

# “Fake News” and Media Literacy: An Introduction

Chris Sperry

This past April, I gave a workshop on integrating critical thinking and media literacy to 40 teacher trainers in Istanbul, Turkey. At the end of the presentation, an educator stood up and said, “If we teach like this, we could get fired or even arrested.” Immediately a second teacher jumped up and said, “We *must* teach our students to question—that is the foundation of our role as educators.” While the risks of teaching critical thinking and media literacy in Turkey today are far greater than in the United States, I believe that the imperatives are the same. As one courageous Turkish high school principal told me, “This work is about bringing the enlightenment to our children.”

It has been five years since NCSS rolled out the C3 Framework that focuses social studies squarely on the critical thinking outcomes that are at the core of media literacy education: asking good questions, evaluating sources, developing well-reasoned arguments, and taking thoughtful action. While historical knowledge continues to fuel student inquiry in our classrooms, the skills of rigorous, evidence-based analysis, complex perspective taking and reflective evaluation are now at the center of our pedagogy.

Changes in communication technologies in the 40 years that I have been teaching social studies have necessitated a profound shift in our discipline. Research into how our students assess the truth, some of it presented in this issue of *Social Education*, should force us to rethink a fact-oriented curriculum (and assessments). We now know that merely providing students with “the facts” does not ensure their ability to successfully evaluate truth. Our curriculum and methodologies should aim to develop our students’ habits of critical thinking about all mediated messages including about their own assessment of what to believe. Our democracy depends on it.

Nearly 20 years ago I gave my 10th grade global studies class a handout I had written on the history of Israel/Palestine as the students were preparing for a weeklong simulated debate from the perspective of Middle East leaders. The student studying Israel’s prime minister, Ariel Sharon, quickly scanned the reading and declared, “This is totally biased against Israel.” I was delighted by her response and asked her to come to class the next day prepared with her evidence. The following day she proudly declared, “I have identified 18 ways in which your history is anti-Israeli.” Without a pause, the student representing Yasser Arafat said, “and I have 23 ways this history is anti-Palestinian.” This led to a far-reaching conversation about fact vs. opinion, the power of words, struggling with

conflicting truths, and our ability to seek more complex and compassionate understandings of the world.

President Donald Trump’s popularization of the term “fake news” has given social studies teachers the mandate to help our students to distinguish between truly inaccurate statements of fact (fake news), misleading and slanted representations (biased news), and news that does not align with our own biases (“fake news”). To address this challenge, this issue of *Social Education* highlights the experience, methodologies, resources and research of leading media literacy organizations.

This special issue begins with the article “Misinformation in the Information Age: What Teachers Can Do to Support Students.” Authors Hodgins and Kahne summarize their research into confirmation bias in student meaning-making before examining classroom strategies that support students in being “effective and thoughtful civic actors.” This is followed by my description of an assessment we used at my school to evaluate student media analysis skills, including their ability to reflect on their own biases. In the second article, “Teaching Students to Navigate the Online Landscape,” authors from the Stanford History Education Project use their research to identify three common patterns in student online reasoning and how teachers might address these in our classrooms. The article “There’s Nothing New About Fake News” describes Project Look Sharp’s online lessons that integrate inquiry-based media analysis into the studies of racism and environmental activism. In the fourth article, “Hidden Biases and Fake News: Finding a Balance Between Critical Thinking and Cynicism,” Elizaveta Friesem explores how different biases impact reasoning and the challenges they bring to the classroom.

In the series of articles that follow, well known media literacy initiatives outline their approaches and resources for address-

ing fake news. In “The Upside of ‘Fake News’: Renewed Calls for Media Literacy,” Peter Adams lays out the News Literacy Project’s five guiding principles for “teaching students how to know what to believe.” In “Facing Fake News: Five Challenges and First Amendment Solutions,” Anna Kassinger and Kirsti Kenneth outline the approach and resources of Newseum Ed. The article “To Create Media Literate Students, We Need to Start Making Media” provides classroom examples from KQED about how student media production can teach core media literacy skills and capacities. The issue concludes with an annotated listing of a number of media literacy organizations and resources.

Thomas Jefferson wrote, “Self-government is not possible unless the citizens are educated sufficiently to enable them to exercise oversight.” In this era of fake news and “fake news,” media literacy must become a cornerstone of social studies education if we are to live up to the principles of an authentic democracy. 🌐

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## 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.

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