

[Can your kids spot fake news? The classroom programme coming to NZ schools](#)

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An Australian journalist created a classroom programme that teaches kids how to avoid the harms of online misinformation and disinformation. He tells Alex Spence he is now bringing it to New Zealand primary schools.



Kiwi kids are being bombarded by [misleading and false information](#) on social platforms, and primary schools should teach them how to avoid falling for it.

That's the view of Bryce Corbett, a Queensland-based media executive and founder of Squiz Kids, a popular news podcast aimed at children. Corbett — formerly a journalist for *60 Minutes*, the *Australian Financial Review*, and the *Australian Woman's Weekly* — also runs a school-based initiative that he says has taught thousands of Australian kids how to think critically when they consume online media.

Newshounds, which was initially funded by the [Google News Initiative](#), is a free classroom tool that uses a cartoon dog and games to show 8- to-12-year-olds how to detect misinformation (incorrect information that isn't spread maliciously) and disinformation (incorrect information that is spread deliberately). Corbett, a parent of two teenagers, says the programme has been adopted by more than 2000 teachers throughout Australia and was positively evaluated by [researchers at Queensland University of Technology](#). He has had discussions with the Australian federal government and hopes it will become part of the national curriculum.

And now he wants to bring the initiative to schools in New Zealand. Corbett was in Auckland last week meeting school leaders about rolling it out here. He spoke to the *Herald* of his concern about the media environment and why he believes Newshounds will help. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

I read in one interview that you said the news consumption of children was ‘democracy threatening’. What is it about the media habits of a typical 12-year-old that worries you so much?

I have two Aussie kids at home. And I guess the genesis of the idea for Newshounds came from my own children’s news consumption habits. They would come to the dinner table and tell me about “facts” they had picked up while scrolling through Instagram or TikTok or whatever and, as a dad and a journalist, that gave me enormous pause for thought. Kids today are getting more information thrown at them than at any other time in history. They’ve got so much information coming at them on their social media feeds, but what they don’t have, because they’ve never been taught, is how to filter that information and work out what’s real and what’s not.

In terms of it being “democracy threatening”, you only have to look at the way that misinformation and disinformation flourish at times of elections. The way that information can be manipulated and the ease with which it can spread on social media. We have seen that it can have the effect of completely destabilising democracy, and I really, honestly believe that unless we start to teach media literacy as a vital life skill, unless it starts to assume the same importance as reading and writing and arithmetic, then we will be sleepwalking into a kind of anti-democratic dystopia.

And I know that sounds overblown and I catch myself when I say it, because I think, that is just a ridiculous statement. But it’s not too far a bow to draw to say that unless we start to inoculate the next generation against the worst excesses of misinformation and disinformation, then we will start to see democratic institutions be undermined.

You’re aiming to combat misinformation and disinformation seen by 8-to-12-year-olds. What’s the extent of the problem among that cohort, and how does it differ from the sort of misinformation that you and I would see on our social feeds?

I don’t think there is that much of a distinction between the amount of misinformation or disinformation that we would see [and what our children would see]. I think most adults would probably be really surprised if they were to see the amount of information that their kids are being exposed to.

We have a daily news podcast called Squiz Kids that is listened to by about 160,000 families and their kids every month, including in about 5000 classrooms. We surveyed that audience a year ago about social media consumption and where kids are getting their news and information and it found that 43 per cent of them were getting

information from social media exclusively. The extent of the problem is large and getting larger. Along with that, people's reliance on traditional media as their source of truth and information is declining, so what that creates is this perfect storm.



Bryce Corbett, who has two teenage children, says he started Newshounds after being shocked by some of the false information his kids came across on social platforms.

Photo / Jason Oxenham

Tell me about your own kids' social media use.

Probably quite typical for Australian teenagers. They're constantly on Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube and their phones are pretty much surgically attached to their hands. They're constantly near a screen. There's that constant pinging — it's like a soundtrack to our lives — as they receive notification after notification. And most of it is social, just connecting with friends. But there's a heavy reliance on YouTube, and TikTok is just all pervasive.

How old were they when they started on social media?

I think once you hand them a phone. I think they were exposed to YouTube relatively early. So, probably from the age of 8 or 9. Once they've been handed a phone, then the gate is closed, the horse has bolted, and they're off, and the ability for a parent to control where they go in that great wild west of the internet is severely limited.

What efforts have you made to try to control their use?

Look, very few. You look into potentially restricting Wi-Fi when you're at home. You look into maybe trying to put filters on phones. Ultimately, it's another job as a parent among the bazillions you have to do on any given day. You can institute any kind of bans and filters and whatever you like, but they will find ways around them. They're far more technologically proficient than anybody my age.

