

# CRITICAL DIGITAL LITERACY

## EDUCATION GUIDE



Sir Wilfrid Laurier @premierministre

**RETWEET:**  
Residents of Edmonton @cityofedmonton

Sir,-

We, the undersigned residents of the City of Edmonton, respectfully urge upon your attention and upon that of the Government of which you are the head, the serious menace to the future welfare of a large portion of Western Canada, by reason of the alarming influx of negro settlers.



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# INTRODUCTION

Today's digital media landscape can leave users frustrated about which sources to trust. Because an informed public is essential to a strong democracy, our civic health depends on analyzing the media we consume with critical thinking skills. This guide is intended as a resource to provide a framework that readers can use to weigh the sources, facts, and opinions that bombard them every day.

Long before the rise of digital and social media, disinformation and manipulation have been woven into the fabric of Canadian politics. Courting public opinion through half-truths, embellishment, omission, and disinformation is a key tool of political and social persuasion.

The difference today is that the internet allows anyone to appear to be an expert, and deciding who and what is reliable becomes increasingly challenging. Furthermore, local and international voices have learned to manipulate public opinion through trolls (people), bots (machines), and social media to distort the truth and circulate falsehoods.

Drawing on historical examples of disinformation, we provide a media literacy framework for addressing 21st-century media. Wartime propaganda posters, covert government campaigns against Black immigration, and public alarm during the 2003 SARS outbreak offer fundamental lessons in visual language, infrastructure of information, and biases that can speak to our digital present.

These historical examples can equip us to assess the content, quality, and consistency of what we read, see, and hear, even as technology continues to change how information is curated and circulated. We invite you to use this guide to empower students to examine the everyday media they consume with a critical eye and greater confidence.



Man uses smartphone (ImYanis/Shutterstock.com /594829253).

## MESSAGE TO TEACHERS

This guide complements provincial and territorial curricula in middle and high school history and social science classes. The framework presented in this guide includes four modules to help identify misinformation and “fake news.” Each module can be completed on its own; however, the four modules are interconnected and are best completed in order. Activities from each of the four sections build on one another and work together.

## Understand the System

What are digital media? How do algorithms and data influence digital media?

## Assess Channels and Bias

Where are you consuming media? How are they reaching you? How do media and individual biases influence the content you encounter?

## Examine the Sources and Content

Is it a reliable source? Is the author trustworthy? Is the headline emotionally provocative, or does it make outlandish claims? Is the content accurate?

## Check the Facts

What are the facts? Where do they come from? Can they be corroborated and validated?

**NOTE TO EDUCATORS:** Accommodations for Special Education, ELL, and ESL students are included under the appropriate sections and identified as “modifications.” Many of the activities in this guide require more advanced reading skills. Consider pairing ELL students with stronger readers.

The complicated nature of recorded history, curricular requirements, and space limitations do not allow us to provide a comprehensive analysis of Canadian media history. This learning tool is designed to cultivate fundamental media literacy, and we encourage teachers to create opportunities for students to practice those critical thinking skills with various forms of digital media. Historica Canada's bilingual education guides are developed in collaboration with history educators, academic historians, and community stakeholders in content creation and lesson planning.

**Cover Images:** Sir Wilfrid Laurier (Courtesy Library and Archives Canada/C-001971).

**W.D. Scott, superintendent of immigration, signing letters** (Still from “The Last Best West,” Historica Canada, 2019).

**G.W. Miller's editorial in *The Oklahoma Guide*, 1911** (Courtesy The Gateway to Oklahoma History and Oklahoma Historical Society).

**Radio receiver** (Africa Studio/Shutterstock.com/735197473).

**Petition signed by residents of Edmonton and Strathcona urging the Canadian government to prevent further Black immigration, 1911** (Courtesy Library and Archives Canada/R1206-127-4-E).

**A Black Oklahoman family reads the newspaper** (Still from “The Last Best West,” Historica Canada, 2019).

**Second World War Canadian propaganda poster** (Courtesy Library and Archives Canada/C-033620).

**Immigration officials draft a document** (Still from “The Last Best West,” Historica Canada, 2019).

**Pedestrians walk by a TV news broadcast** (Still from “The SARS Outbreak,” Historica Canada, 2019).

## ONLINE RESOURCES

Recommended articles mentioned throughout the guide (in **bold**) can be accessed by visiting *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. All **supplementary worksheets** (noted in **bold**) complementing this education guide can be downloaded on the Historica Canada Education Portal. The videos in the Critical Digital Literacy Video Series, “**The Last Best West**,” “**Wartime Propaganda Posters**,” and “**The SARS Outbreak**,” can be accessed by visiting Historica Canada's YouTube channel at [youtube.com/historicacanada](https://www.youtube.com/historicacanada).

The following is a list of bilingual research resources to support educators and studies. This list is not exhaustive, and you may choose to seek out supplementary resources.

[The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Historica Canada Education Portal](#)

[MediaSmarts](#)

[Canadian War Museum](#)

[Pier21 Museum](#)

[Statistics Canada](#)

**W.D. Scott signs letters**  
(Still from “The Last Best West,”  
Historica Canada, 2019).

# SECTION 1: UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM

While “fake news” and disinformation have a long history, the digital environment where we encounter them today is relatively new. The internet is a democratic space that has given rise to platforms that allow all types of media to be produced and circulated by anyone. While this has given some people and groups fresh opportunities to share knowledge and express their views, it has also created space for opportunistic individuals, organizations, and entities to spread disinformation. To think critically about digital media, it is essential to understand the system and the digital landscape we inhabit.

This section will help you understand how and why disinformation and misinformation are created and spread, as well as their potential impacts. It is also an opportunity to reflect on the past and to see how historical incidents can help us better understand the present.

