OER: Basic journalistic application to the analysis of an apparently informative message

Learning outcomes:

- Differentiate between the message sender and the source of information
- Identify authorized and reliable sources
- Understand the importance of verifying information
- Appreciate the value of information sources
- Recognize the relevance and appropriateness of an information source
- Detect opinion in an apparently informative message

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this educational resource is for your students to learn to differentiate between the **sender** of a message and the **source** of information (Phase 1); to understand the need to verify the information they receive (Phase 2); and to learn to assess the **relevance** and **appropriateness** of a source based on the information it provides in the message (Phase 3).

Before starting the exercise, it is worth recalling that the sender of a message and the source of information are not the same, although they may sometimes coincide. In this sense, the **sender** is the person or entity that transmits the message, while the **source** of information is the origin of the content used by that sender to craft their message. During the exercise, we will delve into some of these basic concepts—key notions to keep in mind before accepting any supposed information as true.

To achieve this, we will use the communication and journalism theories studied so far and progressively apply them to the analysis of a message circulating on a well-known social network—one of the main channels through which misinformation flows today. It is time for you to start thinking like journalists...

PHASE 1. The distinction between the sender of a message and the source of information

John Smith is an ordinary citizen with no experience or knowledge in the subject being discussed.

Mathew Anderson is a prestigious sociologist from a renowned university in your country.

The Truth is a prestigious news outlet / media organization in your country.

Ministry is the competent Ministry in your country.

John Smith @JohnSmith

The Government is considering lowering the voting age from 18 to 16.

Mathew Anderson @EconomyExpert

The Government is considering lowering the voting age from 18 to 16.

The Truth @TheTruth

The Government is considering lowering the voting age from 18 to 16.

Ministry @MinistryofYourCountry

The Government is considering lowering the voting age from 18 to 16.

Data about the senders and the message:

SENDER / WHO?	MESSAGE / WHAT?
• John Smith is an ordinary citizen with no experience or knowledge of the topic addressed • Mathew Anderson is a renowned sociologist from a prestigious university in your country • *The Truth* is a reputable journalistic outlet in your country • *Ministry* is the competent ministry in your country	• The social network X is used as the channel for the message • It contains identical information in all four cases • It is fictional information of public interest that, for the purposes of the exercise, we will consider as real • It can be replaced by authentic information issued by an authorized official source from your country

QUESTION: Of the four senders, which one would you say is the source of the information?

The only correct answer is the Ministry of your respective country. This is because it is the only one of the four senders that originally has the competence and legitimacy (authority) to issue this type of information. The Ministry is, therefore, both the source of the information and the sender of the message. Meanwhile, John Smith, Mathew Anderson, and the outlet *The Truth* are senders of information whose accuracy we must question, as they do not include the legitimate and authorized source—the Ministry—in the supposed information they provide, and thus we cannot verify it directly.

Remember: The sender of the message is not the same as the source of the information.

This first phase of the exercise also allows you to reflect, together with your students, on who has the competence and legitimacy to issue information in the way it is being presented. To achieve this, it is important for students to ask themselves two key questions during the analysis of the message: What information does it contain? and Who is issuing it? As we have seen, it is the relationship between these two questions (**WHAT-WHO**) that defines the type of source we should use when reporting on a given topic (you can consult the OER: *Learn how to identify and check sources of information*).

Remember: Without a legitimate source in the information (as in the cases of John Smith, Mathew Anderson, and the outlet *The Truth*), the information may lack value.

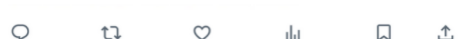**PHASE 2. The importance of being able to verify the information conveyed in a message**

John Smith @JohnSmith

The Government is considering lowering the voting age from 18 to 16.

Official State Gazette

The Ministry of the Interior reports that the Government is evaluating a proposal to lower the minimum voting age from 18 to 16 years. This initiative aims to encourage civic engagement among young people and expand democratic representation. The measure, which is still in the study phase, will require extensive parliamentary and social debate.

Mathew Anderson @EconomyExpert

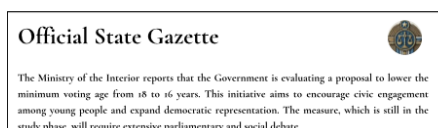The Government is considering lowering the voting age from 18 to 16.

