

Fake news: can you spot it?

Topic

- Learning how to identify fake websites

Aims

- To expand knowledge of vocabulary related to news and the media
- To raise students' awareness of fake news through discussion and reading
- To develop students' 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, collaboration and media literacy

Age/level

Older teens B1+

Time

45–60 minutes

Materials

1. Worksheet
2. High-tech classes: Use the internet. Send students to the two websites online.
Low-tech classes: Make photocopies of the two website pages and hand them out to students.
<https://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/> <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/octopus-tree-of-oregon>

Introduction

Ideally this lesson is for teenagers, but it can also be used with adults. The lesson begins with a brief discussion about news and fake news.

Students then skim read two webpages. One website is about the Tree Octopus (a spoof), while the other is about the Octopus Tree. After a brief reading comprehension activity, students study the websites, using a set of questions to help them. The goal is to discover which one is the fake website and why it's fake!

As a final activity, students find other fake news stories currently circulating the internet. They choose one from the list and design a post or meme advising their friends not to fall for it.

Procedure

1. Lead-in (5–10 minutes)

- Tell the class that today's lesson is about real and fake news websites.
- Hand out the worksheet. Ask students to answer Q1 in small groups.
- Bring the class back together. Elicit the meaning of 'fake news'.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage students to come up to the board and write a simple definition. Use prompts to help them develop a more complete definition as a class, e.g. Is it deliberate? Is it always a complete lie or does it contain some true elements? Where do you find it? How is it spread? Why is it done? Read out a definition. <p>Answer key</p> <p>Fake news: the deliberate spreading of misinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional print and broadcast news media or online media. Fake news is written and published usually with the intent to mislead in order to damage an agency, entity or person, and/or gain financially or politically, often using sensationalist, dishonest or outright fabricated headlines and images to increase readership. (Wikipedia)</p> <p>Fake news: false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke. (Cambridge Dictionary)</p>
2. Reading (10–15 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce Q2 of the worksheet. Tell the class that they are going to skim read two website pages. One site is about a Tree Octopus, the other is about an Octopus Tree. (Important: don't explain yet that one is fake.) • Send students to the websites (high-tech) or give them the photocopies (low-tech). https://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/ https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/octopus-tree-of-oregon • Set a time limit. Monitor and help students as they read the two websites quickly, looking for specific information. Discourage them from spending a long time looking up unknown vocabulary. Then briefly check the answers. <p>Answer key: Tree Octopus</p> <p>Habitat: In the temperate rainforests of the west coast of North America.</p> <p>Characteristics: The octopus has eight arms. On average (measured from arm-tip to mantle-tip) it is 30–33cm long. It is amphibious, intelligent and its eyesight is comparable to that of humans.</p> <p>History: The octopus has become endangered because the fashion industry began to kill it in large numbers and sell it to the rich in the form of hat ornaments.</p> <p>Answer key: Octopus Tree</p> <p>Habitat: Pacific Northwest coast of the USA</p> <p>Characteristics: The tree itself extends from a central base that is 15 metres around, and instead of shooting straight up with a central trunk, the body of the tree splits into a number of smaller trunks.</p> <p>History: It is believed to be around 250 to 300 years old. No one knows how this tree came to have so many trunks.</p>
3. Discovery activity (15–20 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead students into Q3. Explain that one of the two websites was fake! Invite them to guess which one, but don't give away the answer! • Turn to p.2 of the worksheet and explain that we can use five W-questions to help us validate websites. Pre-teach some useful vocabulary from the W-questions: credible/genuine/authentic/legitimate, suspicious, sensational, source, layout, URL, headline, reverse Google image search, Photoshop.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students to work in groups. Tell them to apply the W-questions to the two websites in order to find out which one is fake. Students make notes of the evidence that shows the fake one. Note: students can divide up the W-questions between them to make the activity quicker and easier. • Finally, as a whole class, elicit the answers. Ask: Which one is fake? (The Tree Octopus). How do you know? Elicit the evidence that proves it's fake (1. The URL is incomplete; 2. the content – see the section on history – is sensational and not credible; 3. the images of the octopus consist entirely of artwork and Photoshopped images – a reverse image search shows this; 4. there is no 'About Us' section or contact information on the page; 5. a simple check on more credible websites, such as Snopes and Wikipedia, reveals that the creature doesn't exist.) • Optional: Have students look at the Wikipedia entry for the Tree Octopus and the Octopus Tree. Additionally, invite them to look at the Snopes page, which explains that it's fake. (Note that this excellent Tree Octopus site has been used in schools around the world to test students' media literacy skills.) https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacific_Northwest_tree_octopus https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Octopus_tree https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/tree-octopus/ • Ask students: Did you guess it was fake? How? What do you think of the quality of the fake website?
4. Project (or homework)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce students to Q4. Time allowing, encourage them to find one (or more) of the fake stories currently circulating the Internet. • Have students create a meme, post or tweet, warning their friends not to fall for this fake news story. They should supply a fact, e.g. the image is fake.

Contributed by

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