Slowing the infodemic:
How to spot COVID-19 misinformation

A classroom guide developed in partnership by:

NAMLE

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR
MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

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How to Spot COVID-19 Misinformation

Classroom Guide

INTRODUCTION

In response to the significant amount of misinformation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, Thomson Reuters and the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) are teaming up to provide educators with unique content that will inspire relevant and rich discussion in their classrooms. This discussion guide can be used as a companion to the *Slowing the Infodemic: How to Spot COVID-19 Misinformation* podcast, video, and infographic to teach media literacy skills through inquiry based learning. Using these resources, students will gain knowledge about the origin of common information we accept as fact, their role in accepting knowledge without inquiry, the process used by professional journalists to verify information, and the skills necessary to think critically about the media messages around them.

BACKGROUND

Media are defined as the means of communication that reach or influence people widely (for example; radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet). Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication and represents a necessary, inevitable, and realistic response to the complex, ever-changing electronic environment. To become a successful student, responsible citizen, productive worker, and conscientious consumer, students need to develop expertise with the increasingly sophisticated information and entertainment media that affect the way they think, feel, and behave. Media literacy is an *essential* life skill in the 21st Century.

Inquiry based learning is the foundation of media literacy education. Guided inquiry helps students construct personal knowledge and prepare to learn and participate in a mediated world. In order to guide inquiry, students must understand the core principles of media literacy:

1. Media Literacy Education requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create.
2. Media Literacy Education expands the concept of literacy (i.e., reading and writing) to include all forms of media.
3. Media Literacy Education builds and reinforces skills for learners of all ages. Like print literacy, those skills necessitate integrated, interactive, and repeated practice.
4. Media Literacy Education develops informed, reflective and engaged participants essential for a democratic society.
5. Media Literacy Education recognizes that media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialization.
6. Media Literacy Education affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.

In order to effectively deconstruct the media messages they consume, students should break down their analysis into three groups: authors and audiences, messages and meaning, and representations and reality using NAMLE's **Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages**. These groups break down further into the following categories:

Authors and Audiences: Authorship, purpose, economics, effects, and responses
Messages and Meaning: Content, techniques, and interpretations
Representations and Reality: Context and credibility

To guide inquiry-based discussions, educators can ask a variety of key questions from each category to provoke critical thinking about each of these concepts in relation to a specific media. Some examples of these questions include:

- Who made this message?
- Why was this message made?
- What ideas, values, information, or points of view are represented? Which are missing?
- What creative techniques are used to attract your attention?
- How might different people understand this message differently based on their own beliefs and experiences?

TEACHER RESOURCES

The Podcast

In this podcast, produced by Thomas Reuters in cooperation with the National Association for Media Literacy Education, Hazel Baker, Reuters' Global Head of User Generated Content, and Michelle Ciulla Lipkin, NAMLE's Executive Director, discuss how and why user generated content (UGC) is shared, the process through which professional journalists verify and debunk UGC, and the important role UGC plays in our information ecosystem. A transcript of the podcast is also available. (24:35) [**listen** | **transcript**]

The Video

This short video from Thomson Reuters and NAMLE features Hazel Baker, Reuters' Global Head of User Generated Content, and explores four tips for dealing with online misinformation related to COVID-19. (2:23) [**watch** | **transcript**]

The Infographic

Created by Thomson Reuters and NAMLE, this handy infographic provides a summary of Hazel's four tips for dealing with misinformation related to COVID-19. This infographic should be used as a supplement to the podcast and short video provided above. [**view**]

CLASSROOM GUIDE

Overview

This discussion guide will serve as a roadmap for leading your students through a variety of discussion prompts about the podcast, video and infographic.

Pre-Learning Activities

Students should review the following materials prior to the class discussion and activities:

> **Podcast: Slowing the Infodemic: How to Spot COVID-19 Misinformation**
> **NAMLE Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages**

Vocabulary

Students should familiarize themselves with the following terms in preparation of the lesson:

Accidental journalist	Person who captures important footage of an incident as it occurs or in the immediate aftermath when journalists are not present.
Bias	Feelings of favor or prejudice against something or someone
Breaking news	Information about planned or unplanned news occurrences that are occurring or still developing
Context	The circumstances surrounding an event, statement, or idea necessary to fully understand and assess the information
Copyright	Exclusive reproduction rights given to the creator of creative works
Lateral Reading	Opening new tabs on your browser to verify the accuracy of content you are consuming with other sources.
Misinformation	False or incorrect information, sometimes intended to mislead
Primary Sources	A person or group with first-hand account of an event
Scraped content	Content shared by someone other than the primary source
Spot News	Incidents or accidents which are unplanned Examples: natural disasters, terror attacks
User Generated Content (UGC)	Any form of content--images, videos, text, and audio--created and posted by users on online platforms

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will be able to describe the difference between *user generated content (UGC)* and *professional journalism*.

