As concerns about disinformation and misinformation have grown in recent years, a new form of journalism has emerged: fact checking. Numerous websites are now devoted to fact checking, some with specialized topics like environmental or climate change fact checking, some with an emphasis on politics, some with an emphasis on a particular geographic location. There are as many topics for fact-checking as there are for the news itself.

The aim of these sites is to provide “unbiased” information that are verified by professional fact-checkers according to criteria established previously, and often disclosed for public perusal. But like all media messages, these websites should be critically analyzed to find the bias, because bias always exists in an imperfect world of information. This is not to say that fact checking is unhelpful – it can certainly provide more information and other perspectives – but it is no substitute for individual judgment about the framing and content of media messages.

AHA! There may be different interpretations of facts!

Key Question #3 How might different people understand this message differently?

Core Concept #3: Different people experience the same media message differently.

Key Word: Audience

Key Question #4 What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in – or omitted from, this message?

Core Concept #4: Media messages have embedded values and points of view.
Checking the Fact-Checkers

Written by Beth Thornton
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Key Word: Content

Grade Level: 6-12

Materials: Do an internet search and identify a fact-checking website of interest. Display on a screen(s) available to the class.

ACTIVITY: Discuss with students ideas about fact-checking and why fact-checking has become a new offering of numerous publishers. Ask students to break into groups of 3-5, and then to discuss amongst themselves what might be useful for them in regards to fact-checking websites, and also, what criteria they might expect fact-checkers to use to verify the information that they present: what examples might they cite of best practices for fact-checkers?

Then, select a fact-checking website to explore in depth with students. Use the Five Key Questions of Media Literacy to deconstruct the site, as a beginning to And why? Fact checking raises as many questions as it answers, but ultimately, the questions are ours to answer. Then, break students into groups again and ask them to find out as much information about the site as possible, using the 5 Key Questions as a starting point: who publishes the site? Who does the fact-checking? What kind of branding is associated with the site? What kinds of techniques are used? How is the site financed? Is there any information about how much financing the site receives, and from whom? What audience does the site serve? Who is targeted and why? What is the bias of the site? Is it easy to tell? What is the site’s reputation? Who says? understanding more about how the site is constructed. Ask the students to cite evidence for their opinions and assumptions about the site: how do they know?