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Recognizing Bias in Social Media News: Resources for Teaching Media Literacy in Special Education

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Recognizing Bias in Social Media News

Resources for Teaching Media Literacy in Special Education

By Sarah K. Myers and Melinda Burchard

Abstract

With the empowerment of social media news literacy, students in special education can interact with their world with deeper competencies of critical thinking skills and civic engagement. In exploring personal and news biases, online users will have the tools to effectively grapple with the content found in their newsfeeds.

The included lesson uses current social media news stories. Students will be able to identify vocabulary communicating possible bias, including absolute words or phrases, words or phrases communicating degree, and words or phrases that are positively or negatively charged.

Keywords: Media Literacy, Autism, Intellectual Disability, Bias



Cover art by Karen Ennis @bleedingheartworkshop

Media Literacy Resources for Teaching Special Education

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About Media Literacy Resources for Teaching Special Education

This publication is a collaborative product of the **Partnership for Media Literacy for Exceptional Populations**. This project is specifically about supporting the teaching of media literacy skills to teens or adults with autism or intellectual disabilities. Each issue focuses upon a specific narrow knowledge or skill that may be particularly challenging for individuals with common characteristics of those disabilities. Though created for a specific population and age range, each may be refined to work for individual needs or for learners with other disabilities.

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Recognizing Bias in Social Media News

By Sarah K. Myers

For Millennials and Generation Z, checking social media is likely a frequent, if not hourly, part of the day. The convenience of connecting on social platforms includes more than just personal celebrations, successes, difficulties, and sorrows told through words, photos, or videos. It is a hub for sharing memes, jokes, quotes, and news. Exchanging, distributing, and reading news information is a significant part of the experience. An area of concern for consumers of social media information is that nearly half of all adults under age 30 primarily get their news from social media (Mitchell, Jurkowitz, Oliphant, & Shearer, 2020). Alarming, engagement with disinformation, falsehoods, and deceptive articles on Facebook is up 102% since 2016 (Kornbluh, Goldstein, & Weiner, 2020). The freedom of speech allows for the free exchange of information and ideas without fact checking and there are few legal limitations about what cannot be shared. This leaves special populations vulnerable to skewed, biased, and potentially dangerous or conspiracy news information. Identifying bias is one way to be a better news consumer on social media. With fake bots and misinformation campaigns, it is more important than ever to be attentive when reading the headlines and choosing whether to like or share a post. There are two necessary areas which need exploration: identifying actual bias in the news and how personal biases affect our perception of the news.

There are two major types of journalism: news journalism and opinion journalism. Many reputable news agencies employ journalists in both areas, though it may not be obvious on social media which type is being shared. Opinion journalism is meant to spark conversation through editorials, commentaries, and reviews. News journalism is informative. For trustworthy news sources, the reporters follow the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics and their newsroom likely has their own, publically available standards. Briefly, the code of ethics

subscribes to four principles: seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, be accountable and transparent (Society of Professional Journalist, 2014). There are hundreds of worthwhile news agencies who share news online, but many disreputable websites have found social media an easy place to get traction. These sources knowingly manipulate content by publishing false content, misrepresenting information, allowing errors to go uncorrected, using deceptive headlines, and withholding names of funders (Newsguard, n.d.).

Our minds are trained to process information so rapidly that anyone can easily fall victim to cognitive biases, or glitches in how we perceive and interpret information (Rosenbaum & Bonnet, 2019). Whether it is seeking out information we already believe (confirmation bias) or believing the reliability of the first information read on a topic (anchoring bias), these biases must be acknowledged when scrolling through social media newsfeeds. Many users surround themselves with likeminded individuals, which leaves readers in an echo chamber with opinions and worldviews like their own. Distinguishing bias starts with the headline. Inward reflection to acknowledge personal biases paired with thorough evaluation of the new source creates the best strategy for effectively recognizing bias in social media news.

