LESSON PLAN

Break the Fake: Verifying information online

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

LEVEL: Grades 6-9

DURATION: 20-30 minutes plus time for the optional assessment/evaluation and extension activities

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Overview

In this lesson, students participate in a workshop that teaches them four quick, easy steps to verify online information. After practicing these four steps they create a public service announcement aimed at teaching one of these steps and spreading the message that it is necessary for everyone to fact-check information we see online every time we are going to share it or act on it.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Learn simple steps for verifying online information
- Practice verifying online information
- Understand digital literacy key concepts:
  - Digital media are networked
  - Digital media are shareable and persistent
  - Interactions through digital media can have a real impact
  - Digital media experiences are shaped by the tools we use
- Create a media text

Preparation and Materials

Prepare to project the following:

- *House Hippo 2.0* PSA video
- *House Hippo 2.0* print PSA
- *Using Fact-Checking Tools*
- *Finding the Source*
- *Verifying the Source*
- *Checking Other Sources*

Prepare to distribute the following tip sheets:

- *Break the Fake: Use fact-checking resources*
- *Break the Fake: Find the source*
- *Break the Fake: Verify the source*
- *Break the Fake: Check other sources*

Prepare to distribute the following assignment sheets (see note under Procedure below):

- *Make fact-checking a habit*

Students will need access to internet-connected devices.

Procedure

Begin by asking students if any of them have ever been unsure about whether something they saw online was real or not. What (if anything) have they done to find out?

Ask students if they have ever shared anything they weren't sure was true. If so, how did they decide whether or not to share it?

Point out that it isn't just scammers, trolls or spies that make online misinformation a problem: all of us are a part of it when we share things we aren't sure are true. Suggest that they think of verifying online information as a habit like using seatbelts: you have to do it *every time* for it to be effective.

Explain to students that you are going to teach them four steps for verifying (or checking) information, but that they won't have to use all four every time. In fact, most of the time just one or two will be enough to find out whether you can believe something you see online, and once they've learned them, none of each of the steps will take more than a minute or so to do.

USE FACT-CHECKING RESOURCES

Distribute the tip sheet *Break the Fake: Use fact-checking resources* and project the video Using Fact-Checking Tools. After students have watched the video and gone through the tipsheet, tell them to verify the claim at the end: Did the Wendy's fast food chain really introduce an "emo" version of its mascot?

- If there are not enough connected devices for all students, have some buddy up.
- For younger grades you may choose to do the exercise as a whole-class activity.

When students have had some time to verify the example, ask them what their conclusion was. Tell them that using the MediaSmarts fact-checker search, or searching for "Emo Wendy's fake," will show that this story is true.

FIND THE SOURCE

Distribute the tip sheet *Break the Fake: Find the source* and show the video Finding the Source.
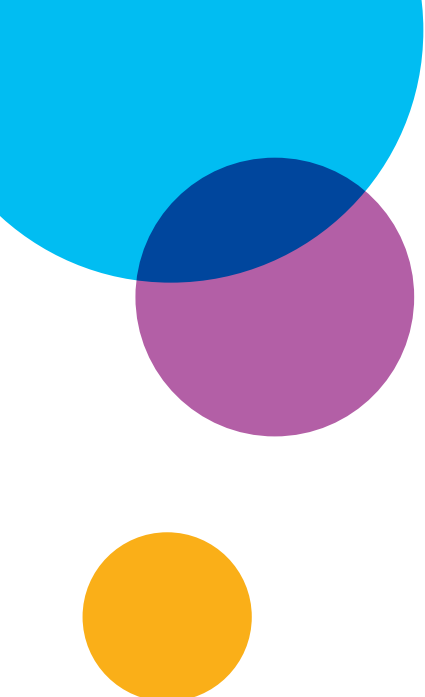
Have them verify the example in the tipsheet preferably using the connected device they use most often in their regular lives. Did a 2023 scientific study really find that humans and ancestors lived at the same time?

