

How Do You Decide What News to Believe, What to Question and What to Dismiss?

Do you have confidence in your ability to distinguish between fact and opinion? What about between reliable journalism and fake news? Do you think of yourself as a savvy news consumer?

By Shannon Doyne and Michael Gonchar

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Knowing what's going on in one's community, country and the world is important. But with so many different ways to get information about current events — from social media sites like Facebook and Snapchat, TV channels like NBC and Fox News, newspapers like The New York Times and your local paper, not to mention from friends and family — it's hard not to be bombarded with a fire hose of information. How do you decide what to believe, what to question and what to just plain ignore?

Do you have confidence in your ability to distinguish between fact and opinion? What about between reliable journalism and fake news? Do you think of yourself as a savvy news consumer?

In "These Students Are Learning About Fake News and How to Spot It," Alina Tugend writes about news literacy instruction in schools:

The students sit at desks in groups of four, watching videos about the recent bush fires in Australia. One shows an apocalyptic landscape in flames, the other a tourist paradise, with assurances that much of the continent is safe.

Instead of dismissing both as fake news, the eighth graders know what questions to ask to tease out the nuances: Who put out the videos? What does each source have to gain? How big is Australia? Could both videos be true?

It is no wonder these students at Herbert S. Eisenberg Intermediate School 303 in the Coney Island neighborhood of Brooklyn approach their task with such sophistication. They have been studying news literacy since sixth grade in one of the only schools in the country to make the subject part of an English language arts curriculum that all students must take for an hour a week for three years.

News, or media, literacy — how to critically understand, analyze and evaluate online content, images and stories — is not new. But it has taken on urgency in the last few years as accusations of fake news and the reality of disinformation permeate the internet and people — especially young ones — spend hours and hours a day looking at screens.

"Media literacy is *the* literacy of the 21st century," said a recent report by the nonprofit group Media Literacy Now.

The article points out the dangers of believing — or doubting — everything one reads or simply not having the skills or the desire to verify information:

Research has shown that an inability to judge content leads to two equally unfortunate outcomes: People believe everything that suits their preconceived notions, or they cynically disbelieve everything. Either way leads to a polarized and disengaged citizenry.

Other recent research suggests that while so-called digital natives — preteens and teenagers — are technically savvy, most of them fail when it comes to assessing the veracity of news articles and images.

"If they were on a highway, it would be equivalent to not knowing you should stop at a stop sign. That's really the state of ignorance we're dealing with," said Sam Wineburg, a professor of education at Stanford University and executive director of the Stanford History Education Group, a research and development consortium.

Students, read the entire article, then tell us:

- Does the example of the class that watched the video about wildfires in Australia remind you of anything you have experienced in school? Do your teachers ever ask you to evaluate sources and determine reliability?
- The article mentions research suggesting that young people "fail when it comes to assessing the veracity of news articles and images." Do you think you're good at spotting fake news? What about your friends? How do you decide what to believe, what to question and what to dismiss?

- In the article, Maria Carnesi says, “This generation is very disillusioned by news — everything is fake news.” To what degree do you agree with her observation? Have you seen this attitude among your peers? Does this ever reflect your own thinking?
- Ms. Carnesi also says, “News literacy is really empowering for young people.” Do you think building news literacy skills is important for students? Should it be taught in school? Do you agree that learning these skills is “empowering?” Why?

Students 13 and older are invited to comment. All comments are moderated by the Learning Network staff, but please keep in mind that once your comment is accepted, it will be made public.