



LESSON PLAN

Level:	Grades 9 to 12
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Duration:	1 to 1 ½ hours, plus time to do and present the assessment/evaluation activity
This lesson is part of the Reality Check lesson series.	

Reality Check: News You Can Use



This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.

Overview

In this lesson, students consider the meanings of the term “fake news” and learn facts about the news industry that will help them recognize legitimate sources of news. They use an educational computer game to learn how to track a news story to its original source before evaluating its reliability, then practice the same skills “in the wild” with actual news stories.

Learning Outcomes:

Students will:

- Learn the characteristics of reliable news sources
- Learn key aspects of the news industry
- Identify the original source of a news story
- Practice authenticating news stories

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy the handout *5 for 5: Five Things You Can Do to Find and Verify the Source of a Story (in Under Five Minutes)* and the assignment sheet *Fake News in the Wild*.

Photocopy or prepare to project the *What is Fake News?* handout.

Make sure students have internet access and are able to connect to the *News Quiz* (<http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/games/news-you-can-use/>) and *Reality Check Mission One: News You Can Use* (<http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/games/reality-check/index.html#/>).

Review the handout *Fake News in the Wild: Teacher's Version*.



Procedure

What is Fake News?

Start by asking the students if they have heard the terms "fake news" or "false news." Ask if they feel they understand what the term means, but don't require them to give a definite answer.

Distribute or project *What is Fake News?* Have students identify whether they consider each of the things listed as "fake news," then share the findings from US and Canadian surveys:

- People knowingly portraying false information as if it were true (94%)
- Journalists reporting stories before checking their facts & sources to be sure they're accurate (82%)
- News organizations slanting their stories to promote a certain point of view (91%)
- Accurate stories that cast a politician or political group in a negative light (77%)

(Taken from *American Views: Trust, Media and Democracy*. Knight Foundation, September 1, 2017.)

- News reports that only present one side of an argument (46%)
- Term used by politicians to describe news coverage they disagree with (46%)

(Taken from *Canadians can't agree on what 'fake news' really is: Ipsos poll*. Global News, September 5, 2018.)

Ask:

- How close were their opinions to the original survey participants?
 - ⇒ Where they were different, why do they think they might have been different?
- Were there definitions where a lot of people in the class disagreed about whether they were false news or not?
 - ⇒ Why might that have been?
- For which definitions was there consensus, or near to it, among the students about what is or isn't fake news?
 - ⇒ Point out to students that the essential parts of the definition are, first, that the content is *news* (a report of a recent event) and that it is either *deliberately* or *recklessly* false (so for example, a news story that failed to fact-check a false report would count, even if the reporter believed it was true, because they didn't do their job in making sure everything in their story was true.)

Now ask students two questions about *recognizing* false news, and then give them the results from the same Canadian poll.

- How many think they can recognize false news stories? (64% of Canadians)
- How many think an average person can recognize false news stories? (40% of Canadians)



News Literacy

Explain that one reason many people have such widely varying definitions of the term "fake news" comes from not understanding how the news industry works.

Project the [News Quiz](#) and do it together with the class, or have students complete the quiz on their own or in pairs, and discuss the answers. Did anything surprise them? Do they feel they have a better understanding of how journalists, editors and producers select and present news stories, and how different news sources make money?

Going Upstream

Point out to students that while knowing if a source is reliable or not is important, there's no point in evaluating a particular news story until you're sure that you've found the original source: unreliable sources often spread stories from more legitimate ones, and legitimate sources occasionally run stories that came from unreliable ones without checking – and on social media, sources we consider "reliable" (such as our friends and family) may share stories without checking where they came from.

Distribute the handout *5 for 5: Five Things You Can Do to Find and Verify the Source of a Story (in Under Five Minutes)* and go through it with the class.

Have students use the handout to help them complete *Reality Check Mission One: News You Can Use*. Students may do this alone, in pairs, or as a whole class at your discretion.

When students have completed the mission, ask them how close their judgment of the story's reliability was. (*This story is rated a 5, "Definitely True," with the corresponding action "Tell my friends to change their routes."*)

What were the most important clues, and how did they find them? (*Tracking the story to its original source led to the *Bytown Herald*, which other sources identified as being reliable. We also saw evidence of the process that the source had followed to verify the source: interviews with eyewitnesses.*)

What might have been some misleading clues? (*The first two steps upstream – the friend who shared it with you, and the blog she linked to – both had some indications of unreliability: the friend had shared some unreliable things, and the blog had no track record or process to suggest it was reliable.*)

Assessment/Evaluation: Fake News in the Wild

Distribute the assignment sheet *Fake News in the Wild* and have students form pairs or groups of three.