When students have had some time to verify the example, ask them what their conclusion was. Explain that either following the first link in the article, or searching for "humans dinosaurs current biology" ("Current Biology" is the name of the journal where the study appeared) will show that the headline and the image are very misleading: the study actually found that the earliest placental mammals (mammals that were born alive instead of hatching from eggs.)

VERIFY THE SOURCE

Distribute the tip sheet *Break the Fake: Verify the source* and play the video Verifying the Source. Have them verify the example given, preferably using the connected device they use most often in their regular lives. Which source can they say with confidence is reliable: Japan News or News on Japan?

When students have had some time to verify the example, ask them what their conclusion was. Explain that searching for "Japan News" on Wikipedia shows that it is the English outlet of the Yomiuri Shimbun, one of Japan's leading newspapers, while searching for "News on Japan" only brings up that outlet and unrelated sites that use that phrase.

Point out that while the story was true, you can only be confident it's true if you've seen it in a source you know is reliable. That's why if you see a story in a source you're not sure about, it's good to check other sources you know are reliable.

CHECK OTHER SOURCES

Distribute the tip sheet *Break the Fake: Check other sources* and play the video [Checking Other Sources](#). Have them verify the example given, preferably using the connected device they use most often in their regular lives.

When students have had some time to verify the example, ask them what their conclusion was.
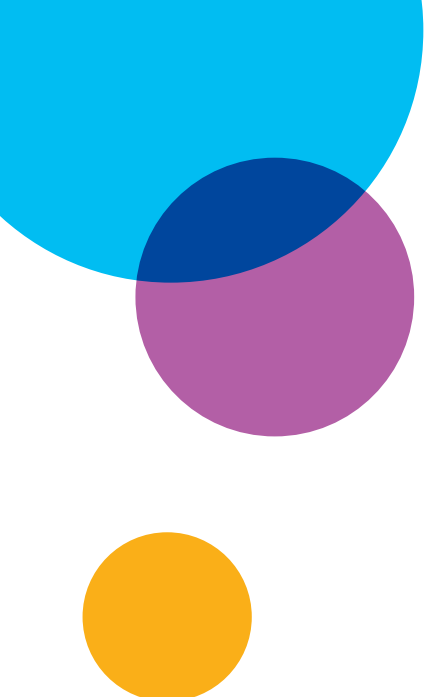
Explain that searching for "octopus aliens" and selecting the News tab will show that while some scientists have suggested octopuses may have alien DNA, it is not the consensus view. Searching the Wikipedia article on "octopus" for the word "alien" does not show any suggestion that octopuses are aliens. Finally, searching "octopus aliens" on the MediaSmarts custom science search engine gives some results that say octopuses are like aliens, but none that suggest they actually ar aliens.

SEE ONE, DO ONE, TEACH ONE

Explain to students that it's not enough for them to have learned to make fact-checking a habit: because all of us have a role in whether or not misinformation spreads, they have to teach others how to do it as well.

Explain to students that it is possible to change a whole society's mind about things: you can give examples such as drinking and driving, and smoking, which both became much less common and viewed more negatively in a fairly short time, as well as wearing seatbelts and keeping cats indoors, which both became more common. Sometimes these changes in social norms happen on their own, sometimes they're caused by media portrayals (including advertising), and sometimes they happen in part because of deliberate *public service campaigns* aimed at changing people's attitudes.

In facts, it's often easier to change a whole society's values than it is to change a single person's mind.

Explain to the class that a good PSA does three things: it makes readers aware of the issue, gives them a reason to care about the issue, and gives them useful information to help them address the issue. Print PSAs can use both text and images to do these things.

Show students the **House Hippo 2.0** video and print PSA. Discuss with the class:

- What issue is the PSA about? (The need to double-check everything you see online.)
- How does it make the reader care about the issue? (Shows you how easy it is to be fooled by what you see.)
- How does it inform the reader about how to address the issue? (It directs them to the Break the Fake campaign website for more information.)

