

Media Literacy

NCSS Position Statement

A Position Statement of the National Council for the Social Studies. This statement was prepared by Chris Sperry, Rashawna Sydnor, Stephanie Flores-Koulish, in coordination with the National Association for Media Literacy Education.

From its inception, the founders of our democracy recognized the need to educate citizens to decode conflicting political claims presented in the media of the day (newspapers created by political parties) in order to make informed decisions. At the same time, laws were passed that forbade the teaching of slaves to read and write. Both examples illustrate the essential role that literacy played, and continues to play, in ensuring democracy, equity and social justice - and the precarious nature of democracy when literacy is neglected.

Today, young people are immersed in a complicated media ecology that promotes an infodemic of dis-information and profit-driven spin while simultaneously presenting extraordinary opportunities for participatory engagement. The social studies classroom is a critical platform for preparing our next generation to cope and thrive amidst this unprecedented deluge of mediated messages. Given these realities, is it essential that social studies education integrates media literacy: the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, act on, and create media messages in a variety of forms.

Today's mass-media storytelling is dominated by enormous transnational corporations with tremendous power to decide who and what will be represented and what lessons will be taught. Social media platforms, driven by economic incentives, use algorithmic data to spread viral messages, often with unexpected social impact. It is essential that we teach our students to understand the motivations, impacts and consequences of media and the roles they play in culture and history.

Revolutionary changes in human communications necessitate a shift in our pedagogical orientation from a fixation on teaching and assessing facts to a

focus on educating students to habitually analyze and evaluate information, including asking essential questions, weighing competing claims, assessing credibility, and reflecting on one's own reasoning and values to determine who gains and who loses through the promotion of particular narratives. The complexities of modern propaganda ask social studies teachers to look beyond the World Wars (where propaganda is traditionally addressed) and analyze contemporary techniques of persuasion and how they reach their target audiences with unprecedented speed, reinforcement and effectiveness in our rapidly changing digital information age.

In our era of polarized politics, question-based media analysis provides an academically bounded approach to analyzing challenging topics in the social studies classroom. The role of the teacher is to choose appropriate media for collective analysis that reflects diverse perspectives, to facilitate evidence-based decoding of the document(s), and to have students reflect on their own thinking, including their own confirmation biases. This process can be done with 1st grade students responding to and asking questions about book covers, product packaging, photographs, etc. It can be done in 12th grade civics classes where students analyze media messages about contemporary or historical controversial political issues through inquiry and reflection. The role of the teacher is not to tell the students what to think but to facilitate rigorous, fact-based and reflective analysis and evaluation.

The questions below have been adapted from the National Association for Media Literacy Education's *Key Questions for Media Analysis* to incorporate questions that target the impact of social media and the infodemic.

Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages:

Authorship and Audience

- Who made this and for what purpose?
- Who is the target audience and how do you know?
- Who might benefit from this message - politically, economically, etc.
- Who might be harmed by this message and how?
- How does this make me feel and why?
- Will I share this? If so, how and with whom? If not, why not?

Messages & Meanings

- What are the messages about _____?
- What values, ideas and biases are overt or implied?
- What is left out of this message that might be important to know?
- What techniques are used and why?
- Was this crafted to trigger emotions, if so, how and why?
- How might different people understand this message differently?
- How do my experiences and identity shape my interpretation?
- Do I have an open mind on this? Why or why not?
- What do I learn about myself from my reaction or interpretation?

Representations & Reality

- When was this made and how was it shared with the public?
- Is this fact, opinion, or something else (fiction, satire, etc.)?
- What are the sources of the ideas or assertions?
- How do I know this is believable or accurate?
- Is this a trustworthy source about this particular topic?
- How might I confirm this information using reliable sources?
- What knowledge do I need to fully understand this? How do I find that information?
- What questions do I have about this?

Teachers are encouraged to follow up student responses with probing questions such as: What is your evidence? Why do you think that? How could we find that out? Why might that matter?

There are many considerations that social studies teachers must make when planning and delivering a constructivist media analysis, including the choice of media document(s), the background information needed for the decoding, the key questions to ask,

the formats for student work (whole class, small group, async, etc.) and the plan for probing student thinking. These considerations should all be driven by the primary goals for each activity—including the content and literacy standards being addressed. But the success of a media analysis activity will be dependent upon the abilities of the teacher to listen well to student meaning making, facilitate understandings about core concepts, and nurture the development of literacy skills. This requires sustained practice in leading student-centered media analysis.

