

# The Case for Media Literacy Implementation in the Social Studies Curriculum

Casey Mackay

**Abstract:** Media literacy is a subject that is worthwhile for implementation in social studies classrooms for students in the internet-age. Because of the wealth of information available at any given time, there is a serious need for the education of students on how to find reputable information throughout all the messaging that is spread throughout the media environment. It is now more difficult than ever to procure media information that is not laden with bias, so students need to be informed on how to consume and create media responsibly. Students must be given structure in how they can effectively sift through information that they both consume and propagate as creators, especially in the realm of social media.

## Introduction

An overarching task of social studies educators is to guide their students in the process of decision making and the means by which these decisions are made. Most individuals will make decisions based on the information presented to them, whether it be word of mouth or messaging put forth in the media. Within this process, students are thrust into reasoning with the information that they are given which can be a challenging task at times, with the immense amount of messaging and information available at any given time. In today's internet-age there is a plethora of media and information that just about everyone is able to access. Inquiry and curiosity on just about any topic can be quenched in minutes with just a few clicks of a mouse. Rather than relying on newspapers and nightly news broadcasts on major networks, there is a 24-hour news cycle that is accessible through various on-air news networks and a plethora of digital sources. Within these different avenues of consumption there is an exorbitant level of conflicting messages as well as content that is strictly driven to promote economic participation or spending beneficial to corporations. Thus, it is vitally important for social studies educators to present opportunities within the curriculum to help prepare students to reason with the mass of available information that is at their fingertips at any given time. Students must be taught the need for multiple sources of information, to false news and misinformation, as well as have an understanding that they are not only consumers but also producers of messaging in the media stratosphere.

Most students in the United States have access to the internet and social media and are exposed to various messages that influence their everyday lives. Hence, it is vital in this ocean of information and media content for students to be able to process and think critically about the messaging they are consuming and engaging with to make sound decisions and formulate well-informed opinions or arguments on topics therein. Within recent years there has been a substantial polarization of ideas and information presented in the media in which all students are exposed to in some form. With the fundamental shift from print media to digital media, there is cause for education and coaching on how students are able to decipher between

factual information and misinformation. Students are tasked with decoding these messages through the “Five W’s” of who, what, where, when, and why to determine whether the information that they are consuming is both relevant and objective. Not only that, but the pace in which media is disseminated is higher than ever before. Many news articles on internet sites and social media typically only focus on quick notes and commentary and not always by experts. Social media is a main source for information for many students in today’s world. For students and users of the internet alike, “Social media is becoming increasingly important as a means to gain information about the world, competing with traditional media sources” (Valtonen et al, 2019, p. 21). This shift from traditional media sources like nightly news broadcasts and daily newspapers has made information more accessible and transferable than ever. Thus, considering the veracity and accuracy of sources and their intentions has become both more difficult and worthwhile than ever before. Students in social studies classrooms are tasked with thinking critically about civics and community in the society in which they live, so it becomes that much more important for them to be able to understand the media messages they consume which effects their perceptions of the information laden within.

## Media Literacy Education

With many students’ propensity to be exposed to social media daily, they must be made aware and grow conscious of how their media information is presented, as well as take the onus of responsibility in what messaging they share amongst their peers. In fact, according to Mason et al., (2018), “In 2017, two-thirds of Americans reported receiving at least some of their news via social media” (p. 4). Within social media, and the internet at large, there are algorithms and technology used to filter what content is presented to individual users. When looking at where most of the information comes from, it is typically most prudent to follow the money or the ad revenue that comes with the attention of the masses. This shift has given credence to, “less in-depth reporting,” as well as “passing along public relations material as news without thoroughly vetting it for bias or inaccuracies” (Mason et al, 2018, p. 4). This creates a bias in terms of which information is put in front of students as their clicks are tracked and the information that is presented to them is based on what the software determines to be “most relevant” to them and typically that is driven by their consumerism or confirmation bias. The more swayed to one side or another, the more information that confirms this sway will be displayed. Thus, the knowledge of information attained becomes more self-serving, promote only half-truths, or be only part of the total picture. Furthermore, through these biases students are thrust into an “echo-chamber” through which they can find multiple sources that corroborate ideas that may be false or misleading which can cause harm to both them and the society in which they live. Media messaging, especially through the internet and social media has taken the form of “targeted media”, tracking users’ preference data, and using it to present and gather information specifically tailored to them. The article by Valtonen et al. (2019), they contend, “The mechanisms of media have changed, and instead of offering the same news for everyone, produced by the editors, reporters, and fact checkers, with today’s technology media and news can be targeted for certain groups of people for certain purposes” (p. 22). By hav-

ing “targeted” information fed to students in their media consumption, there is the possibility for the information presented to be slanted or presented in a way in which the consumer is comfortable or echoes their preconceived sentiments. Consequently, without proper education on determination of the validity of sources of information or its purpose, there lies the possibility of toxic and unhealthy decisions being made as well as propagation of misinformation being viewed as absolute truth. This education of media literacy becomes even more vital as students attending schools today will soon become adults and obtain the right to vote. For adolescents and young adults, identifying information that is truthful and objective is essential to become well-informed and be able to carry out their civic duties as functional and contributing members of society. So, part of the teaching of media literacy in social studies classrooms must be rooted in considering the sources of information, and the reason in which the messaging has been created. Within this same sphere, students must be educated in both social studies and English/language arts classrooms alike, on which sources of information can be deemed as trustworthy, and how to effectively interpret the media content between what one wants to know and what one needs to know.

