



## **PEN AMERICA: TEACHING MEDIA LITERACY GUIDE**

**This guide provides key principles and topics that librarians and other educators may use in media literacy workshops and trainings with library constituents and others in your community. The final pages of this guide include three interactive activities to explore with your participants.**

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### **PART ONE**

#### **Why Media Literacy Matters: A Solution to Combating Disinformation**

Disinformation poses a dangerous threat to all aspects of democratic engagement, but it's not a new phenomenon. It's helpful to ground this lesson in history to help participants understand the urgency in addressing disinformation. It's also effective, as an educator, to admit that even you have fallen prey to fraudulent news, instilling a sense of togetherness in this fight.

- Faking the News: Fraudulent News and the Fight for Truth (PEN America's report)
- There are countless examples of "fake news" throughout history to draw from for your lessons, including medieval Europe, the Cold War, even early American newspaper days in which reporting was rife with lies.

#### **The Effects of Disinformation On Elections & Democratic Discourse**

Providing practical, current examples will drive your point home. Relate the threat to your participants' daily lives online. Use the latest, most contemporary examples you can find. Providing Context for why media literacy skills are important in your new role as salesman for media literacy.

We encourage you to share PEN America's 2019 report, Truth on the Ballot: Fraudulent News, the Midterm Elections, and Prospects for 2020, as part of this lesson.



Some likely sources of disinformation in the context of the past couple U.S. elections, for example, include:

- Foreign actors' fake social media accounts/bots
- Hyper-partisan websites
- Domestic agents peddling conspiracy theories
- Misleading political advertisements
- Spreading Election Day misinformation

**Important Reminder: social media is often our gateway to news. It is not a news source.**

Encourage participants to spend some time reflecting on the pivotal role that social media sites and tech giants play in the spread of disinformation online. Encourage them to question the level of transparency in companies like Twitter and Facebook.

Encourage people to take control of their news feeds and think critically about WHERE they get their news. (**Activity 1, below**)

This part of the lesson is an opportune time to guide participants through the lifecycle of a fake news story, from creation to sharing to super-spreading bots to widespread misinformation narratives.

A distinction between disinformation and misinformation:

**Disinformation** - demonstrably false information created with the intent to deceive the public

**Misinformation** - false information that has been created and/or shared in error

### How Disinformation Works and is Spread

Emotions	Emotions are manipulated, particularly fear and anger, and capitalization and exclamation points suggest urgency Our emotions are HEIGHTENED - disinfo thrives in urgency
A 'patina' of credibility	In other words, the post or tweet or meme 'kinda' looks real with names of fake organizations that appear familiar, real people's names are slightly misspelled, references to people and events are in credible news

Bots	Bots are computer generated and designed to appear to be users on social media, particularly Twitter
Illusory Truth Effect	The more we encounter something, the more we believe it
Confirmation bias	Confirmation bias refers to our human tendency to seek out sources of information from sources which support our own beliefs

**Examples of manipulated images and content**

Again, we highly encourage media literacy educators to include the most recent and local examples of manipulated content when teaching these workshops, as these will be most effective in driving your point home.

To get you going, here are some ideas:

- 1) Joe Exotic & coronavirus: Joe Exotic was rumored to have coronavirus. This has been debunked and proven false. You can discuss with constituents how it was researched and how the false news spread online.
- 2) Images that are altered or misattributed to incorrect contexts.



## PART TWO

### The Basics of Journalism & Standards of Reporting

Integral to media literacy is understanding how the news gets made and what constitutes responsible journalism. Ethics, Quality, Standards:

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#### Responsible journalism

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##### Ethics:

- Accuracy
- Seek contrary viewpoints and perspectives
- Follow a story no what matter the outcome
- Fairness
- Objectivity

##### Quality:

- Retract, correct, apologize for mistakes
- Correct misinformation *quickly*
- Thoroughness
- Fact-checking
- Challenge quoted sources

##### Standards:

- Maintain calmness; avoid emotion
- Identify sources
- Use accepted data to verify information
- Pursue evidence

Sources: *Columbia Review of Journalism*. 23 Feb., 2017;  
Society of Professional Journalists

PEN AMERICA

The Freedom to Write

### How the News Gets Made

If there's an opportunity to speak with a local journalist or visit a local newsroom, we highly encourage this as part of the media literacy training experience. This can be a companion event, or it can be embedded within a workshop setting.

