
MEDIA LITERACY, MISINFORMATION, AND PUBLIC TRUST

Activities and teaching tools that help students examine credibility, trust, deception, rumors, conspiracy thinking, viral claims, and digital public life.

Source Credibility & Verification Skills

Habits and tools for deciding, quickly and reliably, whether a source or claim deserves trust.

Tool / Activity	Description & Application	Source
SIFT (The Four Moves)	A four-step habit for evaluating anything encountered online: Stop before reacting or sharing; Investigate the source; Find better coverage; Trace claims, quotes, and media back to their original context. Designed to replace slow, deep-dive checklists with fast habits that mirror what professional fact-checkers actually do.	<i>Caulfield, Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers (2017); Hapgood blog, CC BY 4.0</i>
Lateral Reading	Rather than scrutinizing a single site in isolation (reading "vertically"), students immediately open new tabs to see what other independent sources say about the site, author, or organization. Stanford's research found professional fact-checkers use this move almost immediately, while students and even professors tend to stay on the page itself.	<i>Wineburg & McGrew, Stanford History Education Group / Civic Online Reasoning curriculum</i>
The CRAAP Test	A legacy evaluation checklist — Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose — for assessing whether a source is credible enough to cite. Useful as a vocabulary-building entry point, though later research found it can make students over-trust official-looking sites; pair it with lateral reading rather than using it alone.	<i>Blakeslee, Meriam Library, California State University, Chico (2004)</i>
Checkology Virtual Classroom	An interactive curriculum walking students through how to tell news from opinion or ads, spot bias, and verify a claim, using real examples of viral misinformation. Built specifically for classroom use, with lessons that scaffold from basic terms to independent verification practice.	<i>News Literacy Project</i>
Fact-Checker Comparison Exercise	Students take the same viral or contested claim to three independent fact-checking organizations and compare methodology, sourcing, and conclusions, then discuss what to do when fact-checkers disagree or reach different emphases. Builds the habit of triangulating rather than trusting a single verifier.	<i>Adaptable using PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, and Snopes as source material</i>

Rumor, Conspiracy Thinking & Viral Claims

Activities that make the mechanics of distortion and belief visible — how a claim changes as it spreads, and what separates healthy skepticism from a conspiratorial thinking style.

Tool / Activity	Description & Application	Source
The Telephone Game as Rumor Model	Run the classic message-passing game, then map what changed against Allport and Postman's three documented distortions — leveling (details drop out), sharpening (a few details get emphasized), and assimilation (the story shifts to match what listeners already expect). Turns a familiar icebreaker into a model for how a claim mutates as it spreads.	<i>Allport & Postman, The Psychology of Rumor (1947)</i>
Rumor Importance × Ambiguity Analysis	Students take a real rumor or viral claim and rate it on two axes — how important the topic is to the people spreading it, and how ambiguous the actual evidence is — to predict (and explain, after the fact) why some claims spread further than others.	<i>Allport & Postman's rumor formula: transmission ∝ importance × ambiguity</i>
CONSPIR Checklist	Students evaluate a claim against seven traits common to conspiratorial (as opposed to conventional skeptical) thinking: Contradictory, Overriding suspicion, Nefarious intent, Something must be wrong, Persecuted victimhood, Immune to evidence, Re-interpreting randomness. Distinguishes healthy skepticism about real conspiracies (which do happen) from a conspiratorial thinking style that resists any disconfirming evidence.	<i>Lewandowsky & Cook, The Conspiracy Theory Handbook (2020)</i>
Fact–Myth–Fallacy–Fact Debunking Practice	Students practice structuring a correction using the sequence recommended by consensus research on debunking: lead with the fact, warn that a myth is coming, explain the specific technique the myth uses to mislead, then restate the fact. Directly addresses the "backfire effect," where a correction that repeats the myth too prominently can reinforce it.	<i>Lewandowsky, Cook et al., The Debunking Handbook 2020</i>
Trace a Viral Claim	Students pick an actual viral post, image, or quote circulating that week and trace it back to its earliest identifiable appearance, noting every point where context, wording, or attribution changed along the way. A concrete application of SIFT's "trace to the original context" move to a live, current example rather than a prepared one.	<i>Adapted from Caulfield's SIFT method</i>

Inoculation & Prebunking Games

Short, research-backed games that build resistance to manipulation techniques before students encounter them in the wild.

