vibrant and dynamic array of information sources, it has also made it more difficult to know which sources can be trusted. So, regardless of whether you're a media consumer, media creator or both—the need for media literacy is greater now than ever. The need to evaluate information critically applies not only to media sources, but to politicians, businesses, public officials and anyone who may have an agenda.

Fact vs. opinion in the news.

Both fact and opinion help shape our understandings of information. The facts are the foundation while the opinions help us determine how those facts affect the people and society we are connected with.

TIP: Teachers and parents can ask students to take a news story or an historical event and write two editorials from opposing perspectives. It could be about a bill before a legislative body, a school issue or the significance of a scientific discovery or a controversial historical event. The idea is to push them to see the same set of facts from at least two different perspectives.

The difference between mistakes and lies.

Whether the author is a professional journalist or someone posting on their social media account, knowingly publishing false information online or in print is always wrong, but recognizing intentional lying is not as simple as it might seem. There are different kinds of lies: blatant lies, partial lies, and lies by omission. It's important to help young people understand the difference. It all comes down to the intent of the author. As parents and educators, we must encourage children to look past the information and consider the reliability and motivations of the source.

TIP: If you come across something that is falsely reported, help young learners investigate more about the source. Then ask them whether that source would have any reason to spread false information.

Dealing with conflicting reports.

Often, as new information is coming to light or even when we review hotly contested historical events, there might be conflicting reports by different sources. When faced with this, sometimes young learners will look to adults and ask which is accurate. Adults should redirect that thinking toward examining why there might be conflicting reports in the first place. Sometimes what looks like conflicting reports or "facts" is actually two different perspectives or "sides" that need to be examined. Other times there are so-called conflicting facts because only one set of information is actually true while the other is a mistake or a lie.

TIP: When faced with the reporting of conflicting facts, encourage students to take their time to develop their own understandings. Analyzing and interpreting information is not a race. Ask them:

- How many other sources are reporting the same facts? Find corroboration.
- Do the corroborating sources seem to be reporting other believable facts?
- Do any of the sources or facts seem biased or skewed to favor one side?

How people's ability to make informed decisions shapes our democracy.

As parents and educators it's our job to help young people hone their critical thinking skills so they can analyze information effectively and come to their own conclusions. It's essential for all aspects of their lives and all decisions they will face ranging from what to buy, what media to create and how, who to form relationships with and, of course, how to vote. We should not tell them what to think, but rather should teach them how to think for themselves, based on accurate information.

This Quick-Guide is based on the free booklet "The Parent & Educator Guide to Media Literacy & Fake News" by Kerry Gallagher, J.D., and Larry Magid, Ed.D, at ConnectSafely.org/fakenews. Creative Common License – attribution required.

