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## Countering Online Misinformation in the First-Year Composition Classroom

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COUNTERING ONLINE MISINFORMATION  
IN THE FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of English  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

By  
Samantha Sparrow Williams

August 2021

COUNTERING ONLINE MISINFORMATION  
IN THE FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Date Recommended: July 16 2021  
Jane Fife  
Jane Fife, Director of Thesis

Ted Hovet  
Ted Hovet

Peggy Otto  
Peggy Otto



\_\_\_\_\_  
Associate Provost for Research and Graduate Education

To Kylie, who showed me I could, and  
to Jon, who made it possible.

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Directed by: Jane Fife, Ted Hovet, and Peggy Otto

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

This thesis encourages the intentional and explicit integration of the best practices in media literacy education within the first-year composition classroom. The nature of FYC, which incorporates such content as research skills and source evaluation, provides an ideal opportunity to address the online misinformation and disinformation that have resulted in growing political polarization and cynicism. Recent findings suggest that these trends can be countered with the teaching of practices like lateral reading to verify a source's veracity. After first demonstrating the challenges that university freshmen may bring with them to campus, this project makes suggestions for simple, consistent practices that instructors of FYC can incorporate into existing courses to support the media literacy of the next generation of online citizens.

## **Introduction**

Although civic discourse is increasingly taking place online, Americans seem to distrust what they see there, especially on social media platforms, more often than not. A 2020 Pew Research Center survey reports that 82% of respondents had concerns about “the impact made-up news could have on the election,” although those from each major party feared that the “made-up news would be targeted at members of their own party rather than the other party” (Mitchell et al.). It was also found that party plays a large role in the way people determine what is true and what is not; sometimes, news that respondents felt was “made-up” was actually only “real, fact-based news that did not fit into their perceptions of what is true.” Generally speaking, Americans seem at a loss to decide who and what should be trusted to tell the truth.

Both misinformation (information that is wrong without the intention to deceive) and disinformation (wrong information that is intentionally wrong or misleading) feed the partisan divide, but they have also, in the past year, interfered with public health information. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, misinformation convinced many that the virus was created intentionally in a lab or that masks did nothing to prevent the spread (Mitchell et al.). As vaccines are developed, unnecessary deaths could continue due to unfounded fears.

These types of serious consequences have sparked concern regarding how quickly misinformation is spread and how poorly many people navigated it. These trends have serious, far-reaching consequences and “[contribute] to the creation of an electorate that is susceptible to consuming and disseminating disinformation [and] misinformation” (Kavanaugh and Rich xiv). While the design of better algorithms, the publication of



guidance in how to avoid “fake news” for the general public, and the independent fact-checking of posts on social media sites is certainly needed, educators have a significant role in combating misinformation. Because online resources, including social media, are relied upon more often to form educated decisions on public policy, there has also been a growing need for better navigation of those resources. The personal responsibility of users to recognize and verify trustworthy sources is not only an important factor but one that can be addressed immediately. The push for media literacy education has grown significantly in recent years, with programs and organizations forming to support teachers in all grades. While providing media literacy education to K-12 schools is certainly vital, and though progress continues to be made through other channels, first-year writing courses also have a duty to deliver practical media literacy education.

In many ways, first-year composition already contributes to media literacy education, such as building research and source evaluation skills. But the tidal wave of misinformation and the doubt and confusion caused by it calls for increased and updated strategies, strategies that first-year composition courses are ideally situated to provide. Motivated researchers have found that "there is a clear need for students to receive targeted support in higher education, which should be urgently addressed" because “the ability to use online resources and critical online reasoning in a competent manner constitute not only an important basis for academic success but also for lifelong learning and for participation in society as an informed citizen” (Nagel et al.) For this reason, researchers like Mike Caulfield, director of blended and networked learning at Washington State University, assert that colleges should “put digital literacy at the core

of the curriculum” rather than merely incorporating it (Caulfield, “Can Higher Education Save The Web?”). After all, he says, instructors

“spend countless hours teaching our students to navigate the world of research and published books. And yet we graduate them into a world where the vast majority of the information they consume professionally and personally will come through the Internet” (“Can Higher Education Save The Web?”).

