

Communicating Economics - Tutorial Plan 2 'Opinion or Fake News? Post-truth Economics'

Duration: 50 minutes



Tutorial description

"Fake news" originally referred to fabricated stories or disinformation masquerading as legitimate journalism. President Donald Trump subsequently popularised the term by using it to describe news coverage he regarded as false, misleading, or politically biased. "Post-truth" refers to the disappearance of shared objective standards for truth in public discourse. Newspapers and websites will often publish a combination of news reports on events, and opinion pieces, 'op-eds', which present the writer's viewpoint on a specific topic. Find two economics-related news items or opinion pieces that focus on the same topic or event, published in the preceding 12-months, and compare and contrast how they try to convince the reader of their particular viewpoint. Identify how they make use of positive and/or normative economics to support their argument, and if their viewpoint relies on "fake news". Post a link to your chosen news items and/or opinion pieces to the tutorial discussion on Canvas, and be prepared to discuss and justify your choice in class.

Further reading

Assenza, T., Collard, F., Feve, P., and Huber, S. (2024) 'From buzz to bust: How fake news shapes the business cycle', VoxEU. Available at: <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/buzz-bust-how-fake-news-shapes-business-cycle>

Learning outcomes

By the end of the tutorial, students should be able to:

1. Distinguish between news reporting and opinion writing.
2. Identify examples of positive and normative economics.
3. Critically evaluate the evidence used in economics-related news articles.
4. Recognise features of misinformation or misleading economic communication.
5. Compare how different authors present the same economic event or issue.

Student preparation

Before the tutorial, students should have:

- Selected two economics-related articles covering the same issue or event.
- Prepared a short justification of their choice to discuss in class.
- Posted both articles to the Canvas discussion board.
- Read at least one or two examples posted by classmates.
- Read the further reading.

Tutorial structure

Time	Activity	Purpose
0-5 min	Introduction and overview	Set expectations
5-10 min	Warm-up discussion	Introduce key concepts
10-20 min	Small-group discussion	Compare and evaluate articles
20-45 min	Whole-class discussion	Identify common themes
45-50 min	Summary and reflection	Consolidate learning

0-5 minutes

Introduction and overview

- Display the opening slide with the tutorial description and briefly remind students of the exercise.
- Explain that today's tutorial isn't about deciding which political viewpoint is correct. Instead, we're asking how economists, journalists and commentators use evidence to persuade readers.
- Briefly remind students that they are looking for:
 - Evidence
 - Argument
 - Persuasion
 - Use (or misuse) of facts
 - Positive and normative economics

5-10 minutes

Warm-up discussion

- Ask the class: "How do you decide whether to trust a news/economics article?"
- Take answers from several students and note recurring themes on the board. Typical responses include:
 - Evidence
 - Statistics
 - Expert opinion
 - Reputation of the source
 - Transparency
 - Balance
 - Bias
- Introduce the group discussion by asking: "Can two articles describe the same event but lead readers to completely different conclusions?"

10-20 minutes

Small-group discussion

- Students are divided into pairs.
- Each student has approximately five minutes to introduce their pair of articles to their partner and to discuss answers to the following questions.
 - 1. Purpose**
 - What is each article trying to achieve?
 - What viewpoint is being promoted?
 - Is it informing or persuading?
 - 2. Evidence**
 - What evidence is presented?
 - Are statistics, expert opinions or examples used?
 - Is the evidence convincing?
 - Is anything important omitted?
 - 3. Positive and normative economics**
 - Can you identify:
 - Positive (descriptive) statements?
 - Normative (value-based) statements?

- Does the author clearly distinguish between the two?
- Which type of statement is used most frequently by the author?

4. Misleading communication

- Consider whether either article includes:
 - Misinformation
 - Selective evidence
 - Misleading interpretation
 - Unsupported claims
 - Emotionally loaded language
 - Exaggeration

5. Which article is most convincing?

- Given answers to these questions, which article do you find most convincing?
- **Tutor role:** Move between groups asking questions as prompts, such as:
 - What evidence would strengthen this article?
 - Could another economist interpret the evidence differently?
 - Is opinion presented as fact?
 - What assumptions are being made?
 - Who is the intended audience?
- Encourage students to explain why rather than simply labelling an article as "fake news."

20-45 minutes

Whole-class discussion

- Invite one student from each group (approximately 4-5 students) to briefly summarise the comparison of their articles.
- After each presentation ask the class:
 - Which article was more convincing? Why?
 - What evidence made it persuasive?
 - What evidence was missing or needed to make the other article more persuasive?
- As themes emerge, build a comparison table on the board between the contents of the 'more' and 'less' convincing articles.
- Encourage students to identify recurring patterns across different examples.

Feature	More convincing article	Less convincing article
Main argument		
Evidence used		
Positive claims		
Normative claims		
Bias or framing?		

45-50 minutes

Summary and reflection

Finish by highlighting four key messages.

1. Strong economic arguments rely on credible evidence rather than confident assertions.
2. Most economics articles combine positive and normative economics. Good communicators make clear when they are describing evidence and when they are expressing opinions.

3. Misleading communication is not limited to completely fabricated stories. Articles can also mislead through:
 - Selective use of evidence
 - Omission of important context
 - Misuse of statistics
 - Emotionally charged language
4. Critical readers should always ask:
 - What evidence supports this claim?
 - What assumptions are being made?
 - What information is missing?
 - Could the same evidence support a different conclusion?

Conclude with an exit question:

"What is one question you will ask yourself the next time you read an economics news article?"

Ask students to share one or two responses before ending the class.