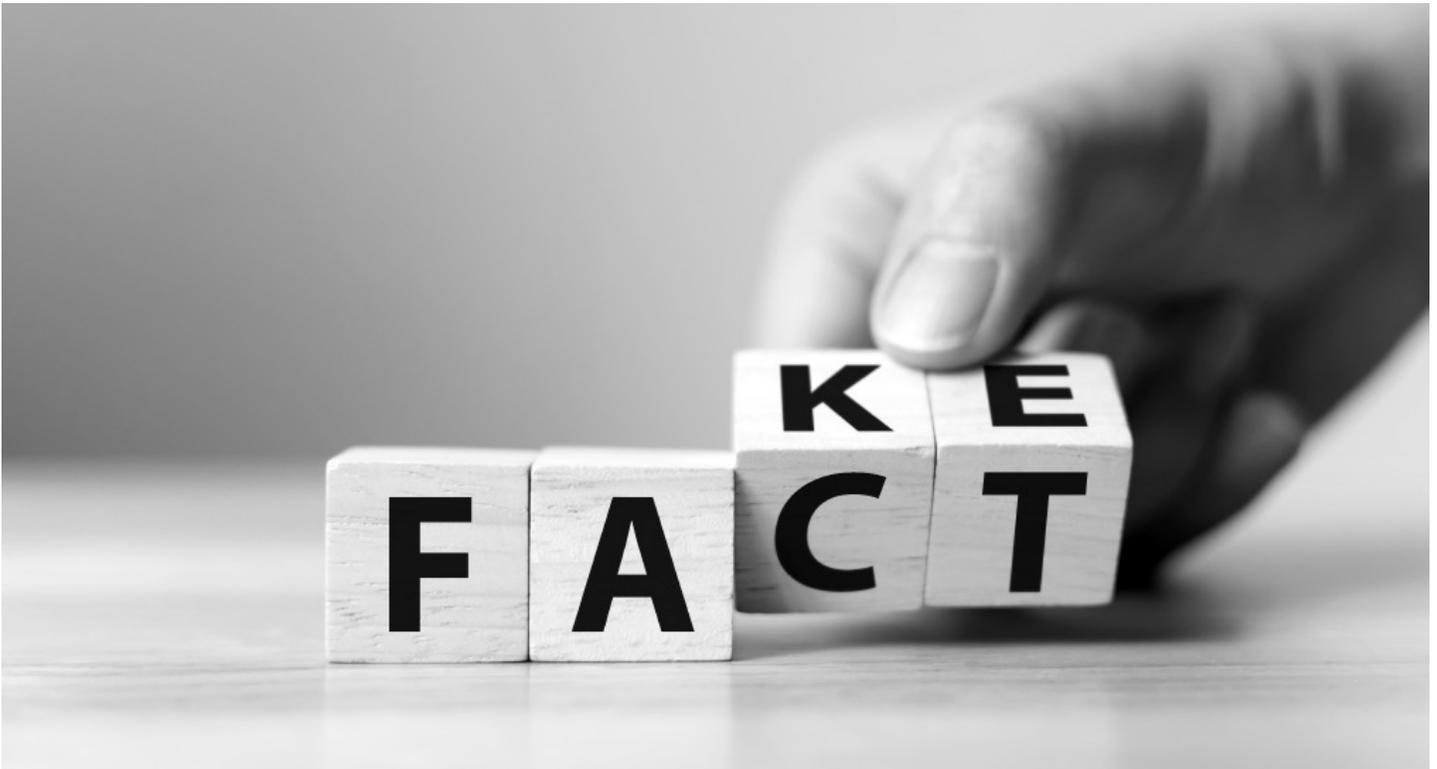# ONLINE VERIFICATION SKILLS

Citizens face an information ecosystem where it is increasingly challenging to separate fact from fiction and to recognize what is credible.

Posts on social media are designed to look similar to one another, so it can be difficult to figure out where information is coming from, and if it is reliable. People often share posts without paying attention to the source or evaluating trustworthiness. Therefore, it is very easy for wrong information to spread, especially when no one is policing the facts.

'Fake news' has become a politicized and controversial term in recent years. The phrase is convenient, but because it describes so many things, its usefulness is limited. All kinds of wrong information are labelled 'fake news' — from articles intended to deceive people, to misleading memes, to clickbait headlines, to conspiracy theories. Some people even call news reports they don't like 'fake news' as a way to discredit reliable sources, which only adds to the confusion.

To understand the problem of wrong information, it helps to define and categorize the main types.

Misinformation is false information, but the person sharing it believes it to be true. While misinformation can be damaging, its intent is not to cause harm. Examples could include a factual error caused by misunderstanding, a manipulated image, or a real photo that appears with a made up story.

Disinformation is false information that is deliberately created and shared to cause harm. It has the goal of confusing people about what is true and influencing how they think and act. For example, a false rumour circulated about a political candidate that causes others to doubt their trustworthiness is disinformation.

Together, all this mis- and disinformation can be thought of as "**information pollution**."

