Webwatcher

Russell Stannard asks his students if Kim Jong-un is the sexiest man alive.

Fake news presents a huge challenge to society in general and is, unfortunately, something that students are not always aware of. In fact, in my experience, they tend to take most information at face value. I was recently working at a school in Fabiano, Italy, and I set up a series of activities to help the students to become more discerning readers, and to teach them to assess the nature of information more critically.

Activity 1

I started by writing on the board the headline *Kim Jong-un – Sexiest Man Alive*. I then gave the students a website link (*www.theonion.com/kim-jong-un-named-the-onions-sexiest-man-alive-for-2012-1819574194*) and told them to read the article there.

Next, I asked them to work in pairs and to do some internet research to find out if the story was true or false. I didn't give any guidance on how they should do this. Most of the students searched on *Google* and some worked out that the story was false. However, many thought it was true.

Actually, the story is false. It was an invention of 'The Onion', a website which posts satirical fake news stories. The problem is that journalists at *China Daily* came across the story, thought it was true, and then did their own special article on Kim Jong-un.

To demonstrate that the story was false, I played a video of a news report about how the fake story was taken up by *China Daily* (*www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6u1Oop_yBk&feature=youtu.be*). An alternative would be to get the students to read an article from *The Guardian* on the subject (*www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/27/china-kim-jong-un*).

My idea was to demonstrate how easy it is to create fake news – and how easily it can be taken as real information.

Activity 2

In the second part of the lesson, I went through some basic rules that students can follow when searching on the internet, to help them decide whether information is reliable or not. I found a useful CARS (Credibility, Accuracy, Reasonableness, Support) poster at *www.sbcc.edu/clrc/writing_center/wc_files/handout_masters/CARS%20Checklist%20for%20Evaluating%20Sources.pdf* and went through it with the class, point by point.

Activity 3

I then gave the students the websites listed below and asked them to apply the criteria we had discussed, to decide if these sites contained real or fake information. I made it clear that I required clear evidence for their decisions. I also told them I needed more than one piece of evidence. Again, the students worked in pairs.

1 Dog Island (*www.thedogisland.com/index.html*)

Does this island really exist? Is this website valid? What tells you that it might be valid? What tells you that it is not valid? Try to find more than one source of evidence.

Answer

This is totally fake. Some of the information on the website is bordering on totally ridiculous, and if the students double-check the information, they should find out that it is completely fabricated. It is a good idea to teach the students about fact-checking websites like *Snopes.com* which try to keep up with information currently being disseminated and will tell you if a story is fake or true (*www.snopes.com/fact-check/dog-island/*).

2 Explorers (*www.allaboutexplorers.com/*)

Is this website a good one to recommend to your friends? What tells you it is a good site? What tells you it might not be reliable? Make sure you get lots of evidence.

Answer

This is a tricky one. The answer is that it is not useful as a source of information about explorers, as much of the information is wrong (eg Christopher Columbus wasn't Australian), even though, at first glance, it looks like an educational site. The real purpose of the website is, in fact, to introduce school students to the idea that the internet is a less reliable source of information than print sources, and to get them to apply critical thinking skills to any information they find online.

3 Ancestors (*www.fulkerson.org/ancestors/buycoming.html*)

On this website, you can buy an ancestor and make your family connections seem more prestigious and important. Is it real?

Answer

This is obviously not serious, and there are many telltale signs that it isn't real. You can find a comprehensive analysis of the site at *http://lshier21t4t.weebly.com/uploads/1/4/6/6/14666002/review_of_buy_an_ancestor_online.pdf*

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In this lesson, I used a mixture of fake news and fabricated websites as a great way of introducing the topic of false information on websites. When I did this in Italy, it was a real success, and the students spent a lot of time reading and researching. Many thought the Explorers site was real, and this highlighted the point that they need to ensure that information is correct by going to several other sources and cross-checking. ■

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Keep sending your favourite sites to Russell:

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