

Checking the Facts: Media Literacy and Democracy

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In his September 2019 *Social Education* article, “Democracy is Not a Spectator Sport,”¹ Ken Davis makes a strong case for why social studies teachers have a particularly important role in guiding our democracy back onto the tracks. Davis warns that fascism is a possibility if we don’t build a citizenry that is media and history literate and thinks critically. Social studies teachers, like all educators in the twenty-first century, are on the frontlines of an epistemological revolution in meaning making. If we are to prepare the next generation to be thoughtful participants and leaders in civil societies, we need a pedagogical shift towards teaching the fundamental principles of reasoned thought that underlie the foundations of our democracy.

The founding fathers of American democracy recognized the importance of mediated political debate as a cornerstone of democracy. The news media of the day was dominated by newspapers, many created by political parties. The revolutionary leadership rejected the creation of a government press as anti-democratic. Instead, they funded the distribution of independent newspapers through a postal subsidy, recognizing that democracy was dependent upon lively political debate, including through the media.² But the founders also recognized the essential importance of public education and literacy. Thomas Jefferson said,

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society, but the people themselves: and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is, not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power.³

Our idealistic experiment in democracy, as limited as it was in the eighteenth century, required both a free press and a literate citizenry prepared to reason through the most challenging political issues of the day.

Fast forward 240 years and our democracy continues to depend on a literate electorate able to critically analyze and evaluate conflicting truths. But today’s constructions of the news are communicated not just through newspapers, but through a dizzying proliferation of media outlets that publish biased messages at an ever-increasing speed. The monopoly that a small number of networks had on “the news” has disappeared, and with it the ethic (or myth?) of “objective journalism.” The relative consensus on what was “true” in the era of Murrow and Cronkite is gone. The presidency of Donald Trump makes it clear that we now determine truth within tribalized filter-bubbles that allow each of us to consume the news that conforms to our preconceived understandings of reality. It is this transformation of how we know what we know that contemporary schools need to address.

We must shift our pedagogy to empha-

size the integration of critical thinking throughout the curriculum. Rather than merely memorizing and repeating information from printed texts, students should be interpreting, synthesizing, and applying knowledge as they explore and solve complex problems. A core feature of this twenty-first century teaching should be the continual repurposing of media messages for critique and analysis in the classroom. This shift to a more inquiry-based pedagogy requires that students continually ask questions about the websites, videos, social media posts and textbooks that mediate their learning. Students must learn to ask questions such as: “Who produced this, and for what purpose?” “Is the information credible, and what is your evidence?” “What are the biases?” Students also need to reflect on the role that their own biases play in shaping their understanding of truth.

In a recent study of how young people understand fake news, authors Erica Hodgins and Joseph Kahne discovered that high school students who are very knowledgeable about politics are no better able to identify misinformation in the news than students who know very little about politics.⁴ In fact, their greater knowledge and motivation leads them to more readily spin the facts to confirm what they already believe and to disconfirm contradictory information and sources. That study has profound implications for our profession. It punches a big hole in the old belief that “if we teach our students the facts—they will understand the truth.” If we are to have an authentic democracy, we need to shift

from an over-emphasis on teaching facts to developing (and assessing) students' habits of critical thinking, including about their own biases. In addition to fueling our students with knowledge and communicating the importance of facts, we need to teach young people, from kindergarten through college, to ask good questions, to value good reasoning, to be open-minded, and to reflect on their own thinking. But how do we do this in the face of current tests and the pressure to cover the content?

We can have our content and critical thinking too. We do this by consistent, thoughtful, and practiced question-based facilitation of content rich media documents. By repurposing diverse media—from websites, popular songs, social media posts, book excerpts, or etchings and sculptures—we can engage *all* our students in applying core knowledge to the interpretation and analysis of complex social studies concepts and knowledge. Hodgkin and Kahne identified three media literacy strategies that were successful in helping young people to identify truth vs. fiction in the news:

1. analyzing conflicting diverse perspectives;
2. giving evidence-based reasoning; and
3. having students reflect on their own thinking, their own biases.

By including that third component into our lessons, we teach the metacognitive habits that are essential for assessing truth in today's polarized politics.

For over 20 years, Project Look Sharp

at Ithaca College in New York has provided social studies teachers with the free materials and support needed for building these skills into the curriculum. We provide hundreds of lessons that use diverse media documents for teaching core social studies concepts and knowledge and critical questioning skills through collective analysis. By examining one recently published lesson, we hope to provide a model for teachers to develop media decoding activities that use contemporary media to teach critical thinking and metacognition.

