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Youth Interaction with News Media

According to Common Sense Media, half of adolescents (ages 11 to 17) use their smartphones for more than four hours a day. We must equip students with the skills to use social media platforms in ways that are healthy, respectful and foster positive experiences. Drs. Benjamin Gleason and Sam Von Gillern write in their paper, "Digital Citizenship with Social Media: Participatory Practices of Teaching and Learning in Secondary Education," that "there is a need for digital citizenship curricula to emphasize the real-life experience, values, and personal interests and engagements of young people themselves..." and a "need for a new model of digital citizenship enabled by the affordances of social media."

Digital citizenship concerns the use of technology in ways that are responsible, ethical, democratic and civically engaged.

Public opinion on social media regulation

To illustrate the need for media literacy tools, I researched the current public opinion of social media content and regulation. The results were overwhelmingly supportive of regulation. According to a study by Pew Research Center, the number of Americans who support government regulation of social media has increased by 16%; starting at 39% in 2018 to 55% in 2023 ("Most Americans Favor Restrictions on False Information, Violent Content Online").

Additionally, 65% of Americans favor increased regulation of false information by the tech companies themselves.

There was further support expressed for alternative solutions:

- 33% of respondents in a Reboot survey identified educational programming as the best way to dampen the power of conspiracy theories.
- 84% said they would support required media literacy education within school systems.
- 90% support required critical thinking education in the K-12 education system.

In their paper, "Digital Media Literacy as a Precondition for Engaged Digital Citizenship," Drs. Kara Brisson-Boivin and Matthew Johnson assert that "there is extensive evidence that digital media literacy promotes positive civic engagement online: young people with higher levels of digital media literacy are better able to evaluate online information and are more likely to join or support an activist group online or post content about a cause or event they care about."

Defining media literacy

How is media literacy defined? Dr. Patricia Aufderheide and Charles Firestone define media literacy as the ability to "access, evaluate, assess and communicate a variety of media messages, drawing attention to the skills of critical analysis and synthesis with the use of audiovisual texts, tools and technologies." Brisson-Boivin and Johnson define digital media literacy as "the ability to critically, effectively, and responsibly access, use, understand, and engage with media of all kinds," going on to argue that media literacy is a key component of civic engagement.

Technology use in the academic setting

Students are already adept at using technologies and other tools in their personal lives, but they often lack the skills to do so in their educational or professional settings. Students who rely solely on their personal experiences can feel an inflated sense of confidence in their critical thinking skills and ability to engage with online political information.

A study by the Reboot Foundation, "Science Fictions: Low Science Knowledge and Poor Critical Thinking are Linked to Conspiracy Beliefs," found that "conspiracy believers tend to self-identify as 'critical thinkers' even if they've never had any formal education on the topic. In contrast, respondents who had critical thinking and media literacy education in school were among the least likely to believe in conspiracies."

By integrating the use of technology into the classroom and training students how to discern what is trustworthy online, they will be able to take those skills with them into their civic experiences. Additionally, it will empower them to do research on their own rather than to simply accept opinions of others. "Other research suggests that education can both provide analytical skills and the feelings of empowerment that push people away from conspiratorial thinking. According to the Reboot study, education provides 'cognitive complexity' that allows people to reject overly simplistic explanations of complicated events."

Benjamin Gleason and Sam Von Gillern further this argument in their digital citizenship and social media research, asserting two important contributions: "(1) a connection between out-of-school social media practices with in-school traditional citizenship curricula, organizations, and models of community change; (2) seeks to leverage the affordances of social media (i.e., its very socialness) to suggest a model that validates, and perhaps even prioritizes, the social values and identities of young people as they develop citizenship practices. For media training to be engaging, teachers must invoke medias that the students are already familiar with and use in their personal lives."

Authors of the paper "Media Literacy Meets the Twenty-First Century Challenge," Drs. Sofia Papadimitriou and Lina Valsamidou, articulate a vision for increased civic engagement among young people in the transformation of social media use through literacy training, saying, "We suggest that there is a need for digital citizenship curricula to emphasize the real-life experience, values, and personal interests and engagements of young people

themselves... we see the need for a new model of digital citizenship enabled by the affordances of social media."

Research shows that students do attempt to identify source reliability and rely on advice from teachers to do so. However, instructions from teachers can be misleading and faulty. Youth have been left at a disadvantage as adults around them fail to properly engage with technology and as the engagement skills they rely on are surpassed by technological advances. As such, the most visible problem with media literacy training in the educational system is due to teachers' inability to understand proper identification techniques.