A crucial hallmark of responsible journalism is accuracy. As stewards of public trust, responsible journalists are in pursuit of truth based on evidence. Incumbent on this is thorough research, fact-checking statistics with accredited agencies, and making sure to quote and/or cite sources. Should mistakes occur, a professional news organization will acknowledge and correct them. Quickly. This stands in contrast to peddlers of disinformation who purposefully blur the lines between accuracy and falsehood.

Cynicism and discrediting of mainstream media has grown with charges of bias. A clever disinformation tactic is the creation of false local news outlets, usually websites that have a masthead and seem like a reputable local newspaper. Maybe it's called "The Local Gazette" or "Chesapeake Bay Times" -- you might even fall prey to reading stories on these sites and frankly, they're not real. They're fake news outlets masquerading as purveyors of news.

Responsible journalism ideally pursues the truth. Purveyors of disinformation intentionally misquote or misattribute, elevate conspiracies, and follow up false stories with more disinformation instead of retracting and correcting.

### **Media Literacy Toolkit**

Better to equip people with tools to assess information and discern truth than it is to suppress free speech.

A 2018 Gallup survey found that more than 60% of U.S. adults said they were less likely to share stories from sites labeled as unreliable.

In 2019, a study conducted by the University of California found that *labels are effective, at least in some capacity*. This means that when users get some flag that information might be false, this notification or label can help reduce the sharing of false news by diminishing the credibility of misleading information for users.

Much of this can rest in our hands to take control of our news feeds and more carefully think about our digital experiences so we become publishers in our own right, deciding what we read and what we share.

1. **STEP BACK:** Take control of your digital experience and conduct a scan of how you consume information.
2. **CONSIDER YOUR REACTIONS:** Take a step back and question your reactions to things you see online.
3. **UNDERSTAND THE CONTENT YOU SEE:** Understand what you're seeing: Is it news or opinion? Is it responsible journalism?
4. **VERIFY & FACT-CHECK:** Before you share something, check the credibility of the source, and then fact-check and reverse-image source. For health information, go to [CDC.gov](https://www.cdc.gov) or [WHO.int](https://www.who.int).
5. **REVERSE IMAGE SEARCH:** Extra credit! Learn how to do a reverse image search on Google to confirm the origins of an image or even the first clip of a video.

## **Fact-Checking Resources**

- *For COVID-related content: NewsGuard has a [Coronavirus Misinformation Tracking Center](#). It's a great place to comb through if you want to see the breadth of misinformation about the pandemic.*
- *[Fact Check](#), through the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, in non-partisan and monitors for political accuracy.*
- *[All Sides](#) offers perspectives on topical news stories from the left, center, and from the right. They also offer a 'media bias rating.'*
- *[Snopes.com](#) has been around since 1994 and fact-checks internet content.*
- *[Politifact.com](#) by The Poynter Institute or Washington Post's Factchecker both fact-check political content.*
- *[Reporterslab.org](#) is a database of both national and global fact-checking resources.*

Share these resources with your constituents. You should take time to review the websites and resources yourselves, so you're confident and adept at using them.

Consider embedding a news literacy quiz into your workshop as well. It is fun, engaging, and informative for each of us! (**Activity 2, below**).

***Please keep in touch! We'd love to hear how your media literacy sessions are going in your community. We are available to support you in tailoring this content, co-sponsoring or facilitating workshops with your communities, or building more materials.***

**Contact PEN America at [medialiteracy@pen.org](mailto:medialiteracy@pen.org) to learn more.**



## KNOWING THE NEWS: ACTIVITY 1

### Personal News Consumption Checklist

**Task:** Think about your news sources and assess what organizations provide you with the news and how often do you find yourself checking it. Jot down specific publications and companies under ‘type of media.’

