News Media Literacy Module

Independent Learning

The following material is posted on the D2L (our course management system, CMS) for students to complete independently before participating in small, recorded online discussions and (in the case of a hybrid course) the in-person class meeting.

This course has been designed for a hybrid format. The time it takes students to complete the independent learning portion is meant to stand in for the 1.5-hour class meeting each week instructors found in traditional lecture formats. To modify this curriculum for a traditional course (3 hours of lecture per week), we had made recommendations about what videos we found most useful so that instructors could more easily determine what could be assigned as homework and/or shown during class.

Module Introduction

Quizzes are not published, but instructors may request them from Rebecca Oldham (Rebecca.Oldham@mtsu.edu)

Submodules

Make sure you do the modules *in order*.

- Propaganda & Disinformation (1.5 hours)
- Information Creation (1 hour)
- News Media Literacy Skills (1.5 hours)

Topics

- Middle ground fallacy
- False equivalency fallacy
- Propaganda
- Misinformation
- Disinformation
- Sensationalism
- Journalism ethics
- Peer-review process
- Lateral reading
- Google search tips
- Click restraint
- 24-Hour News Cycle
- Evaluating claims

Discussion Preparation

As you are working through the content for this module, **ponder** and **take notes** on the following questions to prepare for discussions:

1. **Take-Home Points.** What is the most important take-home point that you learned from this module?

2. **Examples.** Consider our polarized news and political landscape.

- How have you seen some of the topics addressed in this module play out in **real life**?
- What has this module made you **think** and **feel** about some of these issues or examples?

3. **Difficult Conversations.** Watch the video about Why Facts Aren't Always Enough to Change Someone's Mind.

- How do **beliefs**, **trusted sources**, and **values** relate to having **difficult conversations** with people with differing political views—people who may be relying on **different sources** of news and information?
- What needs to happen to **heal** some of the political divides in our country?

4. **Self-Efficacy.** How **confident** are you that you can effectively sift through information and news media to make judgments about credible sources?

- To what extent do you find this task or goal **overwhelming**?
- How, if at all, has this module and the one about social media **changed** how confident you are about your ability to navigate the media landscape?

Submodule A: Propaganda and Disinformation

Post at the top of the content, an automatically graded quiz that asks questions about the content that they can complete as they work through it. I give students three attempts on these quizzes. The box below contains pages (written by Rebecca Oldham) and links to online content that can be copied and pasted in your CMS. I embed videos so students can watch without having to leave the CMS. The content below is listed in the order it appears in the module.

Make sure to complete the quiz and the participation activity **WHILE** you are working through the material.

Media Literacy Fallacies
Right now, you'll hear a lot of people complaining about "media bias." In this module, we're going to talk about bias and media, and how to be smart when you critique news media to find high-quality information. However, if we're not careful, our **skepticism** about media bias can turn into something counterproductive—**cynicism**.

Many Americans have adopted a belief that all media (news, social media, entertainment) is untrustworthy and that there is no point in trying to find the truth. Indeed, this is *exactly* what bad actors (e.g., anti-democratic governments, white supremacist groups, misinformation/disinformation pundits) *want* you to feel. If they can make you confused and disillusioned enough to believe that you can't know the truth and that you can't trust traditional news institutions, then you are more likely to turn to *them*, because they will tell you what you want to hear. They will rile you up with sensationalism, which helps them achieve their financial and political ends.

There are a couple of fallacies that are commonly manipulated by disinformation peddlers, propagandists, and media outlets to convince you that you can't trust reputable news organizations. Let's talk about some of these fallacies so that you can recognize them when you see them and so that you can recognize when you are accidentally using them in argumentation.

Middle Ground Fallacy

Believing the truth must lie somewhere between extremes.

