Where Literacy Is Heading:
News Literacy as a Signal of Change

Helping students unpack and understand the news is a critical component of 21st century literacy

By Peter Adams

Angel Gonzalez's "aha!" moment—the one that crystallized the value of teaching news literacy to his students at De La Salle Academy in New York City—came after he found a fake news article claiming that the U.S. Senate was going to change the names of all Hispanic people in the country.

Gonzalez, a middle school social studies teacher, shared the article with his students and told them to really think about it: What if their names were Anglicized? Some students were horrified by what they were reading. But others debunked the fake news article—and felt empowered to say so.

"I could see them not just developing a set of skills, but a sense of confidence." Gonzalez said, recalling the experience. "To me, that was the goal: to empower students to say, 'This is not true.'"

Gonzalez and his students are not alone. Young people today are contending with what is, by many magnitudes, the largest and most complex information landscape in human history—one whose contours and conventions are continuously shifting and evolving. This landscape has few limits; new forms of content are quickly co-opted and combined by a variety of people intent on deceiving us, often by turning our innate biases against us and exploiting our most deeply held beliefs.

Understanding how to safely and effectively navigate this information landscape is not simply an essential part of 21st century citizenship; it is a significant—and growing—part of what counts as literacy itself. After all, consuming, evaluating, and engaging with information is the foundation for all other civic actions, both

traditional (voting) and new (participating in online communities and conversations).

The good news is that even with all the pitfalls in today's information landscape, there are an unprecedented number of tools and pathways that help students take authentic civic actions. Some of these—such as researching the views of political candidates, requesting documents from the government, circulating petitions, or contacting legislators—have been recognized since our country's earliest days as essential forms of civic engagement.

Other skills are unique to the digital age: tracking down the registry information for a web domain; interacting on social media with public officials and experts in specific areas; creating infographics and data visualizations to simplify complex information; and using online fact-checking and digital forensics tools to determine the authenticity of claims, images, and video.

21st Century Literacy Is More Than Reading and Writing

If "teaching literacy" means teaching students to access, comprehend, and evaluate information and create meaningful information of their own, then it also necessarily means teaching three overlapping skill sets: news literacy, civic literacy, and digital literacy. Far from distinct areas of study, these specialized literacies signal ways in which literacy itself is changing.

Teaching news literacy gives students the ability to evaluate the credibility of the information they encounter. News literacy requires educators to help students learn the aspirational standards of quality journalism so they can both recognize them in practice and respond to reports that fail to live up to these ideals. For example, teaching students about fairness, the pursuit of neutrality (or the minimization of bias), the importance of context and quality sourcing, and the role that documentation plays in reporting gives students new ways to understand and respond to the information around them. It helps them separate fact from fiction,

distinguish news from opinion and analysis, and recognize the vital role that quality journalism plays in our democracy.

Learning the ideals of journalism also empowers students to respond to news coverage they find problematic in ways that are accurate, nuanced, and productive. For example, once students learn how complex the issue of bias is—once they understand that their own biases skew their perceptions of information; that bias can potentially influence straight news coverage in a number of ways, including word choice, story selection, and a lack of balance or fairness; and that most instances of it are usually unconscious, not systematic—they are much better equipped to analyze and evaluate bias in news stories.

The same is true of newsworthiness: Once students learn how news judgments are made, they can become insightful critics of the coverage decisions made by news outlets in their communities and by national news organizations.

News literacy also helps students understand the dizzying array of information that is designed to mislead, distort, and deceive. This includes viral rumors that reappropriate and recontextualize images in the aftermath of controversial events; hoaxes—some of which are sneaky forms of advertising or activism; propaganda and disinformation; and, of course, "fake news."

Such misinformation can be highly engaging and act as a kind of "side door" to discussions about current issues and events, but it also presents several challenges to educators:

- **Misinformation is ceaseless.** New rumors and pieces of disinformation and falsehoods surface every day.
- **Misinformation is constantly evolving.** Its creators improvise on existing strategies and techniques of deception and introduce new ones as new information technologies emerge.
- **Misinformation is designed to provoke a strong emotional response.** It invites us to indulge in confirmation bias, searching for reasons to embrace claims that affirm our existing beliefs and to dismiss claims that complicate our existing views.

Learning how viral information works can help disrupt this process, and analyzing patterns of misinformation that cluster around major events—such as the 2016 presidential

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election, the nuclear capabilities of North Korea, or the events in Charlottesville, Virginia, this summer—can help students better understand the beliefs and ideologies that underpin the national, and even local, conversation.

Another increasingly important part of teaching students how to track and engage in the national conversation is showing them how to assess the authenticity of digital artifacts and accounts. This isn't just a matter of teaching students "digital forensics" strategies, such as doing a reverse image search, learning to note such observational cues as street signs and license plates, and accessing metadata in images; it also involves helping students develop skeptical habits of mind. We need to teach students to ask questions such as: Is the image that purports to be of a breaking news event actually one from a previous event? Have key details in the photo been altered? Is the social media account I'm interacting with what it seems to be, or is it a bot or "sock puppet" account used to spread confusion and misinformation?

Foundations for Understanding

While many news literacy concepts and skills are best taught in middle school and high school, the foundations for this updated understanding of literacy need to be laid early—and educators in elementary schools have a unique opportunity to help their students develop modern information sensibilities and skeptical habits of mind.

Students in lower elementary grades can be taught basic news literacy skills—for example, they can learn to categorize information in a variety of ways and identify potentially misleading content such as nontraditional advertising, propaganda and raw, unfiltered information (which may seem irrefutable but often presents an incomplete picture of events).

These skills can work to ignite and empower authentic student voices. The students at MS 57/James Weldon Johnson Academy in New York City's East Harlem neighborhood were so inspired by their news literacy learning that they decided to create a school news website. Selena Misquiri and Heidi Soriano—then sixth-grade students at the school—looked into the cancellation of a popular computer class and published their findings in a report that examined students' tech skills and recommended more teaching time for computer skills.

DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP RESOURCES

DIGITAL LITERACY

Mozilla Tools to Teach and Learn the Web

DigitalLiteracy.gov

Google for Education

Edutopia Digital Citizenship Resource Roundup

ISTE digital citizenship resource collection

Common sense education digital teaching resources

Partnership for 21st Century Learning educator resources

NEWS LITERACY

The News Literacy Project (NLP)

Facing Ferguson From NLP and Facing History and Ourselves

NLP's Story Explorers activity

NLP's 10 Questions for Fake News Detection

On the Media's Breaking News Consumer's Handbook series

The Internet Archive

ProCon.org

Newseum's Today's Front Pages tool

FactCheck.org

PolitiFact

PolitWoops by ProPublica

On the Media

CIVIC LITERACY

Newseum's First Amendment Center

PBS NewsHourExtra teacher resources

iCivics

Constitutional Rights Foundation

Partnership for 21st Century Learning civic literacy resource hub

"I think journalism is important because we learn more about our world and ways to inform others about what is happening," said Soriano after the report was published on the school's student news website.

When we acknowledge these new literacies and integrate them into our practice of teaching literacy, we improve the quality of the national conversation and, with it, our democracy. ℗

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