Assign each group one of the news stories (it's all right if more than one group is assigned the same story).

Have them use the *5 for 5* handout to track the story upstream and determine whether what's in their source is both reliable and accurately presented.

Students will then share with the class the story they researched, their judgment about the source and story and what tools they used in doing so. Use the backgrounder *Fake News in the Wild: Teacher's Copy* to give feedback.



Fake News in the Wild

For this assignment, you will select one of the news stories below:

- "Mini Ice Age to Hit Earth and Last 30 Years"
<https://newslanded.com/2020/02/04/mini-ice-age-2020-solar-minimum/>
 Alternate link: <https://web.archive.org/web/20181120114216/https://newspunch.com/scientists-find-earth-is-cooling-not-warming-nasa-predicts-mini-ice-age/>
- "8-meter python slain after swallowing woman in Southeast Sulawesi"
<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/06/16/8-meter-python-slain-after-swallowing-woman-in-southeast-sulawesi.html>
 Alternate link: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180729060221/http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/06/16/8-meter-python-slain-after-swallowing-woman-in-southeast-sulawesi.html>
- "Gender Reveal Party Causes 47,000 Acre Wildfire In Arizona"
<https://bgr.com/2018/11/28/gender-reveal-fire-explosion-arizona/>
 Alternate link: <https://web.archive.org/web/20181128214825/https://bgr.com/2018/11/28/gender-reveal-fire-explosion-arizona/>
- "Acorn-hating, barefoot-running Minneapolis man sends internet nuts"
<https://bringmethenews.com/minnesota-lifestyle/acorn-hating-barefoot-running-minneapolis-man-sends-internet-nuts>
 Alternate link: <https://web.archive.org/web/20181010155447/https://bringmethenews.com/minnesota-lifestyle/acorn-hating-barefoot-running-minneapolis-man-sends-internet-nuts>
- China Moves To Rate Its Citizens Using A 'Social Credit System'
<https://exonews.org/black-mirror-meets-reality-china-moves-to-rate-its-citizens-using-a-social-credit-system/>
 Alternate link: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180924144701/https://www.collective-evolution.com/2017/10/26/black-mirror-meets-reality-china-moves-to-rate-its-citizens-using-a-social-credit-system/>

and see if you can find out:

- What is the original source of the information in the story?
- Is the original source of the story reliable?
 ⇒ How do you know?
- Does the source you started with present that information accurately?
 ⇒ How do you know?



Use the handout *5 for 5: Five Things You Can Do to Find and Verify the Source of a Story (in Under Five Minutes)* to help you in your evaluation.

When you've finished, you will share the following with the class:

- The story you researched
- Your findings about its accuracy
- The steps you took and tools you used to determine its accuracy



Fake News in the Wild: Assessment Rubric

	Learning Expectations	Achievement
Use	<p><i>Finding and Verifying:</i></p> <p>applies digital tools to gather, evaluate and use information</p> <p>uses a variety of searching strategies to conduct effective and efficient online searches</p> <p>locates, organizes, analyzes, evaluates, synthesizes and ethically uses information from a variety of sources and media</p>	<p>Insufficient (R)</p> <p>Beginning (1)</p> <p>Developing (2)</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>
Understand	<p><i>Finding and Verifying:</i></p> <p>demonstrates understanding that anyone can publish on the Web, so not all sites are equally trustworthy</p> <p>compares, contrasts and synthesizes information from diverse sources (triangulates information) before it is used in a knowledge-making process</p> <p><i>Community Engagement:</i></p> <p>understands how meaning is produced through multimedia (text, images, audio, video) and how culture is produced through the Internet and social media in particular</p> <p>understands the wider context of digital tools in a 'digital age' characterized by globalization and networks</p>	<p>Insufficient (R)</p> <p>Beginning (1)</p> <p>Developing (2)</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>
Engage	<p><i>Finding and Verifying:</i></p> <p>uses digital technology to identify and define authentic problems and significant questions for investigation</p> <p>understands how meaning is produced through the news media (text, images, audio, video) and how culture is produced through the news</p> <p><i>Community Engagement:</i></p> <p>identifies and participates responsibly in online networks that foster positive community</p> <p>uses digital media to be part of a community</p> <p>exhibits leadership as a digital citizen</p>	<p>Insufficient (R)</p> <p>Beginning (1)</p> <p>Developing (2)</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>

Fake News in the Wild: Teacher's Version

"Mini Ice Age to Hit Earth and Last 30 Years"

<https://newslanded.com/2020/02/04/mini-ice-age-2020-solar-minimum/>

What is the original source of the information in the story? A link leads to <https://www.thesun.co.uk/tech/10864950/mini-ice-age-earth-weather/>, which seems to be the original source.

