

Media Smarts During Breaking

News: Don't believe everything you read -- and other lessons for kids growing up with a 24/7 news cycle.

Adapted from article by Sierra Filucci



When big news breaks, it's easy to get caught up in following the news online. But while the Internet -- from major news sites to Twitter -- can be a valuable place to find useful information, it can also be the source of misinformation. Understanding the news and how to separate fact from fiction is an important and challenging job. Adults can be just as unskilled as kids when it comes to evaluating the news.

Here are some guidelines to remember when consuming the news:

Remember, breaking news is often wrong. In the rush to cover stories, reporters make mistakes, officials don't always have correct information, and tidbits that sound plausible often get passed around before anyone can check for accuracy. One Texas TV station reported through closed captioning that Zooey Deschanel was one of the accused Boston Marathon bombers!

Use social media wisely. Some say Twitter is a great source of news in the first few minutes of a tragedy, but after that it just gets messy and largely inaccurate. On the other hand, Facebook can be a great way to connect with friends affected by news and spread personal news within a more limited circle, for example: "I've heard from all my Boston-area family and everyone's OK." (Of course, news links posted by friends on Facebook might contain unverified information, so take them with a grain of salt.)

Be skeptical. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. After the Boston Marathon bombing, NBC Sports reported that some runners kept running all the way to the hospital to donate blood for the victims. Not true. There are plenty of websites

devoted to debunking fake news stories, like Snopes, Urban Legends Online, Truth or Fiction, and Factcheck. Visit them to find out if a story is true or not.

Stand back, take a break. With social media at your fingertips, it's tempting to weigh in with your opinion or pass along every tidbit that comes along. But restraint is necessary to avoid adding to the noise and confusion. We like the reasonable approach taken by NPR reporter Steve Inskeep, who cautioned listeners during the Boston Marathon aftermath, "We are collecting dots. It's a day to be careful about connecting them."

Stick with credible news sources. News sources that claim to have all the answers or jump to conclusions about why something happened are just adding to the fray. And remember that cable news channels make money off the news -- the more titillating the story, the more eyeballs watch, the more money they make.

Keep it age appropriate. Younger teens and kids aren't always ready to digest big tragic news -- especially if it seems to affect kids, like school shootings or abuse scandals. The constant repetition of information can be overwhelming and confusing for younger kids, and in the beginning of a news event, parents might not be able to offer any reassuring answers right away. The Internet and especially Youtube have lots of primary sources of information about murders, attacks, and threats, these videos aren't Hollywood movies and though it might seem "fun" to watch these atrocities, it's important to remember that these are real people suffering, dying, or being murdered.