## ACTIVITY 1: TERMINOLOGY WORD WALL

To navigate digital media, we need to define some basic terms that describe how we encounter and interact with information.

1. Break into six groups. Each group will define one of the terms from the list below as it relates to digital media.
2. In your groups, share your definition with the class.
3. As a class, discuss and develop examples for each term.
4. Create a word wall in the classroom to reference throughout the activities in this guide.

### Terminology:

- |                   |               |                               |
|-------------------|---------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. MISINFORMATION | 3. FAKE NEWS  | 5. CONFIRMATION BIAS          |
| 2. DISINFORMATION | 4. PROPAGANDA | 6. FILTER BUBBLE/ECHO CHAMBER |

**MODIFICATION:** Using the **Terminology Word Map Worksheet**, work in pairs to create a word map for one of the terms. This will include a definition of the term in your own words, an example of the term in a real-life context, and a sentence that makes use of the term in a meaningful way.

## ACTIVITY 2: ACTIVE VIEWING

### Analyze the Critical Digital Literacy videos.

Developing digital literacy skills requires us to actively engage with media content. Assessing content with a critical eye involves three steps: questioning the content, synthesizing the content, and understanding the content.

1. Break into small groups of three to four students.
2. Each group will complete three tasks: questioning, summarizing, and giving examples. Take notes on the following as you watch each of the videos in the Critical Digital Literacy collection: “**The Last Best West**,” “**Wartime Propaganda Posters**,” and “**The SARS Outbreak**.”
  - **Questioning:** Question the content. What questions do the videos raise? How do they make you feel? What questions do you have after watching the video? Develop three to five questions about the video content.
  - **Summarizing:** Synthesize the content. What is the video about? What is the main message? Synthesize in two or three sentences.
  - **Giving examples:** Understand the content. What examples are used in the video to demonstrate its key concepts? Provide three to five examples.
3. For each video, write up your analysis and share it with your teacher.

**MODIFICATION:** Working in pairs, complete a KWL chart before and after viewing each video. After viewing the videos, address any remaining questions in a class discussion.



▲ Smartphone homescreen featuring several social media apps (Dreamstime.com /Anton Garin/155432556).

**TEACHER TIP:** Encourage students to add additional terms to the word wall as they work through the activities in this guide.



▲ Men stand around propaganda posters (Courtesy National Film Board of Canada).



▲ A Black Oklahoman family reads the newspaper (Still from “The Last Best West,” Historica Canada, 2019).

▲ Hospital workers treat SARS patients (Still from “The SARS Outbreak,” Historica Canada, 2019).



## ACTIVITY 3: THE LAST BEST WEST

Compare historical and contemporary examples of information flow and analyze the ways disinformation spreads.

**TEACHER TIP:** Introduce students to the concept of a flow chart or provide a template to support the activity.

### Part 1: Mapping the Flow of Information (How Disinformation Spreads)

In 1911, G.W. Miller, a Black American doctor, was one of two agents employed by the Government of Canada to carry out a campaign of disinformation to discourage Black Oklahomans from immigrating to Canada. Miller conducted his anti-immigration campaign by travelling around Oklahoma, meeting with influential figures in the Black community, giving lectures, writing editorials in local newspapers, and visiting the homes of families interested in going to Canada. Where possible, he would exaggerate the hostility of the climate and the people.

The flow of information has changed dramatically since G.W. Miller toured Oklahoma in 1911. The technology and distribution networks of the 21st century have expanded the speed and reach of information exponentially. Understanding how the flow of information works and how it has changed over time can equip us to be better critical thinkers in today's digital media landscape.

1. Watch "[The Last Best West](#)" video and read about G.W. Miller in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* article [Order-in-Council P.C. 1911-1324](#). Take notes on how information passed from one person or group to another.
2. In pairs, create a flow chart illustrating how (dis)information travelled from the Canadian government to Black Oklahomans. Use free online software to create a flow chart or draw one by hand. When creating your information flow map, consider the available broadcast channels of the time.

### Part 2: Communications and Media Systems - Then and Now

The systems through which information spreads have changed dramatically in the last 100 years. Understanding how communications have evolved is essential for digital literacy in the current media environment.

1. Working in a small group, brainstorm a list of ways information is gathered, distributed, and broadcast today. Consider various technologies, digital platforms, and distribution channels.
2. In your group, conduct research online about the most significant changes in communications since the early 20th century. Identify five of the most critical developments in the transmission of news since 1900. Consider technological developments, distribution, reach, and access to mass media.
3. As a class, share your findings. Together, create a new information flow chart that illustrates the ways that information is transmitted today.
4. As a class, discuss the implications of the changes to information flow over the past 100 years regarding the spread of disinformation.
  - What kind of reach do you think G.W. Miller had in 1911? Consider the reach of his message at the local, regional, and national levels.
  - What does the flow of information look like today, compared with 100 years ago? Consider different forms of media.
  - Imagine what G.W. Miller's anti-immigration campaign would look like in the 21st century. What kind of reach would Miller have through the internet and social media?



▲ A government agent shakes hands with Black Oklahomans (Still from "The Last Best West," Historica Canada, 2019).



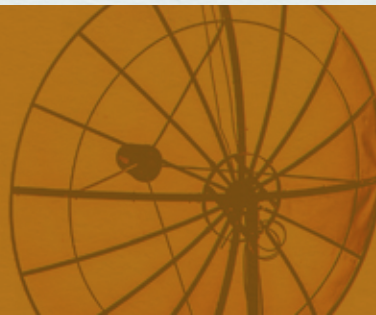
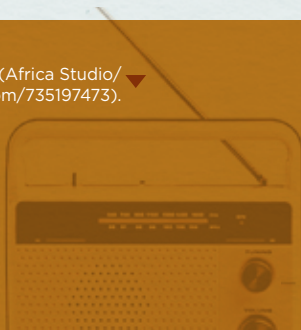
▲ G.W. Miller's editorial in *The Oklahoma Guide*, 1911 (Courtesy The Gateway to Oklahoma History and Oklahoma Historical Society).

