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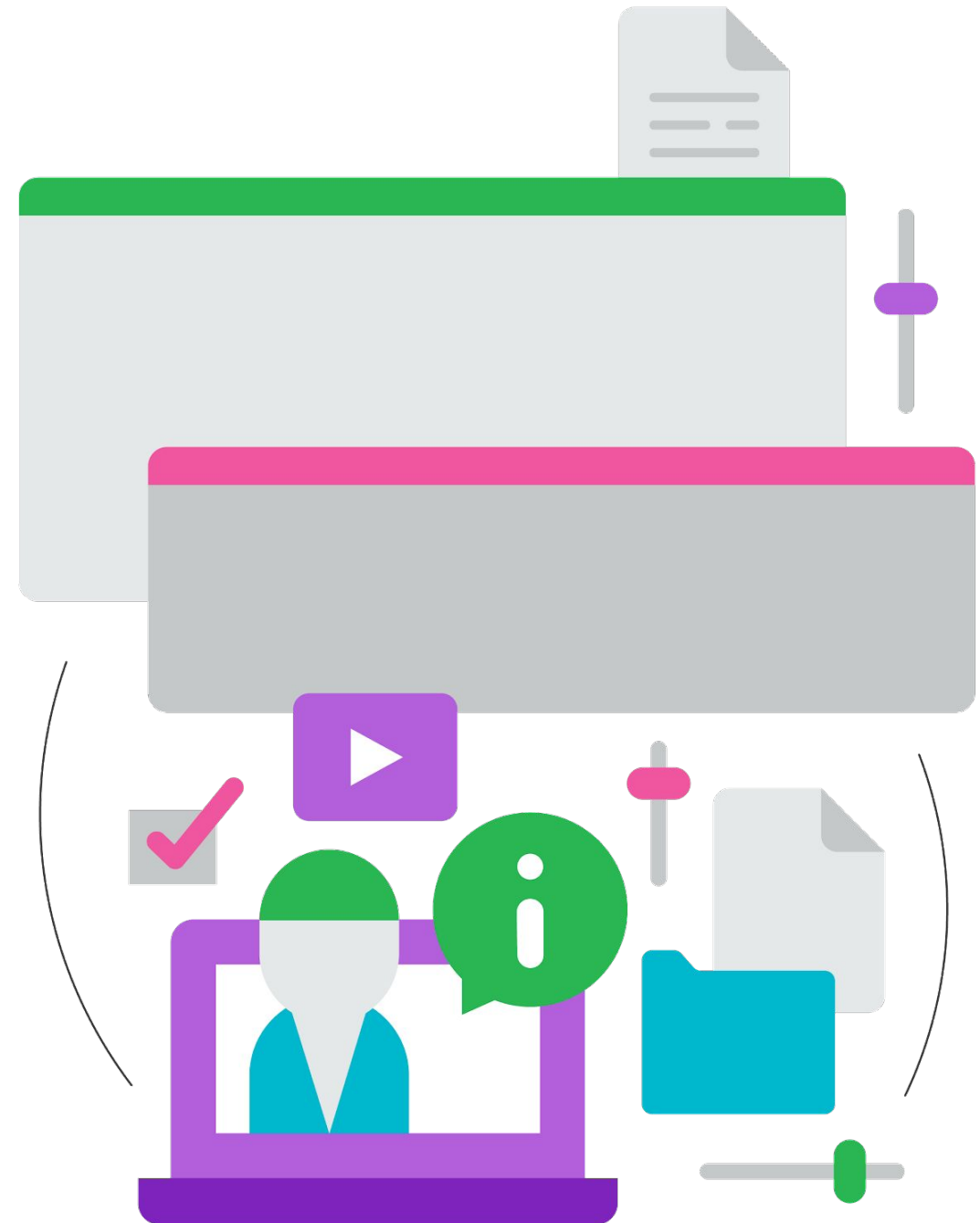


Understanding fake news

Building Critical Thinking Skills

By Mobilizing Expertise

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Introduction to Fake News

Fake news refers to false or misleading information presented as news, often designed to deceive or manipulate audiences, which masquerades as legitimate news. Generally, fake news falls into two categories:

Deliberately inaccurate stories – that is, the people publishing them know them to be false but publish them anyway. This might be to manipulate public opinion or to drive traffic to a specific website.