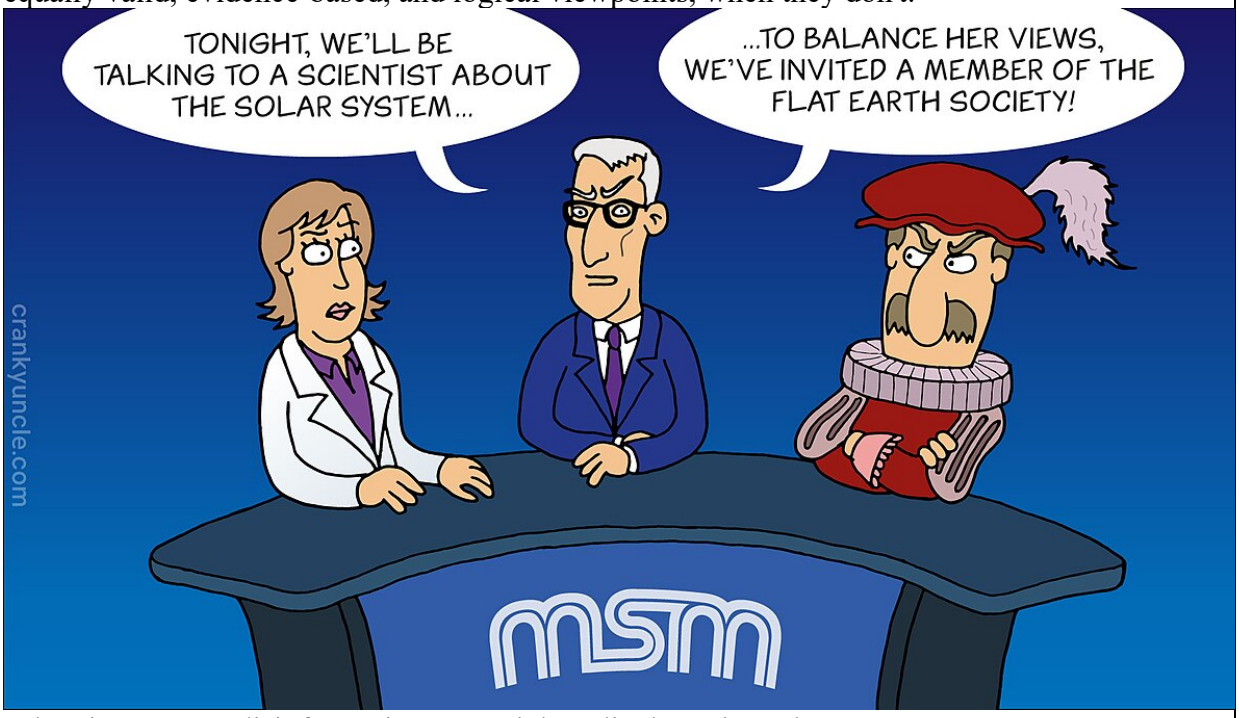
Sometimes, in an attempt to be fair and unbiased, we assume that the truth or the morally right choice lies somewhere between two extremes of an issue, but that's not always true. Consider how what is "extreme" changes historically. For example, I think we can probably all agree that slavery was bad. Should we take the middle ground on this issue? I don't think so. Just because something is the **middle ground**, doesn't mean it's **RIGHT**.

Extreme examples of this have occurred in real life. For example, in 2021, a law passed in Texas requires K-12 teachers to present multiple perspectives when discussing "widely debated and currently controversial" issues, such as slavery, race, and the Holocaust. Consequently, a Texas school district executive director of curriculum and instruction was recorded in a training

saying, "make sure that if you have a book on the Holocaust, that you have one that has an opposing-that has other perspectives."
In the words of veteran journalist, Christiane Amanpour:

"Be truthful, not neutral."

So, how does this play out in the media landscape? Sometimes, in an attempt to appear neutral and unbiased, news media will present two sources of information as though they are equal, even though really are not. This makes it seem to viewers like both sides of a debate have equally valid, evidence-based, and logical viewpoints, when they don't.



When it comes to disinformation on social media, knowing what sources are **worth giving attention** to saves us time and energy in terms of what we fact-check. Some sources of information—such as peer-reviewed research, experts in a field, or reputable news outlets—will publish different versions of the same story. These are worth reading, listening to, and fact-checking.