**EXTENSION 1:** As a class, or working in small groups, create a visual timeline that represents the evolution of media and communications in the 20th century. Be creative!

**EXTENSION 2:** Consider both the positive and negative implications of our current information flows. Working in pairs, create a T-chart, listing the positive implications on one side and the negative implications on the other side. Brainstorm ways to reduce the effects of the negative implications.

**MODIFICATION:** Working in pairs, choose one type of technology that has changed communications in the past 100 years (e.g., radio, TV, internet, smartphones, etc.). Create a point-form list of three to five ways that this technology changed how information is communicated.

Radio receiver (Africa Studio/  
Shutterstock.com/735197473).



◀ Satellite dish with television receiver (Dreamstime.com/  
Chaikom Atichayo/153814005).

## ACTIVITY 4:

### THE LAST BEST WEST — THE IMPACT OF DISINFORMATION

Examine the motivations of stakeholders in the creation and spread of disinformation, as well as the short-term and long-term effects of disinformation.

G.W. Miller writing an editorial  
(Still from “The Last Best West,”  
Historica Canada, 2019).

**TEACHER TIP:** Use “[The Last Best West](#)” video as an example or select a current issue in the news.

1. In small groups, discuss the motivations behind disinformation. Why would governments, special interest groups, or individuals choose to spread disinformation? What are the advantages of disinformation as a tool of socio-political influence?
2. Watch “[The Last Best West](#)” video as a class or review your notes from Activity 2.
3. Identify individuals and/or groups who benefited from the Canadian government’s campaign of disinformation against Black immigration. Brainstorm other perspectives that should be considered, even if they were not mentioned. These perspectives can include individuals, organizations, and institutions that were involved in shaping immigration to Canada’s West or that were affected by immigration policy in Canada.
4. Consider and discuss the short-term and long-term impacts of the government’s efforts. Which individuals or groups were affected by this historical example of disinformation? Consider more obvious effects as well as subtler changes in social and political attitudes brought about by this disinformation campaign.

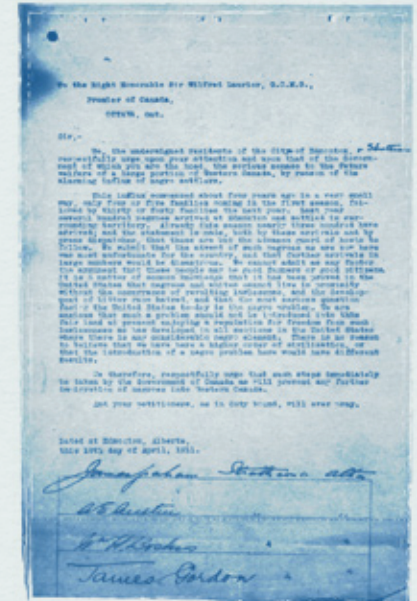


◀ “Canada West: The Last Best West.” Cover of pamphlet produced by the Department of the Interior in 1909 (Courtesy Library and Archives Canada/C-030620).

#### MODIFICATION:

Complete a 5Ws chart for “[The Last Best West](#)” video.

- What disinformation did anti-immigration agents spread?
- Where and when was disinformation spread?
- Who was impacted by the disinformation spread in Oklahoma?
- Why was disinformation about immigration to Canada spread?



▲ Petition signed by residents of Edmonton and Strathcona urging the Canadian government to prevent further Black immigration, 1911 (Courtesy Library and Archives Canada/R1206-127-4-E).

## SECTION 2: ASSESS CHANNELS AND BIAS

Once we have an understanding of the system behind digital media and “fake news,” we need to critically assess the channels through which we access content and the bias that is built into these channels.

Channels influence the content we see, how it reaches us, and how it is presented. We have access to more information than ever, but we aren’t necessarily exposed to a more diverse range of perspectives. Rather, the media and news we are exposed to online are often fragmented and lacking in depth, and may reinforce our existing worldview. In this section, we’ll explore how and why this happens.

**What are channels?** Channels are the sources and pathways through which information flows. This includes social media platforms, radio, television, newspapers, and news websites.

#### Media bias and personalization

As people increasingly access news through social media platforms, we must examine how those channels can shape and intensify our biases. We often rely on sources that confirm our existing worldviews. Algorithms on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube track our online activity to deliver personalized content recommendations. These mechanisms can shape the diversity of perspectives we encounter.

◀ Man sitting in front of a laptop  
(amenic181/Shutterstock.com  
/1492825922).

Radio studio (Branislav Nenin/  
Shutterstock.com/1111185239).

## ACTIVITY 5:

### MAPPING YOUR MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

**Document your digital media activity to create and analyze a map of your news ecosystem.**

The line between media creator and media consumer is no longer clear cut. Many of us are actively producing and distributing media through online platforms. The media that we click, read, and share influence other people in our networks, and can shape societal perceptions as a whole. Being aware of our own media consumption habits is an important step toward critically assessing media and current events.

