

In our information-saturated age, how can students learn to critically question the messages and news they encounter?

Chris Sperry



Teaching Media Literacy in an **INFODEMIC**

Throughout history, education has emphasized the teaching of essential knowledge. Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1817 that democracy requires an informed and literate citizenship (Arthur, Davies, & Hahn, 2008). At the founding of our nation, the men who put into practice our new form of government recognized the role of literacy in democracy. They discussed the importance of public education for American citizens—at that time, though, they were

referring exclusively to white males. In the early years of our democracy, newspapers became the primary means of mass communication and knowledge, particularly about political issues.

Fast forward to current times, where, with the growth of the internet and now AI, we are inundated by a deluge of information—some accurate, some false, some misleading, but all coming from particular perspectives and biases. Many students (and adults) struggle to analyze and evaluate the mediated communication that inundates

our worlds and to reflect on how their identities shape their understanding of truth. Habits of critical thinking about media messages must become integrated across our curriculum for all students if we are to fulfill the promise of true democracy.

We need to equip our students with the skills and habits needed for citizenship in a communications ecology dominated by social media, algorithmic manipulation, deep and shallow fakes, and partisan political propaganda.

We need a shift in our pedagogy from filling students up with knowledge to teaching them to analyze, evaluate, and reflect on their understanding of knowledge. This shift is necessitated by changes in our media landscape, particularly with respect to politics and news.

Misinformation Overload

The way U.S. citizens consumed and thought about news media has swung back and forth throughout the decades.

Media-Decoding Lessons from Project Look Sharp

With smart questions, students can learn to better analyze news and information for truth and bias.

In this age of information overload, students are bombarded with stories, videos, and images of all types. How can we teach them to be smart and savvy about the information they consume? Below are some examples of the free media decoding lessons from Project Look Sharp for all grade levels.

Lower and Upper Elementary Students

How Much Fruit Is in This Drink? How Can You Tell?

In this lesson, students examine juice containers for messages about health and nutrition.



Sample questions:

- Is this drink made for kids or adults or both? What makes you say that?
- What does “100%” mean? What does “50% less” mean?
- How could you tell if a product is only made of fruit, if it only has a little bit of fruit, or no fruit?
- Why might the makers of the drink have wanted to make it look fun to kids?
- What does this teach us about food packaging?

Middle School

Four Newspaper Reports on the “Gettysburg Address”

This lesson has students identify the partisan nature of news coverage in the 1860s.

<p>Harrisburg Patriot</p> <p><i>“We pass over the silly remarks of the President; for the credit of the nation, we are willing that the veil of oblivion shall be dropped over them and that they shall no more be repeated or thought of.”</i></p>	<p>Providence Journal</p> <p><i>“Could the most elaborate and splendid be more beautiful, more touching, more inspiring, than those thrilling words of the President?”</i></p>
<p>Chicago Times</p> <p><i>“The cheek of every American must tingle with shame as he reads the silly, flat, and dish-watery utterances of the man who has to be pointed out to the intelligent foreigners as the President of the United States.”</i></p>	<p>Chicago Tribune</p> <p><i>“The conclusion of the President’s remarks was followed by immense applause, and three cheers given for him.”</i></p>

Sample questions:

- Which are from Democratic vs. Republican newspapers? What is your evidence?
- Why would political parties be interested in running newspapers?
- What impact might partisan news have had on our democracy?
- Is our news media today partisan? How do you know?

In the 1850s, for example, 80 percent of newspapers were partisan, often created and run by political parties (Starr, 2004). For readers of that time, news was assumed to reflect a partisan editorial perspective.

The public's expectations for news coverage changed with the advent of nationwide mass media—television news—which promoted “objective” journalism. Walter Cronkite's daily

sign-off on the CBS *Evening News*, with his catch phrase “And that's the way it is . . .”, reflected the public understanding at the time that true journalism was unbiased. The major networks, in fierce competition to capture the vast political center of American viewership, helped to unify public opinion and delegitimize non-mainstream views.

This began to change yet again with the rise of cable television in the 1980s. And then came the internet. As viewers were channeled into echo chambers and filter bubbles that reinforced narrow views, “news” outlets began to perpetuate highly partisan and often false information.

We have largely moved back to an era of partisan coverage, but students are not prepared to think critically about the biases in their news (and other information) nor to reflect on how their own thinking may limit their understanding of the truth. This infodemic of mis-, dis-, and mal-information overload requires that schools better integrate critical thinking about the biases in media messages throughout the curriculum.