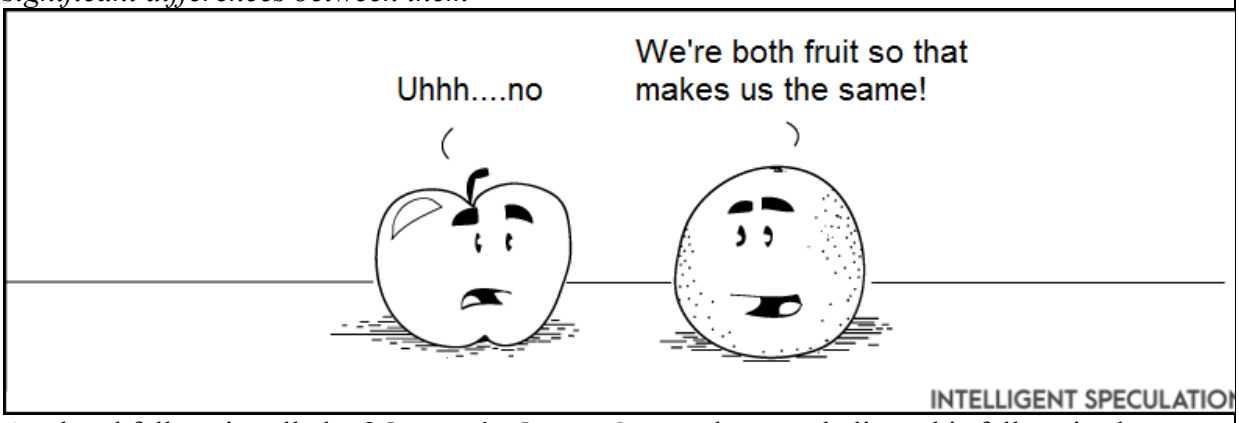
However, there are also bad actors (e.g., anti-democratic governments, white supremacist groups, disinformation pundits) who **intentionally flood** social media with false or misleading claims (i.e., disinformation) so they can overwhelm and confuse people and create distrust of reputable news sources.

In this module, you will learn a little about who some these bad actors are, how they work, where we are likely to encounter their disinformation, what it looks/sounds like, then be better able to identify their content on social media. We should NOT give them our clicks, time, or attention. This is why it's important to know where the information we see online comes from, especially on social media.

In short: Sometimes taking the middle ground IS appropriate, and most of the time we SHOULD listen to both sides. However, we should NOT give attention or clicks to opinions based on the lies of trolls, pundits, and disinformation peddlers. It feeds into their nefarious purposes and promotes their propaganda.

False Equivalency Fallacy

Concluding that two things are equal because they share SOME characteristics while ignoring significant differences between them



A related fallacy is called a **false equivalency**. Our tendency to believe this fallacy is also rooted in our desire to be fair and unbiased. However, when we ignore the details of differences between two things, we can be fooled into thinking they are equally bad (or good). Again, this honorable motivation is often manipulated and weaponized by bad actors in the media landscape to make you distrust reliable sources so that you turn to them for information instead. Those pundits, political actors, and disinformation peddlers stir the pot of sensationalism, tell you what you want to hear, make more money off of your audience, and/or profit from your vote or donation to their campaign. **Don't fall for it!**

These arguments sound like...

The 'media' is biased! Listen to <u>us</u> for the truth!

However, as you will see later from this chart, the degree and nature of that bias and information quality between outlets differ substantially. Often outlets that make this claim are the least reliable. This chart is a useful tool to check to see which news outlets are providing reliable reporting.

"THEY'RE ALL EQUALLY BAD."

"BOTH PARTIES ARE EQUALLY CROOKED."

"CNN, MSNBC, FOX - THEY'RE ALL THE SAME."

This is an example of **false equivalence**!

It pretends to be knowingly cynical but ***it's just an excuse for those who are too dumb or lazy to do the work necessary to research a particular issue.***

Don't fall for it.

Both candidates have lied so we can't trust either of them. There are just no good choices.

People often say this even though the quantity and seriousness of falsehoods between candidates/news outlets might differ substantially. You may notice that this is a common response when someone's favored candidate/news source has been caught in falsehood as a way to deflect criticism and avoid having to justify their continued support.

