

# THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY: INFORMATION

## Understanding Fake News

### Overview

In this lesson, students learn about how to identify fake news and about the factors that make many of us believe fake news is real. They also learn how to spot fake news online in order to avoid it. First, students read and discuss an article about why people fall for fake news and how it proliferates on the Web. Next, students familiarize themselves with the SEARCH checklist for sifting out fake news in online information. Finally, students apply elements of SEARCH and analyze actual news sources.

### Standards and Topics

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.B:** Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision-making (e.g., informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, presentation of alternate views), clear goals and deadlines, and individual roles as needed.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.B:** Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2:** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4:** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines *faction* in *Federalist* No. 10).
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2:** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

### Topics: fake news, news, media literacy, elections

### Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Define fake news and identify the characteristics of fake news.
- Explain the factors that lead internet-users to believe fake news.
- Examine a news article to determine if it is legitimate news or fake news.

### Materials

- **Handout A – Understanding Fake News** (one per student).
- **Handout B – SEARCH for the Truth About Fake News** (one per student)
- **Handout C – Text of article from CNN.com**
- **Handout D – Text of article from Daily Buzz Live**

## Procedure

### I. Focus Discussion

- A. Ask students: *How would you define a lie?* (Answers may vary, but look for the definition of “an intentionally false statement.” Intent is very important in defining a lie, and in defining “fake news.”) Then tell students: *Think of a time when someone lied to you.*
- B. After a moment, ask students: *How did you find out it was a lie that was told to you?* (Here, students may share answers only to the extent that they are comfortable. You can ask anyone to share, as long as it’s not too personal. Students may share that they had to find out true information from different people (sources) to realize that they had been told a lie.)
- C. Tell students: *Today, you’re going to learn about how false information is intentionally spread on the internet in what we call “fake news.” You’ll also learn about ways to find out if what you’re reading online is fake news.*

### II. Reading – Understanding Fake News

- Distribute **Handout A - Understanding Fake News** to each student. Give students time to complete the reading.
  - Allow students to work in pairs to discuss and answer the Writing & Discussion questions, or have each students write answers for homework.
  - Note that neither this lesson nor Part 2 (“Tackling Fake News”) deal with the investigation into Russian government interference in the 2016 election, documented in *The Mueller Report* (2019). Issues related to Russian government-interference and other foreign interference in U.S. elections generally will be part of a separate lesson in *The Challenge of Democracy*, “Political Propaganda.”
- A. Conduct a whole-class discussion using the **Writing & Discussion** questions or assign the questions for assessment (see Part IV).
    1. What is the definition of fake news? (*intentionally fabricated news stories*) Why would satire or editorials not be considered fake news? (*The intent behind satire is to entertain. The intent behind an editorial is to express an opinion. The intent behind fake news is to mislead, either for money or for political gain.*) Why would some advertising be considered fake news? (*Some is designed to look like news but could contain false information intended to mislead.*)
    2. What are the main reasons why people believe fake news is real? Which reason do you think is the strongest, and why? (*Many people have lost faith in traditional news media. Many people trust peer recommendations, even when the information is false.*)

### III. Activity: SEARCH for the Truth About Fake News

- A. Tell students that today they will work in teams to determine if examples of news articles are fake news or legitimate news.
- B. Divide the class into pairs of two or groups of three to four students each. Distribute the **Handout B - SEARCH for the Truth About Fake News** to each person in each group. Review the instructions and answer any questions that students may have.

- C. Give students time to read through the SEARCH description. (“SEARCH” stands for Sources of the Information, Errors, Advocacy, Research, Comprehensiveness, Hyperlinks.)
- D. Distribute **Handout C** to half of the groups and **Handout D** to the other half of the groups. This will be the “SEARCH Article” on the students’ SEARCH worksheet.
  1. As a group, students should work together to read the assigned news article and write notes on the second side of **Handout B** following the questions and prompts in the chart.
    - a. Each group should choose (1) one spokesperson who will report out a summary of the article content and (2) at least one other spokesperson who will report out the group’s other findings from Handout B.
    - b. Every member of the group should also be ready to report out what steps from the SEARCH checklist would be the most effective for them to use.
  2. **Handout C** is an example of a legitimate news article, corroborated by multiple news outlets. **Handout D** is an example of a fake-news article. (See Source List below.)
  3. You may choose a different article for one or both groups, which is fine. Make sure half the groups have a legitimate-news article, and the other half have a fake-news article. You may choose local or national news for the legitimate article. Fake news is rarely intended for a local audience. Your city’s or town’s local newspaper likely has a website of its own where you could choose a news article. Be sure whatever you choose comes from the news section and not the opinion or editorial section.