Sample Lessons for Integrating Media Literacy onto the Social Studies Curriculum

TRUTH AND DISINFORMATION IN THE MEDIA		
Early Elementary School	Middle School	High School;
In this lesson students are introduced to the idea that what they see in media can be deceptive. They explore the idea that media are “framed” by their creators and consider what parts of the world are left out of the frame.	For this lesson students explore and identify the elements that render a website/source fake.	This lesson has student explore PEN America's News Consumers' Bill of Rights and Responsibilities and read an article about "fake news" that presents strategies on how to approach digital sources.
WAR & PEACE		
Upper Elementary School	Middle School	High School
This series of lessons uses primary source documents for students to 'unpack' the Revolutionary War from the perspectives of an enslaved person, a woman, British loyalists and revolutionaries.	In this lesson students analyze diverse media imagery and explore the interconnections between peace and social justice movements by examining the lives of five peacemakers: Dekanawidah, Henry David Thoreau, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr. and Dolores Huerta.	This lesson has students explore the complicated nature of memorial statues by looking at who funded and designed the Freedmen's Memorial, as well as a critique of the monument by a leading voice of the time, Frederick Douglass.
CIVIL RIGHTS		
Upper Elementary School	Middle School	High School
This lesson has students explore iconic images from the Civil Rights Movement and create captions that summarize the features and ideas in the images	Turn this lesson about the Children's March into a media literacy lesson by adding questions about the documentary film itself - such as: "What were the filmmakers main messages about the Children's March and how did they communicate those?" "What role did media pay in the children's activism?"	In this lesson Students analyze excerpts from four songs to reflect on the meaning of black identity in the black freedom/civil rights movement.
ECONOMICS/CONSUMPTION		
Early Elementary School	Middle School	High School
In this lesson students consider the feelings of themselves and others when making decisions about when, where, and how much to use technology. In this lesson students analyze a toy commercial, an educational video and a clip from an animated film for messages about the purpose of media messages.	For this lesson students build on their media literacy skills as they examine media images for messages that consciously and unconsciously affect attitudes and behaviors toward others	This lesson has students look at how advertisements use images and language to appeal to consumers, analyze art that uses images from popular culture, create their own artistic interpretations of advertisements, present them, and reflect upon the nature of consumerism in their lives.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS/JUSTICE		
Upper Elementary School	Middle School	High School
In this lesson students analyze children’s videos for messages about the impacts of climate change and what people can do to help.	For this lesson students discover what the Flint water crisis is, why it occurred and about the youth advocate “Little Miss Flint.” Consider adding a media creation component with students making their own social media posts about safe drinking water.	This lesson has students learn about the history of the environmental justice movement thorough analysis a book cover, poster, web page, map, online magazine, and editorial cartoon.
GLOBAL STUDIES		
Upper Elementary School	Middle School	High School
This lesson has students recognize differences and similarities between their own lives and the lives of children living in a different country. Make this into a media literacy lesson by starting with the KWL chart and students identifying knowledge in the movie.	For this lesson students analyze video clips for messages about media stereotypes and cultural respect of people of Asian descent.	This lesson has students analyze social media and news videos for messages analyzing misinformation and bias in reports on Russia’s war on Ukraine.

The [C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#) necessitate shifts in teaching practice towards more inquiry-based and constructivist approaches that emphasize the teaching of critical thinking using diverse texts. Media analysis provides a student-centered methodology that explicitly teaches to C3 standards. Through the decoding of content-rich media documents in the social studies classroom, students learn and practice the habits of asking key questions, applying historical analysis, identifying perspectives, assessing credibility, providing text based evidence, drawing conclusions, and reflecting on their own process of reasoning - key abilities emphasized in the four dimensions of C3. Media production in the social studies can engage students in an empowering process of communicating their thinking with compelling evidence as a form of thoughtful action—exemplars of Dimension 4.

This generation is making and sharing media in unprecedented ways. The participatory nature of new media forms gives our students the expectation of being involved in selecting, repurposing, sharing, and producing social messages. We need to leverage these new capacities to enfranchise more young people to be engaged in life-long-learning, develop the skills needed for personal agency in the 21st century and for well-reasoned and reflective civic action. Our discipline has an opportunity to lead the way in integrating media literacy throughout our curriculum.

Media production enables students to apply their analytical and creative capacities to communicating their own well-reasoned thinking about a topic. Through the process of researching, planning, constructing, and reflecting on their own media messages (in video, website, slide show, social media, poster, etc.) teachers can lead students through an engaging process of planning inquiries, applying the tools of social studies, evaluating sources, providing evidence, drawing conclusions and taking action—all of the dimensions of the C3 Framework.

By incorporating media literacy, both analysis and production, into social studies we expand our classrooms to include the modes of communication that dominate the lives of our students. This is particularly important for non-print oriented students who are sometimes alienated from their academic experience. Social studies teachers have the charge of teaching students how to negotiate that dynamic ecology. The discipline of media literacy expands our pedagogical view of literacy to enable us to teach our students to read and write their worlds.