Moreover, some voters take these views because it makes them feel like they are a reasonable, skeptical centrist who is above the political fray (e.g., *"I'm an 'independent,' so I am immune to being manipulated by the political machine."*). For others, it may just be a lack of willingness to examine the details of differences on a political issue, candidate, or news source. This is similar to the middle ground fallacy—being neutral is not always the same as being right.

See how the experts used to say one thing, but now they're saying the complete opposite? They must not know any more than the rest of us!

Ethical scholarship and science evolve as new data emerges. Scientists' and scholars' ability to change their recommendations based on new information is exactly the purpose of doing research. This is not a sign of inexpertise or compromised actors—it's just good scholarship.
Furthermore, it certainly does not mean that experts' opinions are equal to the rest of us. In a video in this module, John Green points out that sometimes experts get things wrong but that doesn't mean they are equally as uninformed as non-experts. Even still, people in the media landscape actively try to persuade the public to ignore experts by cherry-picking instances of experts not being right 100% of the time. Again, if these bad actors can get you to distrust experts, then you will bring your clicks and money to them, and they will feed your confirmation bias with sensationalism and disinformation.

Earning Our Opinions

You may have heard before:
You're entitled to your own opinion, but not your own facts.
I would like for you to consider that ***when your opinion is based on false information and ignorance, you are NOT entitled to your own opinion*.** You would be wise to listen to those whose opinions are more well-informed than yours before deciding that you are entitled to an opinion—much less an opinion that deserves equality with experts on a topic. In a world where social media gives all voices a platform and disinformation abounds, we as a society would be wise to keep in mind that (1) **not all opinions are created equal** and (2) **we should earn our opinions through studying reputable information sources**.

Module Objectives
Now that you know some of the fallacies, manipulation tactics, and motivations of bad actors in the news media landscape, let's dive into some more details so that you can be prepared with the information, critical lens, and skills that will empower you to navigate a rapidly changing news ecosystem with skepticism, and not cynicism.
In this module, you will learn:

1. **Submodule A:** What are propaganda and disinformation? Who are some of these "bad actors" who create this kind of information? What are their motivations? Where are we likely to encounter disinformation and propaganda? What are its impacts on our information ecosystems?
2. **Submodule B:** What makes a news outlet a reputable and reliable source? What are their ethical standards? How do they produce news and information using methods that make it more trustworthy than other outlets? Who can I trust and how can I tell? What are threats to the integrity of high-quality journalism? How is science produced in a way that makes it more trustworthy than other sources of information?
3. **Submodule C:** What are the skills that I need to be able to fact-check sources that I encounter on social media and in the news? How can I critically evaluate various kinds of evidence (e.g., statistics, photos, videos) to make sure that I'm not being manipulated?

Videos (*Favorite)
* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFC-0FR2hko
* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLlv2o6UfTU
* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rR7j11Wpjiw
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwA4k0E51Oo
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ix8JEqCJ1s
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Lx5VmAdZSI

Mis/Disinformation in Spanish-Language News
Spanish-language programming on the radio and news is particularly suspectable to misinformation and disinformation for several reasons, including but not limited to:

1. There is less support for rigorous local and national Spanish-language journalism.
2. Spanish-language programming is less likely to be fact-checked than programming in English.

3. The news may be sourced from news in other countries (e.g., Venezuela) where Russia targets some of their disinformation campaigns (e.g., Sputnik) that are designed to harm the United States.

One finding from this reporting is that word-of-mouth is an important mode of sharing news in Hispanic communities. Here are a few resources to share with Spanish-speaking friends and relatives to help them navigate their media ecosystems:

- **Feet in 2 Worlds** (fi2w.org) is a media organization that empowers immigrant journalists to report on stories that matter in their communities. Podcasts and articles are available in Spanish and English.
- **Palabra (**palabranahj.org**)** is a multimedia platform initiative from the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, designed to support freelance journalists.
- **Radiofrequencia de Engaños** (The Frequency of Disception) is a six-part part article series (available in Spanish and English) reporting on the misinformation and disinformation in the Spanish-speaking community as well as tools for how to deal with it.
- **Spanish-language fact-checking websites**
  - **elDetector from Univision Noticias**
  - **T Verifica from Noticias Telemundo**
  - **Factchequeado**

If you'd like to listen to the full podcast, you can do so below or by visiting its webpage.

