

Tackling Fake News (A CivCon Activity)

Overview

This lesson continues from where the previous lesson **Understanding Fake News** leaves off. In this lesson, students learn about the constitutional, legal, and practical considerations and controversies surrounding regulation of fake news. First, students read and discuss an article that reviews what fake news is and then describes measures taken by private parties (such as social media platforms) and government to try to regulate fake news. Next, they participate in a Civil Conversation (CivCon) on the reading. In this structured discussion method, under the guidance of a facilitator (the teacher), participants are encouraged to engage intellectually with challenging materials, gain insight about their own point of view, and strive for a shared understanding of issues.

Standards and Topics

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10/11-12.1.A:** Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C:** Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C:** Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D:** Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D:** Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

Topics: fake news, news, media literacy, social media, defamation, libel, *New York Times v. Sullivan*

Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Explain the problem of fake news in contemporary political discourse.
2. Cite examples of private and public measures to regulate fake news, especially on social media.
3. State a reasoned opinion on what the most effective methods are for protecting internet-users from fake news.

4. Participate in Civil Conversation (CivCon), which will enable them to:
 - a. Gain a deeper understanding of a controversial issue.
 - b. Use close reading skills to analyze a text.
 - c. Present text-based claims.
 - d. Develop speaking, listening, and analytical skills.
 - e. Identify common ground among differing views.

Materials

- [Handout A – Tackling Fake News](#) (one per student)
- [Handout B – CivCon Guide](#) (one per student)

Procedure

I. Focus Discussion

- A. Hold a brief discussion by asking students: *How often do you learn about news of the world or your community from social media?* (Accept reasoned responses.) *How do you make sure that what you're learning about is true?* (Accept reasoned responses and look for answers in which students fact-check what they read or hear.)
- B. Tell students that today they will be able to discuss what can be done about deliberately untrue information spread primarily on social media, otherwise known as fake news.

II. Reading: Tackling Fake News

- A. Briefly overview the purpose and rationale of the CivCon activity. Use the Overview above to help you. Give each student a copy of [Handout A: Tackling Fake News](#).
- B. Distribute a copy of [Handout B: CivCon Guide](#) to each student to complete as they read handout. (Each student should fill in his/her own guide.)

III. Activity: Civil Conversation (CivCon)

- A. Divide the class into groups of 3–4 students. You may want to have each group select a leader who will get the discussion started, ensure the group stays on-task, and finishes on time.
- B. Determine how much time the groups have to complete the discussion. (Depending on the length of the reading and how experienced your students are in student-directed discussion.)

Time: Conversations for classroom purposes should have a time limit, generally ranging from 15 to 45 minutes and an additional five minutes to reflect on the effectiveness of the conversations. The reflection time is an opportunity to ask any students who have not spoken to comment on the things they have heard. Ask them who said something that gave them a new insight that they agreed or disagreed with. Consider the length/difficulty of the text(s) students will use and how experienced in student-directed discussion your students are in determining the time.

Small Groups: This discussion strategy is designed to ensure the participation of every student. Groups of 3-4 students are ideal. If you are scaffolding text for various reading levels, group students who will use the same text.

- C. Review the rules of a Civil Conversation (listed under Step 3 on the Guide) and direct the groups to follow the instructions on the Guide to get started.
- D. Let groups know you will be circulating to listen in on their conversations and that each person in a group is expected to participate. The goal is for everyone to contribute equally to the conversation.
- E. If necessary, remind groups of the time and urge them to move to the next steps.

IV. Assessment/Closure

- A. After the groups have completed their discussions, debrief the activity by having the class reflect on the effectiveness of the conversation:
- What did you learn from the CivCon?
 - What common ground did you find with other members of the group?
 - Conclude the debriefing by asking all participants to suggest ways in which the conversation could be improved. If appropriate, have students add the suggestions to their list of conversation rules.
- B. If you want to debrief the content of the CivCon, you might ask:
- Was there any surprising information you learned from the reading and CivCon? What was it?
 - What are the problems people encounter when trying to decide if what they are reading online is fake news or not?
 - What is the best way to tackle fake news: regulation by social-media platforms, regulation by government, better education in media literacy for young people and adults, or some other way? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each way to tackle fake news?
- C. For assessment, look for the following on each student's CivCon Guide:
- Step 2 - A B: Basic understanding of text.
- Step 2 - C D: Text-based arguments.
- Step 2 - E: Appropriate and compelling questions about the text.
- Step 3 - A: Level of participation (should be "about the same as others").
- Step 3 - B: Answer is appropriately related to topic/issue presented in text.
- Step 3 - C D: Specificity/text-based.
- D. In addition, you may want to collect the article/text students used to assess the annotations they made in terms of connections to prior knowledge/experience, questions they had while reading, and comments they made.