Is the original source of the story reliable? *It's not clear.*

How do you know? A search shows that The Sun is a real newspaper, but its Wikipedia entry says that "The Sun has been involved in many controversies in its history, including its false claims about the 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disaster."

Does the source you started with present that information accurately? *No.*

How do you know? The story in The Sun has been corrected to show that "Professor Zharkova's claims are widely disputed by the scientific community" and its headline reads "Claim that Earth will enter 'mini Ice Age' for 30 years is wrong, top scientists reveal."

Final judgment: *The original story about cooling in the thermosphere is true, but the article's claim that the whole Earth is cooling is a misrepresentation of that story.*

"8-meter python slain after swallowing woman in Southeast Sulawesi"

What is the original source of the information in the story? *The story is sourced to Tribunnews.com, a Malay-language website.*

Is the original source of the story reliable? *It's hard to be sure.*

How do you know? *There are no English-language sources about Tribunnews.com. A translated article from Malay-language Wikipedia has a warning banner, suggesting that the Wikipedia article is unreliable.*

Does the source you started with present that information accurately? *Yes.*

How do you know? *Visiting the Asian News Archives on the Web leads to Malaysiakini, an English-language source which Wikipedia describes as being generally reliable. This source has a story with the same details.*

Final judgment: *The story is accurate.*

"Gender Reveal Party Causes 47,000 Acre Wildfire In Arizona"

What is the original source of the information in the story? *A search shows the video was released by the U.S. Forest Service.*

Is the original source of the story reliable? *Yes*

How do you know? *A search shows the Forest Service is a U.S. government agency that has occasionally been controversial because of its forest management practices, but would be unlikely to release a false video.*



Does the source you started with present that information accurately? *Yes*

How do you know? *Many other sources that can be confirmed to be reliable ran stories about the same video with basically the same facts.*

Final judgment: *The story is accurate.*

"Acorn-hating, barefoot-running Minneapolis man sends internet nuts"

What is the original source of the information in the story? *A Twitter account claiming to repost content from a Facebook group called I Love Minneapolis.*

Is the original source of the story reliable? *It's impossible to tell.*

How do you know? *The Twitter account isn't verified and a search for the author, Alex Conover, doesn't provide any useful new information. There's no way to access the original Facebook group so we can't confirm if the tweets are accurate.*

Does the source you started with present that information accurately? *No.*

How do you know? *A search for "barefoot acorn Minneapolis" turns up several stories debunking it as a hoax (though there are still a lot of stories online that present it as true.)*

Final judgment: *The story is a hoax.*

"China Moves To Rate Its Citizens Using A 'Social Credit System'"

What is the original source of the information in the story? *A blog titled "China Copyright and Media" published a translation of a Chinese government document.*

Is the original source of the story reliable? *Yes*

How do you know? *A search on the blog shows it's cited by many other sources that can be shown to be reliable. A search on the author shows that he is a lecturer on Chinese law who has published several articles in sources that can be shown to be reliable.*

Does the source you started with present that information accurately? *Not entirely.*

How do you know? *The starting source (ExoNews) actually gives very little detail about the Chinese system, spending more time on the TV show it's comparing it to. With so little information it's hard to say the original source is being represented accurately.*

Final judgment: *Basically true, but possibly misleading.*



5 for 5: Five Things You Can Do to Find and Verify the Source of a Story (in Under Five Minutes)

Checking online info doesn't have to be hard, and it doesn't have to take a long time – but you do have to do it every time you want to share something, or you might make a decision based on it.

A lot of the time, when we get news or information online we're not getting it from the original source. That means we have to find out where it originally came from before we can check it.

Here are five things you can do in less than five minutes to find the original source of a story and see if it's reliable. (Most will take you less than two minutes!)

1. Make sure the story you're reading is intended as a source of factual information rather than opinion. (Keep in mind that a fact isn't necessarily something that's *true*, but something that's *provable*. "The moon is made of cheese" is a factual statement, though untrue; "the moon is beautiful" is an opinion, though most people would likely agree that it is true.)
2. Look inside the story for links back to earlier sources.
 - You can also look for phrases or words like "reported by" and "via", which both usually mean the story you're reading is drawing on earlier sources.
 - Many news sources are part of chains that share content, and also use stories from content syndication networks or wire services like Canadian Press or Reuters. Check the byline of the article to see if it came from one of those. (That's not necessarily a bad sign, but it does mean you need to double-check to make sure it's a legitimate source.)