Today's news has proliferated in forms as well as outlets. Today's news is spread through social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat, as well as older platforms such as radio, or TV news, and news websites. News is also spread through references to current events in entertainment forms like late night TV monologues and news satire, as well as editorial opinions in Facebook posts, tweets, and homemade videos. Assessing the credibility of news has become far more complex and demanding than even a decade ago.

Fact Checking websites have become an important tool in helping assess the credibility of information in the twenty-first-century universe of "news." But how do these sites determine credibility, what are their biases, and should we trust them to assess "truth" for us? In February 2020, Project Look Sharp published a new media decoding lesson, "Fact Checkers: How Do They Decide?"⁵ In the lesson, students analyze websites from three prominent fact checking organizations: Factcheck.org,

Snopes.com, and Politifact.com.

The lesson engages students in the process of inquiry by analyzing and evaluating information about the protocols that professional fact checkers use in determining the credibility of a news story. The lesson encourages high school students to use their own inherent skepticism in the process of uncovering "fake news" by looking for biases, assumptions, and evidence in stated claims and opinions. We also want students to reflect on their own assumptions, inviting them to explore their own confirmation bias.

While the creation of a media decoding activity is often prompted by a particularly engaging or irritating media document, any lesson should also be grounded in your objectives. At Project Look Sharp, our process for developing question-based media decoding activities follows these steps:

1. Determine objectives that will align with relevant standards (e.g., the *C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards*; the *Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History*; *6 Key Concepts in Media Analysis*)⁶
2. Choose media documents that will help to achieve these objectives; and
3. Create questions for analyzing the media documents that tie back to those standards and objectives.

For the *Fact Checkers* lesson, we began by identifying two C3 standards that we used to ground our activity, one each from Dimension 3 (evaluating

6 Key Concepts in Media Analysis

1. All media messages are "constructed."
2. Each medium has different characteristics, strengths, and a unique "language" of construction.
3. Media messages are produced for particular purposes.
4. All media messages contain embedded values and points of view.
5. People use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.
6. Media and media messages can influence beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors and the democratic process.

Scheibe, C. & Rogow, F. *The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin/Sage, 2012.

- What is each site's criteria for determining accuracy?
- Who funds these websites, and why might that be important?
- Which of these sites do you consider most trustworthy and why?
- What are the benefits and risks of relying on fact checking websites when determining what to believe in the media.

sources and using evidence) and from Dimension 4 (communicating conclusions and taking action). It's important to note that many C3 standards could easily apply to this activity. For purposes of honing our objectives and questions we selected these two:

C3 Standards

D3.2.9-12. Evaluate the credibility of a source by examining how experts value the source.

D4.4.9-12. Critique the use of claims and evidence in arguments for credibility.

We also identified a Common Core ELA standard in History and Social Studies literacy:

Common Core Standard

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8

Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

Finally, we wanted to incorporate one of the *Six Key Concepts for Media Analysis* that pertains to student meta-cognition:

Media Literacy Key Concept

5. People use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.

Having identified the content standards and media literacy concepts that centered our activity, we then articulated several objectives that defined what students will learn and practice:

Objectives

- Students will evaluate an author's premises by corroborating or challenging them with other information.
- Students will critique the use of claims and evidence in arguments for credibility.
- Students will reflect on their own habits and biases in determining credibility in media information.

The next step in creating a constructivist media decoding activity was to select media documents that invite deep analysis and reflection tied to the objectives and standards we've identified. In this instance, we wanted students to reflect on how fact-checking professionals go about their work. We selected three primary fact-checking organizations to research so that we could encourage a more nuanced, non-binary approach to the inquiry. Having selected the organizations, we looked for sections of their websites in which they described their internal processes for deciding what to fact-check and how to determine credibility. This required some digging since the rationales and practices for how organizations do their work are not

always evident up front.

Having identified the sections of each organization's website that pertain to our inquiry ("Our Mission" and "Our Process" for Factcheck.org; "About" and "FAQ" for Snopes.com; and "FAQ" for Politifact.com), we created a handout for decoding. The handout contains excerpts from each of the three organizations' websites, including website headers and mission statements for context, along with specifics on fact-checking decisions and practices.