Source List

- Allcott, Hunt, and Matthew Gentzkow. "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2017, pp. 211–236.
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- Stewart, Emily. "Facebook Bans Alex Jones, Infowars, Louis Farrakhan, and Others It Deems 'Dangerous.'" *Vox*, 2 May 2019, www.vox.com/recode/2019/5/2/18527357/facebook-bans-alex-jones-louis-farrakhan-infowars.
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Tackling Fake News



Image by S. Hermann & F. Richter
from Pixabay

Have you ever seen a news headline that just seemed too incredible to be true? Perhaps it was satire, which is comedy mixed with social commentary. An example would be “Trump’s Fourth of July Parade to Include Flyover by Russian Air Force.” Clearly untrue, it was written by satirist Andy Borowitz in 2019 for *The New Yorker* magazine.

But what about this headline: “Parkland First Responder: I Was Told to Stand Down”? If true, it would mean an emergency medical responder was ordered not to try to save victims’ lives at the scene of a mass shooting. It would be shocking and not at all funny to think that this was true. In fact, it is not true. The story was produced by the fake-news website InfoWars, whose founder routinely claims that mass shootings are hoaxes designed to help gun-control advocates.

Fake-news stories are made to look like legitimate news stories. The difference is that fake news is intentionally fabricated news. Its apparent purpose is to misinform or mislead readers, either for political or financial gain. During the 2016 presidential election season, fake news was widely shared on social media, especially on Facebook and Twitter.

Social media has grown over the past several years and has completely altered how most Americans get their news and information. Users share news and information directly with each other with no fact-checking in between. Fake-news creators have found this set up to be perfect for marketing their fake-news products.

Economics professors from New York University and Stanford University investigated the fake news of 2016. Their research uncovered startling numbers. Users shared fake-news articles 38 million times. From those shares, users clicked on links to fake-news headlines 760 million times. These stories were “heavily tilted” toward then-candidate Donald Trump, with 115 pro-Trump fake-news stories being shared 30 million times. On the other side, 41 pro-Clinton fake stories were shared 7.6 million times. As we know, Donald Trump won the election.

After the election, many social-media users demanded that tech companies take action to prevent the wide circulation of fake-news stories. In response, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg announced the company would make it easier for users to report and flag fake stories. Additionally, unpaid third-party organizations indicated they were going to start fact-checking articles flagged by users.

Google announced that it would ban fake-news sites from using Google’s advertising services. Fake-news writer Paul Horner, for example, said he can make up to \$10,000 a month on his website through Google AdSense. If Google and Facebook curtail fake news, he said that he would simply work under different names and sites. “Nobody fact-checks anything anymore,” Horner said.

Some internet users have demanded that social-media platforms simply ban fake news. Many users, however, oppose bans on posting content as a form of censorship. In fact, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram (which Facebook owns), and other platforms do shut down accounts they determine to have violated

terms of use. For example, they ban pages run by hate groups, like neo-Nazis. In 2019, Facebook banned accounts by right-wing extremists Alex Jones of InfoWars, Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, and others that the platform deemed to be dangerous.

Also in 2019, Facebook banned 265 accounts run by Archimedes Group, a company that Facebook found was targeting political discourse in countries in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia through the spreading of fake-news stories. The company tells its clients it can “change reality according to our client’s wishes.” Facebook cited the company for the violation of “coordinated inauthentic behavior.”

Television and radio stations must have broadcast licenses to operate and must follow regulations set by the Federal Communications Commission. For companies like Facebook and Twitter, however, there currently is no such regulation or licensing. Accuracy and liability for what is posted rest with the users. Readers must be aware of the risks and assess the reliability of information for themselves.