Research has shown that students do rely on media literacy training to identify source trustworthiness and bias, but that their training is outdated and no longer effective. Writer Nadav Ziv and Drs. Sam Wineburg, Joel Breakstone, and Mark Smith studied college students' ability to identify the trustworthiness of a satirical news article in their study, "Educating For Misunderstanding: How Approaches to Teaching Digital Literacy Make Students Susceptible to Scammers, Rogues, Bad Actors, And Hate Mongers." They found that a majority of students failed to identify the article as satire. The authors concluded, "Ninety-five percent never located the PR firm behind the supposedly "nonpartisan" website and focused exclusively on the website or prompt, rarely consulting the broader web." They also found that, "Alarmingly, students' approach was consistent with guidelines that can be found on many college and university websites. Sometimes these materials are just plain wrong. Sometimes they are incomplete. Sometimes they are so inconsistent that they offer scant guidance for navigating the treacherous terrain of today's internet."

Sam Wineburg, the Margaret Jacks Professor of Education at Stanford University, said the researchers' finding presents a "concerning picture of American students' ability to figure out who produced a given story, what their biases might have been, and whether the information is reliable. More troubling still is how easy it is for agents of disinformation to produce misleading -- or deliberately false stories -- that carry the sheen of truth. Coupled with the instantaneous and global reach of today's social media, it does not bode well for the future of information integrity."

The same problem occurs for students in K-12 classes. Peter Adams, head of the News Literacy project, says that teachers often worry about being partisan during their classroom instruction, and said that students can struggle because the strategies teachers provide for evaluating sources can be outdated.

Tools for Improving media literacy skills

The media literacy tools that schools commonly use need to be updated to reflect a rapidly evolving media landscape. Drs. Gleason and Gillern contend that "effective instruction involves teaching people to be neither blindly cynical of all sources, nor to preferentially select information that confirms their former biases, but rather to 'teach students to recognize the indicators of trustworthy versus untrustworthy experts and other sources of

testimony' (Greene and Yu 2016) to understand how knowledge is produced and evaluated in different disciplines, and to learn different ways of justifying a claim."

According to the study by MediaSmarts, a Canadian nonprofit focused on media literacy, the implementation of training in critical thinking skills and media literacy caused great improvement among a group of adolescents learning to identify misinformation and disinformation, stating that "youth participants in MediaSmarts' study recognized the challenges caused by the opacity of platforms' interfaces and algorithms [and] after a short primer they were able to critically engage with the topic and develop recommendations for best practices."

In Educating for Misunderstanding, the authors suggest a reformatting of college classes centering on rhetoric and composition to include updated education on media literacy tools, writing that, "At many colleges and universities, first year students are required to take 'college success' or 'composition and rhetoric' courses. Many of these courses have not been retooled since they were added to the curriculum. In addition to traditional ways of reading, today's students need to be taught how to read laterally in a digital environment: how to turn to the broader Web to determine the credibility of digital information." The same can be done within the K-12 classes focusing on composition.

The most fundamental skill that students need today is the ability to think critically about a source's biases and qualifications. Established by Dr. Sam Wineburg, one of the founders of the Stanford History Education group, the Digital Inquiry Group (DIG) provides literacy tools to social studies teachers, particularly in Illinois. One tool they emphasize is called "lateral reading," saying they "found that what helped students distinguish misinformation the most is something called lateral reading. That can be as simple as opening a new tab and leaving the post to find more about the source of information. It appears to be effective. Students reportedly got a lot better at spotting questionable sources. But this effort takes time and practice...Many assume that if a social media influencer has tons of followers, it means they're trustworthy."

Additionally, DIG has created five questions for the personal assessment of media: (1) Who created this message? (2) Which creative techniques are used to attract my attention? (3) How might different people interpret this message? (4) Which lifestyles, values and points of view are represented – or missing? (5) Why is this message being sent? Using these questions and tools from DIG can help consumers identify the biases of online sources, or at least to question their authority.

The European Media Literacy Standard for Youth Workers (EMELS) identified five areas of digital competency: (1) information and data-effectively searching and approaching media, (2) media creation and communication-how media can be used for self-expression and to create meaning, (3) resistance and empowerment-how to stay safe using the media, protect our rights and impact a wider community), (4) understanding media usage of children and young people, and (5) training skills and development.

Drs Papadimitriou and Valsamidou write, “These good practices of using media have been implemented in schools in various frameworks and have been selected due to their positive evaluation by educational communities, awards in competitions and sustainability for numerous years. All of them can be transferred within the educational contexts in which they have been implemented (e.g., curricula, supporting complementary non-formal learning activities) or can be extended to different educational contexts.”

These tools can be employed in the K-12 classes through various student-led learning experiences that encourage students to build their own competency. In their paper, Drs. Gleason and Gillern promote two projects that teachers can use, as well as arguing that online engagement promotes increased civic engagement, saying “we conceptually discuss how students can create digital research projects, such as public service announcements that investigate issues that matter to them and their communities, raise awareness, and advocate for their beliefs with broader communities through social media. Second, we conceptualize and illustrate opportunities for students to investigate issues, prepare arguments, and connect with publicly elected officials with numerous goals in mind including developing an understanding of the political process, creating powerful and persuasive media, participating in political processes, connecting personal commitments and interests, and influencing legislation.”