**TEACHER TIP:** This is a Think-Pair-Share activity but could be adapted as an individual assignment.

**Newspapers are a traditional news platform** ▶  
(Rawpixel.com/Shutterstock.com/577238302).

1. For 48 hours, track the content you click, read, and share. Although you're consciously tracking your behaviour, aim to use the sites and sources you would visit in a typical day.
2. Using the **Media Ecosystem Worksheet**, make a note of each channel and/or source that you view, along with the content or article you engaged with. For example, if you read a news article from an online newspaper that you accessed via social media, record both the social media platform and the source (for example, Twitter and *The Globe and Mail*, or YouTube and Lilly Singh). Record the title of the article, and whether you read the entire article, part of the article, or just the headline. Include videos, audio, and images you encounter.
3. As a class, discuss what makes a balanced media ecosystem. What types of channels and sources are reliable? How do algorithms influence online behaviour and media consumption?
4. Review your completed **Media Ecosystem Worksheet** with a classmate. Based on the class discussion, draw one or two conclusions about your media ecosystem. What did you learn? Consider what surprised you, how the media you consumed challenged or reinforced your existing values, and how you might change your media consumption habits moving forward. Do you detect a significant imbalance of biases in your media ecosystem?

**EXTENSION:** Use free online software to create a word cloud of your media ecosystem. Examine this visual representation of your news consumption and write a critical reflection or present a critical analysis of your media ecosystem to the class.

## ACTIVITY 6:

### THE ROLE OF ALGORITHMS

Algorithms on social media and other platforms use our online behaviour to tailor content to our personal interests, presenting a curated selection of information for our consumption. This personalization helps distill information, but we need to remain cautious of the risks of confirmation bias and filter bubbles.

1. Using your **Media Ecosystem Worksheet**, reflect on the pathways you typically follow to access news. Go to your most visited social media platform and scroll for a few minutes, making notes about the content in your feed.
2. Write a reflection about the composition of your feed. Address the following questions in your reflection:
  - What does your feed reveal about your political views, your hobbies, your values, and your interests?
  - Does the content in your feed align with your beliefs and values?
  - Is there content in your feed that you disagree with or that makes you feel uncomfortable?
  - What are the risks associated with carefully curating our media ecosystem?

**EXTENSION:** As a class, create a YouTube account. Select a topical news story or political issue. Spend a few minutes each day browsing and watching videos on that subject. Make notes about the videos that YouTube recommends in the sidebar and homepage as the week progresses. At the end of the week, take stock of how the account's video recommendations may have changed according to your viewing habits. Do you see how your class's viewing habits have shaped the recommendations? Do you notice a particular bias to the content and YouTube channels listed there? Are there a variety of perspectives and voices presented in those recommendations?

**FILTER BUBBLES AND ECHO CHAMBERS:** As algorithms increasingly personalize our social media experience, we encounter information and opinions that conform to and reinforce our own beliefs. This is called a "filter bubble" or an "echo chamber." People can also create their own filter bubble: users specifically seek out only information that conforms to or reinforces their beliefs. For example, users might only visit news websites with a particular political bias, which frame the same information in different ways. In the above examples, the same information is presented to the reader, but with a different spin. If a reader only visits the orange website, their take on that information will not be the same as a reader who visits only the teal website.

**Fictional example of two stories told from different perspectives** (Dreamstime.com/Phah Sajjaphot/136301249; Dreamstime.com/Christoph Lischetzki/102728325; Dreamstime.com/Umarin Nakamura/110195571; Dreamstime.com/Pictureguy66/67506721).



## ACTIVITY 7:

### MEDIA BIAS IN THE PAST — PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS

**Conduct a primary source analysis. Consider the role the media play in broadcasting misinformation and disinformation and the ways this reinforces discrimination.**

Media have the power to both reflect and shape public opinion. This means that the messages and imagery in news media have the power to influence people in both positive and negative ways.

1. Choose one of the following examples of discriminatory immigration policy in Canada's history, and read the corresponding article on *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Take notes or complete a 5Ws chart:

- **Chinese Head Tax**
- **Komagata Maru**
- Black Oklahomans  
(**Order-in-Council P.C. 1911-1324**)

2. Next, working in pairs with the **Media Analysis Worksheet**, review other news coverage and imagery from the time.

3. In your pair, complete the worksheet.

4. Join another pair and share your findings.

**EXTENSION 1:** Explore examples of media bias around the issue of immigration in Canada today using the same framework as above. How has the language used to describe immigrants or immigration changed or stayed the same?

## ACTIVITY 8:

### DETECTING MEDIA BIAS — ANALYZING HEADLINES

**Build skills to analyze bias in news headlines.**

Media coverage plays a critical role in shaping and informing public opinion. Reliable news sources provide well-researched context and analysis on current events. But even the most dependable sources are prone to bias. Bias in media can appear in many ways: by omission, by emphasis, by repetition, in language, in photos, in statistics, and in headlines. Bias, in some capacity, is unavoidable. Every piece of news that is published carries with it the point of view of its creators. While we cannot find a news source devoid of bias, we can remain alert to how it influences coverage.

Digital media consumers often do not read beyond the headlines. Headlines are designed to capture your attention, prompting you to read and (hopefully) share content. Today, some platforms create attention-grabbing “clickbait” headlines that do not represent the content of the article or the truth. Clicking on these headlines generates advertising revenue for the site. This financially motivated disinformation has the potential to confuse the public on important issues. Headlines have the power to shape public opinion, even if few read beyond the catchy text.

**EXTENSION 2:** Watch “**The Last Best West**” video and read the **Order-in-Council P.C. 1911-1324** entry on *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Make notes on key points. Write a report or participate in a class discussion answering the following question: What is the historical significance of Order-in-Council P.C. 1911-1324? Use the Historical Significance Criteria listed below to guide your assessment.

**Immigration officials draft a document** ▶  
(Still from “The Last Best West,” Historica Canada, 2019).

#### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA:

For more information on the Historical Thinking Concepts, visit [historicalthinking.ca](http://historicalthinking.ca).