<b>Type of media:</b> jot down the specific publications and media companies you consume	<b>Access 1-10x/day</b>	<b>Access 10-20x/day</b>	<b>Access 20-30x/day or more</b>	<b>Access once a week</b>	<b>Access once a month</b>
National or international newspaper(s)					
Local newspaper(s)					
News magazine(s)					
Professional journal(s)					
TV: Network news					
TV: Cable news					
TV: Cable opinion					
Radio: Talk/opinion					
Radio: News					
Curated smartphone news feed:					
Digital media: (ex: BuzzFeed, Vox, TheSkimm)					
Documentary(ies):					
Social media platforms (ex: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, LinkedIn)					



**Read** the following questions and circle 'true' if the statement applies to you or 'false' if it does not. Select 'not applicable' if necessary.

1. I find myself doing follow-up research after encountering a news story. True/False/Not applicable
2. I consider myself a 'news-junkie.' True/False/Not applicable
3. I educate myself from a wide range of publications with diverse editorial views. True/False/Not applicable
4. I have gotten into conflict with a friend or family member about the reportage of a news story. True/False/Not applicable
5. I have followed the imprisonment of journalists, abroad, or the online harassment of journalists in the U.S. True/False/Not applicable
6. I have been reluctant to share my perspective on a news story with friends and/or family. True/False/Not applicable
7. I read some of the same publications, watch the same networks, or listen to the same radio programs as my parents or as my children. True/False/Not applicable
8. My source of news is similar to my friends' source of news. True/False/Not applicable
9. I feel different news organizations have a bias. True/False/Not applicable
10. I find local news stories more credible than national and international news stories. True/False/Not applicable
11. I find I don't have enough time to delve deeply into news coverage. True/False/Not applicable
12. I have found a correlation between my mood and my depth of awareness of the news. True/False/Not applicable
13. I am familiar with fact checking websites like: snopes.com, politifact.com, factcheck.org? True/False/Not applicable
14. I am familiar with the policies and practices that make a news organization transparent and credible? True/False/Not applicable



## KNOWING THE NEWS: ACTIVITY 2

### What is factual news? What is fraudulent news?

**Instructions:** Determine which of the following is a credible news article and what is fraudulent news?

1. Pelosi Stops Bill to Make English the Official Language of the U.S.
2. 'The ducks have won': French court says they may keep on quacking
3. Bill Nye the Science Guy Arrested for Manufacturing and Selling Illegal Drugs
4. Social media post: Ukrainian head of Burisma has been indicted and records reveal Hunter Biden & partners received up to \$165 million for their services



[Source: [Posted on 'The Ferguson Show' Facebook page, 20 November, 2019](#)]

5. Cat placed in "solitary confinement" for "repeatedly" breaking feline friends out of shelter





## KNOWING THE NEWS: ACTIVITY 3

### How 'news literate' are we?

**Task:** Review your group's responses on *News Literacy Project's* quiz with the following discussion questions:

1. What is the chief difference between a reporter and a columnist?
2. Are you often able to differentiate between pieces you may read online if it's a reported article or if it's an opinion piece?
3. In the news sources you consume, do you know the editorial board's political positions?
4. Were you able to successfully identify all of the advertisements in this exercise?
5. Why do ads appear on news sites? Why are they often tricky to identify?
6. Why might it be problematic that news organizations and websites are subsidized by advertising?
7. What type of sources do you think are the most credible when evaluating a news article?
8. Why do you think trustworthy news organizations avoid the use of anonymous sources?
9. Do you think that news organizations should be obligated to offer equal coverage to a diversity of viewpoints, even if they are not substantiated?
10. Were you surprised to learn the international ranking of how free is the United States' press?

