

What Is Verification?

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| Estimated time: | 50 minutes <ul style="list-style-type: none">• [15 minutes] Activity #1• [15 minutes] Assignment• [20 minutes] Discussion |
| Group or individual activity: | Group |
| Ages: | 14-18 years old |
| Grades: | Grades 9-12 |
| Online / offline elements: | This learning experience includes an activity and assignment that suggests the use of computers or mobile devices with Internet access (offline alternatives are also presented) and an offline discussion. |
| Areas: | Main area: Information Quality Additional areas: Civic and Political Engagement, Content Production, Context, Data, Media (Literacy) |
| License: | <p>This learning experience has been created by Youth and Media and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International license. For more information, please visit http://dcrp.berkman.harvard.edu/about</p> <p>This "What Is Verification?" learning experience is inspired by the "Quick Start To Verifying Online Media" and "Verification Training For Journalists" courses by Dr. Claire Wardle at First Draft, available here.</p> |

Learning Goal

Participants will learn what information verification is and why it is important for news consumers to verify the stories they read or view. They will consider the responsibilities news organizations, audience members, and social media platforms have in promoting a media landscape of factual news information.

Materials

- [One per participant – optional, for Activity #1. Required if no Internet access is available] Handout: National Geographic Cameraman Eaten Alive During Shooting
- [One per participant – optional, for the Assignment. Required if no Internet access is available] Handout: Pig fish
- [For educator] Computer with Internet access
- Projector and projection screen
- [For participants] Computers or mobile devices with Internet access
- [One per participant] Paper
- [One per participant] Pens or pencils
- Printout of pigfish image
- Printout of underwater image

Resources

- Video: [Did Fake News Influence the Outcome of Election 2016?](#) - by PBS NewsHour
- Video: [The Rise of 'Fake News,' Manipulation and 'Alternative Facts'](#) - by BBC Newsnight
- Article: [Fake News. It's Complicated.](#) - by Claire Wardle (First Draft)
- Article: [The Number of Fact-Checkers Around the World: 156... and Growing](#) - by Mark Stencel (Duke Reporters' Lab)
- Websites: [Snopes.com](#), [FactCheck.org](#), and [National Public Radio's Politics Fact Check](#) - Fact-checking websites
- Glossary: [Information Verification Playlist Glossary](#) - by Youth and Media / First Draft

- Handout: [National Geographic Cameraman Eaten Alive During Shooting](#) - by Dan Evon (Snopes)
- Handout: [Pig fish](#) - by David Mikkelson (Snopes)
- Image: [Pigfish image](#) - Source unknown (originally circulated over social media)
- Image: [Underwater image](#) - by Miguel Pereira

Activity #1: Identifying Your Source

SAY:

- In 2016, the *World News Daily Report* website published an article about a *National Geographic* photographer who was eaten alive by a giant ocean sunfish in Peru. According to the article, 29-year-old Joaquín Álvarez Santos was on an underwater shoot with four other divers when he was swallowed whole by the fish, which weighed more than 2,000 kg (4,400 lbs).
- [Project the [underwater image](#) on a projection screen.]
- One of the divers on the shoot, James C. Wyatt, was said to have captured this image before the incident took place.

ASK:

- Spend two minutes doing a Google search of this news event. What do you find? [Alternatively, if there is no access to the Internet, ask participants to read [this](#) article, which you may pass out as a handout.]

SAY:

- You may have discovered in your search (or while reading the article) that the article from the *World News Daily Report* is not factual.
- Every piece of news content online has a **source**, which can be defined as the person, publication, or agency that captured an image or has information about the original news event.
- The source of the story about the photographer who was eaten alive by a giant ocean sunfish in Peru is the *World News Daily Report* website, which has a [disclaimer](#) stating that it “assumes all responsibility for the satirical nature of its articles” and that “all characters appearing in the articles in this website — even those based on real people — are entirely fictional.”
- However, you may have also discovered that the image is real. It was captured by photographer Miguel Pereira who encountered a massive sunfish off the coast of Portugal (and lived to tell the tale) in 2013.

ASK:

- Why do you think the *World News Daily Report* published this article?
- Do you think there should be a website that primarily publishes content that is not factual? [Some websites, such as the *World News Daily Report* and *The Onion* are dedicated mainly to satirical content / comedy writing that is not factual. The humor is often based on presenting basic events as newsworthy, surreal, or alarming. Three examples are included below. Feel free to project these headlines on the projection screen.]