#### Prominence:

Was the person or event recognized as significant at the time?

#### Consequences:

What effect(s) did the person or event cause?

#### Impact:

How widespread was the person or event's impact?  
How long-lasting were the effects?

#### Revealing:

What does the person or event reveal about the larger historical context or current issues? Does it improve our understanding of a historical issue or period?

**Immigrants aboard the Komagata Maru, 1914** (Courtesy Library and Archives Canada/PA-034015).

**Order-in-Council P.C. 1911-1324** (Courtesy Library and Archives Canada/301313).

His Excellency in Council, in virtue of the provisions of sub-section (c) of Section 36 of the Immigration Act, is pleased to Order and it is hereby ordered as follows:-

For a period of one year from and after the date hereof the landing in Canada shall be and the same is prohibited of any immigrants belonging to the Negro race, which race is deemed unsuitable to the climate and

**Busy train station in China** ▶  
(Still from “The SARS Outbreak,” Historica Canada, 2019).

1. Work with your teacher to identify a current issue in the news for analysis and do some background reading on the issue.
2. Working in pairs or small groups, conduct research online to identify five to ten news articles on the assigned topic. Be sure to select a variety of sources that represent different points of view.
3. Use the **Analyzing Headlines Worksheet** to create a list of the headlines and the sources you consulted.
4. Use the worksheet to explore the headlines further. For each headline, answer the following questions: Is the headline a statement of fact or opinion? What type of language does the headline use? Does the language of the headline suggest any bias on the subject?
5. Have a class discussion about media bias and the importance of reading beyond headlines. What are the benefits of reading an entire article and not just the headline? Why is it sometimes harmful to read only the headline of a story? How might reading only the headlines of stories contribute to the spread of disinformation or misinformation?

**Stack of newspapers** (Photo Kozyr/ Shutterstock.com/790644301).

## ACTIVITY 9:

### COMPARING DISCRIMINATION IN THE MEDIA

*Examine and compare the impact of media-fuelled discrimination in the past and today.*

During the SARS outbreak of 2003, media coverage provided valuable information to a frightened public. While news sources shared vital information, the volume of media coverage sometimes contributed to “public hysteria in reaction to the disease and to Asian communities.”<sup>1</sup> Although the outbreak took place more than 15 years ago, the discrimination and bias revealed then are still alive and well today.

In this activity, you will compare coverage of SARS with a current news story.

**TEACHER TIP:** Guide students to a relevant topic or news article to use as a comparison with the SARS media coverage.

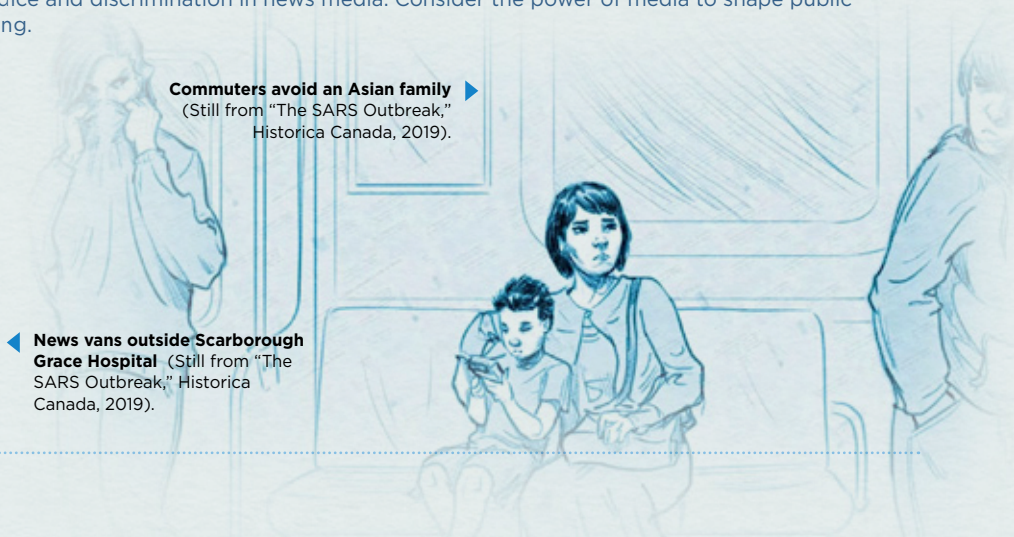
**EXTENSION:** Individually, write a reflection on prejudice and discrimination in news media. Consider the power of media to shape public opinion and the consequences of inaccurate reporting.

1. As a class, watch “[The SARS Outbreak](#)” video, and review your notes from Activity 2.
2. Read *The Canadian Encyclopedia*’s entry on [SARS](#), taking notes about media coverage and discrimination faced by Asian Canadians during the epidemic.
3. Working in pairs, choose an issue that is prominent in the media right now (e.g., immigration, refugees, etc.). Work with your teacher to identify a relevant topic and suitable media coverage.
4. Research how the story has been covered in the media. Consider the following questions: Do headlines reflect the content of the stories? Is the story told from multiple perspectives? Create a T-chart with article headlines and source information on the left and your analysis on the right.
5. With your partner, review your chart and discuss the similarities and differences between the media coverage of SARS and your selected contemporary example.
6. Discuss as a class the ways in which discrimination can appear in news stories, and how you can identify it.



◀ **News vans outside Scarborough Grace Hospital** (Still from “The SARS Outbreak,” *Historica Canada*, 2019).

**Commuters avoid an Asian family** ▶  
(Still from “The SARS Outbreak,” *Historica Canada*, 2019).



## SECTION 3: EXAMINE THE SOURCES AND CONTENT

Assessing the reliability of sources and content is essential to digital literacy. Every piece of content we consume should go through a critical screening process to determine its trustworthiness. This screening process is just as important for established, respected news organizations as it is for infographics you come across on Instagram.

