CREDIBLE
OR
CLICKBAIT
SCHEMA OF FAKE NEWS TO CORRECTIONS

BY STEPHANIE WILLEN BROWN

WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

There are so many words describing news floating around that it helps to define some of the most commonly used terms — at least in the context of this article and in the classroom. The sequence of terms (schema, outline) flows from hoaxes ("A humorous or malicious deception," such as "Betty White is dead" — not true, as of press time) to mundane newspaper corrections.

Tucked into the continuum are terms such as propaganda ("Information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view."); sponsored content ("Material in an online publication which resembles the publication's editorial content but is paid for by an advertiser and intended to promote the advertiser's product."); and satire ("The use of humor, irony, exaggeration or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.").

Less clear is the phrase "fake news." It is not defined in either of the most credible dictionaries: the Oxford Dictionaries or Merriam-Webster. The only mention in either is an undated blog post at Merriam-Webster, which declares, "Fake news is frequently used to describe a political story that is seen as damaging to an agency, entity or person." Dartmouth political science professor Brendan Nyhan defines fake news as "100 percent false stories motivated by profit." Most recently, in late 2017, Collins Dictionary defined fake news as "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting."
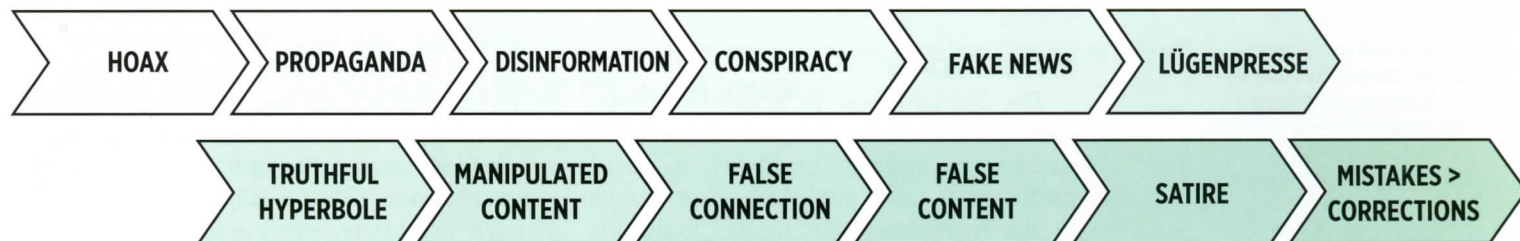
TEACHING STUDENTS TO BE SKEPTICAL

Journalism educators agree that fake news is not good, and yet it and its cousins are everywhere. I have been guilty of sharing untruthful information. I'm sure we all have. If that is the case, how can we teach our students to be skeptical of what they read?

Regardless of how we define fake news, here are three sample scenarios for use in the classroom, with tips about how to customize them to students and community.

1. Compare coverage of the same news from two very different sources. The scenario, relying on a one-page checklist or a multipage worksheet, requires students to look at many elements of a news story, ranging from the reporter's name and sources used to the advertis-

HOAX > PROPAGANDA > DISINFORMATION > CONSPIRACY > FAKE NEWS > LÜGENPRESSE

TRUTHFUL HYPERBOLE > MANIPULATED CONTENT > FALSE CONNECTION > FALSE CONTENT > SATIRE > MISTAKES > CORRECTIONS

Fake news was defined by Collins Dictionary in 2017 to mean, "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting." Lügenpresse, truthful hyperbole, false connection and false context have not been defined in common dictionaries.
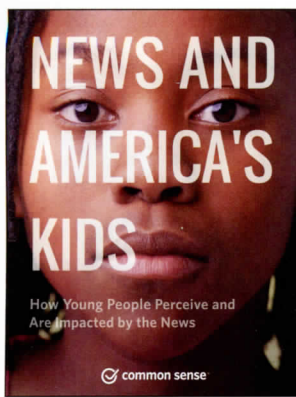
NEWS AND AMERICA'S KIDS: HOW YOUNG PEOPLE PERCEIVE AND ARE IMPACTED BY THE NEWS

- **Kids value the news.** Most access it and care about it, and overall they feel smarter when they are informed. Forty-eight percent say that following the news is important to them; 70 percent say consuming news makes them feel smart and knowledgeable; and half believe following the news helps them feel prepared to make a difference.