10/3/19
3:00 PM



NEWS IN BRIEF

Fisher-Price Recalls Dangerous 30-Foot-Tall High Chair

EAST AURORA, NY—Apologizing to customers for mistakenly boosting their children far past the height of the average kitchen table, Fisher-Price officials announced Thursday that they had recalled thousands of dangerous 30-foot-tall high chairs. “After a thorough investigation, we have determined that the risk of a...

Source: <https://www.theonion.com/fisher-price-recalls-dangerous-30-foot-tall-high-chair-1838749032>

10/10/19
8:00 AM



POLITICS » NEWS IN PHOTOS

Despondent Trump Drives Golf Cart Into Water Hazard

Source: <https://politics.theonion.com/despondent-trump-drives-golf-cart-into-water-hazard-1838927609>



9/12/19
1:57 PM



NEWS

Inspiring: Thousands Of Gamers Have Pitched In To Rescue Consoles Abandoned In The Wake Of Hurricane

Source: <https://ogn.theonion.com/inspiring-thousands-of-gamers-have-pitched-in-to-rescu-1838074885>

- Do you think all readers will realize that *World News Daily Report* stories are not factual? Why or why not?

SAY:

- How many of you have shared news (e.g., information related to politics or current events, celebrity gossip, the weather, new games, your friends (like about your friend winning a sports competition or getting an internship)) on social media before? People around the world today are sharing news on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and messaging apps like Snapchat and WhatsApp. Millions of people have used social media as an important tool to organize protests and engage with the news (by posting images, videos, text-based posts, sharing, commenting). Knowing how to filter and make sense of all this information is an essential skill for anyone who wants to consume the news today. This skill becomes especially important because people can create, read, or share information that is not factual.

ASK:

- “Can you think of [any] news events where you were fooled by a rumor or a false image or video?” (First Draft).
- What was the event?
- How did you figure out that the news was not factual?

SAY:

- While some people intentionally try to fool news media (e.g., by [tweeting that the New York Stock Exchange was flooded during Hurricane Sandy](#)), other people may share the same information on social media out of a genuine interest to help or update others if they think the information is factual. “There are often so many false rumors during breaking news events that newsrooms have actually started collecting lists of them” (First Draft). Journalists are trained to remain skeptical of everything they hear and see — whether it is breaking news or viral content — until they can verify the information or prove that it is not factual.
- Verification is a process by which a news organization or a person gathers and assesses evidence from different sources to investigate if information is factual or not. Although the process of verification used to be performed mainly by journalists and news organizations, it has become essential for anyone who wants to stay well-informed about current events. Beyond being well-informed, verification is crucial in understanding the facts of current events and making sure the information you’re getting is factual. In an environment where anybody can create and share information online, especially on social media, being able to verify the content we consume and share is important for building healthy online communities and becoming someone your friends / followers / those you are connected to on social media feel they can trust.

ASK:

- Has anyone heard of fact-checking or fact-checkers before?
- What do you think fact-checkers do?

SAY:

- Fact-checkers are people who identify then verify or prove to be wrong every single fact in a piece of writing. Fact-checkers have traditionally worked for newspapers, magazines, authors, or book publishers, but in recent decades, they are increasingly verifying content on social media platforms. Professionals believe that the number of fact-checkers worldwide [will increase in the future](#) due to the rise of social media and user-generated news content. An example of user-generated news content might be a photo that someone takes of an approaching hurricane, which they then upload on social media.
- Fact-checking and verification are two closely related concepts. Fact-checking mostly happens after news content is published, and examines statements made publicly to decide how factual they are. Meanwhile, verification is a process that typically assesses how factual content is before it becomes part of “the news.”
- Both fact-checking and verification can involve examining “more official” and “less official” web content. An example of more official content could be an

article published on a university website. An example of less official content could be video footage uploaded on social media from someone at a political rally or at the center of a natural disaster.

- Typically, journalists engage in fact-checking and the verification process, but, as mentioned previously, anyone can apply these methods when engaging with news content.
- You can use popular websites such as Snopes.com, FactCheck.org, and [National Public Radio's Politics Fact Check](http://NationalPublicRadio.com) to help you verify how factual news content you come across online is.

