Fact-Checking Political Rhetoric

Analyzing misinformation and disinformation in politics

EVERY DAY
ADVOCATES

Environmental
Leadership
Canada

Contents

Objective

This material is intended to introduce advocates to the importance of political literacy, familiarize them with misinformation and disinformation, and provide them with tools to think critically about political rhetoric, fact-check information, and find the truth.

Questions considered include:

- *What is political literacy and why does it matter for environmental advocates?*
- *Why is it important to understand government jurisdictions?*
- *What are different types of information and what role does personal bias play in making these classifications?*
- *How can you identify and fact-check misinformation and disinformation?*
- *What are reliable and credible resources for fact-checking?*

1 The Importance of Political Literacy

What is Political Literacy?

Political literacy refers to a set of skills required for people to participate in a democratic society. It is more than just knowing or reading about politics. A politically literate person is someone who understands and thinks critically about the political context in which they live so they can make informed decisions about their democratic participation.

To understand the political context in which you live, it is vital to:
- Stay informed about global, national, regional, and local issues
- Know how political systems work, including how different levels of government interact
- Know how politicians make decisions and how the impacts of these decisions vary for each person in society depending on a wide variety of factors
- Listen to political perspectives that differ from your own
- Always be open to learning and base your opinions on research from credible sources

It's important to think critically when navigating the information listed above. **The ability to identify and fact-check misinformation and disinformation is a necessary skill to understand political context and meaningfully participate in a democratic society.**

Why is Political Literacy Important for Environmental Advocates?

Political literacy is especially important for advocates who want to raise awareness and gain support for environmental issues. The pressing nature of issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and reconciliation is often overlooked, so **advocates must have the tools to communicate the importance of environmental issues within a political context that overlooks them.**

Political literacy allows advocates to have firm knowledge on an issue AND the skills to curate an evidence-based advocacy approach that takes advantage of political opportunities. **Being able to identify and fact-check misinformation and disinformation builds political literacy**, helping advocates to understand how politicians are framing issues in the public sphere, disprove misleading rhetoric, and use research and credible data to build stronger arguments for change. This approach can also help to increase public awareness and active support for a cause.

Additional political literacy skills that could be important for advocates include public speaking, debating, and lobbying skills. Find resources for these skills in the provided links.

1 The Importance of Political Literacy

Why are Government Jurisdictions Important?

One important aspect of political literacy is understanding that different levels of government have different jurisdictions. Knowing which level of government makes decisions about a given policy area helps advocates to focus their efforts and resources where they will be most effective.

Knowing what each level of government does also helps us identify misleading political claims. Lack of knowledge about government jurisdictions can lead to the spread of false, inaccurate, or misleading information that can impact the effectiveness of advocacy efforts.

While some responsibilities overlap, especially when it comes to environmental matters, federal, provincial, and municipal governments each have their own distinct functions:
- The federal government makes laws for the whole country, provides money to provinces for important services, and handles national and international issues.
- Provincial and territorial governments are responsible for implementing regional services.
- Municipal governments are responsible for local services.

Here's a simplified overview of each level of governments' environment-related responsibilities:

Federal	Provincial/Territorial	Municipal
-marine life, fisheries, boundary waters, and oceans -natural resources -environmental laws and regulations -rivers and lakes on federal land (i.e. national parks) -safe public drinking water on federal land, in federal buildings, and on Indigenous reserves -emissions from industries in its jurisdiction -toxic substance regulations -cross-border pollution (inc. air, land, and water) -migratory birds and wildlife on federal lands	-water resources and watershed management -natural resources -environmental laws and regulations -safe public drinking water -wastewater and waste management -GHG emissions from most industries -most wildlife within their borders	-wastewater and waste management (mostly day-to-day operations of facilities and collections) -public parks -zoning and land use -fire protection -flood control

Check out this <u>*Library of Parliament publication*</u> *for more information!*

2 Types of Information

What are the Different Types of Information?

According to the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, information can be classified into four different categories: valid information, inaccurate information, false information, and unsustainable information

Valid Information	Is factually correct, is based on data that can be confirmed, and isn't misleading in any way.
Inaccurate Information	Is either incomplete or manipulated in a way that portrays a false narrative.
False Information	Is incorrect and there is data that disproves it.
Unsustainable Information	Can neither be confirmed nor disproved based on the available data. In other words, the accuracy can't be verified.

What is Bias and How Does it Impact Our Perception of What's Valid?

BIAS

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, bias is "the action of **supporting or opposing a particular person or thing in an unfair way**, because of allowing personal opinions to influence your judgment". **Unconscious bias is when the person isn't aware of their bias**. Conscious and unconscious bias can influence what information we think is truthful.

One example of bias is when a privileged group of people believe that inequality is fair and legitimate. Someone in this group with this bias may view attempts to achieve societal equality as unfair. Changes to the established order, such as a 'just transition', often cause backlash as conscious and unconscious biases are likely to arise. Valid information will not seem valid when biases influence someone's perception of the truth.

3 Information and Intention

Why Does Intention Matter?

Whether information is intended to mislead, manipulate, or cause harm or not determines whether it's misinformation or disinformation.

What are Misinformation and Disinformation?

Misinformation is false, inaccurate, or unsustainable information that is not intended to cause harm. Misinformation could be a misquoted statistic, conclusions based on feelings instead of fact, or <u>satire being mistaken for real news</u>. Essentially, it is false information that is shared because people think it's true. This happens a lot on social media because it's so easy to quickly share information without making sure it's accurate.