Divide students into eight groups, with two groups responsible for each of the four fact-checking steps the students have learned. (If this makes for groups that are too small to be practical, split them into four groups instead.)

Distribute the assignment sheet *Make fact-checking a habit* and have each group create a print public service announcement that will teach their fact-checking step and also encourage those who see it to make a habit of fact-checking.

Alternately, depending on the course you're teaching and what media production work students have already done, you may have them create a different type of media product (or let them choose) from the following list:

- Skit or live video
- Stop-motion animation (see the MediaSmarts lesson *Getting the Toothpaste Back into the Tube* for more information)
- Common Craft-style cutout animation video (see the MediaSmarts lesson *Online Relationships: Respect and Consent* for more information)
- A meme, using the MediaSmarts meme maker (https://myvoice.mediasmarts.ca/sharing/tools) (Students will need to register with an email address.)

Have students present their PSAs to the class, explaining the audience they chose and the choices they made to target their PSA to that audience.

BREAK THE FAKE: VERIFYING INFORMATION ONLINE

Break the Fact Tip Sheet #1: Use fact-checking tools

Sometimes a single search can Break the Fake if a professional fact-checker has already done the work for you.

- You can use a specific fact-checker website, or our custom search engine https://mediasmarts.ca/fact-checker:

This lets you search many fact-checkers at once. including.

- To look at a broader range of sources, do a search for the story with the word "hoax" or "fake" added.

| eagle attacks drone hoax | ✕ | 🔍 |

- Because anyone can call themselves a fact-checker, you need to double-check if your search leads to sources you don't already know are reliable. Check out the Find the source tip sheet for more info.

- You can also make sure it's signed on to the International Fact-Checking Network's code of principles (see https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/signatories).

- Remember that just because a fact-checker hasn't debunked something doesn't mean it's true. It can take a while for fact-checkers to verify a story, and not every one will verify every story.

- If no reliable fact-checker has covered it yet, move on to other steps like Find the source or Check other sources.

Make sure to take these steps to double-check before you share anything we see online, every time. Because only you can Break the Fake.

Try using this step. Did the Wendy's fast food chain really introduce an "emo" version of its mascot?

Yup That Exists
@yup.that.exists

Fast food chain Wendy's unveiled their new 'Emo Wendy' logo at a location in London, UK.

BREAK THE FAKE: VERIFYING INFORMATION ONLINE

Break the Fact Tip Sheet #2: Find the source

Because it's so easy to copy and share things online, it's important to find out where something originally came from before you decide whether or not to trust it. Someone might have shared it with you on social media, or a news story might be based on someone else's story.

- The easiest way to find the source is usually to follow links that will lead you to the original story.

On a website, follow links that lead back to the source. Look for phrases like "According to" a source, a source "reported" or the word "Source" at the top or bottom of a story.

### Farmers honour 'Peanuts' creator Charles M. Schulz with corn mazes across Canada and U.S.

Mark Kennedy, The Associated Press

Make sure to keep going until you're sure you're at the original!

- On a video or social media post, see if the sources are listed in the post or the description. If there aren't any, use the Verify the Source step to see if the person posting it is a reliable source.

- You can also use a search engine like Google or DuckDuckGo. See if you can find any information about where the story originally came from and do a search for a description of the story and the original source:

"peanuts" "corn mazes" "associated press"

- To find the original source of a photo or image, you can use something called reverse image search. Start by right-clicking on the image and selecting the option "Copy Image Location." Then go to the website Tineye.com and paste in the address you just copied and sort the results to show the oldest first. See the example below:

- *On a Mac, hold down Control while clicking instead of right-clicking.*

- *On Chrome and Safari, select Copy Image Address.*

- *On Edge, select Copy.*
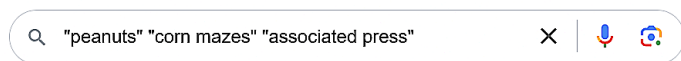
You can sort the results to Oldest, to find where the image first appeared, or to Most Changed. You can also scroll down the results until you find a source that you know is reliable:

bbc.co.uk

news/uk-england-hereford-worcester-6... - First found on Nov 22, 2022

Filename: _127733723_313922769_629866402258947_35618131423463775...
(624 x 415, 49.6 kB)

If you can't copy the image link, take a screenshot and then upload it to TinEye. You can also take a screenshot of the cover image of a video.

