

Fake News and the Caulfield Technique

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Abstract

Students are fighting a flood. Social media, news feeds, and more saturate them with misleading and fact-free information. In his open access ebook, *Web Literacy for Student Fact Checkers* (webliteracy.pressbooks.com), Michael Caulfield lays out practical, hands-on techniques for determining the validity of online information. The Director of Blended and Networked Learning at Washington State University, Vancouver, and the editor of the New Horizons column for the *EDUCAUSE Review*, Michael Caulfield provides strategies students can use to fact check information they find online:

- Check for previous work
- Go upstream to the source
- Read laterally
- Circle back

In this session, participants will learn how to apply these techniques and how to teach them within a traditional one-shot session. Participants will leave with tools and strategies for helping their students critically evaluate the information they find online.

Summary

San Jose State is one of 11 campuses chosen to participate in the Digital Polarization Initiative (DigiPo). Headed by Mike Caulfield, this initiative seeks to improve civil discourse by developing web literacy skills in undergraduates. DigiPo has three student learning objectives: after instruction, students will be able to

1. Perform basic verification and contextualization tasks (90-second fact checks)
2. Understand the larger social impact of mis-, dis-, and mal-information
3. Intervene in their information environment to make a difference

Mike's book, *Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers*, addresses the first learning goal with four moves and a habit:

1. **Check for previous work:** This means searching fact-checking sites such as Snopes and Sourcewatch to see if a news item has already been fact-checked.
2. **Go upstream to the source:** These are strategies for determining where the information originated and its original context.
3. **Read laterally:** This teaches students to step out of the site they are evaluating and look for what others say about it.
4. **Circle back:** This emphasizes the iterative nature of research. That is, the more students research the better and more focused their search terms become.
5. **The habit: Check your emotions.** Caulfield writes, "When you feel strong emotion — happiness, anger, pride, vindication — and that emotion pushes you to share a 'fact' with others, STOP. Above all, it's these things that you must fact-check."¹

A typical one-shot library session is already packed, but it is possible to quickly integrate one or two of these techniques. Some ways to do this are listed in the [Ten Minute Tips](#) section of San Jose State's [Fake News LibGuide](#) and in the PowerPoint following this summary.

Search techniques are important tools for students to have. However, these skills need to be placed in context so students know *why* they should go to the effort of fact-checking. This leads to DigiPo's second learning goal: understanding the impact of misinformation. In class, a potential discussion question is, "How does fake news affect society?" Some possible responses include:

1. **Fake news destroys trust.** Civilization is built on trust. To have a civilization, people need to trust individuals, systems, and institutions. When fake news infects a society it undermines trust and replaces it with cynicism and suspicion.
2. **Fake news can hurt.** This is especially true of pseudo-science articles, such as the misinformation that HIV and AIDS are not related. Incorrect

¹ Caulfield, M. (2017). Web literacy for student fact-checkers. Retrieved from webliteracy.pressbooks.com

information can harm individuals' personal welfare—politically, socially, and physically.

3. **Fake news destroys personal credibility.** Sharing false information demonstrates poor judgement.
4. **Real news, especially about politics or business, can help people make informed decisions.** To invest or vote wisely, individuals need accurate information. Fake news can lead to poor decisions.

These impacts lead to the third learning goal: how to intervene. Interventions can be small, such as providing context and sharing a better source on social media. Students can also think big, such as creating a blog devoted to correcting misinformation or updating Wikipedia articles on controversial topics.

The PowerPoint accompanying this summary includes more information on the three DigiPo learning goals as well as samples of fake news for classroom use. Also provided are sites for finding and archiving additional fake news artifacts. A final thought: fake news is not new. It has been known as disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, and yellow journalism, but with the proper techniques, we and our students can fight back.