A family guide to talking about misinformation and deepfakes

Introduction

Misleading information of all kinds is deliberately spread and shared in various online forms – from dangerous conspiracy theories and suspect cures, to videos about 'warring' politicians. However, sorting out genuine, accurate facts from potentially damaging fiction can be difficult.

This guide explains the differences between misinformation, fake news and deepfakes, and includes advice for your child and family on how to recognise and stop the spread of false and possibly harmful information on the internet.

What is misinformation?

Misinformation is essentially 'wrong' information. It could be a:

- message or post on social media
- real or edited photo/video
- website
- file or document of some kind.

A person might share something online without realising that it's factually inaccurate or misleading. On the other hand, if they deliberately share it to deceive others and get them to believe it, this is known as spreading 'disinformation'.

Is fake news always misinformation?

Yes. The term 'fake news' specifically refers to when someone makes up an untrue, and often over-the-top, story about a famous person, group, company or place. If there's a lot of public interest and the timing is right, fake news can go viral very quickly – damaging reputations or spurring others on to embellish a story further.

Why is fake news a problem?

If the fake news is about someone famous, that person will often issue a statement to say it's untrue, leading to a situation where it's one person's word against another's. But rather than being dismissed as false and quickly forgotten, fake news stories can 'live' online for a long time, potentially changing people's views and perceptions for the worse.

Some stories are so outlandish, they're easy to spot or question. For example, you'd probably dismiss immediately a story headlined 'Houses of Parliament burn down after minister tries making a pancake!' But if you read 'Celebrity in coma after horrific car accident', this seems more plausible and, therefore, believable.

Why do people spread misinformation?

There are many reasons why some people spread misinformation. They might have made a genuine mistake – believing they are sharing accurate information that comes from a trustworthy or influential source.

But there might be dishonest, exploitative and malicious motives at work. These could include:

- **attempts to sell/market/promote** a product or service, or monetise online behaviour. 'Clickbait' headlines, for example, entice users to click on a link and visit a site to boost advertising revenue

- **scams** designed to trick people online into handing over personal information, money or property to criminals

- **calls to action** that mobilise people into performing a certain action after hearing a message – which often only benefits the source

- **a desire to damage the reputation** of an individual, group or organisation.

People will often share a fake news headline without reading the entire article first. It's the stuff that gets us fearful, angry, anxious or joyful that tends to really go viral. And we're more likely to quickly forward on posts, e-mails and WhatsApp messages that reinforce our existing beliefs.

The dangers of misinformation online

Misinformation shared online potentially influences beliefs and behaviours, such as extreme ideologies around politics, race, religion and sexual identity. This is especially true if the information is presented as fact or only with evidence that supports that particular viewpoint. It can also lead to other problems such as:

- **radicalisation** – extreme views about a religious group can breed hate and create divisions in society, which can lead to extremism and people experiencing verbal and physical abuse

- **social media filter bubbles** – which can lead to people seeing more of the same extreme views, and becoming isolated from other counteracting viewpoints

- **'echo chambers'** – where only like-minded individuals with the same viewpoint interact and their existing views are reinforced by only hearing the same view expressed by others

- **conspiracy theories and myths (particularly around health and well-being)** – that can encourage people to act in ways that increase the risk of them harming themselves and/or others.

How you can help

It's important for you and your child to understand and spot the signs of misinformation in the first place. Appearances can be deceptive. It's possible, for instance, to impersonate official accounts and authorities, including BBC News and the government. Screenshots can also be altered to make it look like information has come from a trusted public body.

Check known and verified accounts and websites. If you can't easily find the information, it might be a hoax. And if a post, video or a link looks suspicious – it probably is.

What are deepfakes?

A 'deepfake' refers to a photo or video where the faces have been swapped or digitally altered using artificial intelligence (AI). Creating fake images in this way can produce very genuine-looking results that appear to show someone saying something or doing something they never really said or did.

The usual intent behind this kind of content is to harm the reputation of the person in the photo or video by portraying them in a negative way. Deepfakes are also used to spread false messages using famous people. A recent example of this was a fake social media video featuring Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn endorsing each other for prime minister.

Spot the signs of false information online

To raise its credibility and make it seem more plausible, misinformation is often placed among factually accurate details which makes it harder to spot.

So when judging how trustworthy online content is, you should consider the following.

- Who or what is the source? Do you trust it and is the information up to date? Is it fact or opinion?
- What are the possible motives for sharing it?
- Is the information seeking to change your views or behaviour – for the better or worse?
- Is there a 'call to action'? And what might happen if you responded?
- If the website is popular, does having lots of likes or views make it more trustworthy?
- Does the text look genuine and accurate? In the case of scam e-mails, look for spelling errors or poor grammar that suggest it didn't come from a real company or website.

If you feel it's something that may worry or upset your child, reassure and remind them that speaking to you or another trusted adult is really important. It will help them make sense of what they've seen and understand what to do next.

Tips on checking content

Check different online and offline sources (TV, radio, printed literature) to assess how consistent the information is. And use trusted fact-checking sites such as WHO's Myth busters page, BBC 'Reality Check', Full Fact or Snopes.

You could also seek another opinion from an expert or trusted professional (for example a GP if your concern is related to health and well-being). Children and young people should be able to turn to a trusted adult such as a parent/carer or teacher for advice.

How can you protect your child from being affected?

The best way to help minimise the impact of misinformation on your child is to encourage them to critically evaluate information.

As well as creating a list of 'trusted' websites for finding information, encourage them to question the source and motives, and seek other viewpoints that could also help them evaluate content in a more balanced way.

You may also need to positively (and respectfully) challenge misleading views, using factual sources to back up your view. But if talking about these, either online or face-to-face, becomes abusive, consider how to end the conversation safely.

Report any concerns

It's important to report any content that could be harmful and put someone at risk – such as extreme negative views targeting an individual or group. If you believe your child has seen misinformation online, use reporting tools on social media sites that can then block or remove this material. Or contact the police directly about any criminal behaviour that someone might be threatening online to carry out in real life.

For more resources and information about misinformation and deepfakes visit:

Hwb – Misinformation playlist for parents and carers

SWGfL – Report Harmful Content

UK Government – Report terrorism or extremism

National Cyber Security Centre – Cyber Aware

Help and support:

Meic – A confidential, anonymous, and free bilingual helpline service available to children and young people in Wales up to the age of 25.

Childline – A free, private and confidential service available to anyone under 19 in the UK. Whatever the worry, they are there to listen.

NSPCC – A national charity working to protect children and prevent abuse, the NSPCC offers a dedicated helpline with professional counsellors.

CEOP – The Child Exploitation and Online Protection website is where you can safely and securely report any concerns about online sexual abuse.