"(Mis)Information Creation as a Process":
A Method for Teaching Critical Media Literacy Designed to Work with Students of All Political Persuasions

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Land Acknowledgement

- I would like to acknowledge with respect the Onondaga Nation, firekeepers of the Haudenosaunee, the indigenous peoples on whose ancestral lands Syracuse University now stands.

- I also wish to acknowledge with respect the Seminole and Miccosukee Nations of Florida, on whose land and water New College of Florida—the institution that is the subject of this presentation—currently occupies.

- And I wish to acknowledge the tribal Nations of the State of Washington, on whose land and water this conference was originally intended to gather, as well as all other tribal nations from whose land we each gather remotely for this virtual conference.

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About Me

- Social Science Librarian at Syracuse University

- Previously Social Sciences Librarian at New College of Florida

- Prior experience teaching Political Science at the community-college level for six years

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The Problem:

Teaching Media Literacy in a Politically Polarized Environment

- Dangers for democracy of the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation
- Authority of established institutions and sources of expertise is under intense scrutiny
  - This is not necessarily negative
  - It just generates social instability
- Imperative that the public be able to critically consume information from the news media, social media, and other sources
- Naming and shaming sources frequently generates pushback from audiences

The Approach:

Applying the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy* Frame "Information Creation as a Process"

- "The unique capabilities and constraints of each creation process as well as the specific information need determine how the product is used."
- "Elements that affect or reflect on the creation, such as a pre- or post-publication editing or reviewing process, may be indicators of quality."
- "Recognizing the nature of information creation, experts look to the underlying processes of creation as well as the final product to critically evaluate the usefulness of the information."

"Information Creation as a Process". ACRL (2015). *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.*

Inducing Critical Media Literacy by Exploring Two Processes in Combination

The Process of News and Information Production

- How does the news get from observations in the field to what is printed or broadcast?

- What people and motivations shape the transformation of raw field observations to the finished product?

The Process of News and Information Consumption

- What does current cognitive and social psychological research show us about how we evaluate the information we consume and whether we will believe it?

Idea into Action:
January Term Independent Study Projects at New College of Florida

- **New College of Florida**
  - Public liberal arts college in Sarasota, Florida
  - Credit-bearing Independent Study Projects (ISPs) during a January Term
    - ISPs can be conducted in a group setting, led by an instructor

E. Nunally (2016). CC 4.0: BY SA

Jane Bancroft Cook Library at New College of Florida and University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee

Course Design

- Two modules
  - The process of news production
  - The psychological process of news consumption

- Content delivery
  - Readings
  - Guest Speakers
  - Field Trip

- Assessment
  - End-of-module short essays
  - End-of-course reflection paper
  - Final project
    - Each student examined an issue of their choice related to misinformation and disinformation in the news or on social media
    - Format: Choice of a media product or an independent study syllabus
    - Students met with Educational Technology Services department to discuss creation of media product or Canvas course shell

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Course Outline

Topics

- Comparative media landscapes and procedures

- Distilling interviews into news stories

- Role of news media in democracy

- Current cognitive and social psychological research on human biases

- Search engine algorithmic biases

- Automated and curated fact-checking

- Information wellness

Guest Speakers

- Alumna who ran for political office

- Alumna who was a reporter at a local newspaper

- Political Science professor

- Cognitive and Social Psychology professor

- Librarians

Field Trip

- Field trip to local ABC affiliate to watch taping of 7pm newscast

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Impactful Class Sessions

Communications and Marketing Coverage of Guest Speakers

- Class session with two alumnae guest speakers
  - A former candidate for local office
  - A former newspaper reporter who had interviewed the aforementioned alumna
- Discussion provided insight into the journalistic process from the perspectives of a politician and a print journalist
  - Included a debriefing about the interview the two guest speakers conducted together
- *New College* News article about the session subsequent class discussion
  - Communications and Marketing published a story about the session in *New College News*
  - Students noted with much surprise how little of the previous class session's content the Communications and Marketing article covered and by what content they chose to cover
  - Led to a discussion about the purpose of a publication and its effects on editorial decisions

ABC 7 Sarasota Field Trip

- Students traveled to the local ABC affiliate in Sarasota to view the taping of the 7pm local newscast
  - Producer conducted a tour of the newsroom, studio, and control room
  - Students watched the broadcast in the control room
- Students noted the effect of time limitations on scope of broadcast content and the pace of its delivery
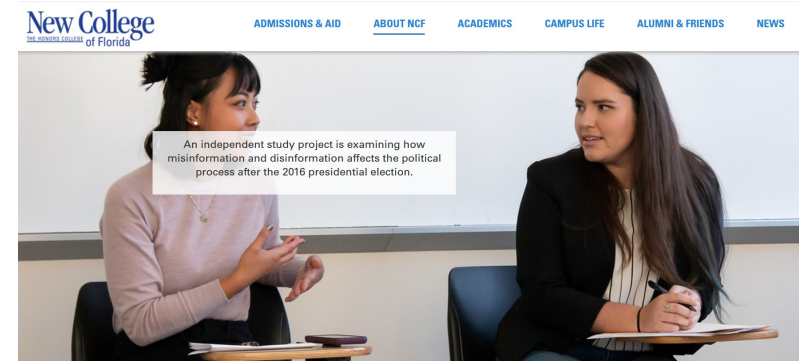
L. Lebron (2019). New College of Florida Communications and Marketing.

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Student Projects and Assessment Results

Project Examples

- Website about the persistence of debunked news, focusing on the Kitty Genevese "bystander effect" and the "Central Park Five"

- Magazine about Russian disinformation campaigns in Western Europe

- Website comparing how California's and Florida's environmental policies and climate change denial rhetoric differ

- Independent study syllabus on the invocation of violent video games after mass shootings to distract from conversations about gun control

- Website about the decades-long disinformation campaign by the tobacco industry

- Political cartoons comparing efforts to shape media narratives in the 1840 and 1992 presidential campaigns

Student Short Essays and Reflection Paper

- Students expressed a profound reorientation in their thinking about the news from their observations on the impact of editorial decisions on what information to include or exclude from the news on the public's perception of events

- Students also indicated increased awareness of how to detect bias in the information that they consume and in their own processing of that information

- Students demonstrated a stronger sense of agency and resolve to scrutinize news and social media in the future and to educate others

- Students indicated greater comfort and proficiency in using media technology

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Information Wellness

- Evident toward the end of the course that the subject matter was having a sobering impact on students
- Course subject matter induced skepticism, but also cynicism
  - Potential for negative effects on student mental health
  - Also potential to negate the benefits of and capacity for informed civic engagement
- Change in schedule to have a counselor from New College's Counseling and Wellness Center visit the final regular class session
  - Discussion of healthy information consumption habits and general healthy lifestyle habits

The Results:

Lessons Learned and Future Directions

- Impact on Students
  - Course design was effective at improving media literacy while avoiding pushback
  - Integration of healthy information consumption is essential to teaching critical information literacy
- Benefits of Guest Speakers and Field Trip
  - Enhanced content by adding improved expertise
  - Strengthened student comprehension of course concepts through empathetic storytelling
  - Built relationships with others on campus and with the members of the outside community

- Intended revisions to curriculum if opportunity to teach course again arises
  - Cover healthy information consumption first to prepare students for course content
  - Include field trips to print and radio news outlets
  - Incorporate a discussion of the tools and methods of digital diplomatics to verify authenticity
  - Include guest speaker from Intelligence Community, a profession that has been detecting (and creating) misinformation and disinformation for centuries

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Thank you.

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