

# Introduction to media literacy

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# Introduction & framing

In today's digital age, media literacy—the ability to critically evaluate and consume media—is an essential skill. This guide, designed to accompany our media literacy video, provides educators with tools and strategies to help their students apply a healthy level of skepticism to their media consumption.

At its core, media literacy is about inquiry and reflection on the information we encounter. This lesson equips students with the skills to assess the credibility, reliability, and inherent biases of information from social media and traditional news outlets. Engaging critically with information empowers informed decisions in civic engagement, personal choices, or societal issues.

By engaging with this material, students will learn what media literacy is, how media is produced, how to identify bias, key questions to ask, and the importance of a diverse media diet.

## How to use this guide

This guide is designed to enhance your students' engagement with the video. You can pause at the suggested “Stop/Do/Discuss” points to explore key concepts through discussion and reflection questions provided for each section.

Alternatively, you may prefer to show the entire video without breaks and use the discussion questions and activities at the end of this guide (“Summative Activities & Reflection”) for a comprehensive post-viewing discussion.

Choose the approach that best fits your students and classroom setting, whether it's real-time engagement or a deeper dive after the video.

[Link to video](#)

## Essential questions

1. Why should we actively question the information presented in media rather than accept it at face value?
2. What are common biases in media, and how can recognizing these biases help us become more independent thinkers?
3. Why is it important to diversify our media consumption, and how can our media consumption influence our understanding of the world?

## Big ideas

1. **Active Questioning:** Being media literate means constantly questioning the credibility, sources, and intent behind the information we consume.
2. **Bias in Media:** Recognizing that all media has some level of bias helps individuals critically evaluate the reliability of information.
3. **Diversifying Media:** Engaging with a range of reputable sources fosters a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues and reduces the risk of echo chambers.

## PART 1

# Introduction to media literacy

[Video \(00:00 - 02:55\)](#)

## Discussion questions

1. **Defining Media Categories:** How might you define the following frequently used terms when discussing media?

- Mainstream Media
- Alternative Media
- Social Media
- Digital Media

Some available definitions to draw from:

**Mainstream Media** — Pew asked Americans what they define as “MSM” and the [answers are here](#). (Broadly speaking, it’s “established journalism outlets” like ABC News, CNN, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal.)

**Alternative media** — “No one term adequately describes all of the various types of publications and sources of information that fall outside of the mainstream: independent, dissident, radical, underground, subversive, non-corporate, progressive, grassroots, activist, anarchist, small, alternative...Similarly, no one definition adequately describes all of the publications or types of publications included when one refers to the alternative press. Often, the alternative press is defined by describing what it is not: it is not mainstream or corporate-owned, for example.” ([From Laura Landon, a librarian at Mt. Allison University.](#))

**Social media** — Websites, messaging platforms, or other types of media that are used for social networking. A medium is considered social if it enables people to interact with each other. Individuals connect with each other through social networks by creating and sharing content, information, and ideas. Some of the most popular social media platforms

include Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. ([See this article from McKinsey.](#))

**Digital media** – “Any content created for digital devices, such as streaming videos, online articles, podcasts and digital photos.” ([From Hilbert College](#))

**2. The Local News Crisis:** Local media are media outlets (print, digital, or broadcast) that service a particular community. [Many journalists](#) have warned that there is a crisis of local journalism. According to the [Local News Initiative](#), of Northwestern University’s Medill Journalism School, “Residents in more than half of U.S. counties have no, or very limited, access to a reliable local news source.” Newspapers are closing at a staggering rate of more than two publications per week.

- Do you believe there is a crisis of local journalism in the country?
- If so, why is that a problem?