#### IV. Assessment/Closure

- A. Have each group report out as indicated in Part III(D)(1)(a) above. One person from each group should summarize what the article was about, and then at least one other student should report out the group’s findings noted on Handout B. Other students can ask questions of any member of a reporting group about what SEARCH steps they would take next.
  1. Debrief with each group by asking the following questions:
    - a. Which part of the SEARCH checklist would be most helpful in assessing the source? Why?
    - b. When you saw the source, did you immediately judge it to be fake news or not? What made you assume that?
  2. In case there is any question, reveal that **Handout C** reflects a legitimate news source, and **Handout D** reflects a fake news source. The following notes may be helpful in your debriefing:
    - a. The news story on **Handout C**, as incredible as it sounds, is corroborated on multiple news sites. Even though the headline is somewhat sensationalized (emphasizing the weird aspects of the story), the story is factual.

- b. The news story on **Handout D** comes from a site described as a “fake news site” on Wikipedia.com (see Source List below). The article was originally written by a comedian named Rob Fox on the *Rare* website (see Source List below). However, *Daily Buzz Live* slightly edited and then reprinted Fox’s story without a byline (no date or author indicated), so it appears as a sincere news story on the *Daily Buzz Live* site.
- B. Have each student write answers to the **Writing & Discussion** questions after having done the reading, activity, and debriefing. Look for answers that use the text and the activity discussions as evidence.

## Source List

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## Understanding 'Fake News'



Wikimedia Commons

Fake news is literally a very big problem. According to the Pew Research Center in 2019, more Americans view “made-up news” as a “very big problem” for the United States than similarly view racism, illegal immigration, sexism, or terrorism as problems. But what exactly is fake news?

Here is an example. A September 2016 video on YouTube purported to be posted by “a professor at a medical school.” It claimed that Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton had a kind of dementia that gave her only one year to live. The video, however, was based on forged medical records “leaked” online. Within five days of its posting, the video had 300,000 views. By June 2019, it had over a million views, even though Clinton is still alive as of this writing.

Generally, the term “fake news” means intentionally fabricated news stories, like the video above. These stories are presented without any credible evidence and for the apparent purpose to misinform, mislead, or enrage people. Creators of fake news might make money by publishing stories with outrageous headlines as “clickbait” for internet users. Clicks often turn into money from advertisers on fake-news websites. But creators might also be driven by a political agenda.

Often, people will use the term to simply describe a news story from a traditional source that contains a mistake. But traditional news sources correct factual errors and have an obligation to notify readers of factual mistakes. Sometimes, too, people use the term to refer to news that seems to contradict their own point of view. President Donald Trump regularly refers to traditional news outlets, particularly CNN and the *New York Times*, as “fake news” in his tweets and public statements. He has even tweeted, “Any negative polls are fake news.”

Regardless of competing definitions of what fake news is, we do know what it is not. Fake news does not include satire, such as *The Onion*, a site that bills itself as “America’s Finest News Source.” Nonetheless, people frequently share *Onion* stories as if they were real, including “news” stories such as “Wolf Attacks Still Leading Cause of Death in U.S.” or “Taylor Swift Now Dating Senator Joseph McCarthy.”

Fake news also does not generally include opinion writing, such as an editorial or “commentary.” Fake news presents itself as fact. Readers should always be skeptical of opinion writers who do not refer to provably true facts in their writing. But at least such writers say they are writing opinions. Supposed news articles that do not refer to provably true facts are designed to mislead and misinform the reader.



## Who Falls for Fake News?

Conservatives and liberals alike are susceptible to believing fake news. Seventeen of the 20 most-shared fake-news stories in the run-up to the November 2016 election favored Donald Trump. But since the election, many liberal critics of Trump have increasingly shared fake-news stories.

In February 2017, for example, a story on AlternativeMediaSyndicate.com claimed that police had burned down the camps of protestors against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, North Dakota. Then-President-elect Trump supported the pipeline. The article showed a picture of burning tipis. Facebook users shared the article 300,000 times. But the picture was actually from a 2007 HBO movie, and the story of burning camps was false.

Many Americans seem to have lost faith in traditional news media, including newspapers, news magazines, nonpartisan polls, and broadcast television. An Axios/SurveyMonkey poll released in June 2018 revealed that 72% of adult Americans believe that “traditional major news sources report news they know to be fake, false, or purposely misleading.” About 63% of those polled believe that these sources report fake news because they “have an agenda.”

