

The University of Virginia Center for Politics and American Evolution



Media Literacy: Making Sense of the 24-7 News Cycle

Purpose: A free press is essential to the success of a democracy. The following quote from Thomas Jefferson expresses the Founders’ belief that informing the public should remain free from government interference. As the media has evolved over time to include radio, television, internet and now smart phones and social media apps- the ability in “being capable to read them” needs examining. This lesson guides students through analysis of social media posts, the definition of terms relevant to the media, and provides tools for identifying quality sources for examination of current political issues. This lesson accompanies the *Talking Turkey: Taking the ‘Dis’ Out of Civil Discourse* program as well as YLI and American Evolution’s (AE) First Freedom Wall.

The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.

- [Thomas Jefferson](#), Letter to Colonel Edward Carrington (16 January 1787) Lipscomb & Bergh ed.

Objectives:

1. Students will collect data from social media platforms in order to describe the legitimacy of social media to inform the public about current political issues.
2. Students will define the term ‘Fake News’ in order to describe the extent to which political groups can use the media to shape public understanding of events.
3. Students will identify the use of propaganda and bias in modern media in order to create a statement of belief about the importance of teaching media literacy.

Key Vocabulary:

propaganda
tribalism

fake news

yellow journalism

bias

Materials:

Access to the internet through a laptop, tablet, or phone

Student Resource, *Social Media*

PowerPoint Presentation, *Media Literacy: Making Sense of 24 Hour Media*

Student worksheet, *Social Media Evaluation: To Post or Not to Post?*

Student Resource, *News Rankings*

Lesson Activity:

1. Display the following sentence starter:

“Politics is....”

Students should write their responses on a post-it. Display the post it and discuss:

- How many responses are positive?
- How many responses are negative?
- Why do you think so many people have negative comments about politics/politicians?
- Is it getting any better? Why or why not?

Students should identify that many people have negative attitudes about politics because of what they hear/see/read in the media. The 24 hour news cycle makes it extremely difficult for citizens to know what is really going on.

2. Distribute the student resource, *Social Media*. Ask students to use their tablet, phone or laptop to search on a social media platform (Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Reddit, etc.) for information on a current political topic. (Immigration, Mid-term elections, etc.) and complete the chart. Students are not required to read the stories- just scan the headline/picture and record their first impressions.

- Is the story positive or negative?
- Is the story impartial or does it have bias towards one side of the political spectrum?
- How many times has the story been LIKED/SHARED?

This can be used as a homework assignment. Ask students to report on their findings. What does this activity tell us about the validity of what we see on social media. Social media is great- but it requires citizens to evaluate the information and make sense of it for themselves.

3. Display the PowerPoint presentation, *Media Literacy: Making Sense of 24 Hour Media*. Play the game, *RU 4 Real?* Have students guess which story is true or false depending upon the question. Refer back to the definition of *Fake News* to see if the stories fit the criteria. Ask students what they think the purpose of each story is; to present facts or to bias people in one way or another, or to make money. Review the list of tips for spotting fake news. Direct students to go back to one of the stories from the warm-up activity, and evaluate it using that information.
4. Why does this matter? There is a link to social psychologist Jonathan Haidt talking about *Post Truth and Fake News* that emphasizes that our brains look for information that confirms our membership in a social group. Liberals tend to post

stories that emphasize the superiority of liberal values and conservatives tend to post stories that confirm the superiority of conservative values.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1ZJ0w7y_xg

Examine the illustration on the slide 10. The story about Pope Francis was shared over 960,000 times. The story is untrue. Why would so many share this article if it is untrue? What can be said about the fact that “fake” news stories were shared more than mainstream news stories following journalistic standards?

5. Ask students to discuss, “What can citizens do to find out the truth about news stories/social media posts?” Review the advice given on slides 11-12 of the PPT and allow students to add other suggestions. Distribute a copy of News Rankings to each student while displaying slide 13.
 - a. What sources tend to be most reliable for posting true stories?
 - b. Which sources are most biased to left? To the right?
 - c. What does that mean?
 - d. What sources tend to be balanced in terms of ideological bias?
 - e. Why are some sources to be avoided?
6. Let’s look back at the topic we researched at the beginning of class. What were some of the headlines you saw while surfing social media? Can you identify the source of these posts? Using the News Rankings sheet find the sources- what is true of most of the stories on social media? Do you think that social media is a good place to find credible stories on political issues? Distribute the Student Worksheet, *Social Media Evaluation: To Post or Not to Post?*
7. Introduce a Talking Turkey assignment. Students will need to prepare to discuss the topic of _____. Ask students to engage family members, friends, etc. in discussing the topic using the resources on the sheet. Students should identify the sources according to where they should appear on the chart. Ask them to use as many sources as possible from both sides of the ideological spectrum as well as more neutral sources. Give students and parents time to research and discuss the topic at home before holding an in-class discussion. Let parents know when the activity will take place, and invite them to inquire about the activity at the dinner table.

8. Go to the First Freedom Wall found on the YLI website. Add the following statement, and ask students to respond with a short statement to support or reject the idea:

What students need is "a clear awareness of how the media influences, shapes and defines their lives."

Richard Riley, US Secretary of Education, December 13, 1995

- Do you agree? Disagree? Is having knowledge of how the media works important to being a good citizen?
9. Hold a Talking Turkey session using the information from this lesson, collected information from the Talking Turkey Resource sheet. After discussing the topic ask students to reflect on the topic of Media Literacy.

What strategies would you suggest for getting citizens to critically evaluate the media's coverage of news stories? How might we move folks away from watching only news that confirms their own biases? Do you think this is possible? Why or why not?

Extension Activity:

Media has always been partisan. Early American papers were usually owned and controlled by political factions. Students can go online to the Library of Congress, Library of Virginia, historical societies and find examples of "Fake News" from the past. The Civil War Era is particularly good for this, and there are many examples of songs, broadsides, news stories, and advertisements that support both sides of the conflict. Students can explain the purpose of the example and compare it to a current "fake" news story.

Student Resource

Social Media

Topic: _____

Date _____ Platform _____

Observer(s) _____

Story	Positive(P) or Negative (N)	Biased (B) or Unbiased (U)	Number of Likes/Shares
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			
14			
15			
16			
17			
18			
19			
20			
21			
22			
23			
24			
25			

Do NOT read the stories, just look at the picture/headline and make assumptions based on your observations:

TONE: Total Positive stories: _____ Total Negative stories: _____

IMPARTIALITY Stories Biased: _____

Total number of SHARES/LIKES: _____

Describe the amount of time spent on each story (on average).

Media Evaluation: To Post or Not to Post?

Using your knowledge from the lesson and its resources, examine the social media that you follow and find examples of posts that contain false or most-likely-false information. Identify the source of the post and describe why you think it isn't a reliable story.

Story and date	Social Media Source	Story Source	What makes it seem reliable/unreliable?	Share or not share
It took the truth 6 Xs longer than falsehood to reach 1,500 people #FakeNews https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/fake-news-lies-spread-faster-social-media-truth-does-n854896	Twitter	CBS News	Comes from a major network. CBS tends to be neutral to slightly right leaning. Factual reporting-comes from the top of the chart.	OK to share

For a week, create a post each day that provides advice to your followers about how to use social media responsibly. Record your posts on paper and bring them to class for discussion. Why is it important for citizens to be responsible when sharing information on social media?