If you don't know if the original source is reliable or not, use the *Find the source* tip sheet to find out.

If you can't find the original source, use the *Check other sources* tip sheet to see if the story is for real.

Make sure to take these steps to double-check before you share anything we see online, every time. Because only you can Break the Fake.

Try using this step. According to this 2023 article, a new study found that humans and dinosaurs lived at the same time. Is that true? How could you find out? www.tiny.cc/coexisted

Our ancestors mingled with dinosaurs shortly before they went extinct, according to a new study (artist's impression)

BREAK THE FAKE: VERIFYING INFORMATION ONLINE

Media Smarts
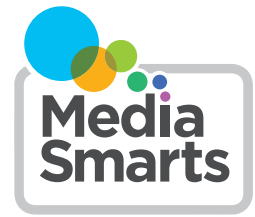
Break the Fake Tip Sheet #3: Verify the source

Whether you're looking at a website, photo, video or news story, what really matters is whether or not the people who originally created it are trustworthy. Even when it has been shared with you by someone you trust, like a friend or family member, you can't know if they checked the facts. So it's up to you!

You can't always confirm that something is false, but if the source isn't reliable you have no reason to believe it.

To find out if a source is reliable, ask these three questions:

1. DO THEY *REALLY* EXIST?

It's easy to make fake pictures, fake websites and fake social network profiles that look just as real and professional as anything out there.

"About Us" pages and profiles are easy to fake, so use Wikipedia or a search engine like Google to find out if other people say they really exist. Pay attention to things that are hard to fake: for example, if somebody claims to work for a particular company, check the company's website or do a search for their name and the company's name to see if they've ever been mentioned together in reliable sources (like a newspaper you already know is real).

2. ARE THEY *WHO THEY SAY THEY ARE*?

It's easy to pretend to be someone else online, so once you know the source really exists, you need to find out if what you're looking at really came from them.

To find out if you're on an organization's real website or social network profile, do a search or check Wikipedia to find their official web address.

This looks like a real Toronto Star article, but a search shows that the web address ("freshnewtips.com") is wrong:

SPECIAL REPORT: Justin Trudeau's Latest Investment Has Experts in Awe And Big Banks Terrified

AS SEEN ON

(~Canadian citizens are already raking in millions of dollars from home using this 'wealth loophole' - but will it make them leave the office at the end of this month?)

Requires only USD 250 (310 CAD) to get the system up and running with GUARANTEED results.

Toronto Star
https://www.thestar.com

3. ARE THEY *TRUSTWORTHY*?

For sources of general information, like newspapers, that means asking if they have a process for making sure they're giving you good information, and a good *track record* of doing it. How often do they make mistakes? If they do make mistakes, do they admit them and publish corrections? Are they willing to publish things their owners, or their readers, wouldn't agree with?

You can answer those questions by looking for their Wikipedia page. See this example from a search about the Washington Post:

As of 2023, the newspaper had won the Pulitzer Prize 73 times for its work,[8] the second-most of any publication after *The New York Times*.[9][10] It is considered a newspaper of record in the U.S.[11][12][13] *Post* journalists have received 18 Nieman Fellowships and 368 White House News Photographers Association awards.[14][15] The paper is well known for its political reporting and is one of the few remaining American newspapers to operate foreign bureaus,[16] with international breaking news hubs in London and Seoul.[17]

You can also do a search for their name and use a minus sign to leave out their own website:

That will tell you what other people say about them.