**There are four steps in the initial screening process:**

### *Consider the source*

- Is it a source you are familiar with? Is it one that you trust to be reliable?
- Click away from the article/post to find out more about the source. Visit the “About” section on the website, or do an online search for more information about the source.
- Consider the bias of the source. Many news outlets have political leanings, which influence the stories that are told and how they are told.

### *Check the author*

- Is the author named, or are they anonymous?
- If the author is named, is it a reputable journalist, a news agency, a “citizen journalist,” or a blogger?
- What kind of bias might the author have?

### *Go beyond the headline*

- Does it use inflammatory or sensationalist language that might provoke an emotional response?
- Does it make outlandish claims?
- Does the content of the article reflect the headline accurately?

### *Assess the content (fact versus opinion)*

- Identify the type of content: satire, article, editorial, infographic, sponsored content, etc. For example, newspaper op-ed articles (originally placed opposite the editorial page) often adhere to journalistic standards but are still just one writer’s opinion.
- Distinguish between statements of fact and opinion within the content.
- Consider where information might have been manipulated or selectively left out. Is there obvious bias in the source?



## ACTIVITY 10:

### NEWS MEDIA ANALYSIS

**Determine the reliability of sources and content.**

To be critical media consumers, we need to be practiced at assessing the reliability of the sources we draw from. Once assessing reliability becomes part of your media routine, whether you're reading a newspaper online or getting your news through social media, you will have the skills to critically examine any piece of content.

1. Working in pairs or a small group, visit Google News ([news.google.com](https://news.google.com)). Select "Canada" from the left sidebar. Choose one of the top stories, and select "View full coverage." Scroll down the page to the "All coverage" section.
2. Together, choose three to five articles from different media outlets. Try to use a variety of news sources with different perspectives or political leanings. You might want to include an article in Canada's other official language.
3. Each person in the group will take responsibility for reviewing one or two articles and completing the **Sources and Content Screening Worksheet**.
4. In your groups, have each person briefly present their article findings. Make sure to discuss the reliability of each type of source you selected.
5. Use the **News Media Assessment Worksheet** to write a report card and give each source a reliability grade. Include explanations of how you came to these conclusions.
6. Present your findings to the class or have a class discussion.



▲ **Pedestrians walk by a TV news broadcast**  
(Still from "The SARS Outbreak," Historica Canada, 2019).

## ACTIVITY 11:

### IDENTIFYING PROPAGANDA

Propaganda can take many forms — films, articles, posters, slogans, symbols, even monuments and clothing. But at its core, propaganda is an act of persuasion that involves deliberately distorting information, images, and ideas to further an agenda.

In recent times, propaganda has been associated primarily with governments and political groups trying to promote patriotism and partisanship through biased or misleading materials. Propaganda has also evolved and expanded its reach with the rise of digital and social media, finding a foothold in tweets, memes, online ads, and more.

**TEACHER TIP:** Work closely with your students to help them identify an appropriate example of contemporary propaganda.

1. Working in small groups, identify a recent example of something that you think qualifies as online propaganda. Hint: propaganda can sometimes be found as advertisements or sponsored content on online news media and social media websites (e.g., election advertisements).
2. As a group, answer the following questions using the criteria in the "What makes something propaganda?" sidebar to guide your assessment:
  - Why do you consider this propaganda?
  - What are the aims of this propaganda? What point of view does it communicate?
  - Who created it? Who is the target audience?
  - What message is being communicated?
3. Each group will present an example of propaganda. In the presentation, explain the reasoning behind your selection and include any challenges you faced in identifying propaganda.

#### What makes something propaganda?

##### *Persuasive:*

Designed to influence public opinion or human action.

##### *Deceptive:*

Distorts perceptions and understandings.

##### *Emotive:*

Designed to provoke an emotional response.

##### *Purposeful:*

Promotes a point of view, and communicates a message intended to further the goal(s) of its creator.



▲ **Workers stand in front of propaganda posters**  
(Courtesy National Film Board of Canada).

▶ **Crowd gathers before a propaganda poster display**  
(Courtesy National Film Board of Canada).

## ACTIVITY 12:

### PROPAGANDA POSTER — PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS

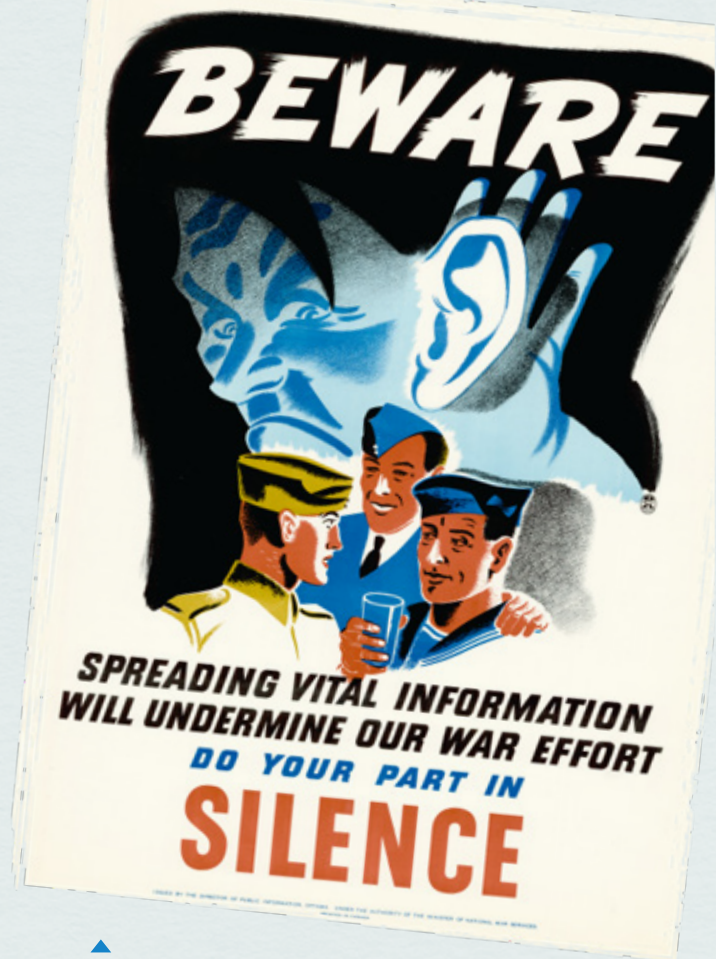
Analyze a primary source propaganda poster from the Second World War.

