

Verifying Popular Information

A lot of popular information spreads because it is interesting and easy to remember. Have you heard that the Wall of China can be seen from outer space? Or that gum takes seven years to digest if you swallow it?

- https://www.nasa.gov/vision/space/workinginspace/great_wall.html
- <https://www.mayoclinic.org/digestive-system/expert-answers/faq-20058446>

For this assignment, you should explore and reflect on a popular piece of information. It can be from any field (science, art, government, celebrity/sports/popular culture, etc.), but it should be something that you think a large number of people have heard about. This could be anything from anecdotal information (e.g., “I heard that peanut butter helps get chewing gum out of your hair”) to scientific information (e.g., Pluto is/isn’t a planet, climate change is/isn’t manmade, fluoride in drinking water is/isn’t bad for human health) or anything in between. For your piece of popular information:

Identify

1. What is the piece of information? For this step, describe it in as much detail as you can remember *without looking it up*.
2. Now, look up the piece of information to see if there are any further details you can record about it before moving on with this assignment.
3. Where did it come from, who popularized it, where did you first hear about it? If you are still in contact with the person you first heard it from, ask them where they heard it from and/or how they knew it was true.
4. What variations (different versions, if any) are there on this piece of misinformation? For example, what are different details or examples about the same information? (E.g., “I heard peanut butter helps get chewing gum out of your hair” + “I heard mayonnaise helps get chewing gum out of your hair.”)
5. How well-known is this piece of misinformation? Without providing any information to them in advance, ask 5 people you know to see if they’ve heard about it. How many have heard of it? What do they think about it? Do they believe it?
6. What proof do we have to disprove the misinformation?

Reflect

7. What did you remember about the information from step 1 and what additional information did you find out about it when you looked it up in step 2? Is there any reason for what you remembered the specific details you did in step 1 but didn’t remember other details from what you found in step 2? For (a fake) example, if you remember being told that the Great Wall of China was visible from space in step 1 but forgot that Buzz Aldrin is the one credited with saying this (which you found out in step 2) why might you forget that Buzz said it?

8. Why might the information you found be believable? Why might it not?
9. Who might be more likely to believe the misinformation you found? As in, what are the characteristics and demographics of the believers or followers of this misinformation? What is their income, socioeconomic status, belief background, religion, political affiliation, etc.? If you don't know, what do you think would make for a "good" believer of this information? Who might not tend to believe this information? NOTE: This step is NOT to stereotype entire groups of people, but to reflect on how new pieces of popular information interact with existing belief systems.
10. Who stands to benefit from this piece of information? Is it deliberately spread for a purpose? Why or why not? Does it fit into a bigger category of popular information / misinformation / conspiracy theories / extremist groups? If so, what might be their motivation for gaining new believers of this information? (If you don't know who stands to benefit, then why do you think this misinformation has spread so far?)