- **Kids feel neglected and misrepresented.** They do not think the media covers what is important to them, and they feel misrepresented when they are covered. Sixty-nine percent say that the news media has no idea about the experiences of people their age.

- **Kids see racial and gender bias in the news.** Half of kids say when they see nonwhite kids in the news, it is negative and/or related to crime and violence. Children also recognize gender bias. Only 34 percent agree that the news treats women and men fairly and equally.

- **What kids are seeing scares them and makes them feel depressed.** Sixty-three percent of kids find the content disturbing. As a result, they are afraid, angry and/or depressed.

- **Kids are fooled by fake news.** This awareness may be why many are extremely skeptical and distrustful of the news media. Only 44 percent agree that they can tell fake news stories from real ones. Of those who have shared a news story online in the last six months, 31 percent say they shared a story that they later found out was wrong or inaccurate.

- **Kids trust their families and teachers for news more than any source, but they prefer to get it from social media.** Sixty-six percent say they trust the news they hear from family "a lot," with teachers being the second-most-trusted source (48 percent). However, when asked to select their preferred news source, 39 percent of children picked online news sources.

ing and comments present on the story's web page.

2. Sponsored content, brand-sponsored articles and videos that appear on websites and social platforms. Few students know what sponsored content is or how to recognize it. Most instances of sponsored content would suffice, along with some questions for you to ask your students to generate a thoughtful discussion.

3. Graphic information, especially a stand-alone image, that may or may not be telling the whole story.

All of the above instances are emotionally neutral stories that might be shared on social media so a fourth conversation could address how to determine the credibility of stories shared on Twitter or Facebook.

GENERAL SUGGESTIONS FOR SCENARIOS

To best teach good evaluation habits, avoid politics and other emotionally charged topics. Students represent a spectrum of political beliefs regardless of whether they live in a red state, blue state or purple state. Examples that arouse strong emotions are likely to lead to distraction and to discussion of the merits of the argument (Vaccinations are safe! Climate change is a hoax!) rather than engaging students in the exercise of evaluating the information itself.

The best examples are designed to provoke the curious but not to press any distracting emotional buttons. There are current controversial issues that can be safely discussed in mixed company: The recent research into the benefits (or lack thereof) of flossing is a perfect example. Most people agree that flossing is good, despite the evidence, but we are unlikely to unfriend someone on Facebook if they disagree with us.

We also know that the more relevant topics are to students, the more they will engage. Even better, choose topics that retain their relevance over the next months and years. Some topics will not be relevant in all classrooms so adapt scenarios to your classroom, your geographic location or your time.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

The Stanford History Education Group recently analyzed the ability of almost 8,000 students to evaluate credibility of social media posts and published their results in the November 2016 report "Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning." The results included the following insights:

- Middle school students were unable to dis-
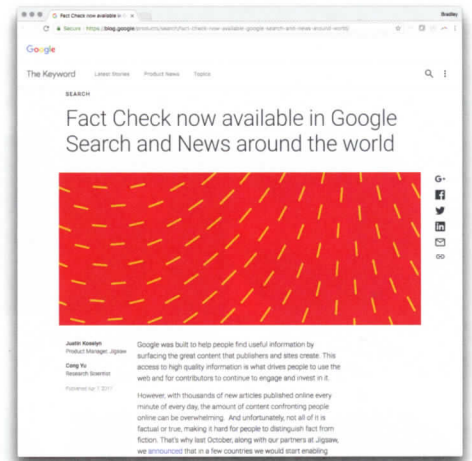
FACT CHECK