During the First and Second World Wars, the Canadian government used propaganda to influence public opinion for a variety of purposes: to encourage recruitment, invigorate the economy, boost morale, guide behaviour, and inform citizens. Created during the Second World War, the Wartime Information Board was the government agency responsible for managing how information about the war was released to the public. The Board created posters carrying war messaging, as well as films and publications to keep Canadians informed. The dangers of “careless talk” was one of the ideas promoted by the Wartime Information Board, with posters designed to provoke fear of enemy sabotage while at the same time encouraging patriotism.

1. Watch the “[Wartime Propaganda Posters](#)” video.
2. Make notes on the visual descriptions of the poster mentioned in the video, and pay particular attention to design elements (colours, fonts), as well as language and meaning (the words used and intent of the messaging).
3. Working in pairs, use the [Primary Source Pyramid Worksheet](#) to conduct a five-step visual analysis of the wartime propaganda poster featured in the video, answering the following questions:
  - **The 5Ws:** Who created the poster? When and where was it created and distributed? What is the poster about? Why was the poster created?
  - **Context:** Situate the source in historical context. Read the [Wartime Home Front](#) article and the [Propaganda in Canada](#) articles on *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. What else was happening at the time the poster was created?
  - **Exploring:** Examine the details of the source. Make notes on visual elements of the poster, including design elements (e.g., representations of people) and messaging. What symbolism do they use? What meaning do these elements add to the poster?
  - **Reaching Conclusions:** Reflect on your findings. What messages are conveyed through this poster? How did this poster communicate its agenda? Does it communicate this message effectively? Is its persuasion subtle or obvious?
  - **Finding Proof:** Do some further research on wartime propaganda posters. You can find a selection of Second World War propaganda posters in the online collections of the Canadian War Museum, Library and Archives Canada, or the US Library of Congress. Compare your conclusions with information from other sources. Do other wartime propaganda posters share these characteristics? How are the aims the same, how are they different? Whom do the posters serve? What can this tell you about the purpose and target audience of this poster? Is this example an outlier?
4. Come back together as a class and discuss your findings. Consider the following discussion questions: Do you think propaganda posters influenced public behaviour? What idea of “Canada” and the war did this poster promote? How might that idea serve the war effort? Do you think it was an effective piece of propaganda?

**TEACHER TIP:** Allow time for students to view the video more than once in order to complete the primary source analysis, and/or provide students with a digital or printed copy of the poster. Find the poster at <http://data2.archives.ca/e/e431/e010753713-v8.jpg>.

**EXTENSION:** Have a class discussion about the similarities and differences between propaganda today and propaganda from the Second World War. Where is propaganda coming from today? Who is it directed at, and what is its purpose? How is it spread?



▲  
Second World War Canadian propaganda poster  
(Courtesy Library and Archives Canada/C-033620).

#### SPONSORED CONTENT:

Advertising makes up a large component of the social media experience. Social media has also prompted businesses and other groups to find creative new ways of selling their products. Today, one of the most popular forms of digital advertising is sponsored content.

Sponsored content blends social media posts with traditional advertising. Businesses can pay for their ads to be shared as social media posts outside their network of followers. The sponsored post thus has the appearance of a regular social media post, and it blends in with a user’s home feed, but it has been crafted and distributed as an ad. This often means sponsored posts have the potential to attract more engagement than traditional advertising. People can engage with it the same way they would a regular social media post. The only way to tell a sponsored post from a regular post is by checking the top of the post, where it should say “sponsored” (or something similar) under the name of the business. While sponsored posts are widely used by businesses and individuals, some believe they should be more clearly identified, as they can be misleading, especially when it comes to political advertising.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Have you ever shared a social media post without realizing it was sponsored? Do you think sponsored posts are misleading? Should they be more clearly identified as such, instead of mostly taking the form of organic posts? Should the content of sponsored posts be regulated? Should certain kinds of advertisements, products, or organizations be denied access to this form of advertising? Why or why not? How might political groups benefit from this form of advertising?

# SECTION 4: CHECK THE FACTS

Man operates a video camera  
(nampix/Shutterstock.com/556157896).



After examining a source, whether or not you suspect it is “fake news,” you still need to check the facts. Sources sometimes provide half-truths, where most of the content is based in fact but with bits of misinformation sprinkled in. Sometimes a “spin” is put on the facts, or the original content is interpreted differently by a secondary source. Quotes can be taken out of context or fragmented, which could change their meaning.

Sometimes, misinformation is deliberately pushed through social media ads. Sometimes, though, a publication simply makes an error. In the age of 24-hour news cycles, reporting on breaking news — such as a natural disaster or a shooting — means the details can take time to emerge. As news organizations fill the space in between new developments, misinformation can find its way into the coverage. Occasionally even trustworthy sources can get the facts wrong, without intentionally sharing false information.