This distrust in traditional news media has a partisan edge. In Pew’s 2019 report on Americans’ views of very big problems facing their country, Republicans were found to be three times as likely as Democrats to blame journalists themselves for the creation of misinformation in the media. Both Republicans and Democrats alike, however, have a strong tendency to view politicians and their staffs as the creators of made-up news.

### Fake News . . . or Not?

Ironically, sometimes even representatives of news outlets themselves promote distrust in the news media. On June 6, 2019, Fox News host Laura Ingraham interviewed President Trump in Normandy, France, the site of the D-Day landing during World War II. It was the 75th anniversary of the landing, and people had gathered to commemorate the event. During the interview, the president said that the people gathered “don’t realize . . . that I’m holding them up because of this interview.” Immediately after the interview aired, however, Ingraham told her viewers, “Some of you may have heard or read that President Trump supposedly held up the entire D-Day ceremony in order to do this interview with me. That is patently false – fake news.”

## How Is Fake News Spread?

Bad news travels fast, the old saying goes. But fake news on social media travels even faster. The public today consumes and shares the news more and more on social media. In 2017, the Pew Research Center found that 20% of adult Americans get news from social media often. At the same time, 67% of adult Americans get at least some news from social media — up from 44% just the year before. And according to new research, social media and fake news seem practically made for each other.

Professor Caitlin O’Connor teaches philosophy of science at University of California, Irvine, and has traced the fake-news problem to trust and the human “bias toward conformity.” In choosing what to believe, people commonly trust peer recommendations. This is true in advertising, financial advice, and news on social media. When a friend or family member shares articles or reposts a tweet, we perceive the information as coming from a reliable source. If it is, in fact, unreliable fake news, we may not realize it because of the trusted peer-source.

And O'Connor points out that it is natural for humans to want to conform, too. There is safety in conformity. But conformity has its downside. If one person in a group finds evidence that may contradict the group's shared beliefs, that person risks being shunned by the group. If a group's shared belief is false, all the members will share the false information with each other. And there are strong social pressures for each person not to question information.

Moreover, neither conformity nor trust in fake news is the product of lower intelligence, according to O'Connor and her fellow scholars. "It's something that happens on the left and right," she says, "among well-educated and poorly educated people. Our human ties and connections shape what we believe."

Young people can be particularly susceptible. In a study by the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) at Stanford's Graduate School of Education, researchers found that students of different ages have difficulty evaluating information they encounter online. In its 2016 report, SHEG found that high school students could not explain the blue checkmark on Twitter and Facebook accounts. The checkmark signifies an account that is verified as legitimate. Over 30% of the students identified fake accounts as more trustworthy than blue-checked accounts.

In the Stanford study, over 80% of middle school students believed that advertisements designed to look like news articles but clearly labeled "sponsored content" were actually news articles. SHEG researchers found that the students simply did not know that when a post is marked "sponsored content," that means it is paid for by advertisers hoping to persuade readers to buy something. It is not actually news.

## Writing & Discussion

1. What is the definition of fake news? Why would satire or editorials not be considered fake news? Why would some advertising be considered fake news?
2. What are the main reasons why people believe fake news is real? Which reason do you think is the strongest, and why?

# SEARCH for the Truth About Fake News

To be an effective internet and digital-media user — a “netizen” — it is important to evaluate the information you find on the internet. News and information almost always comes from an online source: a website. Use this SEARCH checklist to analyze the credibility and content of the websites from where you get your news articles and information, whether you suspect they are fake news or legitimate news.

**SOURCES OF THE INFORMATION.** Who sponsors the website (or website where a particular article has been published)? What does the website’s “About” section tell you? Look up the sponsors on a search engine (e.g., Google). What can you learn about the sponsors from the links that come up? Are the sponsors also advocates of a particular position? What bias, if any, can you detect? Who created the specific article or document available at the website? What are their qualifications? What bias, if any, can you detect? Does a specific article quote credible sources for claims?

**ERRORS.** Are there any obvious errors — dates, names, historical facts — in the website’s articles? Use vetted (tested) fact-checking websites such as Snopes.com (for general news and viral videos), FactCheck.org (for political news and ads), Politifact.com (for politicians’ claims), and Wikipedia pages marked with a padlock symbol (to show that its content cannot be edited by just anyone on the internet).

**ADVOCACY.** If the website advocates a particular public policy, determine what the goals of the public policy are; who is for the policy and who is against it; and what the policy’s benefits and costs are. Determine what advocacy position the website’s sponsors take and whether it is a position that seems reasonable.