"washington post" -washingtonpost.com

For more specialized sources, you want to ask whether they're experts or authorities on that topic. Being an expert is more than just being a doctor, a scientist or a professor: make sure they are an expert in the area that they are talking about.

The same is true for groups that say they represent groups of doctors or scientists. A quick search will usually show you if they are for real. The American Academy of Pediatrics has 67,000 members. The American College of Pediatrics, on the other hand, has just 700.

You also want to make sure they have a strong reason to give you accurate information. The Richmond Standard might give you accurate news about a lot of things. But because they're owned by Chevron, an oil company, you can't trust them to tell the truth about climate change or pollution.

Not all sources are as open about their bias. Do a search to find out if accuracy and credibility are a big part of why people watch, read, buy or trust a source.

Try using this step. Which of these stories about Godzilla comes from a reliable source?

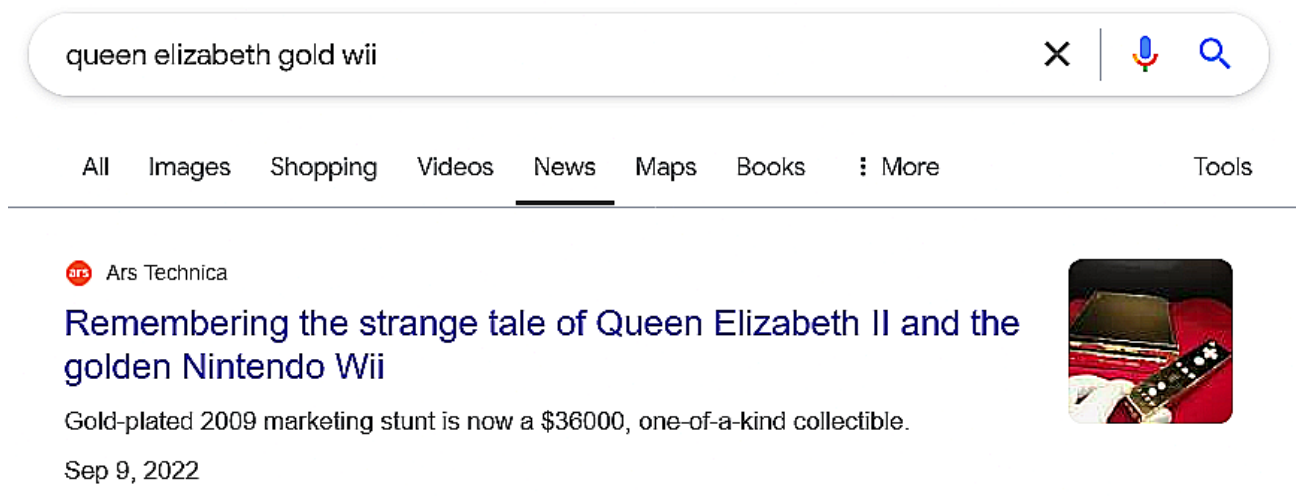What evidence can you find that either one is reliable?
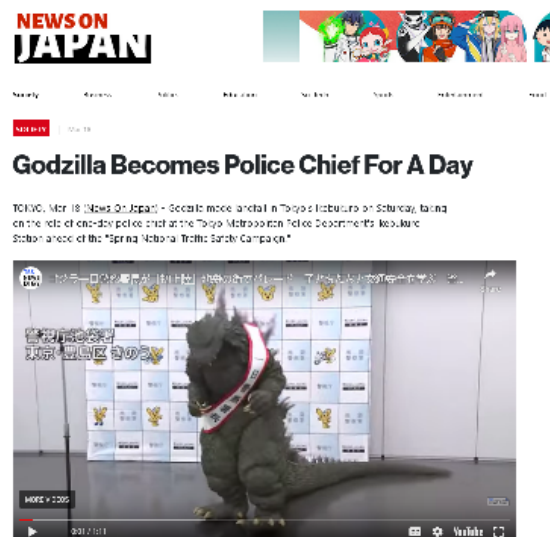
BREAK THE FAKE: VERIFYING INFORMATION ONLINE

Break the Fake Tip Sheet #4: Check other sources

This step may sometimes be the last one you do, but it could also be the first. The News tab is better than the main Google search for this step because it only shows real news sources. While not every source that's included is perfectly reliable, they are all news outlets that really exist. Here is an example of how this works:

- By taking this step, you can be sure you get the whole story. Remember, all sources make mistakes sometimes, but reliable ones will correct them.