**3. How America Gets News:** Discuss with your students how they think many Americans get their news.

- Provide choices from this recent (2023) [Pew survey](#): digital devices, TV, radio, print publications, etc.
- Have students further break down their answers by considering: Age, Gender, Race, Education.
- Discuss some key takeaways from the Pew Research chart:

	Television	Radio	Print publications	Digital devices
Total	62%	52%	37%	86%
Men	61%	51%	35%	86%
Women	65%	53%	38%	86%
Ages 18-29	41%	37%	24%	89%
30-49	53%	52%	29%	90%
50-64	72%	62%	39%	86%
65+	85%	52%	55%	77%
White	62%	54%	38%	86%
Black	76%	54%	39%	80%
Hispanic	62%	48%	32%	87%
Asian*	52%	42%	32%	93%
High school or less	67%	53%	37%	77%
Some college	63%	51%	35%	89%
College+	57%	51%	37%	93%
Lower income	61%	48%	34%	80%
Middle income	64%	53%	37%	88%
Upper income	60%	52%	38%	92%
Rep/Lean Rep	63%	54%	35%	85%
Dem/Lean Dem	63%	50%	38%	87%

\*Estimates for Asian adults are representative of English speakers only.  
 Note: White, Black and Asian adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic; Hispanic adults are of any race.  
 Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Sept. 25-Oct. 1, 2023.

- i. Young people get their news from TV (18-29) far less than people 30+.
  - ii. The biggest consumers of print publications for news are those ages 65+.
  - iii. Black adults are the biggest consumers of TV News.
- Why do you think there are differences in news consumption based on age, race, or education?
- These results are based only on adult (18+ years old) responses. How do you think current high school students' responses would compare?
- Is this trend concerning? If so, why? If not, why not?

## PART 2

# How media production works

[Video \(02:56 - 05:17\)](#)

## Discussion questions

1. **Corporate Sponsorship & Bias:** Semafor — a new journalism venture founded by Ben Smith, a former New York Times columnist and former Editor-in-Chief of BuzzFeed News — sparked controversy by launching a climate change newsletter [sponsored by Chevron](#). How might the economic incentives involved affect the newsletter's ability to critically address the fossil fuel industry and climate change, considering that a major industry player is a sponsor?
2. **Industry Influence in Media:** Can you think of any other major industries that have a significant interest in how stories are presented? Divide the class into four industry media committees. Each is assigned an industry (e.g., soda manufacturing industry; cigarette manufacturers; health insurance; oil producers). Each group develops a video commercial for their industry about why they are so beneficial to society as a whole.

After reviewing each video, the class discusses which elements of the commercial were factually incorrect, biased, or ignored key facts in order to serve the producer's purpose.

3. **Algorithms & News Shaping:** Algorithms determine which stories appear, and in what order, on various search engines and social media platforms. These platforms are crucial for media companies, as a significant portion of their traffic comes from user searches. Media outlets often try to optimize their content for these algorithms by employing various techniques, such as being the first to report or publishing stories early as they develop. They also craft headlines with Search Engine Optimization (SEO) in mind or use eye-catching language ("clickbait").
  - Watch [this clip \[8:04-10:09\]](#) from an interview with Kyle Chayka, author of "Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture," discussing the difference between curation and algorithmic recommendation.

- How might the pursuit of clicks, views, and advertising revenue influence the way news stories are crafted and presented?
- What could be the negative impacts of these practices on public discourse?

**4. Social Media & Conspiracies:** Watch [this video from the BBC](#) about psychological research on how conspiracy theories spread on social media.

- How do social media algorithms contribute to the spread of conspiracy theories?
- Based on this research, what strategies can we use to protect ourselves from false information and conspiracy theories?



## PART 3

# Key biases within media

Video (05:18 - 10:02)

## Discussion questions

1. **The Power of Headlines:** Compare stories on the same issue with headlines that vary in their tone—negative, neutral, and positive.