Nigeria's president has had to take the unusual step of denying that he has died and been replaced by a clone.

Muhammadu Buhari, who has disappeared for months at a stretch before, reassured supporters at a town hall event in Poland, where he was attending the UN Climate Change conference on Sunday, "It's the real me, I assure you. I will soon celebrate my 76th birthday and I will still go strong."

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-politics/nigerias-buhari-denies-dying-and-being-replaced-by-lookalike-idUSKBN1O10RU>

3. Look for the earliest and most local source on the story. To find the earliest source in Google, go to the News tab, click Tools, switch from Sorted by Relevance to Sorted by Date and go to the last entry.

nigeria president buhari denies dying



The screenshot shows a search engine interface with the 'News' tab selected. The search results are sorted by relevance. The top result is from NBCNews.com, dated 9 hours ago, with a headline about Nigeria's President. A dropdown menu is open over the sorting options, showing 'Sorted by relevance' (selected) and 'Sorted by date'. Below the search results, there are links to BBC News and Aljazeera.com, both dated 9 hours ago.

You can also find out what newspapers are closest to the story (see <https://www.ibiblio.org/slanews/internet/archives.html>, <https://www.ibiblio.org/slanews/internet/intarchives.htm> and <https://www.ibiblio.org/slanews/internet/canpapers.html> for US, international and Canadian papers respectively) and see how they're covering it – sometimes when stories spread important details get left out.

4. Once you're confident you've found the original source of the story, you can see if it's reliable. If you're not familiar with it, there are a few easy steps you can take:

- Do a search for the name or the web address (if you're searching for the name, add the web address with a minus before it: that will leave out results from the source's website).

reuters -site:www.reuters.com

- You can also do a search with the word "Wikipedia" added to go straight to the Wikipedia article on the source, if there is one.

reuters wikipedia

When you read the article, remember that you're looking to see if this source is *generally considered reliable* and whether it has any specific bias *relevant to this story*. Being biased doesn't disqualify a source, but it does mean you need to read it more carefully – and probably need to look for another source to fill in the gaps.

- Make sure the web address for the article you're reading matches the actual web address of the source. People have created fake versions of news websites to spread false information.
- Remember that news sources are mostly biased towards what they see as being *most newsworthy*: rather than taking one side or another on a political issue, news bias more often consists of not covering things that the producers or editors think their audiences won't be interested in.



Reuters - Wikipedia

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reuters> ▼

Reuters is an international news agency headquartered in London, United Kingdom. It is a division of Thomson **Reuters**. Until 2008, the **Reuters** news agency ...

Headquarters: Canary Wharf, London, England, ... **Founder:** Paul Reuter

Founded: October 1851; 167 years ago **Parent:** Thomson Reuters

Thomson Reuters

The Woodbridge Company - Reuters
Group - Jim Smith - ...

[More results from wikipedia.org »](#)

Paul Reuter

Paul Julius Freiherr von Reuter was a
German-born, British ...

While you're at Wikipedia, you can also check to see if the source is on the list of fake news websites: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fake_news_websites

5. If there's no Wikipedia article on the source, it's not necessarily a bad sign: a lot of small newspapers, magazines and websites, especially if they're outside the U.S., don't have one. What it does mean is that you need to judge your source's reliability yourself. Here are a few things to look for:

- **Track record:** How long have they been in business? Do other reliable sources see them as reliable?
- **Balance:** News outlets have no obligation to amplify hate, harassment or pseudoscience, but in general they should make sure that all sides of an issue are represented
- **Process:** "Trustworthy sources don't ask you to trust them, they show you why you should." (Peter Adams, The News Literacy Project.) Reliable sources have a clear and public process for making sure their facts are correct. Does the source do their own reporting? Do they publish corrections when they make mistakes? Do they have a Public Editor or ombudsperson to handle reader complaints? Are they a member of an oversight body like the National NewsMedia Council (<https://mediacouncil.ca/>)?

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- **Aim:** How important is accuracy to their business model? Most legitimate news sources would lose money if they made mistakes and didn't correct them, but sources that make their money by shocking people or making them angry don't. Does the source clearly separate between news and editorial (opinion and analysis)?



What Is Fake News?

Below is a list of things people have described as "fake news." Decide for each one whether you think it fits your definition of the term.

- People knowingly portraying false information as if it were true
- Journalists reporting stories before checking their facts & sources to be sure they're accurate
- News organizations slanting their stories to promote a certain point of view
- Accurate stories that cast a politician or political group in a negative light
- News reports that only present one side of an argument
- A term used by politicians to describe news coverage they disagree with