In a classroom setting, when high schoolers with learning disabilities were taught to critically examine the news on social media, one special education teacher recorded that students "grasped onto the ideas and concepts..., especially when provided with time to analyze the information" (Siegel, 2017, p. 95). This success indicates the ways that perspective and bias can be identified through dissection and critical thinking. Though students were successful with the evaluation of content, in practice, students struggled to "separate their personal political feelings....[and] preconceived notations" (Siegel, 2017, p. 95). This cognitive bias is not limited to this example, but it is a continued difficulty that many find challenging to overcome.

Identifying bias in social media news is a valuable tool for any online reader and consumer of information, and it is especially worthwhile for students and adults with disabilities. This special population wants to engage in the five components of media literacy, access, analyze, create, reflect, and action (Center for Media Literacy, n.d.), along with their friends, family, and online acquaintances. Social media is an inclusive platform, open to all online users. With the empowerment of social media news literacy, users can interact with their world with deeper competencies of critical thinking skills and civic engagement (Friesem, 2017, p. 7). In exploring personal and news biases, online users will identify the continuum of ideologies and have the tools to effectively grapple with the content found in their newsfeeds.

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Lesson Outline

By Melinda Burchard

Narrow Skill Focus of this Lesson	Identifying bias in social media news
Requires these Skills or Background Knowledge	Pre-requisite skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to read varied vocabulary common to social media news, ranging from 4th to 7th grade reading level • Ability to look up definitions of unfamiliar vocabulary • Ability to compare and contrast meanings of words by degree of meaning
Lesson Objective	Using current social media news stories, students will be able to identify vocabulary communicating possible bias, including absolute words or phrases, words or phrases communicating degree, and words or phrases that are positively or negatively charged.
Helpful Resources	All Sides Media Bias chart found at https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-ratings rates media sources by trends in news coverage.
Materials Needed	A document camera or similar projection equipment that can project an article from print or from a social media source. Three colors of highlighters (two each of yellow, orange and green) Three colors of index cards (matching highlighters, yellow, orange, & green) Two social media news stories about the same current event from different sources with opposite obvious biased perspectives.
Pre-Instruction	Advanced preparation: In advance, find two separate articles about the same current event. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both should be from social media news sources. • The first should communicate an obviously negative bias in reporting the event. • The second should communicate an obviously positive bias in reporting the event. Prepare three sets of index cards: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On yellow index cards, write one word on each card from a list of “absolute” or “qualifying” words or phrases that communicate amount or volume or quantity (such as: always, all, every, everyone, never, none, nobody, most, many, several, some, few, etc.). Ideally include words that students will later find in the two articles. • On orange index cards, write one word on each card from pairs of adjectives or adverbs communicating degree (ie. damaging versus devastating, or alone versus isolated, etc.). Ideally include words that students will later find in the two articles. <i>Also identify one or two example sentences from each article that contain an adjective or adverb communicating DEGREE (ie. damaging or devastating).</i> • On green index cards, write one noun or phrase on each card, each communicating a perception of value. These should be clearly charged meaning specific to one context that fits the articles to be used later. For

	<p>example, value nouns for “protestor” could include: citizen, patriot, peaceful protestor, or rioter, looter, thug, violent protestor. Ideally, include words or phrases that students will later find in the two articles.</p> <p>To start the lesson, first, Gain Attention: Ask a few hand raising response questions such as who watched a specific school ballgame or recently aired TV show? If most watched a particular event or show, respond by saying, “Oh, everybody is a football fan!” or “It seems everyone enjoys country music!”</p> <p>Activate prior knowledge: Repeat how many students responded that they watched the event/show. Repeat what you said. Ask, “Does my response match our facts?” Prompt for observations of use of “everybody” or “everyone”. Prompt for observations that “watching” doesn’t mean liking that sport, or that type of music or show. Ask, “If MOST of us watched the game, and I report that ALL of us like football, what did I just do?” Prompt for responses that mean exaggeration, interpreting one behavior as another, etc.</p> <p>Build Expectancy: Today, we’re going to learn about finding bias in news we find on our social media.</p>
<p>Instruction</p>	<p><i>This lesson can occur across four days, or more, as appropriate for your specific student audience.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Quantity vocabulary:</p> <p>Directions: “Let’s work first with our set of yellow cards. On these cards I have written words or phrases that talk about amount. As a group we are going to sort these as if our table is a number line. We’ll put the cards that mean the “most” on your right side of the table, and the cards that mean the “least” on your left side of the table. In the middle we can sort of put them in order.”</p> <p>Model: select two cards, maybe “everybody” and “nobody”, showing where to place them as you verbalize reasoning.</p> <p>Group Collaborate: Have students work together to sort the remaining words.</p> <p>Apply to articles: Have students work in two smaller groups. Each group needs one yellow highlighter and ONE of the two articles printed. Students can reference the index cards to collaborate in finding and highlighting words in their article that communicate quantity or amount. Have students list some of the words they found.</p> <p><i>Take a digital photo of your word “number line” before you clear the table, in case students want to reference that later.</i></p>

