

Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Fake news is not a new concept, for years governments all over the world have produced propaganda to try and portray a positive image of themselves, or to persuade people to think a certain way. We know students are constantly exposed to fake news and other messages from the media. It's crucial for them to learn how to engage with and interpret the messages they see. Designed for students aged 11-16, this downloadable guide shares ideas for teaching students across Humanities how to spot fake news and engage with mis- and disinformation.

Curriculum Links

Media literacy skills are related to the following curricular targets. Further subject specific links can be found in each subject section within this guide.

History Curriculum Links

- Equip pupils to ask perception questions, think critically, weigh evidence, sift arguments and develop perspective and judgement. Distinguish fact from fiction, make connections, draw contrasts and analyse trends within periods. Create relevant, structured and evidentially supported accounts.
- Pupils should understand how different types of historical sources are used rigorously to make historical claims and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed.

Citizenship Curriculum Links

- Pupils should use and apply their knowledge and understanding whilst developing skills to research and interrogate evidence, debate and evaluate viewpoints, present reasoned arguments and take informed action.
- Pupils are equipped with the skills to think critically and debate political questions.

Geography Curriculum Links

- Equip pupils with the geographical skills needed to interpret a range of sources of geographical information, including maps, diagrams, globes, aerial photographs and Geographical Information Systems (GIS).
- Develop students' competence in using a wide range of geographical investigative skills and approaches.



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Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

How to fight fake news

Regardless of subject or discipline, the skills required to combat fake news are applicable across the Humanities. The amount of disinformation being spread, particularly online, can be overwhelming for students and difficult to navigate. Horizontal research and fact checking websites can help young people to combat fake news.

What is a fact-checking website?

Fact-checking websites are sites that verify or debunk a variety of news stories, this means they prove if a story is real or fake. They do this by using researchers to look into the story and the evidence that is available.

On their website they inform you if the story is fake or real and why.

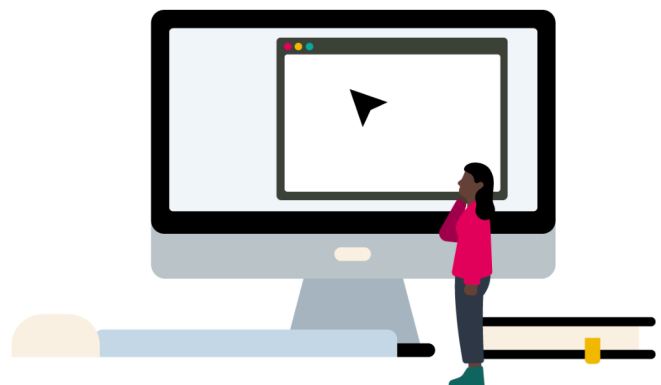
A list of fact-checking websites are:

<https://www.snopes.com/>

<https://fullfact.org/>

How to carry out out horizontal research

1. Search for your story in a news aggregator, e.g. Google News UK.
2. Open up multiple tabs in your browser.
3. Select a different website for each one of your chosen topics, use a fact checking website, e.g. Snopes.
4. Read across the various websites, don't read all the way down.



Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Geography

“Media literacy is a vital part of geographical education and, as geography teachers, we must ensure that students are aware of how their views of the world are shaped by the images and messages they receive from the media.” - Biddulph et al., 2021

The media plays a significant role in developing student’s geographical knowledge and understanding of the world. Students primarily build their understanding of the world through the geographical representations found in these resources. Media literacy skills are therefore vital in developing students’ competency within the subject - empowering them to confidently and critically engage with media content, including the ability to engage with mis- and disinformation.

Geography KS3-5 Curriculum Links

KS3

- Equip pupils with the geographical skills needed to interpret a range of sources of geographical information, including maps, diagrams, globes, aerial photographs and Geographical Information Systems (GIS).
- Pupils should be able to use fieldwork in contrasting locations to collect, analyse and draw conclusions from geographical data, using multiple sources of increasingly complex information.
- Pupils should extend their locational knowledge and deepen their spatial awareness of the world’s countries. They understand geographical similarities, differences and links between places through the study of human and physical geography of a region within Africa, and of a region within Asia.

KS4

- Develop students’ competence in using a wide range of geographical investigative skills and approaches.
- Enable young people to become globally and environmentally informed and thoughtful, enquiring citizens.

KS5

- Apply geographical knowledge, understanding, skills and approaches in a rigorous way to a range of geographical questions and issues.
- Develop as critical and reflective learners, able to articulate opinions, suggest relevant new ideas and provide evidenced argument in a range of situations.

Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Fake or For Real?

Go through the following examples with pupils to see if they are able to identify whether it is fake or for real.