Disinformation is false, inaccurate, or unsustainable information that is intended to mislead, manipulate, or cause harm. It often intentionally evokes strong negative emotions and is often used to confuse, overwhelm, and/or encourage doubt.

It's not always about falsehoods - disinformation is very effective when it exploits peoples' emotions and pre-existing beliefs, providing seemingly coherent explanations for things people don't understand or blaming others, especially faceless organizations or institutions, is a quick and easy way to create an explanation of certain challenges.

A common disinformation tactic used in politics is the <u>'straw man fallacy'</u>. This is a strategy where someone else's argument is distorted, oversimplified, or exaggerated so that the attacker can dispute the distorted version of the argument instead of engaging with the original point. This type of information doesn't engage with the opponents' original argument.

Bias can influence what feelings are evoked when strong persuasive language is used. For example, negative language may be more convincing to people who already feel negatively about the topic.

How Can Language Evoke Feeling?

Language is a very powerful persuasive tool. Words can be intentionally used to influence how people feel about a political topic, especially if they align with their biases. Here's an example:

Factual statement with no strong language: The Government of Canada ended the federal fuel charge and the Carbon Rebate for individuals on March 15, 2025.

Statement with strong negative language: In March, the **corrupt** Government of Canada **finally put a stop to** the **unconstitutional** carbon tax that has been **impoverishing** everyday Canadians for years.

4 Finding the Facts

It can often be hard to tell the difference between facts and the persuasive language politicians use to win support. Being an informed environmental advocate means looking beyond catchy slogans and asking the right questions. So how can you identify whether information is valid or not?

How to Identify Valid Information?

1 First, decide if the content contains topical information that is within context. If so, it's possible that the information is valid, but further analysis is suggested.

2 From here, decide if any of the following strategies are used:
- Making a bold statement on a controversial issue
- Making an extraordinary claim
- Using very strong or emotional language
- Using small pieces of valid information that are exaggerated or distorted
- Blaming another politician or party for something outside of their control

If they use any of these strategies, further analysis is recommended to determine if the information is valid.

3 Some of the questions you can ask yourself to **analyze what is really being said** include:
- Are they explaining their opinions and plans, or just attacking others?
- Are they addressing their opponents' original argument?
- If blame is being placed, are there other factors that affect this situation?
  - Is this a municipal, provincial, federal, or international matter? Who is responsible?
- Is the information meant to provoke an emotional response? Is that response a strong negative feeling like anger, fear, hatred, doubt, or confusion?

It's also important to know *why* **the information being shared.** Consider the following questions:
- What is the motivation behind it? Who gains what from saying it?
- Is it being said because the speaker/author is passionate and there is a lot of research to support what they're saying?
- Or are they saying it in order to garner support for a certain cause?

4 And no matter what they are saying, we need to check if **there is actual proof to support their claims.**
  - Are their stances based on research or scientific evidence?
  - If they're using numbers or statistics, where did they come from and are they being used correctly?

More on fact-checking on the next page.

4　Finding the Facts

How to Fact-Check?

It's vital to find proof, evidence, or data to verify whether the information is valid or not. Go to the source and/or find reliable sources that verify the information.

Instead of relying on social media, political campaigns, and mainstream news sources, use **trusted sources** such as **unbiased data and reports** and **government websites**. **Think tanks** and **non-governmental organizations** can also be good sources for unbiased information, but be sure to evaluate their potential political leanings first.

If there are sources provided - check them. Signs of a credible source with information that can be trusted include:
- The publication is recent and updated as information changes
- The author has relevant credentials
- The source is viewed by others as legitimate and is peer-reviewed
- The publisher has fact-checking and/or ethical standards
- For bonus points: other credible sources have also published the same information

When it comes to **numbers and statistics**, we need to make sure they are being used correctly. It's good practice to look at the original source of the data to see how the context and wording compares to the source you're checking. You don't need to be really good at math to identify when things don't quite add up.

In the case that you don't know the original source of the information, you can try different google searches to see if any credible sources have shared the information. With this approach, be cautious about using AI-generated material or sources as this can be difficult to verify.

If you can't find evidence that information is valid, it's best to proceed with caution as this is unsustainable information. It's probably best not to share it.

5 Next Steps and Resources

What are the Next Steps for Environmental Advocates?

This resource has covered the basics of political literacy for environmentalists, how to identify different types of information, and how to fact-check political rhetoric with the goal to provide environmental advocates with the tools to think critically to identify misinformation and disinformation, continue advocating for the issues we care about most using credible information from reliable sources, and focus our efforts where it matters most.

The next step is take what you've learned here, fight misinformation and disinformation with facts, and continue advocating for people and the planet!

What are Some Potential Resources for Valid Information?

Unbiased Data & Reports:
Parliamentary Budget Officer - Government spending breakdowns
Office of the Auditor General - Reviews of government programs
Library of the Canadian Parliament - Research on public policy and laws
Statistics Canada - Data on the Canadian economy, people, and society

Environment- and Climate-Focused Organizations:
Canadian Climate Institute - An independent climate change policy research organization that focuses on mitigation, adaptation, and clean growth strategies
Pembina Institute - A think tank that advocates for policies to support Canada's clean energy transition
Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) - A Canadian research institute that performs thorough research and analysis on policy issues that affect life in Canada
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) - A non-partisan research institute that produces research and analysis to help decision-makers make informed decisions
International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) - An independent think tank that focuses on policies with the potential for sustainable transformation

Elections & Government Info:
Parliament of Canada - Voting records, debates, and policies
Legislative Assembly of Ontario - Ontario's laws and debates