What’s the Real Story?
SLI Session Addresses Challenge of Fake News

by Corinne French and Jo Monahan

At the 2018 TASB Summer Leadership Institute in San Antonio, attendees had the opportunity to learn about “ Fake News and the Fate of Our Democracy,” a session hosted by Leadership TASB graduates and open to all attendees. The session featured Elise Jordan, a nationally known political contributor for NBC/MSNBC. Trustees had the opportunity to ask Jordan questions, and the conversations were both informative and challenging.

Should school board members be concerned about fake news? What steps can we take to help our students be wise consumers of information? Do we believe that administrators can positively impact the way students distinguish between news and propaganda? Questions such as these in this engaging session sparked a deeper conversation with colleagues.

What Is Fake News?
Fake news is misinformation and disinformation. It can be fabricated or manipulated in order to deceive. It can be taken out of context to mislead and can be interspersed with truth or real news to propagandize.

Teachers and librarians from elementary school through college can help students distinguish between factual and fictional news. In addition, they can show students why they should care that there is a difference and, in the long term, make credible arguments. Students are familiar with the internet and sources such as Google and Wikipedia; however, students need to be able to discern authentic news sources and to analyze and reflect on their search results.

Why Care about Fake News?
Now more than ever, it is important to understand where information is coming from so that we can be credible resources for the people we lead. School board members are trusted leaders in the community; it is up to us to be credible sources.

Some may say the infrastructure to combat fake news lies not with the social media purveyors (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) but with the educational system. Educators have the opportunity to teach students to be smart news consumers. Schools can empower students to analyze information on the web and discern fact from fiction. Some may take an even stronger stand and actively campaign against viral misinformation.

Though some may question whether schools should be involved with the issue, fake news is a growing concern. A recent study found that many US high school and college students can’t tell the difference between fake information and real news. Schools can incorporate courses into the curriculum to train students to evaluate information and make connections to reliable sources.

Together, school librarians, instructional technologists, and teachers can offer useful learning resources and increase students’ skills. Critical thinking skills have been long recognized as core competencies for students in all disciplines. Simple educational strategies can be used at home and school to educate students to use critical thinking to assess the accuracy of information and to learn how to respond when they encounter individuals or websites that may not have valid information.

The SNAP Process
Librarians have developed a process to promote and reinforce the use of critical thinking in evaluating the legitimacy of information—the SNAP method:
Source—Who created this site? A basic step is to look at the URL address. Some URLs may appear to be valid but, upon closer inspection, have telltale signs that they are not legitimate. For example, an “O” in a particular link may actually be a zero and send viewers to an illegitimate site.
**Nature**—Why does this site exist? What is its purpose? Be alert to details within the text of a website. Are sentences grammatically correct? If not, this should raise a red flag. Some fake news sites may also select names of their organizations that sound trustworthy but are actually misleading.

**Appearance/Accessibility**—Does this site function efficiently? Fake news sites may be clickbait. They may plagiarize or duplicate content originally published elsewhere but change it to incorporate wrong or misleading content. Some websites use screen shots from authentic news organizations to appear credible. Double-check the image before sharing the link or trusting the information posted.

**Page Content**—Is the information accurate and reliable? Some browsers have plug-ins to assist finding fake sites.

**Importance of Critical Thinking**

Many students do not typically question online content. Once our students understand the need to evaluate the accuracy of online content and have learned a simple process to do so, they will be more likely to become actively engaged in their own online learning.

As critical thinking skills improve, students can be encouraged to engage in an in-depth evaluation of online content and can begin to develop responsive strategies to safeguard themselves against spreaders of misinformation and, in some cases, purveyors of hate.

In the face of today’s challenges, critical thinking skills are more important than ever. Students will need to learn a full range of skills and knowledge that facilitate a mastery of thinking through and analyzing the information presented to them. Teaching our students the importance of questioning content will help them to better evaluate data. As educational leaders, we are challenged, therefore, to update educational policies and practices to this end.★

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