1. Comedian and actress Tiffany Haddish was surprised at the quality of a supermarket in Zimbabwe whilst on holiday.
2. Global temperature has fallen, not risen, in the last few hundred years.
3. North Korea recently sent balloons full of trash over the border to South Korea.
4. Indonesia is moving its capital city to combat climate change.
5. Marbella, a Spanish city, plans to fine tourists for urinating on the beach.



Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Fake or For Real?

Comedian and actress Tiffany Haddish was surprised at the quality of a supermarket in Zimbabwe whilst on holiday. REAL

Whilst this is true and she has faced significant criticism online, Tiffany has since defended her controversial TikTok video. Haddish claimed on X that as an American she had been raised with a false perception of Africa and was sharing the video to educate and help quash negative perceptions of Africa.

This example can be used as a discussion point with pupils as part of a SOW on a region within Africa or within a unit on development to discuss stereotypes and false perceptions of different parts of the world that may be shared online or in the media.

Global temperature has fallen, not risen, in the last few hundred years. FAKE

Climate-sceptic scientist Professor Ian Plimer recently claimed Earth's climate has cooled, not warmed, since medieval times, which is inaccurate and misleading.

This example can be used as a discussion point with pupils as part of a SOW on climate change, an area where there is significant mis- and disinformation shared widely online, especially around the evidence and science of climate change.

North Korea recently sent balloons full of trash over the border to South Korea. REAL

REAL

North Korea has recently sent balloons filled with trash, such as leaflets and waste, across the border to South Korea as a form of warfare and propaganda. These actions have led to heightening tensions between the two nations.

This example can be used as a discussion point with pupils as part of a SOW on Superpowers, or as part of a region study on or within Asia.

Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Fake or For Real?

Indonesia is moving its capital city to combat climate change. REAL

Indonesia is moving its capital from Jakarta to a new city called Nusantara on the island of Borneo due to several pressing issues including air pollution, traffic and issues arising from urbanisation.

This example can be used as a discussion point with pupils as part of a SOW on climate change, an area where there is significant mis- and disinformation shared widely online, especially around the evidence and science of climate change.

Marbella, a Spanish city, plans to fine tourists for urinating on the beach. REAL

Marbella city council recently approved a series of initiatives designed to improve the quality of the city's famous beaches. The proposals include sanctions for antisocial offences such as playing loud music or playing annoying ball games, as well as a fine for those who carry out "physiological evacuations (bowel movements and urination) in the sea or on the beach".

This example can be used as a discussion point with pupils as part of a SOW on tourism and responses to tourism. Other countries such as Japan have recently introduced restrictions and sanctions in response to significant levels of tourism.



Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Geography and fake news

In addition to those explored in the Fake or For Real activity above, the following areas of the geography curriculum provide an opportunity to explore and develop critical thinking and media literacy skills.

Globalisation:

- **Interconnectedness:** understanding how misinformation spreads quickly across borders and across global communities.

Climate Change:

- **Perception and denial:** exploring climate change denial and the spread of misinformation on climate science.
- **Environmental protection:** investigating how disinformation campaigns can undermine environmental protection efforts and policies.

Natural Disasters:

- **Disaster response and relief:** exploring the role of accurate information in emergency response and how misinformation can hinder disaster relief efforts. One significant example of misinformation during a natural disaster occurred during Hurricanes Harvey and Irma in 2017. Numerous false claims spread rapidly online, which led to residents not seeking help due to fear of being detained by immigration authorities. In addition to this, false reports of shelters closing or running out of supplies leading to unnecessary panic and confusion among evacuees.
- **Media coverage:** understanding how media portrayal of natural disasters can be influenced by misinformation, affecting public perception and aid.

Urbanisation:

- **Urban planning and narrative:** understanding how misinformation can influence public opinion about urban development and planning.



Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Global Development:

- Development indicators: how data manipulation can distort our view of global development.
- Case studies: analysing examples where misinformation harmed development projects or the distribution of aid.

Resource Management:

- Energy and water resources: how misinformation can sway opinions and policies on resource management, especially in debates over energy sources, like fossil fuels, renewables, and nuclear power.
- Food security: analysing how misinformation can impact global food security and agricultural practices.

Population and Migration:

- Migration narratives: studying how misinformation can shape views on migrants and affect immigration policy.
- Population issues: investigating the misuse of demographic data in debates on overpopulation and resource use.

Geopolitical Issues:

- Conflict and co-operation: understanding the role of misinformation in international conflicts and diplomatic relations.
- Territorial disputes: analysing how disinformation can be used to justify territorial claims and influence geopolitical outcomes.



Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Citizenship

A key aim of citizenship education is to empower pupils to become well informed and active citizens ready to engage in a democratic society. The national curriculum is designed to equip students with the knowledge and skills required.

The curriculum emphasises the importance of critical thinking, debating, and forming reasoned arguments on political and social issues. To do this, students need to be able to critically assess the range of information and sources available to them. They need to know which sources are trustworthy and which are not so they can use that information to form well-informed views and opinions.

Citizenship KS3-4 Curriculum Links

KS3

- Equip pupils with the skills and knowledge to explore political and social issues critically, to weigh evidence, debate and make reasoned arguments.
- Equip pupils with the skills to think critically and debate political questions.
- Pupils should use and apply their knowledge and understanding whilst developing skills to research and interrogate evidence, debate and evaluate viewpoints, present reasoned arguments and take informed action.

KS4

- Use and apply knowledge and understanding as they formulate citizenship enquiries, explore and research citizenship issues and actions, analyse and evaluate information and interpret sources of evidence.
- Enable young people to become globally and environmentally informed and thoughtful, enquiring citizens.



Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Fake or For Real?

Go through the following examples with pupils to see if they are able to identify whether it is fake or for real.

1. Residents in Paris threatened to poo in the River Seine in protest at the government.
2. Ukrainian President Zelensky's wife Olena purchased luxury cars during a visit to Paris to commemorate D-Day.
3. 80% of Britons voted against Labour at the 2024 general election.
4. Nigel Farage missed the King's speech opening Parliament after the 2024 UK election to visit Donald Trump in the US.
5. A student in Newcastle started a fire in college to avoid doing an exam.



Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Fake or For Real?



1. Residents in Paris threatened to poo in the River Seine in protest at the government. **REAL**

Before the 2024 Paris Olympics, the French government spent over 1.4 billion euros to clean up the River Seine which was due to be used in Olympic events. Many Parisians were angry at a perceived misuse of resources, and threatened to poo in the river on social media. This example can be used as a discussion point exploring unique forms of protest as well as an introduction into different forms of direct and indirect action.

2. President Zelensky's wife Olena purchased luxury cars during a visit to Paris. **FAKE - DISINFORMATION**

Olena Zelenska, Ukraine's first lady, allegedly bought a rare Bugatti Tourbillon sports car for 4.5 million euros (\$4.8 million; £3.8 million) while in Paris for D-Day commemorations in June. The source of the funds was supposedly American military aid money. A number of pro-Russian accounts widely shared the story on X. Many of these accounts have since been linked to a Russia-based disinformation operation.

This example can be used to discuss the origin of disinformation and how it can spread online easily. It can also be used to explore the Ukraine-Russia conflict and the role and involvement of international organisations such as the UN and NATO.

3. 80% of Britons voted against Labour at the 2024 general election. **FAKE**

The 80% figure is based on the number of people on the electoral roll who did not vote for Labour, either because they voted for other parties, did not vote at all or spoiled their ballot (FullFact). This example of misinformation was shared widely on Facebook and other social media after the election results were declared. Labour won 34% of all votes cast in the UK (and under the UK's 'First Past the Post' electoral system, 63% of all seats in the House of Commons).

Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Fake or For Real?

This example can be used as a discussion point to explore different electoral systems around the world. It can also be used to reinforce pupil's understanding of the difference between first past the post and proportional representation.

4. Nigel Farage missed the King's speech opening Parliament after the 2024 UK election to visit Donald Trump in the US. **PARTLY FAKE**

Widely shared posts on social media said Farage had gone to visit Donald Trump in the U.S. instead of attending the Westminster ceremony. During the King's Speech ceremony the monarch delivers a speech to both houses of parliament, setting out the government's agenda for the next parliamentary session. After the monarch has left, MPs debate their speech in the House of Commons. Several press photographs from parliament's opening, published by news agencies show Farage at the speech. Farage did however miss the parliamentary debate in the house of Commons, which followed straight after the King's speech.

This example of misinformation could be used as a discussion point to discuss the role and responsibilities of a MP, as well as the process of being elected to Parliament.

5. A student in Newcastle started a fire in college to avoid doing an exam. **REAL**

24 year-old student Ozlem Firat set two fires in toilets at her college to try to get out of an exam she was sitting. The defending lawyer claimed that whilst Ozlem's behaviour was self-destructive, doubtless causing risk to members of the public - there was no intent to harm anyone in that building whatsoever. In September 2023, she was sentenced to 14 months suspended for two years, with a four month curfew between 8pm and 8am. This example could be used as a discussion point within a unit on law and justice to explore mitigating circumstances and the effect they can have on sentencing. It can also be used to explore the process of a criminal trial and the process of sentencing.

Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Citizenship and fake news

In addition to the examples in the fake or for real activity, the Citizenship curriculum includes a number of topics that can help students understand and tackle fake news, misinformation, and disinformation.

Rights and Responsibilities:

- Freedom of speech and press: exploring the balance between free speech and the responsibility to avoid spreading misinformation.
- Digital citizenship: understanding the ethical use of digital platforms and the importance of identifying reliable information sources.

Democracy and Government:

- Elections and voting: examining how fake news can influence voter understanding and election results.
- Political literacy: exploring how misinformation can shape public understanding of government policies and political parties.

Role of the Media:

- Media regulation: exploring the role of IPSO and media regulation in preventing the spread of fake news and protecting public interest.
- Impact of social media: analysing how social media can amplify misinformation and the importance of digital literacy.
- Media influence: analysing how the media can shape public opinion, and the role misinformation plays in this process.
- Critical media literacy: teaching students to critically evaluate news sources, identify bias, and recognise fake news.

Diversity and Equality:

- Social cohesion: discussing how misinformation can fuel prejudice, discrimination, and social division.
- Hate speech and propaganda: understanding the impact of disinformation on minority groups and the importance of combating hate speech.

Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Diversity and Equality

- Social cohesion: discussing how misinformation can fuel prejudice, discrimination, and social division.
- Hate speech and propaganda: understanding the impact of disinformation on minority groups and the importance of combating hate speech.

Justice and the Rule of Law:

- Legal system: understanding how misinformation can affect public trust in the legal system and the consequences of spreading false information.
- Human rights: exploring how disinformation can be used to undermine human rights or justify discrimination.

Active Citizenship:

- Campaigning and advocacy: learning how misinformation can undermine legitimate campaigns and how to ensure information used in advocacy is accurate.
- Engagement with democracy: examining the impact of fake news on public engagement and democratic participation.



Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

History

Media literacy training can provide students with vital skills which can be used in History. Developing these skills within the context of history helps students spot fact and fiction. They learn to evaluate sources and narratives. They learn how biases and propaganda shape public views and the historical record. These skills are invaluable in the classroom, where students analyse how history is portrayed in the media, and beyond, enabling them to navigate the vast array of information available to them.

History KS3-5 Curriculum Links

KS3

- Equip pupils to ask perception questions, think critically, weigh evidence, sift arguments and develop perspective and judgement. Distinguish fact from fiction, make connections, draw contrasts and analyse trends within periods. Create relevant, structured and evidentially supported accounts.
- Pupils should understand how different types of historical sources are used rigorously to make historical claims and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed.

KS4

- Pupils should improve as effective and independent students and as critical and reflective thinkers with curious and enquiring minds.
- Pupils should develop the ability to ask relevant and significant questions about the past and to research them
- Pupils should be able to use historical sources critically in their context, deploying appropriate information and reaching substantiated conclusions.

KS5

- Pupils should acquire an understanding of the nature of historical study, for example that history is concerned with judgements based on available evidence and that historical judgements are provisional.
- Pupils should use historical sources critically in their context, deploying appropriate information and reaching substantiated conclusions.
- Pupils should be able to comprehend, analyse and evaluate how the past has been interpreted in different ways, including in historians' debates.

Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Fake or For Real?

Go through the following examples with pupils to see if they are able to identify whether it is fake or for real.

1. Joseph Stalin used to airbrush his enemies out of photos whilst leader of the USSR.
2. In 1835, astronomers discovered life on the moon, including bat-like creatures.
3. In Ancient Rome, Emperor Marc Antony planned to move the Roman base from Rome, Italy to Alexandria, Egypt.
4. During the First World War, Germans extracted fat from the bodies of dead soldiers on both sides of the war to make soap and margarine.
5. In the mid-1700's King George II was gravely ill, which led to him almost losing the throne.



Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Fake or For Real?

1. Joseph Stalin used to airbrush his enemies out of photos whilst leader of the USSR. **REAL**

Stalin's Great Purge was a late 1930s campaign of political repression in the Soviet Union. Millions were falsely accused of treason, imprisoned, or executed. The victims included party officials, military leaders, and ordinary citizens. An example of disinformation, the Soviet government spread false accusations and manipulated evidence. This included using edited photos that erased purged individuals from history. They did this to justify their actions and consolidate Stalin's power. These doctored images and false stories were designed to mislead.

This example of misinformation could be used as a discussion point to explore Stalin's rise to leadership and consolidation of power as well as the expansion of Soviet Russia into Eastern Europe.