Google's Fact Check, which appears in the company's Search and News functions, identifies stories that include information fact-checked by news publishers and fact-checking organizations, allowing users to identify verified stories. Facebook also added the ability for users to mark stories as false. Marked stories go through a fact-checking process. If the item is confirmed as fake news, Facebook posts a warning label below the article.
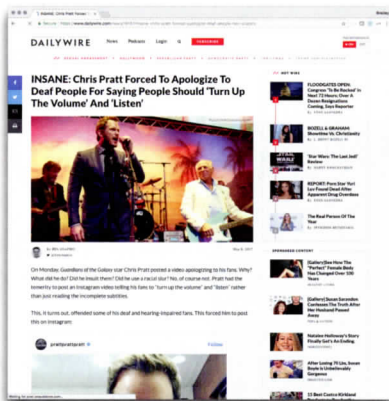
tinguish a news story on Slate from sponsored content on the same website.

- High school students did not correctly indicate that a stand-alone photograph of "mutant" daisies purported to have been affected by Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster did not provide proof that the daisies were, in fact, damaged by nuclear radiation.

- College students could not distinguish between the American Academy of Pediatrics, the professional association of more than 66,000 pediatricians, and the American College of Pediatricians, a socially conservative group of 200 pediatricians designated a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

CHECKLIST

The checklist is a wonderfully simple set of questions to ask when looking at an online story. The News Literacy Project created the checklist as part of a mission to "teach middle school and high school students how to sort fact from fiction in the digital age."

The checklist of questions for students to consider start with their emotional reactions to the story – noting that if the reaction is a strong one, that is a red flag. Further red flags are awarded to stories shared on social media and designed for easy sharing and use of excessive punctuation. Green credibility checks are awarded for a byline, expert or official sources cited in the story as well as hyperlinks to other credible sources. The checklist indicates, "The more red flags you circle, the more skeptical you should be!" ∎

https://www.dailywire.com/news/16157/insane-chris-pratt-forced-apologize-deaf-people-ben-shapiro

http://ew.com/movies/2017/05/04/chris-pratt-sign-language-apology-instagram-video/

https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/may/5/chris-pratt-apologizes-for-posting-video-that-some/

CREDIBLE OR CLICKBAIT

BACKGROUND: "Guardians of the Galaxy" actor Chris Pratt posted a video on Instagram in which he requested that people turn up the volume and not simply "read the subtitles." The post, which offended his fans who are hearing-impaired, has since been removed. In his May 4, 2017, apology, he used American Sign Language to apologize to his fans. The story is all over the internet so it is easy to find some credible stories and some that are more sensational for students to compare.

DIRECTIONS: With a partner, review each of the versions of the story above. Then, on your own paper, briefly answer each of the questions below. Be prepared to discuss your answers with the larger group.

1. What else, if anything, has the author of each story written? Does this give him or her more or less credibility? Why?

2. When was the story published? In relation to the original incident (May 4, 2017) does this give the story more or less credibility? Why?

3. Is the story biased? How do you know the story is biased?

4. Find other coverage of the story online. How does each story relate to the overall tone of coverage online?

5. What are the advertisements on the page of each website?

6. What is the general tone of the comments that accompany each story? Does this lead you to believe that the readers are biased? If so, in what way? Why?

BE SKEPTICAL. FACT CHECK.

