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Facing Fake News: Five Challenges and First Amendment Solutions

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Media literacy education is not new, but the spread of so-called "fake" news has brought new urgency to teaching it and renewed debate about the best ways to approach the topic. Requests for the Newseum's "Fighting Fake News" student class and professional development workshop poured in from the moment we rolled them out. We heard from teachers that students were easily confused by the rhetoric dismissing all media as "fake news"—and some teachers were themselves unsure of whom or what to trust. More concerning was that students seemed to lack not only the skills to decide what to believe, but also an understanding of why they should do the work of evaluating sources in the first place.

Tackling an already challenging topic that has also become politicized and sensationalized requires extra consideration and preparation. NewseumED has been teaching media literacy skills for two decades. Over the years, we've found that teaching the skills of accessing, analyzing, evaluating and creating media through a First Amendment lens hooks students and provides crucial context. Approaching fake news with this framing in mind makes it possible to keep the conversations practical and productive.

A First Amendment Lens

Using a First Amendment lens means introducing students to two ideas: a "what" and a "who." For the what, we ask students, "What does the First Amendment guarantee?" We show them the text of the First Amendment and point out that the Constitution guarantees freedom of the press, but does not regulate quality. Nowhere does it say the press must be kind, or accurate, or fair. The quality—or lack thereof—is left up to the creators. This context is critical to understanding why all of us should care about media literacy and have a role to play in our media.

The second part of looking at media literacy through a First Amendment lens delves deeper into that role by asking, "Who?" We ask students: "Who has ever posted on Facebook, Instagram, or other social media sites?" As the hands go up, we point out that posting photos and comments online is essentially a form of publishing information and ideas, their exercise of *freedom of the press*. This simple conclusion consistently surprises students and hooks them into exploring their role as media decision makers who can weigh quality and balance rights versus responsibilities.

Once students are hooked, we can move into exploring specific fake news content. Because it's both a political and pervasive topic, tackling it in the classroom brings up unique obstacles. Here, we discuss five challenges we've faced and road-tested responses.

Challenge 1: It's Too Confusing Tactic: Define What "Fake News" Is – And Isn't

Sometimes, talking about fake news feels like a national re-enactment of the famous Abbott and Costello "Who's on First?" skit. Everyone from experts to average folks can wind up talking past each other in an extended muddle of absurd questions and non-answers about politics, trolls and the press. When the president labels real polls as "fake news" and product ads claim to be "real news," is it any wonder that our conversations go in circles?

We head off this confusion at the pass by quickly assessing students' background knowledge and then establishing a common vocabulary. First, we ask students what they've heard about fake news, and press them to give examples. Then we tell students our definition, the one that will guide our conversation going forward: fake news is made-up information. We offer synonyms to drive the point home: Fake news is not real; it's lies. And we illustrate that point with headlines from the fake news website The National Report, which (during its characteristically short existence) made up stories wholesale, but presented them as true.

Next, we look at how the term fake news is being used incorrectly, the root of much of the confusion. We define and show examples of common misuses: for flawed news (incomplete stories or

mostly accurate ones with accidental errors), biased news (news packaged to reflect a certain viewpoint), and unpopular or unflattering reports or ideas. To better illustrate this range of content, you can find an extensive set of stories for middle and high school students here: **newseumed.org/activity/real-fake-flawed**.

A shared vocabulary ensures that students—and their teachers—start from a common understanding and investigate the same issues as they build their media literacy skills. As one teacher wrote us: "The idea that biased and flawed news is not fake news really made me reconsider my notions of Fake News and how I understand it, so that I can better teach it to my students." At the same time, it keeps students engaged by showing them the layers of confusion that even adults struggle with when tackling this topic and illustrating the need to be media literate so they can make sense of the free, and free-for-all, press.

