

# Misinformation and Disinformation: Fact-checking Challenges

Review by Meg Heckman

Cherilyn Ireton and Julie Posetti, *Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*. UNESCO, 2018.

The adage “if your mother says she loves you, check it out” is so common in journalism classrooms that it’s become a cliché, but it’s still good advice – especially in a modern informational ecosystem rife with deepfakes, viral hoaxes and Twitter bots peddling conspiracy theories.

Telling journalism students they *should* check things is fairly simple. Teaching them *how* is harder, but there’s a new resource that can help. *Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* is packed with practical advice for both working journalists and journalism educators.

[The free, open source handbook](#) is the latest in UNESCO’s growing collection of training resources for journalists, part of the organization’s ongoing efforts to promote journalistic standards that “[are essential to bring out the potential of media systems to foster democracy, dialogue and development.](#)”

It’s written as much for instructors as it is for students, so assigning it as a textbook might not be the best approach. Instead, consider it a roadmap for teaching broad concepts about the evolution of misinformation and disinformation as well as a guide to practical debunking techniques students can apply to their own reporting.

The text is packed with examples from a variety of different countries, something I appreciate given that I’m based in the U.S. but teach a very international population of students. Looking at fact-checking projects from around the world sparks great classroom discussions that reveal both the uniqueness of each region’s news ecosystem and the common challenges journalists face when it comes to debunking bad information.

The book is organized into seven modules. The first three deal with history, theory and policy. The re-

maining four take a deep dive into fact checking and social media verification as well as the importance of media literacy and efforts to combat online trolling. The modules [are available online](#) and can easily be broken down into smaller PDFs to pass out in class or upload to a learning management systems.

I’ve used the book in a couple of ways. The first half is fantastic source material for introductory lectures exploring the state of misinformation and disinformation. Modules 5 and 6, meanwhile, are good frameworks for in-class exercises and graded assignments. In Module 5, students receive an overview of the rise of fact checking and a primer on how it differs from the kind of digital debunking that’s become increasingly necessary in the age of viral hoaxes. This module formed the backbone of an in-class activity I’ve used with students at both the graduate and undergraduate level.

I uploaded the introductory text to our learning management system and assigned it as take home reading. In class, we had a brief conversation focused on the Venn diagram on page 83, plus a quick review of the three-step fact checking process outlined on page 84.

Then I asked students to work in teams of two to fact check portions of a transcript of a U.S. presidential debate held in February 2020. Each team was responsible for identifying and checking three to five claims and then reporting their findings to the class. (We used a shared Google Doc and highlighted checked text green for true, red for false and yellow for information that needed to be contextualized.) We wrapped up by discussing the strengths and limitations of this form of journalism.

The exercise – like the handbook itself – gives students both theoretical grounding and practical skills they can apply long after graduation.

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