The Truth @TheTruth

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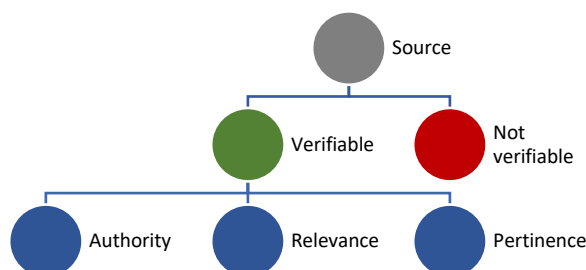
QUESTION: What makes the citizen John Smith a reliable source of information?

In this case, citizen John Smith becomes a reliable source of information because he has included the primary and authorized source (the Ministry's statement) in his message. The recipient can verify that what John Smith is communicating is true by directly (with a click) accessing the source of the information. Citizen John Smith, and of course the Ministry, are the most reliable sources here, ahead of the media outlet *The Truth* and the renowned sociologist from your university, because they still do not include the source of the information in their respective messages.

The goal in this second phase of the exercise is to delve into the concept of **verification**, the fundamental pillar upon which the credibility of any informative message is built. Verification of information is a process used in journalism—and in academia—to check the accuracy, validity, and reliability of the data and information obtained. Verifying is a key act in quality journalistic production, as it helps filter out false or misleading information and ensures the integrity of publications.

Remember: Information that cannot be verified indicates a lack of reliability and credibility.

John Smith @JohnSmith

The Government is considering lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. It is clear that the Government wants to rig the elections to stay in power.

Official State Gazette

The Ministry of the Interior reports that the Government is evaluating a proposal to lower the minimum voting age from 18 to 16 years. This initiative aims to encourage civic engagement among young people and expand democratic representation. The measure, which is still in the study phase, will require extensive parliamentary and social debate.

Mathew Anderson @EconomyExpert

The Government is considering lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. The measure could strengthen the current social democratic Government.

Official State Gazette

The Ministry of the Interior reports that the Government is evaluating a proposal to lower the minimum voting age from 18 to 16 years. This initiative aims to encourage civic engagement among young people and expand democratic representation. The measure, which is still in the study phase, will require extensive parliamentary and social debate.

The Truth @TheTruth

The Government is considering lowering the voting age from 18 to 16, a measure that would add 2 million new voters to the electoral roll, according to the latest data from the National Institute of Statistics.

Official State Gazette

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The Truth @TheTruth

"The measure could strengthen the current social democratic Government," warns sociologist Mathew Anderson, whose University recently conducted a demographic study indicating that young voters predominantly lean toward social democratic positions.

The Truth @TheTruth

This electoral reform, which would need to be approved by Parliament, could significantly alter the political landscape in the next elections, given the considerable increase in the electorate and its predominant ideological leaning.

In this third phase of the exercise, we encounter elements that lead us to a different communicative scenario. The four senders—John Smith, Mathew Anderson, the outlet *The Truth*, and the Ministry of your respective country—include the source of the information (the Ministry) in their messages, and the recipient can also verify it with a simple click. However, John Smith and Mathew Anderson add new content to their respective messages, making them potential sources of information. At this point, imagine you are a journalist and try to answer the following:

QUESTION: What makes Mathew Anderson a reliable source of information for *The Truth*?

What makes Mathew Anderson a reliable source of information is his competence and legitimacy (authority) to speak on the topic at hand. He is also a relevant source because, as a renowned sociologist, he provides a contribution that aligns with the context and approach of the information, making him pertinent. (You can consult the OER: *Learn how to identify and check sources of information*)

QUESTION: Why shouldn't *The Truth* include John Smith as a source in its information?

The Truth should not include John Smith as a source in its information because he lacks the preparation, experience, or authority on the topic he is addressing. Citizen John Smith is offering an opinion in his message, which is, of course, very respectable, but without providing proof or evidence that the government wants to lower the voting age to "manipulate the elections" in order to "remain in power".

Remember: For an information source to be pertinent, it must be authorized, and its message must be relevant (Pertinence = Authority + Relevance).