2. Students will be able to identify at least three ways UGC can be used to mislead media consumers.
3. Students will be able to describe the process through which Reuters reporters and producers verify user generated content.
4. Students will identify at least two ways in which primary sources can both harm and help breaking news reporting.
5. Students will identify at least three key questions they can ask to critically analyze UGC.
6. Students will be able to describe at least three tips or tools for identifying misinformation.
7. Students will demonstrate their understanding of the verification process used by journalists by replicating the Reuters content verification process.

Part 1: Introduce the Lesson/Begin Discussion

Review the definition of media literacy (as well as any additional background information provided above, depending on the knowledge level of students or to check for understanding of pre-learning materials):

"Media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create and act using all forms of communication."

Possible discussion prompts to open discussion and help students analyze their relationship with news media:

- Do you watch, listen or read the news?
- How do you determine your preference?

Part 2: Classroom Discussion (engagement)

Podcast review:
- Discuss Hazel's role at Head of User Generated Content News Gathering
  - Is this a role you knew existed?
  - Does it surprise you that Reuters has a dedicated team to do this work?
  - Why or why not?
- Hazel discusses determining when content is authentic or inauthentic - how do you assess the authenticity of content you see?
- What misinformation have you come across related to COVID-19? How did you know it was misinformation? How did you respond?
- Share quote: "...there are thousands of potential cameras around the world, it's a very small number compared to the number of smartphones carried by individual citizens."
  - What do you think is the responsibility of witnesses to news events?
  - Hazel describes them as "accidental journalists." How would you describe them?
- Hazel describes the painstaking task of finding out the source of the user generated content. Does it surprise you that so much time is spent working on verification? Why or why not?
- Hazel says "misinformation thrives on anxiety". Do you agree with her? Why or why not?

Watch the **short video** and view the **infographic** as a class and discuss the following:

- Hazel discussed four types of misinformation commonly shared online: copy and paste rumors, imposter content, home remedies, and out of context imagery.
    - Have you seen examples of these types of misinformation?
    - Who was the original source of the information--someone you know, or a share/forward/retweet from someone you know, or from an unknown source?
    - Have you ever unintentionally shared misinformation? How do you know?
- Reuters and NAMLE have distributed information about misinformation in three different formats: Podcast, short video, and infographic. Discuss:
    - The differences in the three formats, and
    - The effectiveness of each medium to present this information,
    - How the format/delivery method changes the information we receive.

Part 3: Group Discussion (analysis)

In groups, discuss the following points made by Hazel in the podcast and then have groups share and compare their findings.

Included below are a series of prompts related to the media content and possible answers to help guide discussion.

- Hazel asserts that UGC plays an important role in the information ecosystem.
    - What positive role does UGC play in the breaking news cycle?
        - Possible answers:
            - Reuters cameras can't be everywhere,
            - Sometimes journalists are not allowed near breaking news scenes,
            - It is more likely an accidental journalist will be at the scene of breaking news as it happens or while it is still occurring before reporters arrive.
    - What negative role might UGC play in the news cycle?
        - Possible answers:
            - Ways misinformation is used to mislead
                - Reports perspective of only one person,
                - Claim old content is new content,
                - Video/photo at a location was old footage/past event,
                - Caption/description of an authentic image/video doesn't accurately reflect what is happening,
                - Misleading headlines,
                - Attribute content taken at one location/event to another location/event.

- One of the primary roles of Hazel's team is to verify content to determine if it can be included as an aspect of storytelling. What are different ways Hazel's team verifies UGC?
  - Possible answers
    - Find the primary source: Whose footage is it?
      - It's not always the person who posted it. Sometimes the primary source sent the content privately to someone else and then that person shared it.
      - Only the person who took the photo/video can really tell Reuters what happened.
      - The person who took the footage also owns the rights to that photo/video.
    - Identify copyright: Who owns it?
      - Reuters must get permission to use the content from the person who recorded the photo/video (primary source).
    - Do additional research: Is more information needed?
      - Interview other people who were on the scene,
      - Verify accounts with other witnesses or authorities,
      - Must prove the photo/video accurately shows the event,
        - Is there a faithful attempt at accurate representation?
        - Is it presented in an unbiased way (no editing or angles used to alter the accuracy of the events)?
- How might Reuters use some of NAMLE's *Key Questions* to analyze UGC:
  - Possible Answers:
    - Who is the person who's filming?
      - Related Key Questions: Who created this message?
    - What was their motivation to film?
      - Related Key Question: Why was this message created?
    - Is there any information that they have, which they're not telling us?
      - Related Key Question: What is left out that might be important to know?
    - Do they support a political side of a protest or event?
      - Related Key Questions:
        - What ideas, values, information, or points of view are overt? Implied?
        - How might different people understand this message differently?