Defining digital citizenship

Gleason and Gillern further their argument by declaring that the employment of media literacy skills and critical thinking skills enhance student civic engagement online through a phrase termed ‘digital citizenship,’ saying “we propose a model of digital citizenship that is student-centered, emphasizes participation via strategic creation, curation, and circulation, and grounded in the authentic sociocultural practices of young people. We theorize a strong relationship between new literacies practices, identity development, expression, and the development of digital citizenship.”

While there are various definitions of digital citizenship, the fundamental definition encompasses political participation meshed with digital engagement in ways that are responsible and ethical. The International Society for Technology in Education underscores the importance of students understanding the rights and responsibilities of being a digital citizen, and acting in ways that are safe, legal, and ethical. Dr. Karen Mossberger more simply defines digital citizenship as the “capacity to participate in politics and society online”, increasing their political knowledge, engagement with politics, and political participation.

Regardless of its explicit definition, Drs. Gleason and Gillern contend there are five key pillars of digital citizenship, (1) that it is citizen-sourced, (2) that it invokes digital, media, and social literacies, (3) that it revolves around the practice of citizenship, (4) that there are rights of protection, provision, and participation, (5) that youth have the freedom and capacity to act and engage virtually.

Most simply, Dr. Paul Milhailidis asserts that media literacy urges people to think and act critically, to communicate effectively and to be active citizens. Digital citizenship, with practices of critical thinking and media literacy, can foster healthy and beneficial political discourse online, even as we continue to face the problems of polarization and disinformation.

Digital engagement in politics

When surveying Americans' attitudes regarding polarization in digital news media, a contradictory finding becomes apparent. Americans say they do not like engaging in political content onlinel yet research shows that they continue to do so.

In a study by PhD candidates at the University of California Berkely, researchers found that while the stated preferences of the candidates were less political, their usage preferences indicated otherwise. This was especially seen with posts that represented the user's political in-group in a positive light, or their political outgroup in a negative light.

Platform usage showed that more time was spent on posts that reinforced the user's opinions, effectively creating a virtual echo chamber. Yet the platform users stated that they would prefer their social media to be less polarized.

The researchers found that "relative to a reverse-chronological baseline, Twitter's engagement-based ranking algorithm amplifies emotionally charged, out-group hostile content that users say makes them feel worse about their political out-group."

Additionally in Reboot's survey, 28% of respondents said they seek out people who tend to have different opinions than their own to engage in discussion or debate. There is an illustrated crisis of people recognizing the importance of civic engagement and moderating tech use, but a lack of capability to engage in these ideas for themselves. Instructing students in media literacy skills and critical thinking can provide them with the means to engage with online political discourse.

Disinformation and partisanship in media sources

Dr. Johnson makes the point that "even those news sources that seem to strongly support missions of diversity, inclusiveness, respect, collaboration, equality, and reason have been subtly sliding into a new mission: not just continuing to fight for the values we hold dear but now having to simultaneously spend much time addressing the unreasonable -- even the absurd -- at enormous opportunistic cost."

With the advent of 24-hours news channels, and an increasing range of news sources available, there is an increased motive for news sources to appeal to their audience, rather than simply reporting the news. This is especially concerning as we look at the impact of social media algorithms on political discourse and their effective evolution into echo chambers.

The Reboot survey showed that "people who got scientific information from social media believed more in conspiracy theories than those who did not. And those who considered social media, independent media sources, and family and friends to be reliable sources also tended to believe conspiracy theories were more likely to be true. Meanwhile, those who found government sources, newspapers, and magazines, and higher education sources more reliable, were less likely to believe in conspiracy theories."

John Fletcher, a social change performance researcher, explains, "Social-psychological consensus leans toward the view that we acquire beliefs and attachments first, pre-rationally, and that we justify them post-hoc, constantly, by filtering evidence (often unconsciously) through interpretive lenses. For issues that we detect as salient to our identities, we ignore, highlight, or weigh input about those issues to maintain identity coherence."

The authors of the Reboot study argue that social media is not the only cause of disinformation online, saying that "popular media consistently misrepresents or poorly represents scientific findings, by touting individual experiments with sensationalist interpretations that are misleading or outright false... The pressures of the online media environment-in terms of speed and audience also create bad incentives for journalists. Health advice in popular media, to take one example, is notoriously unreliable. The practice of science deserves a share of the blame as well... The social sciences, meanwhile, have faced a 'republican crisis' in recent years, with poorly designed studies producing results that are widely disseminated only to turn out to be unreplicable years later. As in journalism, this is partially a result of perverse incentives that can lead scientists to chase funding or provocative results instead of strictly pursuing the truth."

Drs. Brisson-Boivin and Johnson say, "With digital media increasingly being both how and where civic engagement takes place, along with the increasingly opacity of algorithmic and persuasive design, it is more vital than ever to ensure that all citizens have the skills, knowledge and understanding they need to be active and engaged digital citizens."

With these issues of partisanship and disinformation appearing to be without end, it is imperative that young people are equipped with the agency to think critically and determine source credibility on their own.

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