- Looking at other sources can help you find out if the first place you saw something might have been leaving something out. This is also a good way of discovering any possible *bias* that might exist in any one source

Use Control-F (Command-F on a Mac) to quickly search a website for a word or phrase.

- You can also use this step to find out whether something agrees with what most experts on that topic think – what's called the consensus view. While it's generally good reporting to give both sides of a story, including views that experts agree aren't right can result in spreading misinformation. Look for a Wikipedia article on the topic and search for keywords.

- You can use our custom search **tiny.cc/sciencesearch** to find the consensus on specialist topics like science and medicine.

If you want to know if another specialist source is reliable, check out the *Verify the source* tip sheet.

Make sure to take these steps to double-check before you share anything you see online, every time. Because only you can Break the Fake.

Try using this step. Do scientists really think that octopuses might be aliens? How could you find out?
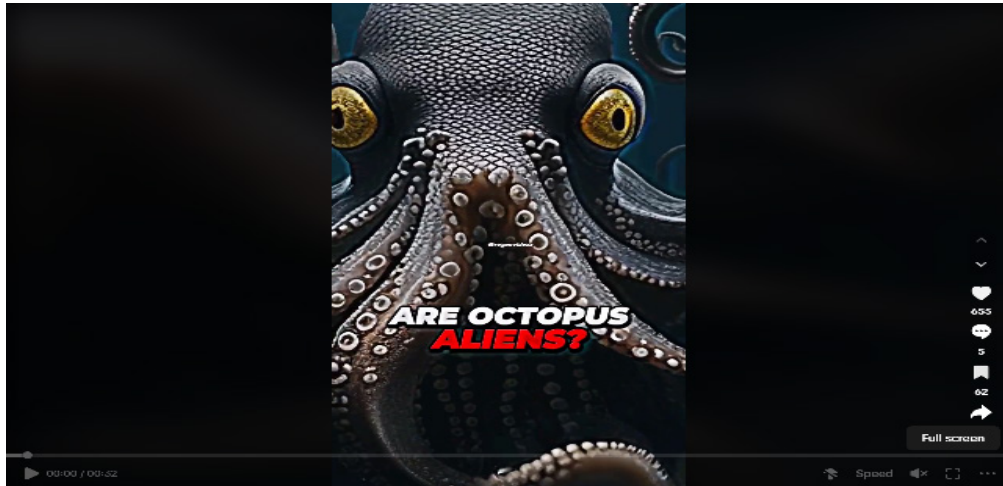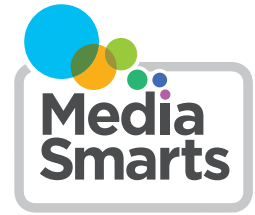
BREAK THE FAKE: VERIFYING INFORMATION ONLINE

Make fact-checking a habit

For this assignment you will be creating a PSA (public service announcement) message to promote the message that people should not share anything online unless they're sure that it's accurate and not misleading. Your PSA will also show your audience how to do the *one step* your group has been assigned.

Decide who your PSA is aimed at:

*   People younger than you?

*   People your age?

*   Young people (teenagers or young adults) older than you?

*   Adults (your parents and relatives)?

*   Seniors (your grandparents or older relatives)?

*   Another group you choose?

Keep your audience in mind as you design your PSA.

Remember that your PSA should:

*   Show your audience that they need to fact-check information every time they are going to share something they see online

*   Make your audience understand that what *they* do about online information affects *everyone*

*   Explain the step your group has been assigned in a way that your audience will understand.