## **Media Literacy to Supplement Civic Action**

In recent years, especially from 2019 to the present, there have been a huge number of world, national, and local events that have sparked debate and, in some cases, resulted in violent and problematic actions. The topic of media literacy is worthwhile in the sense that in order for meaningful change to be brought to the forefront by the youth and future adults that are our students, they must learn to be better informed. Issues like the fight for social justice, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the floundering economy are all huge pieces of the media machine currently. Students need to be able to sift through various sources to determine the purpose of the messages in which they receive. With determining the purpose of the information students will be better prepared to make determinations on what can be trusted and how to cut through the noise of biased reporting. The concept of media literacy is discussed by Cappello (2017) who said, as “To be media literate today means to be able to cope efficiently with the flood of information in contemporary highly mediated societies and act as critical, creative and responsible digital citizens” (p. 31). The skills and strategies of new-age media literacy can help students with their current schoolwork as well, for example, in writing informational or persuasive essays, checking the reliability of sources can be pivotal to crafting an effective argument or conveying a sound representation of the topics being covered. Beyond that, as students progress through their scholastic careers, and begin transitioning toward adulthood, media literacy becomes paramount as they enter higher education or start their careers. This calls for educated reasoning and guidance in deciding which information is suitable to use as fact and formulation of contention, which is important for both educators and students alike.

## Responsibility as Consumers and Producers

Students must be taught to interact with this information responsibly, as they are able to immediately share and disseminate the information across the various social media platforms that they use. Lin et al. (2013) noted that students must have the basic skills of finding valuable information as well as how to understand and analyze the material that is found. This analysis involves, “that individuals should not simply perceive media contents as neutral conveyors of reality, but recognize the construction of media messages as a subjective and social process” (Lin et al, 2013, p. 164). These skills can be categorized as both “Consuming” and “Prosuming” skills, as students are both consumers and creators of media messages (Lin et al, 2013). Having a working and objective understanding and knowledge of the interpretation of the media messages so readily available to students will give them the tools needed to become sound decision makers and members of the society at large. Within this understanding, students must come to terms with the notion that they are not only consumers of media but also creators of media. Capello concurs, “Media literacy is also about producing and sharing media content in a responsible manner through the innumerable platforms and services of the cyberspace” (Capello, 2017, p. 36). This comes from the use of social media and its sharing functionality, in which students or individuals in general can propagate any messaging that they choose with simply the click of a button. So, it is vital for educators to give their students a working understanding of the implications and consequences of sharing misinformation and the need to fact-check any information that is brought into their specter. Accordingly, we as educators need to stress the importance and consequences associated with dissemination of information. Students understanding their role in the messaging and information within the media is a critical part of their media literacy.

## Conclusion

Students are bombarded with media messaging daily, specifically through their use of the internet. That is why it is vitally important that there be media literacy strategies and education implemented within the curriculum of social studies education. Such education must be vested within the ideology of having multiple sources to corroborate information as fact, students understanding their role as media content producers/creators, and the identification and subsequent mitigation of false news presented as factual and reputable information. Therefore, there must be education and guidance for our students in situations where there are contradictory elements and that pairs closely with the dis/misinformation brought forth by “fake news” in the current media landscape within social media platforms. These platforms are at the forefront of our students view and typically used regularly and discussed throughout peer to peer. Furthermore, this flux of incorrect or misleading information characterized as “fake news” is a threat to students and society. So, it is further critical for educators to teach their students to question and contemplate multiple sources before sharing out media information to which they are exposed. Teaching responsibility in what information is propagated, as well as emphasizing taking ownership of messaging that is disseminated from the students themselves must be a cornerstone of contemporary media literacy education. It is paramount that

students be educated on the current state and environment of media, the sense and reasoning involved with vetting sources and identifying misinformation and taking responsibility while being accountable for the media that is distributed from their own accounts across platforms in the online world.

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## About the Author

Casey Mackay is from Marion, Ohio and completed his student-teaching internship at Hull Prairie Intermediate School in the Perrysburg Local School district. He received a bachelor's degree in education and sport management from Bowling Green State University and is anticipating his master's degree in education from the University of Toledo.