Tool / Activity	Description & Application	Source
Bad News	Players take on the role of a 'fake news tycoon,' building a fake following by practicing six common manipulation techniques (trolling, emotional exaggeration, conspiracy, impersonation, polarization, discrediting) themselves. Playing from the manipulator's side is the mechanism: study participants who played it became measurably better at spotting the same techniques used against them.	<i>Roozenbeek & van der Linden, Cambridge Social Decision-Making Lab, with DROG (getbadnews.com)</i>
Harmony Square	A short game in which players are hired to sow political division in a fictional town using disinformation tactics, developed to build resistance to election-related misinformation specifically. Shown in published studies to reduce how reliable players found real political misinformation afterward.	<i>Roozenbeek & van der Linden, developed with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (harmonysquare.game)</i>
Go Viral!	A five-minute game focused on health misinformation techniques (fake experts, manufactured doubt, and conspiratorial framing), developed during COVID-19 in partnership with a national health agency. Its brevity makes it usable as a five-minute warm-up before a longer discussion.	<i>Basol et al., developed with the UK Cabinet Office (goviralgame.com)</i>
Cranky Uncle	A humor-based mobile game (built around a cartoon cranky uncle character) that walks players through the specific rhetorical techniques used in science denial — useful whenever a course covers scientific consensus, climate, or health topics specifically, rather than politics.	<i>Cook, George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication (crankyuncle.com)</i>
Debrief: Why Prebunking Works	After any of the games above, discuss the two-part mechanism explicitly: a forewarning that manipulation is coming, plus practice spotting a weakened version of it — the same logic as a vaccine. Naming the mechanism (inoculation theory) helps students transfer the skill beyond the specific game.	<i>McGuire's original inoculation theory (1960s); van der Linden et al. applied to misinformation</i>

Digital Public Life & Public Trust

Activities that connect individual verification skills to the larger systems — platforms, algorithms, and institutions — that shape what people see and whom they trust.

Tool / Activity	Description & Application	Source
Filter Bubble Comparison	Students (or pairs with different browsing histories) search the same neutral term and compare results side by side, discussing how personalization shapes what looks like a 'complete' picture of an issue. Makes an invisible, individualized process visible and comparable.	<i>Concept: Pariser, The Filter Bubble (2011)</i>
Detect Fakes / Deepfake Spotting Exercise	Students view a curated set of real and AI-generated images or videos and guess which is which, then review what gave away (or didn't give away) the fakes — lighting, physics, skin texture, blinking. Calibrates confidence realistically: most people, including trained researchers, do only slightly better than chance on high-quality fakes.	<i>MIT Media Lab, Detect Fakes project</i>
Trust-in-News Data Discussion	Students examine current tracking data on public trust in national news, local news, and social media, broken out by age and party, and discuss what's driving the gaps — and what, if anything, would rebuild trust. Grounds a discussion that easily turns abstract in a specific, current, and nonpartisan dataset.	<i>Pew Research Center, Pew-Knight Initiative trust-in-media tracking</i>
Who Counts as a Journalist? Debate	Students debate where the line falls between a journalist, an influencer, and a citizen posting firsthand video, using Pew's finding that the public itself is divided on the definition. Surfaces that "is this a reliable source" and "is this person a journalist" are related but separate questions.	<i>Pew Research Center / Pew-Knight Initiative research on public definitions of journalism</i>
Algorithmic Amplification Case Study	Students trace how a specific piece of content (real or a provided case) moved from a small original post to wide reach, identifying which platform features — recommendation, resharing, notification design — accelerated it at each stage. Separates "why is this claim believable" from "why is this claim everywhere," which call for different remedies.	<i>Adaptable case-study format drawing on platform transparency reports and misinformation-spread research</i>

Sources & Further Reading

- Allport, G. W., & Postman, L. (1947). The psychology of rumor. Henry Holt and Company.
- Blakeslee, S. (2004). The CRAAP test. LOEX Quarterly, 31(3), 6–7. Meriam Library, California State University, Chico.
- Caulfield, M. (2017). Web literacy for student fact-checkers. Pressbooks, CC BY 4.0.
- Cook, J. Cranky Uncle: A game about climate misinformation. George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication. www.crankyuncle.com
- Lewandowsky, S., & Cook, J. (2020). The conspiracy theory handbook.
- Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J., et al. (2020). The debunking handbook 2020.
- McGuire, W. J. (1964). Inductions of resistance to persuasion: Some contemporary approaches. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 1, 191–229.
- MIT Media Lab. Detect DeepFakes: How to counteract misinformation created by AI. www.media.mit.edu/projects/detect-fakes
- News Literacy Project. Checkology virtual classroom. www.newsliit.org
- Pariser, E. (2011). The filter bubble: What the internet is hiding from you. Penguin Press.

Pew Research Center / Pew-Knight Initiative. Trust in media tracking and news habits research. www.pewresearch.org

Roozenbeek, J., & van der Linden, S. (2019). Fake news game confers psychological resistance against online misinformation. *Palgrave Communications*, 5, 65.

Roozenbeek, J., & van der Linden, S. (2020). Breaking Harmony Square: A game that "inoculates" against political misinformation. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 1(2).

Wineburg, S., & McGrew, S. Lateral reading and the nature of expertise: Evaluating information on the internet. Stanford History Education Group / Civic Online Reasoning.