2. In 1835, astronomers discovered life on the moon, including bat-like creatures. **FAKE - DISINFORMATION**

The Great Moon Hoax of 1835 was a series of articles in the New York Sun. They claimed a famous astronomer had found life on the moon, using a powerful new telescope. The articles described strange creatures and landscapes. These fabricated reports, were intended to boost the newspaper's sales by captivating the public with sensational and imaginative stories.

This event serves as an early example of how newspapers could manipulate information to influence audiences, highlighting the importance of critical thinking and the verification of sources. This example can be linked to the study of media and propaganda within the history curriculum, particularly when exploring the role and impact of the press in shaping public opinion.



Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Fake or For Real?

3. In Ancient Rome, Emperor Marc Antony planned to move the Roman base from Rome, Italy to Alexandria, Egypt. FAKE - DISINFORMATION

Octavian, later Emperor Augustus, spread false rumours about Marc Antony during their power struggle in ancient Rome. He claimed that Cleopatra, the Queen of Egypt, had bewitched Antony and that Antony planned to betray Rome by shifting power to Alexandria. These rumours, spread through propaganda, turned the public against Antony and helped Octavian rise to power. This example of disinformation illustrates the use of propaganda and misinformation in political power struggles.

The story of Octavian spreading rumours about Marc Antony can be used as a discussion point linked to the study of Roman history, in particular the rise and fall of the Roman Empire.

4. During the First World War, Germans extracted fat from the bodies of dead soldiers on both sides of the war to make soap and margarine. FAKE - DISINFORMATION

A British government department leaked this false story to the press. The government knew the narrative was false but it was used to strengthen the view of the Germans as an enemy. This portrayal effectively persuaded readers and reinforced the necessity of defeating them.

This example of disinformation could be used as a discussion point within a unit on conflict and war to explore the role of propaganda.

Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

Fake or For Real?

5. In the mid-1700's King George II was gravely ill, which led to him almost losing the throne. **FAKE - DISINFORMATION**

The rumours surrounding King George II's alleged illness are an example of fake news and disinformation in the 18th century. In 1751, newspapers falsely reported that the king was gravely ill and near death, prompting widespread panic and concern among the population. The King was facing a rebellion at the time and newspapers allied with rebels reported false news about the king being ill. This was then published by other printers without verification.

This incident highlights the power of the press to shape public perception and influence public emotion. It demonstrates how the manipulation of information for political or social purposes is not a modern phenomenon but has historical roots in earlier forms of media.



Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

History and fake news

As well as the examples in the fake or for real activity above, the following areas within the History curriculum offer opportunities for pupils to engage with the concepts of misinformation and disinformation.

The Holocaust:

- Holocaust denial: studying the spread of Holocaust denial and the role of disinformation in distorting historical truth.
- Propaganda in Nazi Germany: understanding how the Nazi regime used propaganda and misinformation to manipulate public opinion and justify persecution.

World War I and II:

- Propaganda efforts: Examining how both world wars saw extensive use of propaganda, including fake news, to maintain morale, demonise the enemy, and influence public opinion.
- Censorship and information control: analysing how governments controlled information to shape public perception during wartime.

The British Empire:

- Imperial narratives: exploring how misinformation was used to justify imperialism and colonial rule, including the portrayal of colonised peoples and territories.
- Resistance and rebellion: investigating how misinformation was used to suppress or undermine resistance movements within the empire.

The Cold War:

- Cold War propaganda: understanding the role of disinformation in the ideological battle between the US and the Soviet Union, including media manipulation and espionage.
- The space race: analysing how fake news and exaggerated claims were used by both superpowers to promote their technological superiority.

Behind the Headlines

Media Literacy Skills in Humanities

The Middle Ages:

- Crusades and religious wars: exploring how misinformation and religious propaganda fuelled conflicts like the Crusades.
- Medieval superstitions: understanding how misinformation about diseases, witches, and other phenomena influenced medieval society.

Russia and the Soviet Union:

- Stalin's Great Purge: exploring how Stalin used disinformation, including doctored photos and fabricated accusations, to eliminate political rivals and consolidate power.
- Cold War misinformation: analysing the role of disinformation in Soviet policies, including state-controlled media and international propaganda.

The Vietnam War:

- Media and public perception: exploring how misinformation and biased reporting influenced public opinion and anti-war movements in the US and around the world.
- Gulf of Tonkin incident: studying how misinformation about this event was used to justify US involvement in Vietnam.

The Civil Rights Movement in the USA:

- Media representation: exploring how misinformation was used by opponents of the civil rights movement to discredit activists and maintain segregation.
- Propaganda and public opinion: understanding the role of media and misinformation in shaping public opinion about race relations in America.

