

Lexicon of Lies: *Teaching Resources*

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LEXICON OF LIES: TEACHING RESOURCES

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Lexicon of Lies: A Guide to Terms for Problematic Information reviews the meanings of a variety of terms related to problematic information, and explores the places where those meanings break down or become complicated. It can be used as a teaching aid in undergraduate and graduate level classes. Professors and teachers of communication, media studies, sociology, and advertising may find the *Lexicon* particularly useful for informing classroom discussions of current events around “fake news,” “post-truth,” media manipulation, or disinformation.

The following activities, exercises, and writing prompts are suggestions for incorporating the *Lexicon* into educational settings. Please let Data & Society Research Institute know if you use, or wish to share feedback about, these resources.

In-Class Warm-Up Activity

This in-class activity takes approximately twenty minutes, and warms students up to engage and discuss the *Lexicon*.

1. Free writing (3 minutes): describe a time when you shared information, and later found out that the information was inaccurate or otherwise problematic. What happened? How did it make you feel? If you cannot think of a time when you shared such information, can you think of a time when someone you know, or an organization you follow, shared problematic information? How did it make you feel?
2. Partner share (5 minutes): partner up with a classmate and share your experience and feelings about it. Describe to your partner how you found out the information was inaccurate, and what you did once you found out.
3. Group discussion (up to ten minutes): Share your experience with the class. How did it affect how you share things online now? What strategies do you use to make sure that it doesn't happen again?

Reading Comprehension Questions

The *Lexicon* contains a variety of terms, each with its own unique meaning and associations. It's important to understand their meanings because using terms imprecisely can help contribute to confusion, and can limit the ways we might try to solve a problem. These questions test your comprehension of different terms in the *Lexicon*.

1. What is the difference between misinformation and disinformation? What are some of the reasons why people might spread misinformation or disinformation?
2. We give information campaigns different names according to the different people and purposes involved. Name three different kinds of information campaigns, and describe what makes them different from one another.
3. Some forms of media manipulation use misdirection rather than deception. What is the principle behind the “Fifty-Cent Army” strategy to influence political discussions on social media sites?
4. Sometimes, people spread inaccurate information to comment on or critique the way things are. Satire and hoax are two forms of such cultural commentary. How are hoaxes different from satire? How are they similar?

Open-Ended Discussion Questions

These questions do not have one definitive right answer; they are prompts for debate and discussion. These questions can be used to kick off a class discussion, or they can be the basis of a debate exercise in which students break into groups of 2-4 and develop positions to present to the class.

1. The *Lexicon* explains that there is a difference between misinformation and disinformation. Does social media sharing complicate the question of whether a piece of online content (such as, for example, a blog post) is unintentionally or intentionally misleading?
2. Is advertising propaganda? Is there a difference between advertising and *agitprop*?
3. Who are we talking about when we talk about “the media”? Does “the media” include both professional news outlets (such as newspapers and news networks) and independent or alternative outlets (such as blogs, podcasts, and Twitter/YouTube personalities)? What responsibilities to the public do these groups have?

Reading Response Exercise

This activity, designed for upper-level undergraduates, tasks students with identifying the main points of an essay, and applying ideas from the *Lexicon* to those main points. Again, there is no one right answer to these questions; the point is to think through the issues raised by these events.

Read the following essay: Thaler, A. D. (2016). How mermaids became a real problem for scientists. *Zócalo Public Square*. <http://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2016/10/27/mermaids-became-real-problem-scientists/ideas/nexus/>

Write a short response (less than 500 words) that addresses the following questions:

- What term from the *Lexicon* best describes “Mermaids”? How does that term capture what’s important about the shows? Is there something about the series that the term leaves out or fails to account for?
- What reasons does the author give for describing the airing of “Mermaids” as a problem?
- If you were the programming executive in charge of deciding whether or not “Mermaids” should be aired on Animal Planet, would you have chosen to broadcast the program? Give two reasons why (or why not).

Critical Analysis Exercise

This set of activities, designed for students at the graduate school level, tasks students with critically analyzing two competing versions of events. Students watch a 22-minute video, read a blog post, and construct a brief, but thoughtful, written response. Again, there is no one right answer to these questions; the point is to think through the issues raised by these events.

As the *Lexicon* points out, “most information campaigns include a mixture of facts and interpretations; an interpretation of facts or events can seem accurate from one political perspective or worldview, but inaccurate from another.” A similar dynamic can be seen in news coverage. For example, on July 6th, 2017, MSNBC host Rachel Maddow reported that she had received a document that appeared to be a “smoking gun” tying President Donald Trump’s campaign staff to Russian hacking in the 2016 U.S. election. The document, Maddow explained, appeared to be a forgery. What emerged was a disagreement between *The Rachel Maddow Show* and *The Intercept* about how news outlets should report on uncertain or unreliable information.

Watch the clip of the Rachel Maddow Show from July 6th, 2017 here (pay special attention to the segment from 14:39 to 20:43):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO9NvXNdA20>

Read *The Intercept*'s response to the *Rachel Maddow Show* segment:

<https://theintercept.com/2017/07/07/rachel-maddows-exclusive-scoop-about-a-fake-nsa-document-raises-several-key-questions/>

Write a short response that addresses the following questions:

- Which term or terms from the *Lexicon* best describe what happened here? Does that term (or terms) capture the situation perfectly, or are there aspects of the story that the term fails to capture?
- What do these two accounts of the story agree on? How do they differ? What kinds of proof do they have for their version of events?
- Do the two accounts of the story represent different viewpoints about what journalists need to do to be worthy of the public's trust?

Digging Deeper

The *Lexicon* is a necessarily brief discussion of problematic information, but there is a wealth of research on the topic. The endnotes for the *Lexicon* are a great place to start your scholarly exploration: they reference a broad range of academic journal articles and books on the subjects of disinformation, propaganda, public relations, branding, hoaxes, satire, and information operations.