With any piece of digital media, it is important to check the facts before you share. There are three steps to take when checking the facts:

### 1. Compare multiple sources and perspectives

- Treat the piece of media as a jumping-off point. If it is legitimate and factually accurate, you should be able to find other sources that support its contents.
- However, just because you can find information to support a claim doesn’t make it legitimate. We are all susceptible to confirmation bias.

### 2. Go “upstream” to find original sources

- Using the information you have, track the facts “upstream” to find the original source of the claims.
- Open a new tab or window on your device and search for the content in question. It can be easy to fall down a rabbit hole online, so tracking your fact-checking is important. Keep tabs open in your browser to refer back to later.
- Determine whether the facts are fully accurate, or whether details have been lost or changed.
- For photographs and illustrations, use Google’s reverse image search to find out where else the image appears online. This will help you determine whether the image originated from a reliable source.

### 3. Use a fact-checking website

- Professional fact-checkers review many news stories and publish their findings online.
- Use a reliable fact-checking website to confirm your own assessment.

## ACTIVITY 13:

### FACT-CHECKING IN ACTION — INFOGRAPHICS

*Infographics visualize data and facts in a compelling way, but as with a news article, the “facts” of the graphic need to be checked.*

#### Infographic Reliability Criteria:

- The original source of the data should be cited, and the source should be reliable.
- The original data should be accessible for fact-checking from the source website.
- Reliable sources often provide details of the research methodology and interpretation of the data, including sample size and outcomes.

#### Fact-checking Infographics

Infographics create a visual narrative. They use data and statistics to communicate a message. When this is done well, infographics make data accessible and easy to understand. However, this data can also be manipulated, fabricated, or misrepresented. In these cases, an infographic can spread misinformation and disinformation widely.

Sharpen your fact-checking skills by testing the accuracy of infographics shared on Twitter.

1. Working in pairs, go to @StatsCan\_eng on Twitter. Identify an infographic that you find interesting, or work with your teacher to choose a relevant infographic.
2. Examine the details to determine the source of the data used in the infographic.
3. Use the **Fact-Checking in Action Worksheet** to conduct your investigation: go “upstream” to find the original data.
4. After completing the fact-checking steps, make an assessment of the accuracy of the infographic based on your findings. Assign a grade to the infographic based on how factual it is: A+ for perfectly communicating the facts from a reliable source; F for wildly manipulating the data or creating false data.

**EXTENSION 1:** Work in pairs to use the “Data” section of the Statistics Canada website to create your own infographic. Work with your teacher to select an appropriate subject from the data library. Choose five to ten data points to visualize in your infographic, using online software or drawing by hand. Ensure you cite the source of your data as well as any relevant research methodology from the original source.

**EXTENSION 2:** Investigate the reliability of an infographic you find on a social media site. Can you determine the original source of the data? Is the source reliable? Do the data support the story the infographic is telling?

#### EXAMPLE: “CHOCOLATE MAKES YOU SMARTER”



**Fictional infographic about the alleged benefits of chocolate**  
(Historica Canada, 2019).

- If we look closely at this infographic, we see that the research was paid for by a chocolate company.
- This is a red flag. It suggests that the research is biased (of course a chocolate company wants to “prove” that chocolate makes you smarter!).
- No additional details about the research are cited, which is another red flag for potentially unreliable information.

## ACTIVITY 14:

### FACT-CHECKING IN ACTION — NEWS MEDIA

**TEACHER TIP:** Help students identify appropriate news articles to investigate. Breaking news is not always the easiest to verify. You may want to direct them to a more in-depth story.

1. Work with your teacher to choose a news article on a current topic.
2. Read your chosen article with the steps from the [Sources and Content Screening Worksheet](#) in mind (refer to the previous section): Are the source and author reliable? Does the article's content align with the headline? Does the content read as statements of fact or opinion?
3. Next, search Google News for more articles on the topic. Identify whether other articles exist on the same subject. If so, are they consistent with the content in the original article? What other perspectives or angles do these other articles present?
4. Now, go upstream to find the information's original sources. Click links in the news article, making sure to open new tabs in your browser. If the article does not contain links, corroborate its contents against reliable sources, such as coverage from other news outlets, encyclopedias, and expert material on the subject.
5. Working in pairs, use the [Fact-Checking in Action Worksheet](#) to conduct a fact-checking investigation on the selected article.

▲ Screen reflected on a pair of glasses  
(HQuality/Shutterstock.com/557355178).



▲ Woman reads from a tablet  
(Igor Stevanovic/Shutterstock.com/1024804060).

## CONCLUSION: SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

### ACTIVITY 15:

#### CIRCLE OF VOICES — THE VALUE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A NEWS SOURCE

Social media has transformed the ways we communicate. Breaking news is available faster than ever, and we can consult a wide range of news sources through a single platform. But social media can also have a negative impact.

1. Consider the following question, and take notes based on your perspective: What value do social media have as news sources? In what situations should we rely on citizen journalists?
2. In small groups of three to five students, take turns sharing your thoughts on the issue with your group. Each person should speak for one to three minutes on the subject. Take notes on other students' thoughts: What do you agree or disagree with? What new questions does this raise?
3. After each person has taken a turn, take turns sharing again, building on questions or points of contention raised in the first round.
4. Conclude the activity with a class discussion with each group sharing some of their thoughts about the value of social media as a news source.



▲ Young woman using social media on her smartphone  
(Dreamstime.com/Anatoly Epaneshnikov/144573358).

▲ Man reading from a tablet  
(Sfio Cracho/Shutterstock.com/573110812).