A practitioner's guide to bias and misinformation

Misinformation is defined by Collins English dictionary as:

'…wrong information which is given to someone, often in a deliberate attempt to make them believe something which is not true.'

There is an unparalleled opportunity online to exchange and share information and ideas, as well as explore new concepts and learn. Your learners will come across online content that has the potential to shape their beliefs and opinions, and influence their behaviour. As a practitioner, it is important to educate learners to differentiate between fact and opinion online, and to provide opportunities for them to develop critical reasoning skills. They can then use these skills to evaluate the trustworthiness of what they encounter online, as well as the motivations of those who create that content.

Top tips for helping learners evaluate online content

- **Help them understand and identify misinformation, disinformation and bias**
  Help your learners to understand the differences between:

    - **misinformation** – false/inaccurate information
    - **disinformation** – false/inaccurate information spread in order to deceive others and influence beliefs and behaviours.

  Remind learners that they may often encounter online content that contains a mixture of both accurate and inaccurate information. Disinformation is at its most powerful when some accurate minor details are included to make it sound more plausible.

    - **bias** – bias in content means that it expresses an opinion or position without taking into account or including any counter argument or evidence to the contrary. The content is therefore unbalanced. Sometimes bias can be easy to spot. On other occasions it can be much more subtle. Either way, bias reflects its creator's world view and, particularly if strongly expressed, an unwillingness to change regardless of accuracy or evidence to the contrary.

- **Discuss fake news**
  'Fake news' was Collins Dictionary's word of the year in 2017, which is no surprise considering the considerable media attention on fake news issues in the preceding year. However, the term is not new. Fake news is misinformation or disinformation broadcast or shared on the internet as a news story.

The [BBC](#) explains that fake news can be false stories that are deliberately published or sent around, in order to make people believe something is untrue or to get lots of people to visit a website. These are deliberate lies that are put online, even though the person writing them knows that they are made up. However, sometimes fake news is when stories **may** have some truth to them, but they're not completely accurate. This is because the people writing them – for example, journalists or bloggers – don't check **all** of the facts before publishing the story, or they might exaggerate some of it.

- Children and young people access news through a range of online sources including social media and websites. Some of the news they encounter could be considered fake news – untrue stories or reports about people, organisations and places. Depending on the story's subject, and its timing and level of interest, fake news can rapidly spread and go viral.

   Discussing together the things your learners have seen and/or heard online is an opportunity for them to hear their peers' opinions and to ask questions. Exploring whether popular online content (such as viral stories or content from celebrities or social media influencers) is more trustworthy than other content can be an effective way of encouraging learners to reflect on the reliability of what they experience online.

   You can also work with them to fact-check stories and claims (websites like fullfact.org and snopes.com can be helpful for this), address misconceptions, and educate them on how and where to find reliable information online and offline.

- **Consider motives**
   Encourage learners to question what has motivated someone to share information online. Questioning the reputation and trustworthiness of the source is always a good starting point, as well as what they might stand to gain from sharing information. For example, exaggerated headlines could be used as 'clickbait' designed to attract attention and draw users to a website that then profits financially from increased advertising revenue.

   Help learners to recognise that media sources may also have their own agendas for sharing news stories or other information. Although the details in a story may be factually accurate, the source may express an opinion or bias alongside these details in an attempt to influence the opinions of others. Biases could be political, financial, religious or moral, and reflect the opinion of an individual or a whole organisation.

Remind learners that not all inaccurate information is shared with malicious intentions. People make genuine mistakes and are sometimes naïve about the true nature of the content they are sharing.

- **Explain the risks**
  The internet offers great opportunities for learners to explore different aspects of their lives and the world around them and many different perspectives too. However, they should be made aware that misinformation and biased information can pose risks to their health, well-being and safety, as well as that of others. They could encounter content that can influence beliefs, possibly leading to negative or prejudiced behaviour towards others who don't share those beliefs. They may also encounter content that encourages risky or dangerous behaviours, including misleading or inaccurate advice around health and lifestyle.

- **Teach and encourage critical reasoning**
  The most effective way to protect learners from risks posed by biased or misleading online information is to help them develop the skills they need to critically evaluate information and then make positive and responsible choices.

  Teach learners strategies for authenticating online information. These could include checking a range of online sources and websites, using trusted sites to fact-check, verifying information through offline sources, and seeking the help and/or opinions of others.

  Where appropriate, encourage them to explore different viewpoints to those they have encountered online. Experiencing different perspectives can enable them to gain a more balanced view and gather more information to help them decide their own views on a topic or issue.

  Empower learners to take positive action when they see misleading information online. Discuss ways they can positively challenge another person's views, and help them understand how they can report misleading or harmful content shared on the services they use.

What are the misinformation and bias implications of the coronavirus outbreak?

From the onset of the current coronavirus outbreak in Europe and even before, there have been many stories published about coronavirus and COVID-19 in the wider media and on online social channels that are not true. Examples might be that gargling with salt water can help cure the disease, or that 5G wireless communications is causing the virus. Scientists have confirmed that these two examples are false.

Misinformation, disinformation or fake news can be difficult to spot. So it means that now, in these exceptional and challenging times, being able to tell the difference between true and false information is more important than ever. This isn't just the case for children and young people. Adults are creating, sharing and re-sharing misinformation too. The advice in this guide about recognising bias and misinformation has never been more relevant.

Help and further information

You'll find more information on supporting learners to understand misinformation online in the Misinformation resource on Keeping safe online on Hwb. A short video on Misinformation is also available.

For more information on how to keep learners safe online, visit Keeping safe online which has a wide range of bilingual online safety resources.

If you need support as an education practitioner, contact the Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH) on 0844 381 4772 or e-mail helpline@saferinternet.org.uk.