And then you reached a point where you were shocked by what they were looking at?

Now and then they would regurgitate some fact because they knew Dad was a journalist, and so they were like, "Hey, did you hear this?" They would tell me about stories they had come across from people on Instagram who purport to be providers of news and they would be factually wrong. Some of them are factually wrong and that's okay, but some are factually wrong and have an agenda behind them.

Explain what you mean when you talk about 'media literacy'.

I think the most obvious way to say it is kids are exposed to fake news. Media literacy is the ability to see through that fake news and recognise it for what it is.

Squizzly the Dog, the animated detective dog we've created, teaches kids to stop, think, and check. It's as simple as that. It's as simple as the way that we teach kids to swim. Or the way that we teach them to cross the road. When they're online when they're exposed to information that maybe raises a red flag in their minds, getting them into the habit of stopping, thinking, and then using the internet to check the veracity of the stuff that's being thrown at you. It's simple enough to do. There are lots of credible news sources out there. It's just getting kids used to the idea that you can't necessarily believe everything you see online.



Newshounds, a free classroom tool aimed at teaching 8-12-year-olds to detect false information on social media, was funded by the Google News Initiative.

There are some countries where media literacy education for primary school kids is mandatory. Finland, for example, is one of the countries where they have understood for some 20 years the importance of inoculating their population, not just kids but the entire population, against mis and disinformation. The fact they're neighbours with Russia is no coincidence because they've spent two decades fighting cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns. California has just introduced legislation to make media literacy education mandatory in all schools. So it's starting to take hold around the world and I'd love for this corner of the world to be one of the pioneers in the space.

Why are you focusing on primary school-age and not adolescents who would come across more-harmful content?

Primary school kids are much more receptive to these sorts of educational campaigns. If you can get kids before they get a smartphone in their hands and before they disappear into the social media vortex and you can teach them a few basic lessons about how to filter online from fiction, then when they do become teenagers and young adults, you will have at least instilled in them some important fundamentals around critical media consumption.

I wonder if there's a risk of negative unintended consequences of exposing them so early to harmful material. That you might teach them to mistrust everything, or make them confused and anxious about the world around them.

We have gamified [Newshounds] to make it fun and the entire ethos has always been — and the reason why so many teachers and parents love it is — we don't make kids feel any more anxious about the world than they already do. The whole point of the Squiz Kids podcast is to tell kids factually about stuff that's happening in the world around them, but not in a way that's going to make them terrified or anxious because there's enough of that around. Newshounds is built in the same way. It's not meant to make them scared. It's just to empower them.

And you can't do it in a way that comes across as being talked down to by legacy media relics nostalgic for a simpler world.

[Laughs.] 100 per cent, yeah, completely. You would be stupid to go out and say that social media is evil and the internet has brought nothing but harm.

I must say I found it amusing when I saw some photos of you surrounded by kids reading newspapers in a classroom. Is that your solution?

It took some doing to find the newspapers! Look I'm not suggesting by any stretch that everything that was printed in a newspaper was good and everything that appears online is bad. Not at all. But there are credible sources of information that are held by much higher standards than the very low standards of the wild west of the internet and social media. Anybody can publish anything they want and make it look like a credible source of information. It's just making sure that our kids are educated enough to understand that they have to be a little bit careful.

Some people reading this would push back on the notion that you can trust the established news media.

Of course they would, and that's unfortunate. As a journalist myself and somebody who trained in legacy media newsrooms, I do care very deeply about the future of trusted sources of information and I think we discount them and write them off at our peril.

I can imagine some teachers looking at this initiative and saying, 'OK, I understand the problem, what you're doing is noble, but we're already overworked and understaffed, but we're already expected to rectify a bunch of other social problems in the classroom, and this is one more thing we don't have time to think about'.

There is a sense that this is an idea that's a little bit ahead of its time. I honestly believe in 12 months' time everyone will be talking about media literacy and misinformation. There are 64 elections [globally] this year. Yes, teachers have a lot to do, but what we found in Australia with the rollout is that really engaged teachers find space for it. Over

2000 teachers in Australia to date have signed up and completed Newshounds because they understand that teaching kids to be media literate is a really important life skill.

It's easy when you're thinking about this, particularly with the emergence of artificial intelligence, to despair about the media environment. Are you hopeful or despairing about the future?

As a journalist, pessimism and cynicism are part of the job description! Of course, there's an enormous amount of good that will come out of AI, I don't doubt that. But unless we are teaching the next generation to be a critical consumer of media then I just think we're sleepwalking into some dystopic nightmare.

Shall we leave it there?

[Laughs]. That's cheery!



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