**RESEARCH.** Check the material on the website using at least two additional sources on the same subject (books, periodicals, or other websites). Has any other news site reported on a particular story from this website? (Often, fake-news sites have a lot of “scoops,” or stories not reported on anywhere else. Legitimate news sites might also have exclusive stories, but usually not several on any one day. And legitimate news sites will inform you if their source information can be *corroborated*, or confirmed by other independent sources.)

**COMPREHENSIVENESS.** Does a website’s news article present more than one view on the subject or issue? If a controversial issue is presented, does the news article fairly provide other points of view or counterarguments?

**HYPERLINKS.** Does the website provide links to other sites? What are the nature and quality of these other sites? Do the links advocate the same view as that on the website? How do they differ? Does a specific article on the website contain links to sources cited?





# A traffic stop turns up whiskey, a gun and a rattlesnake, police say – and that was before they found the uranium

By Allen Kim, CNN

Thu July 11, 2019

(CNN) — When police officers pulled over Stephen Jennings in Guthrie, Oklahoma, on June 26, they searched the car and got a lot more than they bargained for.

Jennings was pulled over about 11 a.m. after an officer noticed that his car tags were expired, police say. He alerted the officers that there were a few other issues likely to arise: There was a gun in the vehicle, for starters.

His passenger, Rachael Rivera, was charged with possession of a firearm after a former felony conviction.

Then, police said, the officers found that the car had been reported stolen and began to dig a little deeper.

And their discoveries: one bottle of Kentucky Deluxe whiskey and one rattlesnake.

“So now he’s got a rattlesnake, a stolen vehicle, firearm and somebody under arrest,” Guthrie Police Sgt. Anthony Gibbs told CNN affiliate KFOR.

Then they found one more thing: a canister of radioactive powdered uranium.

“When that happens, of course, we call in a company that deals with that specifically, and it’s taken safely into possession,” Gibbs said. “The uranium is the wild card in that situation.”

The rattlesnake, it should be noted, was happily stored in a terrarium in the back seat.

Jennings is charged with possession of a stolen vehicle, transporting an open container of liquor, operating a motor vehicle with a suspended license and failure to carry a security verification form.

The Guthrie Police Department has not filed charges related to the uranium; officers are still looking into a potential motive.

The rattlesnake brought no additional charges.

Source: Kim, Allen. “A traffic stop turns up whiskey, a gun and a rattlesnake, police say – and that was before they found the uranium.” CNN.com. 11 July 2019. Accessed 11 July 2019. URL: <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/11/us/rattlesnake-uranium-oklahoma-trnd/index.html>.

# Check Your Grapes! 700-800 People a Year Find Black Widows in Them

By Daily Buzz Live

(No date)

A woman in Omaha, Nebraska got an extremely unfun surprise when she went to snack on some grapes she'd recently purchased at her local Hy-Vee grocery store: pure terror.

Pure terror, that is, in the form of a male and a female black widow spider that burrowed itself INSIDE the grape!

The woman nearly bit into the grape, but luckily saw the movement inside before indulging. Then, presumably, she dropped the bag on the ground and briefly considered burning her house down.

According to a totally unacceptable statistic cited by one wildlife expert, about *700 to 800 people a year* find black widow spiders in their grapes.

Yeah that's not going to fly. It's pretty unreasonable to demand absolutes, but that number needs to be brought down to a hard zero.

According to Hy-Vee spokesperson Christina Gayman, a decrease in pesticide use is to blame for the increase in mini-demons hiding in your produce.

To be fair, black widow bites are rarely deadly, though that's only a mild comfort. You still need to see the doctor *immediately* if bitten by one. (No word on what to do if you accidentally put one in your mouth when reaching for a grape and it starts biting your insides. See the doctor super duper fast?)

A black widow spider is also more scared of you than you are of it. Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's what they say about mountain lions and rattlesnakes too. I still don't want them to pop out of my fridge's produce drawer. Plus, imagine if that happens to one of your kids. You're never getting him or her to eat fruits and vegetables again. Then it doesn't matter if the produce is "GMO-free" or "pesticide free." That kid is going to spend their life eating cheese and hot dogs and have a massive coronary at 48. Nothing healthy about that!

Source: "Check Your Grapes! 700-800 People a Year Find Black Widows in Them." *Daily Buzz Live*, n.d. Accessed 11 July 2019. URL: <http://dailybuzzlive.com/check-your-grapes-700-800-people-a-year-find-black-widows-in-them/>.