

Integrating Media Education into the Social Studies

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"Stop watching cable news."¹ This was the message that many teachers reported sending students during the fall of 2020 leading into the U.S. presidential election and in the days that followed. The comments arose in interviews that were part of a study I conducted with colleagues on how teachers taught about the election and how they experienced events such as the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol building. Their message was simple. Cable news, much like social media, is designed to get our attention; and this is done through sensationalizing stories and feeding polarization by playing on fears and anger—also known as "affective polarization."²

The message from the teachers we interviewed—to stop watching cable news—makes sense. Teachers see the effects that 24-hour news programs have on young people. They understand the networks' goals—vying for viewers to make a profit. However, we also know that students are not generally seeking out information from cable news—though in many parts of the country it is hard to avoid, as cable news is on in almost every business and restaurant you enter.

The message to stop something, however, also reflects a longstanding protectionist stance in education. The teacher is trying to protect students from these messages, and from the messages entering their classroom, instead of helping students learn how to critically analyze the messages and understand the broader system they are a part of. Given the current political context, it is also easier to say "stop watching" than to challenge students' (and their parents') political perceptions.

Much of what is purported to be media literacy curriculum today follows similar lines of protectionism and has been around since the early days of access to the internet. It provides forms of curriculum designed to help students root out fake news or be good digital citizens.

However, these programs, much like internet filters in schools intended to block access to sites that could include harmful information, simply do not work. There is no easy technological fix to shield students from misinformation and extreme political views.³

Instead, we must help young people develop and understand the nature of political information and the information ecosystem they also inhabit.⁴ Students contribute to this ecosystem through the choices they make, the apps they use, the content they create or share, and through who they "follow" or "like." They are also influenced by this system as a result of these choices, as well as the choices made by those designing algorithms and systems that prioritize retaining users' attention, collecting data about users, and profiting from the advertising revenue these generate.

By going beyond fact checking skills and protecting students, principles from media education can help students understand these systems and make them aware of the intended goals. Media education can also help students develop the skills and knowledge to produce media content and use these same systems for taking informed civic action on issues they care about. Elements of media education have long been part of the social studies curriculum. The goal of this special issue of *Social Education* is to help teachers think more deeply about how they can integrate media education across the social studies and better equip students to engage actively in today's polarized and digital society. What follows are some starting points for integrating media education into social studies education:

1. *View media as both texts and in context.*
Too often media literacy programs analyze media texts, such as a news story or Tik Tok video, in isolation. The skills

behind understanding the message of that media, who the author is, who the intended audience is, and what the goal of the text or video is, are important. But examining texts in isolation ignores how we engage with media. It avoids asking why we saw this video or story in our social media feed in the first place? Is it from someone we trust? How does it make us feel? What is it trying to get me to think or do?

2. *Go beyond checklists—understand ecosystems:* Heuristics, such as a set of questions or analytical steps for verifying the quality and veracity of a media source (e.g., CRAAP test), are helpful skills and habits of mind for students to develop. However, they do not help us understand the larger media ecosystem. They do not help young people understand how the choices they make and the choices programmers and advertisers make influence what they see in their newsfeeds. Heuristics do not help students take more control over the media sources they engage with and see. Having an understanding of the political information ecosystem is key to being an informed and engaged citizen. It means understanding the role of money and power on entities attempting to influence how we view elections and policy issues.⁵
3. *Affect and emotion:* As the previous example of affective polarization illustrates, we cannot ignore the emotional and affective response to media messages. Young people often share social media postings because they have an emotional reaction to them or believe others may. However, are they examining how these media texts are designed to produce an affective response? How can understanding the emotional appeal of social media, propaganda, and political advertisements help them better recognize the intent behind these messages and have a more thoughtful engagement with media? There are reasons why films and music are engaging and compelling in

history classes—they induce an affective response that students need to reflect on and engage with.⁶

4. *Media education includes both critical consumption and production.* Too often media literacy is framed as skills for consuming news and information. However, media education includes both the critical analysis of issues of representation—such as analyzing how different historically marginalized and minoritized groups (e.g., American Indians) are represented in films about historic events or in propaganda—and the production of media. This is key for students when taking informed action as civic agents. As producers of media messages, students need to consider their own choices, and why they make certain decisions when trying to persuade an audience. Finally, media production is a great space for fostering student voice on issues or histories young people care about.

In this issue of *Social Education*, authors examine media education beyond a version of media literacy focused on protecting students from polarizing messages and fake news. The articles in this issue are intended to be an introduction to ways that media education can be integrated across the social studies in history courses, geography, civics and government, and social and behavioral sciences. The articles cover a range of media education topics, from providing insights that support the selection of media education curriculum programs, or educational media for teaching media education principles, to powerful examples of how media education can be integrated into social studies classrooms. ■

Notes

1. Jeremy Stoddard, Brett Levy, Nora Shaffer, and Paul Fitchett, “Stop Watching Cable News: Implementing Media Education as Part of Teaching the 2020 U.S. Election” (Paper to be presented at the College and University Faculty Assembly of the National Council for the Social Studies, Philadelphia, Penn., Dec. 2022).
2. Shanto Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J. Westwood, “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no. 1 (2019), 129–146.

3. Jeremy Stoddard, "The Need for Media Education in Democratic Education," *Democracy and Education* 22, no. 1 (2014), Article 4.
4. Ethan Zuckerman, "Why Study Media Ecosystems?," *Information, Communication & Society* 24, no.10 (2021): 1495–1513, DOI: [10.1080/1369118X.2021.1942513](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1942513).
5. Lance Mason, Daniel Krutka, and Jeremy Stoddard, "Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Challenge of Fake News," *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 10, no. 2 (2018): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2018-10-2-1>.
6. Megan Boler, "Digital Disinformation and the Targeting of Affect: New Frontiers for Critical Media Education," *Research in the Teaching of English* 54, no. 2 (Nov 2019): 187–191; Renee Hobbs, *Mind over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age* (WW Norton, 2020).

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