How to spot disinformation and misinformation

Video summary

A short classroom film for secondary schools explaining misinformation and disinformation (often known as 'fake news'). In the film, presenter and documentary filmmaker James Blake arms students with the critical thinking skills needed to navigate online media, challenging students to interrogate the headlines they see online.

Before watching

Establish a safe learning environment. Remind students not to mock or shame others for believing false information online; anyone can be vulnerable to it. Encourage students to focus on general online behaviour rather than sharing sensitive personal experiences.

In preparation for watching the film in class, ask students where they usually get information from (e.g. social media, friends, online news sites) and whether they've ever seen something online that turned out to be false.

Introduce key terms:

Misinformation: is false content shared by mistake.

Disinformation: content that is created specifically to mislead.

While Watching

There are 'pause points' in the video for students to engage in tasks. You can either pause at these suggested points (you will need to manually pause the video to give your students enough time to complete these tasks) or watch the film through and try the activities afterwards.

Activity 1

The first task asks students to analyse three headlines for the same event and discuss in groups how each one makes them feel:

- How does the tone, language and image used for each headline change the story?
- Who is the headline aimed at?
- What emotional reaction is it trying to evoke in a reader?

Give students a maximum of five minutes for discussion followed up with whole class feedback.

Responses could include:

Headline 1: Mob rule: Out-of-control teen gangs terrorise park, leaving trail of filth and fear

The dramatic language ("mob rule," "terrorise") sets a sensational, negative tone that exaggerates the situation and frames teens as dangerous. It's aimed at adults or community members who may already be worried about youth behaviour. The goal is to provoke fear, anger and a sense of threat, encouraging readers to see the teens as a problem rather than understand what has actually happened.

Headline 2: Police disperse teen gathering in park following noise and litter complaints

The neutral, factual tone presents the event as a routine police response with no loaded language. It's aimed at a general audience looking for straightforward information. The emotional impact is minimal; it encourages readers to view the situation as manageable and ordinary rather than alarming.

Headline 3: 'Nowhere else to go': Park complaints spark debate over lack of local youth facilities

This headline takes a more empathetic, reflective tone, shifting focus to underlying issues like the lack of youth facilities. It targets readers interested in community solutions, including both adults and young people. It aims to evoke understanding and concern rather than fear, encouraging readers to think about context and fairness.

Activity 2

The second task requires students to work individually, in pairs or groups to create their own sensational, misleading headline for a completely mundane school event, such as someone handing out text books or the food being served for lunch.

The aim of this task is not to write a full story, but to practise exaggeration, emotive language, and misleading framing in a short, headline-style sentence.

To support students, teachers may wish to use one or more of the scaffolding options below.

1. Clarify the Purpose

Remind students that:

- The event itself should be completely ordinary (e.g. lunch being served, textbooks handed out, a teacher giving homework).

- The headline should make it sound dramatic, shocking, or extreme, even though nothing unusual actually happened.

- Headlines are short, punchy, and attention-grabbing, not detailed explanations.

You may want to model this verbally first by taking a mundane event and exaggerating it together as a class.

2. Use Sentence Starters

Provide students with one of the following headline starters if needed:

- "What I saw in the school lunch queue today was…"

- "Students left stunned after…"

- "You won't believe what happened when…"

- "School chaos as…"

- "Outrage as students discover…"

Students can then finish the sentence with exaggerated or emotive language.

3. Provide a Word Bank

For students that need extra structure, offer a small bank of sensational words to choose from. For example:

Emotive adjectives:
Shocking · Outrageous · Incredible · Disgusting · Amazing · Unbelievable · Dramatic · Disturbing · Brilliant

Strong verbs:
Exposed · Revealed · Shocked · Stunned · Terrified · Amazed

Students can swap words in and out to create different effects while keeping the headline short.

4. Use a Fill-in-the-Blank Headline Frame

Teachers may wish to provide a simple structure such as:

- "Students were [emotion word] after [ordinary event]"

- "School lunch described as [adjective] after today's meal"

- "Outrage as [ordinary school activity] leaves students [emotion]"

This allows students to focus on language choice rather than inventing a structure from scratch.

After Watching

Rewrite for accuracy: Students take their sensational or misleading headline (from earlier tasks or new examples) and rewrite it as a balanced, factual version. They then compare how the tone and impact change.

Spot the techniques: Give students three real life media headlines (these need to be from different sources and if they are about the same event this will be more effective). Ask them to identify which techniques from the video are being used and why;

- How does the tone, language and image in each one change the story?
- Who is the post aimed at?
- And what emotional reaction is it trying to get from you?

Curriculum notes

This film will be relevant for several curriculum areas:

Citizenship and PSHE Key Stage 3 and 4: exploring how the media operates in the UK, how information shapes public opinion; understanding the rights and responsibilities of citizens online; encouraging participation in society as informed, critical thinkers.

Computing Key Stage 3: understanding how digital content is created, shared and manipulated; recognising risks such as misinformation and disinformation; developing responsible and safe online behaviours.

English Key Stage 3 and 4: developing critical reading skills, including analysing how language, tone and structure influence meaning; evaluating the credibility and viewpoints of texts, especially media and online sources; understanding how writers manipulate information to persuade or influence.