Stories that contain elements of truth but are broadly inaccurate. This might be because the writer hasn't checked all their facts or has exaggerated certain aspects to make a particular point.

Misinformation isn't a new phenomenon – the term “fake news” was actually used in the 19th century – but the internet and social media have transformed how it's created and spread.

Pre-internet, people tended to receive their news from trusted media sources whose journalists were required to follow strict codes of practice. The internet enabled new ways to publish, share and consume news and information, with relatively little regulation or editorial standards. Many people now consume news from social media and other online sources – but it's not always easy to determine which stories are credible and which are false.

Impressive fake news

Coronavirus fake news

The Covid-19 pandemic provided fertile ground for false information online, with numerous examples of fake news throughout the crisis. A persistent example of fake news in social media was the claim that 5G technology was linked to the spread of the virus – supposedly because 5G suppressed the immune system while the virus communicated through radio waves. These claims were not true and were repeatedly debunked by official sources but were still shared extensively.

US presidential election in 2016

Fake news and misinformation became a big issue during the US election in 2016, with false and misleading claims across the political spectrum. One analysis suggested that a large proportion of fake news generated in the election was created by teenagers in Macedonia, who found the more hyper-partisan stories they created, the more people clicked through and shared, and the more money they made as a result.

Boston Marathon bombing

In the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, false claims that the bombing was an elaborate ruse plotted by the US government circulated online. In the wake of many terrorist events across the world, conspiracy theories are often rife. The notion that they are "false flag" operations – i.e., carried out by the state or a secret cabal to pin the blame on others or provide cover for other activities – is a common trope.

Kim Jong-un – the sexiest man alive?

In 2012, satirical website The Onion ran an article claiming that North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un had been voted the sexiest man alive, declaring that "the Pyongyang-bred heartthrob is every woman's dream come true." In an example of how satire can sometimes be misunderstood across cultures, publications in China – including the online version of China's Communist Party newspaper – reported the claim as though it were true.

Critical Thinking

"The Power of Critical Thinking" is an important concept that emphasizes the ability to think clearly and rationally, understanding the logical connection between ideas. It involves questioning and evaluating information and arguments, discerning hidden values, recognizing built-in biases, and assessing the soundness of reasoning.

- Every piece of information can be influenced by biases, whether they are intentional or unconscious. By analyzing information critically, individuals can identify these biases and consider how they affect the validity of the information. This is crucial in preventing the spread and acceptance of fake news, which often exploits biases to create compelling but misleading narratives.
- Critical thinking involves assessing the evidence that supports a claim. This means looking at the quality, quantity, and relevance of the evidence. Information that is backed by strong, verifiable evidence is more likely to be true and reliable. Analyzing the evidence helps prevent the acceptance and spread of fake news, which often lacks solid backing.
- By teaching and practicing critical analysis of information, individuals become more equipped to question and verify the news and stories they encounter before sharing them. This is particularly important in a social media-driven age where misinformation can spread rapidly across platforms.
- Critical thinking and information analysis lead to more informed decision-making in all aspects of life, from personal decisions to professional and political ones. When people are able to discern reliable information from fake news, they make decisions based on accurate data, leading to more rational outcomes.

Importance of critical thinking

● **Analyse information:**

- Discerning Fact from Fiction
- Understanding Biases
- Evaluating Evidence
- Preventing Misinformation Spread
- Promoting Informed Decision-Making
- Encouraging Open-Mindedness

Make decisions:

- Choosing Reliable Sources:
- Assessing Information Credibility:
- Implementing Fact-Checking:
- Engaging or Disengaging with Content:
- Choosing Responses to Misinformation:
- Prioritizing Transparency and Accountability:
- Developing Personal and Organizational Policies:

Solve Problems:

- Developing Analytical Skills:
- Applying Logical Reasoning:
- Generating Solutions to Misinformation:
- Enhancing Decision-Making:
- Encouraging Strategic Thinking:
- Fostering Creativity:

Communicate effectively:

- Clarifying and Disseminating Truth:
- Building Public Trust:
- Educating About Media Literacy:
- Promoting Critical Dialogue:
- Advocating for Fact-Checking:
- Encouraging Responsiveness:
- Supporting Collaborative Efforts:
- Navigating Emotional Responses:

Types of fake news

Clickbait: Headlines, visuals, or captions do not support the content

Propaganda: Genuine content shared with false contextual information

Misleading headlines: Misleading use of information to frame an issue or an individual

Imposter content: Impersonating genuine sources

Satire or parody: No intention to cause harm but has the potential to fool

How to identify fake news

1. Check the source:

Check the web address for the page you're looking at. Sometimes, fake news sites may have spelling errors in the URL or use less conventional domain extensions such as ".infonet" or ".offer". If you are unfamiliar with the site, look in the About Us section.

2. Check the author:

Research them to see if they are credible – for example, are they real, do they have a good reputation, are they writing about their specific area of expertise, and do they have a particular agenda? Consider what the writer's motivation might be.

3. Check other sources:

Are other reputable news or media outlets reporting on the story? Are credible sources cited within the story? Professional global news agencies have editorial guidelines and extensive resources for fact-checking, so if they are also reporting the story, that's a good sign.

How to identify fake news

4. Maintain a critical mindset:

A lot of fake news is cleverly written to provoke strong emotional reactions such as fear or anger. Maintain a critical mindset by asking yourself – why has this story been written? Is it promoting a particular cause or agenda? Is it trying to make me click through to another website?

5. Check the facts:

Credible news stories will include plenty of facts – data, statistics, quotes from experts, and so on. If these are missing, question why. Reports with false information often contain incorrect dates or altered timelines, so it's a good idea to check when the article was published. Is it a current or old news story?

6. Check the comments:

Even if the article or video is legitimate, the comments below may not be. Often links or comments posted in response to content can be auto generated by bots or people hired to put out misleading or confusing information.

How to identify fake news

7. Check your own biases:

We all have biases – could these be influencing the way you respond to the article? Social media can create echo chambers by suggesting stories that match your existing browsing habits, interests, and opinions. The more we read from diverse sources and perspectives, the more likely it is that we can draw accurate conclusions.

8. Check whether it's a joke:

Satirical websites are popular, and sometimes it is not always clear whether a story is just a joke or parody. Check the website to see if it's known for satire or creating funny stories.

9. Check images are authentic:

Images you see on social media could have been edited or manipulated. Possible signs include warping – where straight lines in the background now appear wavy – as well as strange shadows, jagged edges, or skin tone that looks too perfect. Bear in mind, too, that an image may be accurate but simply used in a misleading context. You can use tools such as Google's Reverse Image Search to check where an image originates from and whether it has been altered.

Tools to unmask fake news

When reading an online article, it would be necessary to ask ourselves if the contents are real or fake. To help us in this mission, several tools have been created in the last years. It is possible to verify the truthfulness of news, by consulting fact-checking websites, which publish and define news to be true, false, or content-altered.

- EDMO (European Digital Media Observatory)
- WE-VERIFY PLUGIN
- THE FACTUAL

Activity: Evaluating news articles

Divide participants into groups and provide them with examples of news headlines to analyse for sensationalism, clickbait, or propaganda, misleading headlines, imposter content, and satire or parody.

Explain the importance of news outlets adhering to journalistic standards, such as accuracy, impartiality, and transparency.

Provide participants with news articles and ask them to evaluate the credibility of each article based on the criteria discussed.

Encourage participants to critically analyse news outlets by considering their track record, biases, and adherence to journalistic standards.

Stress the need to verify information through multiple credible sources and fact-checking organisations.

Activity: Real world scenarios

Discuss real-life examples of fake news spreading through social media and its consequences.

Discuss the role of education in empowering individuals to critically evaluate information and discern truth from falsehoods.

Facilitate a brainstorming session where participants can share ideas and strategies for fighting with fake news at individual and community levels.

Divide participants into groups and assign them scenarios where they must respond to fake news situations using critical thinking skills.

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