Recommended Resources for Media Literacy Integration:

Free Classroom Resources

[National Association for Media Literacy Education](#)

A national nonprofit organization advocating for media literacy to become a highly valued and widely practiced life skill. This link is to a definition of media literacy:

[Handout: Media Literacy Defined + Key Questions To Ask When Analyzing Media Messages](#)

This sheet defines media literacy and summarizes six key questions anyone can ask when learning to become more media literate.

[Project Look Sharp](#)

A program of Ithaca College, Project Look Sharp provides resources for K-16 educators to integrate question-based media analysis into the curriculum - with [495 free social studies lessons](#), searchable by keyword, level, and C3 standards - as well as annotated [video demonstrations](#) of media decoding.

[MediaSmarts](#)

MediaSmarts is Canada's center for news and media literacy. The center offers a comprehensive collection of resources, including lessons and tip sheets searchable by grade and topic.

[Bill of Rights Curriculum](#)

A compilation of more than 650 lessons specifically for the history, civics government and social studies classrooms. Videos and additional resources, such as current events articles and primary source texts, are also available.

[Common Sense Education](#)

A free K-12 digital citizenship curriculum and links to educator resources, such as webinars, chats, and self-paced training.

[Common Sense – Social Justice and cultural Literacy](#)

A compendium of resources specifically designed to support literacies around social justice and culture. Resources include curricula, research, and tips for navigating difficult classroom discussions.

[PBS LearningMedia](#)

PBS has a section of their curriculum specifically dedicated to media and news literacy, which is searchable by subject. Videos, interactive lessons, and primary media examples are available for free.

[I Am Not The Media](#)

Curriculum for purchase that teaches teens how to access, analyze and evaluate media messages. Workshops for teachers serving colleges, schools and community agencies in North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia.

[Media Education Lab](#)

From the University of Rhode Island, this lab provides professional development and learning support for teachers engaging students through media.

[Media Literacy in Action](#)

A secondary/college-level textbook by Renee Hobbs covering a many topics including the rise of news partisanship, algorithmic personalization, social media, stereotypes, media addiction, advertising, media economics, and media influence on identity.

[Media Literacy for Young Children: Teaching Beyond the Screentime Debates](#)

A book by Faith Rogow for integrating media literacy into early childhood education that invites readers to consider what media literacy education looks like when grounded in literacy and imagination rather than fear and control.

[Journal of Media Literacy Education](#)

The Journal of Media Literacy Education (JMLE.org) is an online interdisciplinary journal that supports the development of research, scholarship and the pedagogy of media literacy education. The journal provides a forum for established and emerging scholars, media professionals and educational practitioners in and out of schools.

[Media Literacy Clearinghouse](#)

A broad compilation of curriculum, resources, teaching ideas and links for K-12 educators, designed to help students become more media aware.

Professional Development Resources

[Website](#)

The Media Literacy Fundamentals web page, hosted by MediaSmarts, Canada's center for digital and media literacy, covers fundamental media concepts as well as ideas for assessing media literacy work.

[Video Demonstrations](#)

Short, annotated videos with elementary, high school and college students demonstrating question-based media decoding for social studies content/objectives.

[Article](#)

Cynthia Resor, "Teaching Media Literacy in Your Social Studies Classroom" (2019)

[Webinar](#)

Teachers College, Columbia University, "Developing Media Literacy" (2022)

[Article](#)

Jeff Share and Elizabeth Thoman, "Teaching Democracy: A Media Literacy Approach," National Association for Media Literacy Education (2014)

[Webinar](#)

A 40-minute recorded webinar with Renee Hobbs, Michael Shaw and Frank Baker discussing how to deepen students' abilities to analyze images.

[Article](#)

Jaclyn Siegel, "Resources for Teaching News Literacy," National Council for the Social Studies (2018)

[Blog](#)

Frank Baker, "What I Want Students to Know About Media," National Council for Teachers of English (2022)

[Blog:](#)

Frank Baker, "What Will We Do With Internet Literacy?," (2021)

[Article](#)

Meghan Manfra and Casey Holmes, "Integrating media literacy in social studies teacher education," Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 20(1).

[Article](#)

Chris Sperry and Sox Sperry, "Checking the Facts: Media Literacy and Democracy" (2020)

[Article](#)

Rachel Roberson, "To Create Media Literate Students We Need to Start Making Media" (2018)

[Podcast](#)

Learning for Justice, "The Mind Online," "explores critical aspects of digital literacy that shape how we create and consume content online."

[DIY Guide](#)

Searchable guide for creating your own constructivist media decoding activities

[Professional community](#)

Medialogue on Propaganda is a professional online learning community with opportunities for educators to dive deeper into media literacy pedagogy as applied to the most urgent and relevant topics facing society today, including election propaganda, disinformation, and conspiracy theories.