First Amendment Protections & Libel Risk

The First Amendment protects the right to free speech. Any law enacted to stop people from publishing or spreading fake news could trigger a challenge that the law infringes on First Amendment free-speech rights. We may have to accept a certain amount of false speech in order to allow true speech to also be published. But there are limits.

Neither newspapers nor television and radio stations may commit defamation, which is the use of false statements that tend to harm a person’s reputation or make that person a victim of public ridicule or harm. In print (including publishing on the internet and social media), defamation is called libel. Like newspapers, a fake-news publisher could face a civil lawsuit for libel.

Under the First Amendment, news sources are allowed in certain specific circumstances to publish false stories. In 1964, the Supreme Court ruled in *New York Times Company v. Sullivan* that publication of false stories without actual malice is protected speech (in other words does not create liability). *Actual malice* means the publisher knows the story is false or has reckless disregard for its truth or falsity. Monetary damages may be awarded where actual malice is involved.

The effectiveness of any law against fake news also faces practical challenges. Many fake-news articles are published on websites in other countries. For example, the Archimedes Group described above is based in Israel. Another website in Macedonia published an article in early November 2016 claiming Hillary Clinton would be indicted on charges connected to her use of a private email server when she was secretary of state. No such indictment was actually going to happen, but a U.S. law against fake news would not have restricted a website in Macedonia.

In the past, editors and other professionals generally curated accurate information delivered to the public. They still do on credible news websites and in traditional print journalism. But not all websites and social-media platforms similarly vet information. In fact, many fake-news websites are deliberately designed to look like legitimate news websites so as to attract readership. It is left to each of us to evaluate whether or not information online is reliable.

As an online user, you can strengthen your digital citizenship with a few simple tools. One is to consult reliable fact-checking websites, like snopes.com or factcheck.org. Another is to balance your news intake: Seek out news about an event from a variety of sources, including those that may have a different political slant than your own. News reporting may not be neutral (having no opinion whatsoever). But reporters can still report facts as facts in as objective a manner as possible.

For Discussion

- How does fake news spread on social media so quickly?
- What are the potential drawbacks of trying to pass laws against fake news?

CIVCON GUIDE

Name: _____ Class: _____

Title of Reading: _____

Step 1: Read.

- A. Read through the entire selection without stopping to think about any particular section.
- B. Re-read the selection and annotate (“talk to”) the text:
- Underline the main/most important points. You can comment on these points in the margins.
 - Circle words or phrases that are unknown or confusing to you.
 - Write down any questions you have in the margin labeling them with a “?”.
 - Draw an ➡ in the margin next to text that connects to something you know from outside the text. Note what the connection is, such as a news item or personal experience.

Step 2: Think about the reading to prepare for the discussion.

<p>A. This reading is about...</p>	<p>B. The MAIN POINTS are:</p>
<p>C. In the reading, I agree with:</p>	<p>D. In the reading, I disagree with:</p>

E. What are two questions about this reading that you think could be discussed? (The best questions for discussion are ones that have no simple answer and that can use the text as evidence.)

1.

2.

Step 3: Discuss and listen.

RULES FOR CIVIL CONVERSATION (CIVCON)

1. Everyone in your group should participate in the conversation.
2. Listen carefully to what others are saying.
3. Ask clarifying questions if you do not understand a point raised.
4. Be respectful of what others are saying.
5. Refer to the text to support your ideas.

You will have _____ minutes to discuss. Your goal is to engage with each other and the text to gain insight about your own point of view while finding a shared understanding of the issue.

At the end of the reading, you will likely find at least one discussion question. Use that question to get started. If time permits, you can also discuss questions you came up with in Section E above.

If the reading does not provide discussion questions, choose questions to discuss from Section E.

Step 4: After your conversation...

A. Compared to others in your group, did you speak? _____ Less than, _____ About the same as, _____ More than others.

B. Note some of the ways you added to the discussion.

C. What evidence did you use from the text to add to the discussion? Why was this evidence helpful?

D. What did you learn about the topic from the CivCon? (Be sure to reference the text!)