Challenge 2: It Sounds Too Hard
Tactic: Make It Snappy

Becoming media literate is work. There's no way around that. But just like gyms don't demand multi-hour commitments from new members, we don't overwhelm students with multistep processes or long checklists to complete. Instead, we pin complex concepts to memorable sets of questions, like the acronym to escape junk news you see below (and online at **newseumed.org/escape**). Instead of an ordered checklist, it's more of a menu of tools and tactics. These visuals reinforce the processes practiced critical thinkers use to evaluate their information sources—and serve as an implicit reminder that students are capable of asking a few questions that will allow them to quickly sort fact from fiction.

We ask students to practice those questions in sprints, not marathons. We use the website **www.PollEverywhere.com** to set up a quick-fire challenge in which students have to categorize news stories that made the rounds on social media as real or fake. Topics range from the discovery of mutant daisies, to pink tap water flooding a town, to Harambe (the deceased gorilla) winning votes in the 2016 presidential election. In teams, students sort fact from fiction and give tweet-length rationales for their decisions. The speed here mimics students' existing media habits as they make rapid-fire judgments about the quality of the content they see. It sparks evidence-based discussions about clues to look for in the future and also illustrates that, with practice, they can become as fluent in media analysis as they are in media production.

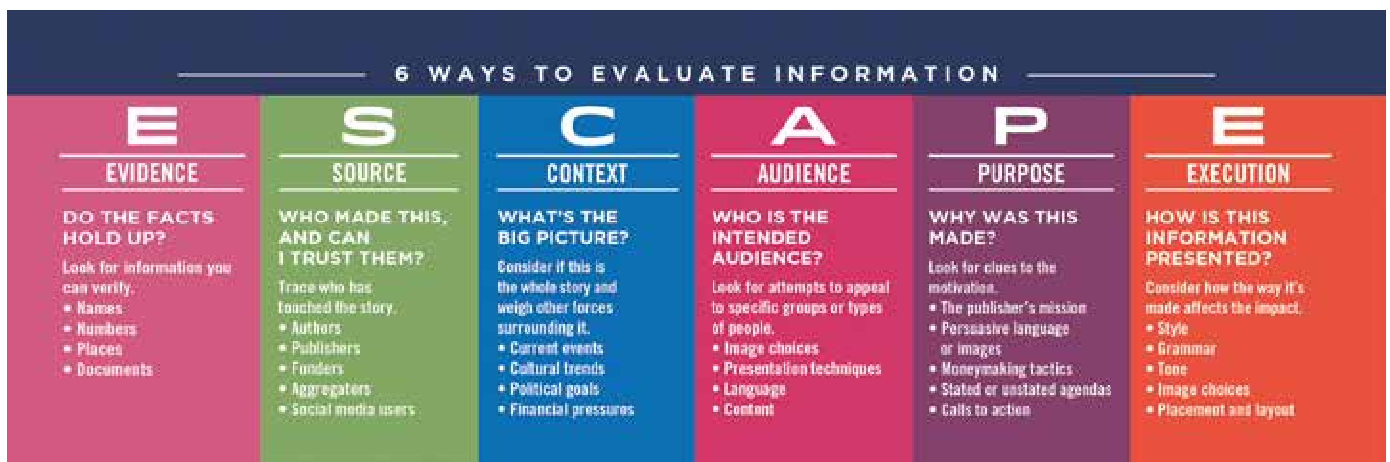
Challenge 3: There's Too Much Cynicism
Tactic: Go Inside the Journalism Process

One danger of consistently looking at flawed or half-hearted attempts at news is breeding cynicism in students. We want students to have a healthy skepticism of the news they consume, but not to disengage because they then assume that quality journalism doesn't exist. To achieve this balance, we lead activities in which students experience reporters' and editors' decision-making process.

For example, our Uncovering How the News is Made unit (**newseumed.org/uncovering-news**) helps students understand the steps journalists and editors go through to ensure their readers consume quality news. Case studies on rewriting captions and reporting illegal activities reveal what journalistic fairness, accuracy, and clarity look like. They prompt students to consider why journalists sometimes fail to produce ethical work, and the effects of publishing it.