With objectives and documents in hand, we turned to the task of creating questions that will allow us to engage students with constructivist pedagogy. This type of learning assumes that individuals construct their own meaning and understanding, each through their own unique perspective. The questions should be inquiry-based and interactive, eliciting collective readings about media constructions. They should provide opportunities for students to sustain and extend their thinking through consistent probing for evidence. Constructivist questions are complex. They invite multiple readings that represent the nuanced interpretations that each individual brings to understanding the constructed meanings within media documents. They take into account that there might be several different but equally valid answers. They lead individuals to consider other viewpoints.

In this activity, we asked a variety of question types including evidence-based factual questions, evaluative questions, and metacognitive questions. We organized questions for social studies, literacy, and media literacy with the awareness that media literacy integration means that many of these questions can seamlessly cross over from one discipline to another (as illustrated by the similarities in the C3 and Common Core standards we've selected).

Possible Social Studies Questions

- How does this website decide whether a claim is accurate? Give evidence from the document to support your answer.
- What sources does the website rely on to determine credibility?
- How does this website's criteria for evaluating accuracy compare to other fact checking sites' criteria?
- Which of these sites do you consider most trustworthy and why?

Possible ELA Literacy Questions for Social Studies

- What are the goals of the organization?
- How are the goals similar or different from the other fact checking websites?
- What do the authors mean by the terms "consumer advocate," "transparency," and "contextualized analysis"?
- Who funds these websites and why might that information be important in understanding their biases?

Possible Media Literacy Questions

- According to this source, why is fact checking important?
- Do you use fact-checking websites? Why or why not?
- What are the benefits and risks of relying on fact-checking websites when determining what to believe in the media?
- What did you learn about your assumptions about media credibility from this activity?

The process of creating a constructivist media decoding activity starts with our objectives and relevant standards, then finding engaging media documents, and finally crafting questions that will enable students to discover complex understandings tied back to our objectives. The process of leading/facilitating a successful decoding is another key factor in the success of this work. You can see annotated video examples of classroom media decoding on the Project Look Sharp website.

There is a natural desire to find technical solutions for deeply complex human challenges. Wouldn't it be great to have "the experts" take responsibility for finding the truth? While credible fact-checking websites can play an important role in helping our students, and us, determine what to believe, we must also develop our students' internalized habits of questioning all information. That practice is at the heart of critical thinking and democracy.

The trusted fact checking website Snopes.com, one of the sites analyzed in this lesson, has an entry that claims that the animal star of the 1950's TV program *Mister Ed* was actually a zebra rather than a horse.⁷ The lengthy article gives detailed evidence to back up the claim, explaining that viewers would not be able to see the zebra's stripes on a black and white TV. At the end of the article one can click on a link called *More Information*. That link takes the user to the following caution: "*Common sense dictates that you should never fully rely upon someone else to do fact checking for you,*" including Snopes. It goes on to explain that the purpose of this entry is to get readers to use their critical thinking skills—and no, Mr. Ed wasn't a zebra.

While we should encourage our students to use fact checking sites like Snopes, we also need to instill in them a practice of questioning. Similarly, while Project Look Sharp's lessons can be an important resource, educators should be consistently repurposing popular culture to create their own media

decoding activities throughout the year. If social studies teachers—as well as teachers in science, English, math, the arts, PE, health, SPED and other curriculum areas—integrate the process of critical questioning of media messages related to their curriculum (from pre-K through high school), we will have a critical thinking citizenry able to negotiate future threats to truth. These habits are not only a bulwark against fascism but central to the vocation of humanity. In the words of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, "For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human."⁸

Notes

1. Kenneth C. Davis, "Democracy is Not a Spectator Sport," *Social Education* 83, no. 4 (September 2019).
2. Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media* (Basic Books, 2004).
3. Thomas Jefferson, Letter to William C. Jarvis (Sept. 28, 1820).
4. Erica Hodgkin and Joseph Kahne, "Judging Credibility in Un-Credibile Times: Three Educational Approaches for the Digital Age," in *Unpacking Fake News: An Educator's Guide to Navigating the Media with Students*, ed. Wayne Journell (Teachers College Press, 2019).
5. Sox Sperry, "Fact Checkers: How Do They Decide?" Project Look Sharp.
6. National Council for the Social Studies, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2013); National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010); 6 Key Concepts in Media Analysis.
7. David Mikkelson, "Mister Ed was a Zebra," Snopes (July 8 2000).
8. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2000).

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