Unreliable stories or posts can be interesting or funny or spark an emotion that makes us want to believe and share them with friends. People contribute to the problem by sharing false and misleading content.

Information pollution poses a serious threat to democracy as it can negatively influence political views and decisions. This is a particular concern at election time. There is also a risk that if people do not know what to believe they will become cynical and not trust any source.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

What are the consequences of information pollution?
How can I verify information online?

PURPOSE

Being able to determine what is fact or fiction online has become an essential skill of citizenship in the digital age. We need to think critically about what we see, learn the tools to fact-check information, develop the habits to verify stories and claims and establish a trusted list of sources.

In this lesson, students participate in an online interactive game, 'FakeOut,' which gives them a chance to assess their ability to detect 'fake news' before and after learning the tricks of verification. Afterwards, students will review what they learned and practice applying the skills.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the lesson, I can…

• Explain why it is important to verify information online;
• Describe the skills I can use to check a source, claim or image;
• Apply the online verification skills to the information I see online.

INTRODUCTION

1. Using the "Online Verification Skills" Slide Deck, show students the three photos, and ask them to determine which is real or fake. Have students commit to answers by writing them down.

2. Ask students to 'Turn and Talk' with a classmate and discuss the following questions.
• Do you believe everything you see online?
• How do you know what you see online is true? Have you ever been fooled?
• What criteria do you use to assess if something is true or trustworthy?

3. Reveal the answers to the three images from Step 1.

ACTIVITIES

1. Introduce the concepts of information pollution, misinformation and disinformation, using the animated video 'Information Pollution' and/or the Slide Deck.

2. Have students play 'FakeOut,' the online interactive game available at www.newsliteracy.ca. By registering and creating a class account, you can monitor each student's ability to detect fake news before and after learning the tricks of verification. This game can be played on mobile devices, tablets or computers.

a) **Set-up:** Explain to students that they will get to test their ability to detect fake news through an online game. Distribute the link to students and have them enter a personal identifier for tracking purposes.

b) **Play Round 1:** In the first round, students face a newsfeed of 10 articles, memes and images from various sources. Using only their instincts, students are asked to assess the trustworthiness of each post by 'liking' the ones they think are true and 'trashing' the ones they believe to be false.

Afterwards, students are presented with their score out of 10 and they are then given the choice to review their answers from Round 1.

c) **Watch the tutorials:** Using the video tutorials, review the following tricks you can use to verify information. It is suggested that you watch these videos as a class. However, students can also watch them independently in the Skills section of game.

• 'Check the Source' – Who produced the information? Search Wikipedia or Google to learn about the source's reputation.
• 'Check the Claim' – What do other sources say? Search keywords or the headline to learn more about a claim.
• 'Check the Image' – Has the image been altered or used out of context? A reverse-image search can help you find out.

d) **Review how the skills work in the game:** Explain to students that these skills are incorporated into Round 2 of the game. For each post, options are available to 'check a source,' 'check a claim,' or 'check an image.' Have students practice using the checks in the example in the online interactive game prior to playing Round 2. (They will not be able to advance to Round 2 without looking at each check in the tutorial.)

e) Play Round 2: Students will face a new newsfeed of 10 articles, memes and images. This time, three pink plus signs representing the checks appear on each post. Clicking the plus sign will reveal the information found by using each check. Not every check will work every time, but players can employ as many checks as they like. At least one check must be clicked on before submitting a 'like' or 'trash' response.

f) Review the results: After submitting an answer for all the posts, a results screen shows the score for Round 2, as well as how it compares to Round 1. Teachers will have access to this data through the admin panel and the class account.

At the end of Round 2, students can review the results from the round in detail or re-watch the skills videos.

CONCLUSION

Review the fact that these verification habits can be used very quickly when reviewing information. Using the "Verification Skills—Review and Practice" Activity, have students consolidate their learning by writing down what they learned from the activity and have them practice the skills on their own time.

- Part 1: REVIEW – What did you learn from this lesson? Write down helpful notes for each check.
- Part 2: PRACTICE – Select two social media posts you come across and practice investigating them. Write down what you find out.

EXTENSIONS

1. Introduce additional skills that can be used to verify sources by watching the video series, 'Online Verification Skills with Mike Caulfield,' available at www.newswise.com/videos.

- 'Video 1: Introductory Video' (3:14) – Introductory video which uses an experiment to highlight the importance of developing verification skills.
- 'Video 2: Investigate the Source' (2:43) – Who, exactly, is the publication or organization behind the story or claim? Find out information about what you are reading with an online search (i.e., Google) or by using Wikipedia.
- 'Video 3: Find the Original Source' (1:33) – With so much re-reporting online, it is important to find the original reporting source and determine its credibility.
- 'Video 4: Look for Trusted Work' (4:10) Look at fact-checking sites like Snopes and HoaxEye on Twitter, or established news sources to confirm stories or claims.

2. Have students practice these skills with examples provided in the "Online Verification Practice" Activity.