- Examples:

- i. Caitlin Clark:

- 1. [Nancy Lieberman gets hot about Chennedy Carter: 'If I were Caitlin Clark, I would've punched her in the face'](#)
    - 2. [Phoenix Mercury legend Nancy Lieberman: Players 'need to thank' Caitlin Clark](#)

- ii. Bird Flu

- 1. [We're Facing a Potential Bird Flu Catastrophe](#)
    - 2. [A Third Person in the U.S. Has Bird Flu. This Time, It's Different](#)

- iii. Student Loan Forgiveness:

- 1. [The Student Loan Forgiveness Bribe EXPLAINED](#)
    - 2. [Forgiveness Isn't 'Free'](#)
    - 3. [A looming deadline for student loan forgiveness](#)

- Why do you think negative stories are more likely to be shared than positive ones?
- Why might news outlets be incentivized to write headlines that elicit negative emotional responses (fear, anger, disgust) rather than positive ones (joy, hope, safety)?

2. **Social Media & Selection Bias:** X (formerly Twitter) is [not representative](#) of the general population, though it is often conflated with it in traditional media. Reporters will sometimes turn to social media platforms like X to get a pulse of the people. (Examples: [SourceBottle](#), [Peerless Money](#), [Digiday](#), [CNET](#))

- In what ways might it be problematic for reporters to source from X?
- How might this fall into the issue of selection bias?

**3. Storytelling vs. Statistics:** In 2012, a former Hillary Clinton staffer penned a [cover article for The Atlantic](#) about how her busy career proved that it was impossible for a modern woman to have a busy, fulfilling career and a healthy marriage and family. This article spawned dozens of heated responses for years across media outlets worldwide ([Washington Post](#)—2012, [Washington Post](#)—2015, [The Guardian](#), [The Atlantic](#), [The Atlantic](#), [ABC News](#), [Inside Story](#), [MIC](#)).

- Can you think of an example of a story that only told one person's experience? How did it make you feel about the topic? How did it shape your opinion of the topic?
- Why do you think detailed stories are more “sticky” and enduring than statistics and informational articles? How do you think the media should balance the power of storytelling with big-picture thinking and reporting?

## PART 4

# MEDIA Diet framework

[Video \(10:03 - 13:05\)](#)

## Discussion questions

1. **Bias vs. Reliability:** Introduce students to websites that evaluate the bias and reliability of news outlets, such as [AllSides](#), [Ad Fontes Media](#), [GroundNews](#). Highlight how these sites provide both bias scores and reliability or factuality scores. Present the following quote from writer, historian, and activist Rebecca Solnit: “The truth is not some compromise halfway between the truth and the lie, the fact and the delusion, the scientists and the propagandists.”
  - Why is it important to consider both the bias and the reliability of media outlets when diversifying our media diet?
  - What impact might focusing exclusively on either bias or reliability have on one’s perceptions?
2. **Challenging Beliefs:** How might exposure to diverse media sources and viewpoints challenge our existing beliefs or assumptions? In what ways can discomfort or cognitive dissonance be valuable in the learning process?
3. **Breaking Echo Chambers:** Discuss the potential societal effects of individuals and communities operating within echo chambers or consuming a narrow media diet. How might adopting a more diverse and critical approach to media consumption enhance civic discourse and decision-making?

# Summative activities & reflection

## Review questions

1. What is media literacy?
  - The ability to read and write.
  - **The ability to analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication.**
  - The ability to create media content.
  - The ability to speak eloquently and persuasively about issues in the media.
2. What are three main factors that influence media production represented in the acronym EVA?
  - **Economics, Values, Algorithms**
  - Entertainment, Verification, Accuracy
  - Evidence, Views, Algorithms
  - Economics, Views, Accuracy
3. True or False: Media bias can be completely eliminated.
  - True
  - **False**
4. What does “framing bias” refer to?
  - **The way information is packaged and presented.**
  - The omission of key information.
  - The prioritization of negative stories.
  - Highlighting only one person’s story.
5. What is the effect of selection bias?
  - It ensures all stories are covered equally.
  - **It influences which stories media outlets choose to cover or emphasize.**
  - It reduces media bias.
  - It promotes only positive stories.

