



Navigating the Information Jungle

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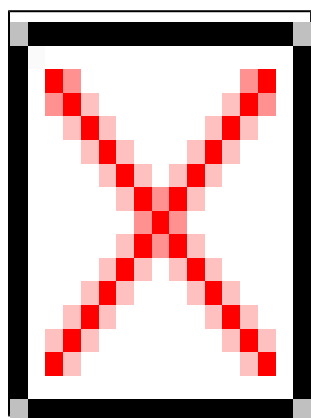
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Susan Martineau asks how we can equip children to deal with 'fake news'?

Susan Martineau asks how we can equip our children to recognise 'fake news'.

Every day we are bombarded with words and images. How can young readers and viewers disentangle the facts they need to know from this overwhelming jungle of information?

In 2018, the **National Literacy Trust** concluded that ... 'only 2% of children and young people in the UK have the critical literacy skills they need to tell whether a news story is real or fake ...'?



As a children's information book writer, I am obsessed with finding out accurate facts. I cannot remember a time when I didn't love learning about the world around me and then enlightening anyone within earshot about my latest discovery, from how long a baby elephant stays with its mother to why you can't pee into a normal loo in space.

But when I was a young fact-finder, we did not have the internet in all its complexity. Being able to research online is the most amazing tool, but it requires certain skills to avoid the traps that lie in wait in its undergrowth. It is tricky enough for hardened non-fiction writers to sift fact from tosh, or even downright dangerous misinformation, so how can we expect young readers to manage it?

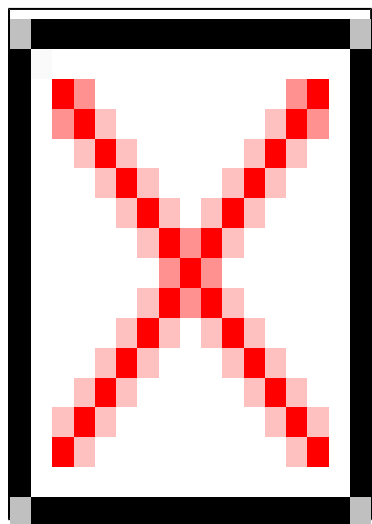
The last thing anyone wants is for children to be put off questing for facts, because they are anxious about what they might read or view. How sad if their curiosity about the world is squished before it can take off. By learning some essential critical literacy skills, they can become discerning and confident explorers. LOOKING, READING, ASKING QUESTIONS, LISTENING, CHECKING FACTS and THINKING FOR YOURSELF are not superpowers, but they do need to be practised.

I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling just a bit sick of the term 'fake news'. The trouble with this nastily tidy little phrase is its use as an indiscriminate accusation for anything someone does not agree with. Just shout 'fake news' as loudly as you can, encourage others to share it, and fear, anger and confusion spreads. Is this a message we want our children to

soak up? They need to understand what fake news is really all about and how to spot it.

Young readers and viewers can be encouraged to become fake-news spotters, armed with the following questions: who is writing this news? Are they an expert on the subject or were they there when it happened? Why are they writing it? How are they trying to make you feel or act? When was it written? Is it old news made to look new? Using their critical literacy skills young readers will learn to see behind the words on the page or screen.

But critical literacy is not just about fake news, it is also about analysing what you are reading to construct a logical picture of the world around us and the facts that are needed for problem-solving. For example, how can children learn about and discuss the urgent issue of climate change without accurate facts? Non-fiction that really gets readers to engage and think about the facts for themselves is essential.



In books that I've written and had published, such as the **Real-life** series, I've told the stories of events such as mysteries or disasters and then created a kind of investigator's file for each one. This is my way of vividly presenting the facts to the reader for them to think for themselves about what really happened. I always research high and low to find out as much as I can and in my recent book, **Question Everything!**, I have set out tips on how to find reliable sources of information.

There are so many wonderful information books out there stuffed with fabulous illustrations (I can't thank my own illustrator and designer, Vicky Barker, enough for making mine look so good!) They are designed to engage attention and really enhance the understanding of the readers. For example, infographics in information books can be invaluable, as can on- or off-page activities which grab the imagination and get readers actively thinking.

But it's not just about information books. Fiction shares truth, too. Reading fantastic stories about characters you can either identify with, or grow to understand, is a wonderful way to learn how others experience the world we all share. In this way, critical literacy also encompasses emotional literacy. And with their new-found skills, readers will still be able to tell the difference between a made-up story and a factual account!

Children are braver than we think. We do not help them if we make them afraid or suspicious of the world, because we have become so wary ourselves. The more they flex their critical reading muscles and open their minds the better they will be at finding their path through the jungle. They are our fact-finders, experts, leaders and writers of the future. Let them take the power back to think for themselves.

Susan Martineau is a **Blue Peter Book Award**-winning author for **Real-life Mysteries** and her latest book, **Question Everything!**, will be published by b small publishing in August 2020.

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