What’s Fake on Social Media?

5 Questions for Teachers And Students to Ask

EISHA BUCH, the director of education programs at Common Sense Media, a nonprofit group that encourages the teaching of media literacy skills, recommends that K-12 students and their teachers critically examine images and videos they see on social media with these questions in mind:

1. How does the social media algorithm work and why is this content being served to me?
   It’s easy to get funneled into an echo chamber and toward more and more extreme or fringe content. Being aware of how the algorithm is working behind the scenes makes you a more critical consumer of content. In the case of TikTok’s algorithm, the more you replay a video to determine if it’s real or not may trigger the app to serve you up even more of the same content.

2. Why is this appealing to me?
   Check your emotions and don’t let them get in the way of evaluating the accuracy of content. Click bait and fake news strives for reactions, and people are more likely to indiscriminately share something that upsets them or makes them angry. Even if a fake video or image seems harmless, it’s still important not to share it.

3. What is the motive?
   Ask if there is an ulterior motive behind the person or source sharing the information. Is the person or source genuinely trying to inform you or attempting to have you share bad information? Is there a possible motive you aren’t seeing?

4. Can I corroborate the information?
   This can be done through a reverse image search on Google or checking the content against what is being reported in mainstream news outlets. It’s also important to remember that in breaking news situations, there is a lot of uncertainty and initial reports from “on the ground” can turn out to be incorrect.

5. Is this an actual conspiracy or a conspiracy theory?
   Conspiracies are real and do happen. But the difference between a confirmed conspiracy and a conspiracy theory is that there is actual evidence to prove a conspiracy took place—say documents that get revealed showing X, Y, or Z—while a conspiracy theory is unproven and devoid of legitimate documentation.