6. True or False: Anecdotal fallacy bias provides an accurate representation of reality.
- True
  - **False**
7. What does the MEDIA acronym stand for?
- **Multiple Perspectives, Examine Evidence, Detect Loaded Language, Investigate the Source and Intent, Ask What's Missing**
  - Media Evaluation, Data Analysis, Investigative Reporting, Accurate Reporting
  - Multiple Evidence, Data Examination, Investigate Authority, Analyze Sources
  - Media Exploration, Data Integration, Analyze Evidence, Investigate Sources
8. What is the purpose of diversifying your media diet?
- To consume more information.
  - To follow only one media outlet.
  - To find multiple sources of information that support your beliefs.
  - **To develop a more holistic view by encountering diverse perspectives.**

## Learning activities

### 1. Writing A School News Report (60 minutes)

- Objective: To apply media literacy principles in researching and writing a news report.
- Materials: MEDIA Diet framework, research materials for a school-related issue, computer access.
- Instructions:
  - Have students research and write a report on a school-related issue (e.g., a school policy, extracurricular activities, arts and music in the curriculum, school meals), using the MEDIA Diet framework to guide their research and writing.
  - Seek out multiple sources, collect credible evidence, and avoid using loaded language.
  - Swap articles and check each other's work, giving feedback based on the MEDIA Diet framework.
  - Share reflections on the processes of writing and reviewing articles.
- Check for understanding: How did using the MEDIA Diet framework help in writing a balanced and credible news report?

### 2. Interview A Journalist (60 minutes)

- Objective: To gain firsthand insights into the ethical considerations and challenges media professionals face in addressing bias.
- Materials: Interview questions, reflection paper guidelines.
- Instructions:
  - Preparation: Arrange for a journalist or media professional (a local journalist or someone from the school newspaper) to visit the class or conduct a virtual interview.

- Question Development: Have students develop a list of questions focusing on ethical practices, the impact of EVA (economics, values, and algorithms on content), challenges in maintaining objectivity, and strategies for addressing media bias.
  - Interview: Conduct the interviews in a panel format, allowing students to ask their questions and take notes.
  - Reflection Paper: Ask students to write a reflection paper on what they learned from the interviews and how it changed their understanding of media literacy.
  - Class Discussion: Conclude with a class discussion on the key takeaways from the interviews and their implications for media literacy.
- Check for understanding: What were the most surprising insights you gained from the interviews, and how have they impacted your view of media ethics and the role of bias in journalism?

### **3. Media Literacy PSA (60 minutes)**

- Objective: To creatively express and communicate media literacy concepts through various mediums.
- Materials: Art supplies, Digital tools for creating multimedia content
- Instructions: Begin by introducing the project and its goals, explaining the idea of multi-modal PSAs and interactive exhibits. Divide students into groups, each exploring a different media literacy topic (e.g., EVA, media bias, source evaluation). Groups will research, plan, and create a PSA or exhibit using visuals, audio, and interactive features. Allow time and resources for creation, then hold a showcase for presentations. Conclude with a feedback session for reflection and peer review.
- Check for understanding: How did creating a multi-modal PSA or exhibit enhance your understanding of media literacy concepts, and what did you learn from viewing others' projects?

## Reflection questions

1. **Shifting Perceptions:** How has learning about media production and media biases influenced the way I perceive news and information?
2. **Applying Media Literacy:** How can I apply media literacy skills to navigate the complex media landscape more effectively?
3. **Building an Informed Society:** In what ways can I contribute to a more informed society by using media literacy principles?
4. **Media Literacy in Action:** How might my understanding of media literacy impact my decisions and actions in the future?



5. **Diversifying Media Consumption:** What steps can I take to ensure that I am consuming a diverse range of media sources?
6. **Empowering Critical Thinkers:** How can I use the tools and frameworks learned in this lesson to help others become more informed and critical media consumers?
7. **Navigating Conversations:** How might your new understanding of media literacy affect how you engage in discussions with others about news and current events?

## Further learning resources

1. [The National Association for Media Literacy Education \(NAMLE\)](#)
2. [Project Look Sharp](#)
3. [Interactive Media Bias Chart](#) (Ad Fontes Media)
4. [Ground News Rating System](#)