Degree vocabulary:

Review that adjectives describe nouns (people places and things), and adverbs can describe verbs (or actions).

Show the illustration on the cover of this article of the boy looking at a bug.

Ask students to share adjectives to describe that bug. Responses could include big, huge, gigantic, etc. List several responses that all meant “big”.

Discuss how their words meant varying degrees of “big”.

Directions:

“Let’s work first with our set of orange cards. These are adjectives or adverbs. In this pile are pairs that mean close to the same thing, just like “big” and “gigantic” sort of mean the same thing but to varying degrees.”

Model from a recent weather event, finding an example pair such as “damaging” and “devastating”. Model looking up the specific meaning of one, then placing the pair together on the table.

Continue directions: “See if you can find pairs that mean close to the same thing even if one means something more powerful than the other. It’s OK to use the dictionary if you don’t remember what a word means.”

Prompt for correct pairs, and for using the dictionary to find definitions.

Discuss the pairs and the differences in meanings.

Apply to articles: Project the sentences identified in advance, one or two from each of the articles. Prompt students to identify the adjective or adverb. Highlight those words in the printed articles in orange. Prompt students to explain how that word communicates a degree.

Take a digital photo of your word pairs before you clear the table, in case students want to reference that later.

Value vocabulary:

Explain: “Sometimes the words I choose communicate my opinion or my value for something or someone. Give examples nouns that could communicate value for little children such as, “cutie”, “rascal”, “brat”, “angel”, etc.

Prompt students to identify one example that sounded negative and one that sounded positive.

Directions:

“Let’s work with our green set of cards. Let’s work as a group to sort these into nouns that sound negative and nouns that sound positive.”

Model with one pair such as “citizen” and “looter”.

Prompt for sorting and for looking up definitions as needed.

Apply to articles:

Have students work in two smaller groups. Each group needs one green highlighter and ONE of the two articles printed. Students can reference the index cards to collaborate in finding and highlighting nouns in their article that

	<p>communicate positive or negative value. Have each group try to find two to four value-charged nouns. Have students list some of the nouns they found.</p> <p><i>Take a digital photo of your word sort before you clear the table, in case students want to reference that later.</i></p> <p>Possible Extension: Repeat value charged words activity with verbs.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Interpreting Bias</p> <p>Say, “Most news we find on social media is written from one person’s perspective. Maybe the writer likes or doesn’t like a certain person or a certain cause. We looked at words that help us understand meaning of <i>how much, to what degree or how someone values</i> someone or something. We highlighted quantity words yellow, degree words orange, and value words green. Let’s look again at each article one at a time and see what those highlighted words reveal.”</p> <p>Project one highlighted article at a time. Discuss how students interpret writer perspectives. Use the words bias and perspective as you interact in that discussion.</p>
Post-Instruction	<p>Reinforce big ideas: Prompt each student to summarize big ideas, hopefully similar to these:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authors write from their perspective, sometimes with bias. • We can use clue words to find bias. • Quantity words might signal exaggeration. • Degree words can communicate interpreted power. • Choice of nouns can signal bias for or against a person or issue. • We can interpret bias in what we read on social media.
Assessment	<p>Caption writing: Have each student write a caption to summarize the bias of each article.</p> <p>Delayed assessment: A few days later, present each student with a short news story from a clearly biased social media source. Ask students to circle words that could signal bias, then tell the class about the bias they found.</p>