In 2017, researchers Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer studied how media literacy initiatives can help high school students accurately assess truth claims in news. One significant finding was that students with high levels of political knowledge and interest were no better at assessing what was true and false in the news than their peers with little knowledge or interest in politics. The “motivated reasoners” used their superior knowledge to argue for claims that supported their biases and discredited opposing views and sources. The research suggests that knowledge and motivation alone are not enough to armor our students against the appeals of false or misleading information, particularly in the face of media-propelled confirmation biases.

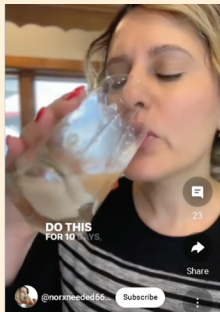
Kahne and Bowyer went on to study the effectiveness of media literacy initiatives in addressing these concerns. What they found has important implications for the crafting of a pedagogy and methodologies for helping students navigate today's complex media environment. They identified three qualities of media literacy initiatives that taught students to more accurately assess truth claims in the news. They found students needed to:

High School and College

Wellness Claims and Social Media

This lesson asks students to analyze four social media posts with health and wellness claims and evaluate their credibility.

YouTube



Instagram



Sample questions:

- What health claims are being made in this video and what is their evidence?
- What is the purpose of this post? How can you research these claims? How can you know your sources are credible?
- Why are these videos so popular? How do they tap into our emotions?

Source: Chris Sperry

1. Analyze and evaluate diverse and conflicting claims.

2. Take and defend their own positions—with evidence.

3. Reflect on their own thinking—particularly their confirmation biases.

While most U.S. schools have students practice the first two skills, particularly at the secondary level and in specific subject areas such as social studies, the same is not true for the third skill—teaching students

address core subject-area knowledge and media literacy (see “Sample Questions for Media Decoding” on p. 67).

By regularly incorporating questions about the constructed nature of media messages, including their purpose, sourcing, credibility, impact, and our own interpretations, educators can give students habits needed for citizenship in the modern day.

Teachers learn to lead media decoding in a way that focuses the analysis on student thinking and collective learning rather than the voice and views of the teacher.

to be metacognitive. For habits of reflection, analysis, and evaluation to become routine for students for all the media messages they see, share, and create, teachers must integrate habits of questioning throughout the curriculum.

Decoding Media, Across the Curriculum

Since 1996, Project Look Sharp, a not-for-profit media literacy initiative at Ithaca College that I co-direct, has helped K–12 educators develop resources and approaches for integrating critical thinking about media into the teaching of their core content. Project Look Sharp provides educators with more than 875 free media-decoding lessons tied to diverse subject areas and all grade levels. Each lesson includes the media documents needed for the decoding—short video clips, website excerpts, book covers, paintings, posters, songs, social media posts, and more. The lessons are also linked to state academic standards and objectives and include questions that

Not long after publishing our first lessons, we saw that teachers often used our inquiry-based lessons to provide students with their teacherly analysis, rather than facilitating projects in which students do their own analysis and teach each other. This led us to codify the classroom methodology we call Constructivist Media Decoding. CMD teaches teachers to integrate critical questioning about media with their students that: (1) supports core content instruction; (2) is inquiry-based and student-centered; (3) is flexible in its use; (4) makes the learning process more engaging, collaborative, and fun for all students; and (5) teaches educators to listen well to how their students understand the information, the concepts, and the learning being addressed.

CMD trains educators to carefully choose media documents and key questions that relate to the learning objectives for that activity, and then ask students to thoughtfully defend and expand upon their responses to

these media documents by:

- Providing document-based evidence (*Where do you see that?*)

- Teaching each other (*Say more about that.*)

- Exploring different views (*Does everyone agree?*)

- Asking their own questions (*What questions do you have about ___?*)

- Answering their own questions (*How could we find that out?*)

- Synthesizing their learning (*What does this teach us about ___?*)

The CMD approach has proven to be particularly effective in bringing challenging topics into the classroom, such as climate change, vaccines, race, and contemporary politics. In turn, teachers learn to lead media decoding in a way that focuses the analysis on student thinking and collective learning rather than the voice and views of the teacher. In this way, CMD trains educators in a constructivist methodology that builds student voice and agency and centers teaching on student learning, rather than just “covering the content.” Here are a few examples:

For an early elementary lesson on emotions, a teacher shows four short versions of the introduction to the movie *The Lion King* with different music under each. The teacher asks students to talk about the emotions that each one evokes and why that might be, probing for understanding (e.g., *Why might you feel that way?*). Students listen to each other put words to different emotions, learn that music can provoke feelings, and begin to realize that not everyone has the same reaction.