Twitter user @san_kaido first shared the picture May 27, 2015, from Nasushiobara City, about 108 miles southwest of the Fukushima Daiichi power plant.
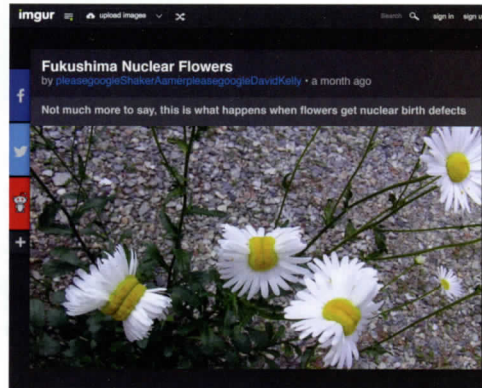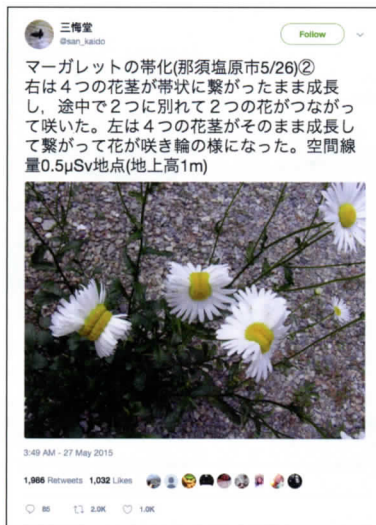
The image appeared on Imgur, a photo-sharing website, in July 2015.

VISUAL LITERACY: MUTANT DAISIES

BACKGROUND: All citizens need to know how to understand ideas that are portrayed visually. The Stanford History Education Group, in the study on evaluating information, assessed high school students' ability to determine whether a photograph of "mutated daisies" proved that the daisies were affected by radiation from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, a disabled nuclear power plant located in the towns of Ōkuma and Futaba in the Fukushima Prefecture, Japan. The plant suffered major damage from the magnitude 9.0 earthquake and the tsunami that hit Japan on March 11, 2011.

Fewer than 20 percent of the 454 students "constructed 'Mastery' responses." Now it is your turn.

DIRECTIONS: After looking at the pictures and background information, discuss your answer to each question below with a partner. Use your online search skills to learn more about the situation.

1. Does the picture provide strong evidence about the conditions near the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant? Explain your reasoning.

2. Where was the photograph taken? How do you know?

3. How close were the daisies to the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant?

4. Where else could it have been taken?

5. When was the photograph taken?

6. Who took the photograph? Who posted it to Imgur?

7. How often do daisies look like this?

8. What do scientists say about the effects of radiation on flowers, or daisies?

9. Where are the scientists quoted? (newspapers, science magazines, scholarly journals, "clickbait" websites, etc.)

10. What websites are talking about this photograph, and what is the consensus?

READ THE ENTIRE STUDY: Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning, https://purl.stanford.edu/fv751yt5934

NAME_____

EVALUATING WEBSITES: AUTHORITY AND BIAS

BY STEPHANIE WILLEN BROWN

DIRECTIONS: Pick a controversial topic of interest to you. Find various stories written on that topic recently on a variety of sources, including sources you would not normally check. Then fill out the checklist below to assess the validity of each source. Make notes so you are prepared to discuss what you find with the class.

THE SITE
Find an About Us page for each site. Is it credible?   ❏ Yes   ❏ Maybe   ❏ No
What makes you think so (or not)? Search the source on Google. Or find it on All Sides Bias
(https://www.allsides.com/bias/bias-ratings), Snopes or Factcheck.org. Is the website listed there?
What does it say?

_____

_____

THE AUTHOR/PUBLISHER
Is the author credible?   ❏ Yes   ❏ Maybe   ❏ No
Is there an author for the piece you are looking at? If there is no author, who is the site's publisher?
What are their credentials? How can you tell? Does this raise any red flags?

_____

_____

THE SOURCES
Are the external sources used by the author credible?   ❏ Yes   ❏ Maybe   ❏ No
What sources (people, academic papers, other websites) did the author mention in the article?

ADVERTISING, SPONSORS AND COMMENTS
List three of the site's advertisers or sponsors.
1._____
2._____
3._____

Is the advertising biased? If so, in what way?

_____

_____

_____

Are there comments on the story? What is the tone of the comments? Are they biased? If so, in what way?

_____

_____

_____

What does all this lead you to conclude about the credibility of the site? Explain.

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