In a lesson called "How the Medium Shapes the Message" (**newseumed.org/medium-shapes-message**), students turn from uncovering the content process to considering the role of technology in shaping the news they consume. They compare and contrast content and layout choices in print, television, and social media stories to understand the roles journalists, news consumers, and the platforms used to share and consume information can play in determining what stories get reported and how.

By digging into the decision-making processes of journalists and deconstructing their own interactions with news and information, students learn what quality looks like and why it can be difficult to achieve, at times despite best efforts.



They become invested in weighing the process as well as the final product as they seek out their own trusted sources.

Challenge 4: It's Too Personal
Tactic: Discuss Historical Examples

A First Amendment lens reminds us to ground debates about the present in lessons from the past. By contextualizing today's press problems with the hoaxes and scams that preceded them, we establish an environment in which all students can feel comfortable participating. Students don't have to fess up to being fooled by the latest social media hoax or feel defensive about their media choices.

We provide an activity in which students apply the E.S.C.A.P.E. acronym to a set of primary sources from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Students analyze front pages containing a fake proclamation allegedly issued by President Lincoln; details of "new life" discovered on the moon; and coverage of the panic caused by a radio broadcast of Orson Welles's "War of the Worlds" in 1938. By comparing and contrasting these historical fake news examples, students can wrestle with questions of motivation and technique that still resonate today, but without the distractions of contemporary politics or personal experiences. You can find the activity materials here: **newseumed.org/fake-news-through-history**.

Challenge 5: It's Not Personal Enough
Tip: Talk About the Weather

In national discussions about the seriousness of the fake news phenomenon, the conversation often leads back to the story of "Pizzagate," the unfounded conspiracy theory about Hillary Clinton running a child sex-trafficking ring. These false reports prompted a citizen from North Carolina to drive to Washington, D.C., and fire a gun in a busy pizza place. While clearly a serious incident, such direct, dangerous actions resulting from the spread of misinformation are relatively rare. So how, then, should we illustrate the more realistic impacts of fake news while still convincing students they should care about this phenomenon?

We have found that the most banal of topics—the weather—works wonders to get the conversation started. We ask students how they decide if they should wear t-shirts or turtlenecks in the morning. Their answer: check the weather, of

New York Post

RADIO 'WAR' PANIC BRINGS INQUIRY; U. S. TO SCAN BROADCAST SCRIP

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course. Then we push students to consider: What if local media outlets started publishing fake weather reports? What would the effects be? Students can jump in on these questions without needing any background knowledge, but it starts to make the issue of fake news and how it can corrupt our expectations of the media more concrete.

Political fake news stories are important to acknowledge and discuss, but they're created to elicit outrage and blame. The sensationalism is calculated to shut down conversation. Stick with the weather to start to help students see the importance of media literacy for communities as well as individuals, and on a scale with everyday impact rather than extreme outcomes.

Take Hurricane Harvey, for example. The difficulty of getting accurate information during the storm and flooding led to an abundance of odd-but-true, incomplete and inaccurate stories that are hard to distinguish from each other at first glance. Was a shark swimming across a flooded highway? (No.) Did you need to watch out for a raft of fire ants floating down a street? (Yes.) Were mandatory evacuations ordered in Houston? (No, but they *were* in nearby communities.)

These stories were shared in newspapers, on TV and on YouTube. Some could have had serious consequences; some were harmless pranks. Analyzed together, they show how all members of a community, from children to seniors, need to be able to separate real, fake, and flawed stories in order to stay healthy, connected, and well-informed.

Conclusion

Media literacy has never been more necessary—or more demanding—than it is today. And freedom of the press only amplifies its importance and complexity. The First Amendment gives us access to a full range of information and freedom to do with that information as we choose. The ease with which everyone can participate in today's information cycle, from writing to reposting, means that it's becoming ever more challenging to stay current and engaged with the media. Our hope at NewseumED is that teaching media literacy through a First Amendment lens provides a foundation for holding ourselves accountable for identifying, creating, and sharing news that supports informed engagement with our world. With effective training and practice, we all can create citizens who think critically, express themselves effectively, examine diverse viewpoints and effectively balance their rights and responsibilities.

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