Another lesson for middle schoolers has students analyze depictions from 1892, 1992, and 2015 of Christopher Columbus and his first contact with

Sample Questions for Media Decoding



AUTHORSHIP AND PURPOSES

- Who made this and for what purpose?
- What does the creator want me to do, think, or feel?
- Who is the target audience?

ECONOMICS

- Who paid for this?
- Who might make money from this and how?

CONTENT

- What are the messages about _____?
- What values, ideas, and biases are overt or implied?
- What is left out that might be important to know?
- Whose voices are included and whose are left out?
- How does this compare to other messages on this topic?

TECHNIQUES

- What techniques are used to communicate the messages?
- Why might they have chosen to use those techniques?
- Was this crafted to trigger emotions? How and why?

CONTEXT

- When was this created and how was it shared?
- What aspects of historical or cultural context are relevant to consider?
- How does this reinforce or counter cultural norms?
- How does the technology or media form (social media, print, TV, etc.) impact the message?

CREDIBILITY

- 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?

EFFECTS

- How does this make me feel and why?
- What impact might this have on others or on society?
- Who might this message benefit? Who might it harm?

INTERPRETATIONS

- How and why might different people interpret this 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 interpretation or reaction?

RESPONSES

- What questions do I have about this?
- What knowledge do I need to fully understand this? How do I find that information?
- Will I share this? If so, how and with whom? If not, why not?
- What kinds of actions might I take in response to this?

FOLLOW UP

- What is my evidence?
- How could I find that out?
- Why do I think that?
- Why might this matter?

Source: ProjectLookSharp.org and InsightersEducation.com

Indigenous people. The teacher asks questions about each representation (*What are the messages here about Columbus, about the Taino people?*), with follow-up probing for document-based evidence (*Where do you see that?*). This can be an opportunity to teach about historical context (*Why might the messages have changed over time?*), with probing by the teacher to have students clarify their reasoning (*Why do you think that?*) and teach their peers.

At the high school level, one health and science lesson asks students to analyze four short TikTok videos that make health claims. The teacher asks questions about content (*What are the messages here about ___?*), about technique (*How do they try to convince the viewer?*), about purpose (*Who made this and why?*), about credibility (*How could we assess the validity of this claim?*), and about the students' own thinking (*Which message might you click and why?*).

In all these examples, the teacher chooses the documents and the questions and probes student responses to address their lesson objectives and learning standards. But the students do the work of analyzing, evaluating, and reflecting. (See sidebar on pp. 64–65 for more lesson examples.)

“Deepfakes” and the Need for Habits of Metacognition

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies necessitates that we prepare our students to habitually ask key critical thinking questions about all mediated messages and about their own thinking. One media-decoding lesson we provide is looking at “deepfakes”—intentionally manipulated still or video images that are created

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using “deep” (often AI) generative methods. Students evaluate images and videos from the internet as fake or true and reflect on how confirmation bias can impact their judgment. After looking at a series of images or videos from social media or other websites, teachers ask students questions including:

- Is this a “deepfake” or not? Why?
- How can you research if it is true or not?
- How might your confirmation bias impact your thinking and your sharing?

These kinds of questions build students' habits of metacognition—that third essential skill that Kahne and Bowyer identified—throughout the curriculum in a way that supports core subject-area instruction, that more effectively reaches all students, and that prepares them for life in our hypermediated world.

However, this approach requires a shift in how teachers often use media in the classroom. They must move from a strictly informational approach (*What did the video say about ___?*) to incorporating appropriate media literacy questions about purpose, credibility, interpretations, and other aspects. Of course, these key questions will need to evolve over time as new technologies require new questions. But developing habits of inquiry about the purpose, credibility, and interpretations of mediated messages

will help prepare students for a future with new media technologies that we have yet to conceptualize.

Our country was built on a belief that well-reasoned thought and action by all citizens can best steward society toward a just and successful future. Public education is a cornerstone of that belief. We need to make media literacy education an essential part of school curriculum—not just for the sake of our students and their future success, but for the sake of our democracy. **■**

References

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