

Believe it or not

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In older days, we had guardians and gatekeepers called editors or librarians who would distinguish, for us, the validity of a given text, whether that be written, or a still or moving image.

Their guides were the reputations of the publishers, some good, some bad, and we chose or were led to choose who would interpret or give imprimatur to our information.

We valued the broadsheets over tabloids, the ABC over A Current Affair, and in the white, Anglo-Saxon environment of my upbringing, Oxford University Press over, well, almost everything.

I've since discovered that these revered institutions told me lies, not necessarily intentionally—their lies were often those of omission; the result of cultural bias.

I never learned of the contribution to Mathematics and the Sciences by India and the Middle East, and the only time China was mentioned was in the context of Marco Polo or fireworks.

I was angry about that initially, but i'm over it now, and the information on the internet allows me as a teacher to show a more complete story to my students.

Even so, I needed to encourage my students to critically assess information, using examples such as that purporting to be the authoritative source for Martin Luther King [martinlutherking.org], a trojan website subtly infusing those who access it with the views of its white supremacist owners, and the pacific tree-dwelling octopus [zapatopi.net/treeoctopus], a site that demonstrates how easy it is to mislead with faux science reports from impressive sounding (but non-existent) research institutions.

Two things have now changed to challenge the ease of critical assessment of web-based data sources: the rise of both Social Media and satirical websites.

Consider this: an article, circulating on the net at the time of writing, which was released by National Report, entitled “Solar Panels Drain the Sun’s Energy, Experts Say.” [nationalreport.net/solar-panels-drain-suns-energy-experts-say]

This satirical article, morphed into a Facebook meme, attributing our current Prime Minister, well known for his objection to and derogatory statements about, alternative energy sources with the statement.

While at first glance the article might look genuine because it includes the names of institutions and quotes, the National Report is a satirical website and the article is not true in any way, shape or form.

This quote, located at the bottom of the article, "While these articles may contain genuine quotes and facts, they are still only political satire, so don't lose hope yet" confirms the satirical nature of the piece.

It's at the bottom of the article, relegated to the same importance as all those internet "terms and conditions" that we all gleefully accept.

I was surprised by the number of people who commented on the Facebook meme, with comments showing that they believed the statement to have been uttered by the Prime Minister.

Usually, such a trap results in someone commenting that the source is satirical, but in this instance that did not happen, despite the simplicity of following links to the original article [<http://www.iflscience.com/environment/no-solar-panels-will-not-drain-suns-energy>]

Originally, satirical sites were pretty much limited to theonion.com, but now there are many [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Satirical_websites]

Even in Australia, we have our own wonderful <http://www.betootaadvocate.com>, which has caught out many a conventional news editor.

To add further complexity, satirical articles are being embedded into known news sites, such as sbs.com.au and the New York Times, giving the impression that they are allied or part of the headline branding. Hence a satirical article in the New York Times by comedian Andy Borowitz is not readily identifiable as satire, unless you look carefully at the URL.

The familiar mastheads and logos imply the same imprimatur as those of Oxford University Press on the spines of the beautifully bound books found in library stacks.

So what is the reality in the minds of the young?

Perhaps it's the same as those of their elders who commented on the meme mentioned above as if it were true. After all, our frequent flier or other loyalty program memberships have often been "enhanced" (i.e. made less valuable) so we've become more susceptible to satire and hyperbole.

For example, what are you to make of these?

Iowa grants gun permits to the blind

[http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/09/08/iowa-grants-gun-permits-to-the-blind/2780303/?utm_content=buffereea8c&utm_medium=social]

Another case of American Blind Justice?

Confirmed: Obama's New Homosexual Chemtrail Superweapon Tested on America, Causes Entire Country to Turn Gay

[liberaldarkness.com/category/world-report]

Many in Nation Tired of Explaining Things to Idiots

<http://www.newyorker.com/humor/borowitz-report/many-in-nation-tired-of-explaining-things-to-idiots>

To add to the confusion of such news articles, many of us are increasingly living in our own "facebook bubble" which distorts our perception of reality.

Pew research shows that approximately 30% of US adults get their news solely from Facebook. [<http://www.journalism.org/2013/10/24/the-role-of-news-on-facebook>]

If we see predominantly the feeds of our Facebook (or other social media) friends, then rarely will we see other points of view (unless they are posted for ridicule). Not only does this reinforce the perception that the members of our bubble have the ultimate truth, it is a distraction from any remaining long form journalism that would offer both sides of an argument with supporting evidence so that we could come to our own, informed, position on a given matter.

This is returning us to a medieval village "group think", characteristic of earlier times when news outside our village was difficult or impossible to garner, even though our opportunity to know more about our world has never been greater.

What can you do to help your students make sense of this world?

Obviously a great place to start is in English.

The Australian Curriculum in English, asks that students can:

"Identify, explain and discuss how narrative viewpoint, structure, characterisation and devices including analogy and satire shape different interpretations and responses to a text (ACELT1642)"

But I suggest we go further, and across more than the year 10 cohort that this suggests.

And we should expand on this, in English classes or in whatever pastoral opportunities are afforded to us.