



Media Education Society
Media for the Common Good

SPOT. QUESTION. RETHINK.

A Guide to Understanding Fake News, Media Bias, & Hidden Agendas

1. How to Identify Fake News

Fake is designed to provoke emotion, not inform. Watch out for:

- ☐ Sensational headlines
- ☐ Use of ALL CAPS or exclamation marks
- ☐ No credible sources
- ☐ Mention of unnamed experts, poll, or research
- ☐ Poor design or spelling errors on the website
- ☐ Story not mentioned by other reliable news outlets
- ☐ Dominant emotional language and lack of facts

Tip: Fact-check claims before you share the story.

2. What Is Agenda Setting?

Media doesn't always tell you what to think—but it tells you what to think about, this is agenda setting.

Outlets will spotlight certain stories, and ignore others, purposefully and deceitfully shaping storytelling to make topics appear more important than they really are. This is manipulation.

On the other hand, journalists can downplay topics of popular interest, because it does not fit the financial, political, or ideological interests of that news organization. Likewise deceitful.

Example: If every network runs hours of celebrity trial coverage, issues like poverty or global conflict get pushed out of public view.

3. Spotting Media Bias

All news is shaped by choices—what to include, what to leave out, and how to frame it. Look for bias in:

- ☐ Word choice (e.g. “anti-abortion rights group” vs. “pro-life group”)
- ☐ Photo selection (images can subtly influence sympathy, fear, or ridicule)
- ☐ Headline framing the story before you read it
- ☐ Omission of key facts or perspectives

Test it: Read how the same story is covered by outlets with different leanings. Don't just seek news sources that affirm your views, consider the full spectrum.

4. Dismantle the Message

Before accepting any message, ask:

- ☐ Who created this—and why?
- ☐ What values or emotions are being used to persuade me?
- ☐ What's missing or being left out?
- ☐ Who benefits from me believing this?
- ☐ How do I choose to respond?

Media literacy is about discernment. Learning to deconstruct messages helps you draw informed, independent conclusions.

Why Thinking Critically About the News Matters

News doesn't just inform, it shapes what we believe, what we fear, and what we value. That's why examining news stories with a critical eye is essential. From the headlines you skim to the stories you share, every piece of media carries choices about what to include, what to omit, and how to frame the narrative. When you learn how to spot bias, understand agenda-setting, and seek out diverse news sources, you become a better-informed citizen—not a passive consumer.

The mission of the **Media Education Society** is to help people understand, engage, and produce media through the lenses of the common good. Learn more at mediaedsociety.org.