Part 4: Small Group Activities (create)

Create Your Own Misinformation Tip Sheet

Help students understand different processes for identifying misinformation by having them create their own Misinformation Tip Sheet for different audiences.

- Review the short video and infographic with the class.
- Provide students with a copy of the fact-checking resources on the following page.
- Have students create a tip sheet for identifying misinformation in one of the following scenarios:
  - Verifying a COVID-19 health remedy received via a chain email from a family member,
  - Fact-checking a video submitted to a journalist by a self-proclaimed eyewitness,
  - Verifying a scientific claim made by a physician on social media.
- Have students consider:
  - Why do they need to be skeptical (what kind of misinformation could this be? Why do they think that?)?
  - What **Key Questions** they should be asking (refer to NAMLE's Key Questions) about each type of media message?
  - How the platform might impact their ability to verify the information?
  - What tools they might use to determine if the message is legitimate?

Identifying Key Questions

Read about the #filmyourhospital hashtag on Twitter, have students
- Locate and image by searching for the #filmyourhospital hashtag on Twitter.
- As a group, using NAMLE's Key Questions to Ask when Analyzing Media Message to brainstorm a list of Key Questions you might ask if you were going to:
  - Investigate the source of the content
  - Learn more about the context of the image
  - Analyze the content for bias

Reuters Fact-Checking

Have students practice the information verification process by recreating the process outlined by the Reuters fact-checking blog.
- Have students select an item from the Reuters **fact-checking blog**.
- Have students retrace the steps described in the blog post (visit links, etc.).
- Have students document their experience:
  - Are they able to verify the information is false/partly false/misleading?
  - Can you verify their findings with another fact-checking source?
  - If not, why? What additional information do you need?
- Get creative! Have students document their experience with a vlog, blog, podcast infographic, etc.!

Fact-Checking Tools

Image verification

Google Reverse Image Search
TinEye
Foto Forensics

Fact-Checking websites

FactCheck.org, Annenberg Public Policy Center
Hoax-Slayer
PolitiFact, The Poynter Institute
Snopes
Hoaxy, Indiana University Network Science Institute
AP Fact Check, Associated Press
Check Your Fact, Daily Caller
Factcheck.org, Annenberg Public Policy Center
Lead Stories, RAND Corporation
News | Fact Check, USA TODAY
Fact Checker, Washington Post
Open Secrets, Center for Responsive Politics
Hall of Justice, Sunlight Foundation
Reuters Fact Check
International Fact Checking Network
CoronaVirusFacts Network
AFP Coronavirus Verification Hub
Science Feedback

Library Databases

Opposing Viewpoints (Gale in Context)
CQ Researcher (CQ Press Researcher)
SIRS Knowledge Source (ProQuest)
Newsbank
Nexis Uni (Lexis Nexis)
Newspaper Source Plus (EBSCO)
National Newspaper Index (New York Times)
Newsstream (ProQuest)

Other Resources

Code of Ethics, Society for Professional Journalists
Codes of Ethics, American Society of News Editors
Code of Principles, International Fact Checking Network
Misinformation Review, Harvard Kennedy School

ABOUT HAZEL BAKER

Hazel Baker is the Global Head of User-Generated Content (UGC) newsgathering operation at Reuters News Agency, directing a team dedicated to sourcing, verifying and clearing this material for timely distribution to agency clients around the world. Prior to her position at Reuters, Hazel helped to found and develop the Sky News Digital Desk, through which she gained an in-depth understanding of best practice in digital newsgathering. Hazel is an expert in the topics of media manipulation and verification.

ABOUT MICHELLE CIULLA LIPKIN

Michelle Ciulla Lipkin is the Executive Director of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. Michelle has been a featured guest or commentator for CNN, PBS NewsHour Extra, NPR, The New York Times, and Al Jazeera English. She is also sharing her knowledge with university students as an adjunct lecturer in the TV/Radio Department at Brooklyn College.

ABOUT NAMLE

The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) is a non-profit, membership organization dedicated to advancing media literacy education. As the leading voice, convener and resource for media literacy education, NAMLE aims to make media literacy highly valued and widely practiced as an essential life skill. Individual membership with NAMLE is free! **Sign-up** to become a member today and get media literacy-related content delivered to your inbox each month!

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