THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Safeguarding: Online Misinformation

Key definitions:

Misinformation: False or inaccurate information that is shared without the intent to deceive. Example: Sharing a rumour you believe is true.

Disinformation: Deliberately false information spread to mislead or manipulate people. Example: Fake news created to influence opinions.

Fake News: News stories that are fabricated or distorted to misinform readers, often for political, financial, or social gain.

Clickbait: Sensational or misleading headlines designed to attract clicks, often exaggerating or misrepresenting the actual content.

Deepfake: Digitally altered images, audio, or videos that make it appear someone said or did something they didn't.

Echo Chamber: An online environment where people only encounter information or opinions that reinforce their existing beliefs.

Algorithmic Bias: When social media algorithms prioritize certain content (often sensational or polarising), influencing what users see and believe.

Key Statistics

- Over half of 12–15-year-olds use social media as a news source, and many have seen false or misleading news online in the past year (Ofcom). [statista.com]
- Only 11% of 11–17-year-olds can reliably identify genuine online content, despite most believing they can spot misinformation (Ofcom). [theconversation.com]
- 48% of children have encountered fake news, and 50% have seen fake images online (GoStudent Future of Education Report). [gostudent.org]

- 40% of UK teachers report that students struggle to distinguish fact from falsehood, with misinformation influencing beliefs about health, history, and social issues (GoStudent)

Key signs to look out for

- Repeating false claims they've seen online as fact.
- Strong emotional reactions (fear, anger, anxiety) to online content.
- Sharing questionable links or stories without checking credibility.
- Distrust of reliable sources like parents, teachers, or official guidance.
- Sudden changes in beliefs or attitudes based on online content.
- Engaging in risky behaviours linked to misinformation (e.g., health fads, viral challenges).
- Isolation in echo chambers – only interacting with like-minded online groups.

What might this look like in church life?

- Sharing false religious content online.
- Believing or spreading conspiracy theories about faith or leaders.
- Promoting unsafe health or spiritual practices from online sources.
- Distrusting church leadership due to misinformation.
- Fuelling divisive discussions in youth groups or forums.
- Preferring online echo chambers over church community.

How to respond if a young person discloses online misinformation

- Responding Well to Victims and Survivors of Abuse | The Church of England
- Reporting Safeguarding Concerns and Allegations | The Church of England

Always follow your diocese's safeguarding procedures and the Church of England safeguarding e-manual. When in doubt, seek advice from the DSO rather than trying to resolve the situation alone.

Key messages for children and young people

- **Not everything online is true** – check before you believe or share.
- **Think before you click** – sensational headlines can be misleading.
- **Use trusted sources** – official websites, teachers, or parents for accurate information.
- **Ask questions** – if something sounds shocking or scary, talk to a trusted adult.
- **Don't spread rumours** – sharing false information can harm others.
- **You have the right to be safe and informed online** – help is always available if you're unsure.

Further information & up-to-date guidance

Church of England resources:

- Safeguarding e-manual
- National safeguarding training portal

UK Government / UKCIS guidance:

- UKCIS – Education for a Connected World & Online Safety Guidance
- Metropolitan Police – Reporting False Information
- CPS – Stalking or Harassment Guidance

NSPCC & specialist services:

- NSPCC – Fake News, Hoaxes and Misinformation
- The Cyber Helpline – Support for Online Harms
- Internet Matters – Fake News and Misinformation Hub
- Childline – Fake News and Misinformation