 Reporter Paulina Velasco

Submodule B: Information Creation

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Videos (*Favorite)
* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdH7G9I30No
* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tgt2FmVhNtw
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIbVBUk5tKc

*Here provide a truncated PDF of the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* which only includes the title page and pages 14-15 about Information Creation as a Process

Journalism Ethics
* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o93pM-b97HI
* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNidQHk5SZs
https://www.spj.org/pdf/spj-code-of-ethics.pdf

Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnR6CHPzyX8
* https://adfontesmedia.com/interactive-media-bias-chart/?utm_source=HomePage_IMBC_Top_Button&utm_medium=OnWebSite_Button

Peer-Reviewed Research
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOCQZ7QnoN0 OR
* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Vc5bgyAXSU

Submodule C: Information Creation

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Don't be fooled by fancy formatting. Not everything that LOOKS like news IS news.
In this module, you'll learn some skills to guard yourself against disinformation.


DISINFORMATION

Study Confirms Readers Believe Anything if you Make it Look Like a News Article

You just have to make it look convincing enough

By Bart Simpson Follow

Updated Sep. 27, oh are you still reading this?

Videos (*Favorite)
* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZsaA0w_0z0
* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoQG6Tin-1E
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9XZk9CLxK4
* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tw44SkkXQg
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxhbOvR2TGk
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiND50qfCek
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7uvqb8fcdA

Collective Learning

Small Group Discussion

Small groups have weekly recorded online meetings throughout the semester. Students submit the recording to a cloud folder so the instructor can listen and assign a participation grade (for quantity and quality of contributions). The following information is posted on the CMS to guide those student discussions.

News Media Module Small Group Discussion

Requirements

- Before starting this discussion, group members should watch Why Facts Aren't Always Enough to Change Someone's Mind.
- Minimum time = 40 minutes
- Make sure someone is recording your discussion.
- Each individual will be graded according to the quantity and quality of their contributions to the discussion.
    - All students should have their video cameras on so]Dr. O can see who is contributing during the conversation.
    - Students are encouraged to go beyond just agreeing with each other. If you agree, elaborate. Add a unique idea to the conversation.
    - Don't be afraid to disagree or share a contrasting experience. That's where learning happens.
- If you are taking a hybrid format of this course, have a student take notes about what of your conversation you want to make sure to mention during the larger classroom discussion.

Discussion Questions

Have someone take notes about what of your conversation you want to make sure to mention during the larger classroom discussion.

1. **Take-Home Points.** What is the most important take-home point that you learned from this module?

2. **Examples.** Consider our polarized news and political landscape. How have you seen some of the topics addressed in this module play out in **real life**? What has this module made you **think** and **feel** about some of these issues or examples?

3. **Difficult Conversations.** Watch the video about Why Facts Aren't Always Enough to Change Someone's Mind. How do **beliefs**, **trusted sources**, and **values** relate to having **difficult conversations** with people with differing political views—people who may be relying on **different sources** of news and information? What needs to happen to **heal** some of the political divides in our country?

4. **Self-Efficacy.** How **confident** are you that you can effectively sift through information and news media to make judgments about credible sources? To what extent do you find this task or goal **overwhelming**? How, if at all, has this module and the one about social media **changed** how confident you are about your ability to navigate the media landscape?

Submission

Before the deadline, the group member who has access to the recording of your discussion should upload the video file on behalf of the group to your group's OneDrive folder. You can find a link to this OneDrive folder under the Welcome! module.

Librarian In-Class Guest Lecture (Hybrid Course Only)

See Appendix G for 2024 version of librarian guest lecture on news media, including a guided activity to prepare students for the Current Event Analysis Paper assignment (Appendices I and J).

We recommend bringing printed copies of slide 24 ("Your Turn" with instructions) so students have a hard copy to guide their work.

Ideally, this lecture occurs after they have completed (1) independent learning and (2) small-group online discussions.