Assignment

[Project the [pigfish image](#) on a projection screen]



SAY:

- This image has been shared on social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube, with text identifying the creature as a “pigfish” or a “wild hogfish.”
- Visit the [Snopes fact-checking website](#) and review how fact-checkers have proven this “pigfish” image to be a hoax (i.e., humorous deception) and that such a creature does not exist. [Alternatively (although less preferably), if there is no access to the Internet, ask participants to read [this](#) article, which you may pass out as a handout.]
- Then, write a short paragraph explaining how identifying the “pigfish” image as a hoax can be helpful for the platforms and organizations that share it, or the people who see it.

Discussion

SAY:

- Traditionally, journalists verify information before publishing their work. If they realize the information is not factual, they normally won’t publish it.
- Some people argue that in the age of social media, it is more difficult to differentiate fact from fiction. Often, factual information looks nearly identical to non-factual information. Because of this, we often rely on friends / followers / those we are connected to, to guide us through the information ecosystem.
- Social media platforms and some of the features these platforms may offer can help us verify information online.
 - For instance, it may be helpful to take a look at the comments below an image, photo, or text-based post — others may share links to articles that support the information, or prove it is not factual.
 - It might also be useful to look at the [profile of the person who shared the information](#). Do they often post about this type of information? If so, what did the previous posts say? Do those posts add in more details about the specific information you’re looking at? Other aspects of the profile that may be helpful to consider: who are they friends with / followers of / connected to? And who are friends with / following / connected to them?
- However, determining how factual information on social media platforms is may also be more difficult than verifying information through traditional media, like print newspapers.
 - For instance, by bringing together stories from many different sources on a single platform, the focus is often on the content of the story, versus *where* the content comes from. Keep in mind, though, that both the source *and* content itself are important to pay attention to.

- Social recommendations (like the number of “likes” or reshares / reposts / retweets for a given story) often guide what people will read online, versus whether or not the information is factual. For instance, if a significant number of people you are friends with / followers of / connected to “like” the same article, you may be (or may not be) more inclined to think the article is factual.

ASK:

- Can anyone tell me what they think is meant by an information gatekeeper when we think about traditional news sources (e.g., radio, print newspapers, television)?

[In the traditional news environment, a relatively small group of professionals in a news organization would act as information gatekeepers, tasked with guaranteeing certain levels of information quality. Gatekeeping, in terms of news selection, describes the process by which pieces of information on various events and issues go through a series of gates, are transformed along the way, and then end up in the news. For instance, a journalist working for a magazine might cover a story on the young climate activist Greta Thunberg but only pull out parts of the story that are factual and relevant. He or she might then show those parts to other people working for the magazine to see if they think the story needs to be edited further. The final story will then be released to the public and become news. Platforms and websites like [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) and [wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com) (*Wall Street Journal*) are still run much like this traditional model.]

ASK:

- Do you think social media has changed this concept of information gatekeeping? If so, how?

[Researchers have come up with a variety of theories to think about information gatekeeping and news on social media. Here is one way to consider it. Online, someone, potentially a news organization, can post a news story on a social media platform. Let’s say the story is about Michelle Obama (the former First Lady of the United States). A young teenage girl comes across the story and wants to share it with others, so she reshares / reposts / retweets it with her 500 friends / followers / connections. Her friends and followers might then see her post, and like or comment on it, or reshare it themselves. This makes everyone who is exposed to the story a possible information gatekeeper. However, certain people and organizations (like news organizations, or those who have many friends / followers / connections) can reach more people and so may be more influential than others.]

ASK:

- Particularly given the rate at which information can spread online, do you think journalists have a responsibility to fact-check the content of their stories before they publish them online? Why or why not?
- Do you think people should develop the skills to verify online news content? If yes: What do you think some of those skills might be? Even if someone is equipped with those skills, do you think there are limits to their ability to verify online news? Why or why not?
- What is the responsibility of social media companies where people post news content?
- In the past, news organizations have published content (e.g., images, videos, text-based posts) that cannot be 100% verified. Why do you think an organization might decide to publish this content?
- What might some of the consequences be for publishing unverified content?
- Do you think there are situations where it is appropriate for people to publish unverified content?

[Discuss as a group.]