Students live much of their lives online already. Much of the landscape is familiar to them because they occupy it every day. But the navigation of that landscape doesn’t come naturally. Part of what makes media literacy challenging is that it is new, both the development of virtual technology itself and the incorporation of that technology into education. The Internet has created a new dimension of human interaction, an uncharted, digital territory to which the humanities are still adapting. While there is always new pedagogical research in any field, media literacy studies a constantly changing culture and has very little history. Without established practices to build from, and with a growing need for stronger media literacy skills, every small addition helps. In order to strengthen those skills, educators should consistently incorporate it in the course as regularly as possible.

This thesis considers the urgent need for media literacy support in the face of common challenges faced by instructors, such as limited time or autonomy in course objectives, that prevent the option of redesigning a first-year composition course to make room for media literacy education. After reviewing the consequences of the spread of misinformation and disinformation, I discuss how media literacy is included in the education standards in middle and high school, especially the limitations presented in

implementing explicit instruction regarding misinformation, and how that frames media literacy for college freshman. Following this, I turn to the best practices in media literacy and compare these practices and aims to the work typically done in first-year composition. In the final section, I suggest simple strategies and approaches that FYC teachers can utilize to bring media literacy into their own courses.

## **Trends in Misinformation and False News**

While it appears that during these recent years, trust in traditional media outlets has eroded and there has been confusion about what information can be trusted, it is also because the way we interact with information has changed in a fundamental way. Historically, changes in how news is delivered to the public tend to accompany a rise in distrust of the media—such as the “yellow journalism” of the 1890s—but these changes are now more pronounced than ever before, with a growing number of citizens perceiving mainstream or traditional media outlets to be part of a corrupt and opaque system (Kavanaugh and Rich 71). It is unclear if the media coverage itself is the source of this disbelief or simply the lack of understanding or interest in the data itself. While traditional media sources publish in greater quantities and with less distinction between fact and opinion, social media faces its own challenges. Websites like Twitter and Facebook, which rely heavily on algorithms to determine what users see, have become commonly used sources for finding the latest headlines; what’s worse, a Pew Research Center study found that those who use social media to access news were found to be “less knowledgeable” than those who preferred other, more traditional sources (Mitchell et al.).

Clearly, sensationalized news coverage is just one contributing factor. With the decrease in formats like newspaper, where space was limited and oversight was less relaxed, in favor of online platforms, traditional methods of civic engagement changed not only how news was consumed but the content as well. Opinion-based and “soft” news stories rose as the 24-hour news cycle developed and the profitable nature of news media encouraged the practice of attracting consumers through enticing and provoking headlines, sometimes at the cost of clarity or even accuracy. The result has been a dense

volume of content that consumers are forced to navigate, which is “effectively overwhelming their cognitive capacity, and creating uncertainty and misperceptions about what is true and what is not” (Kavanaugh and Rich 29). To investigate each story or claim as it arises in a news feed seems to be a lot to ask: the intent or motivation behind a post often isn’t clear, and the producers of this information may rely upon that lack of distinction. This is what separates disinformation from misinformation: “fauxtire” websites, which claim to be satirical or humorous sites like *The Onion*, rely upon consumer confusion to veil disinformation as humor. But even poorly identified sites such as these can be considered misinformation because they can be easily confused with reality.

A particularly dangerous consequence that has arisen from the spread of disinformation is an increasing belief in conspiracy theories which can have dangerous real-world consequences. Conspiratorial beliefs are complex to confront and correct, and disinformation helps to fuel the spread of conspiracy theories and makes them more accessible to the public. The psychology behind conspiratorial thinking is not simple or straightforward but rather it is a deep-seated, “general tendency to view the world a certain way rather than any specific trait, predisposition, or set of attitudes” (Enders and Smallpage 2018). Some people are simply more likely to see patterns in random events, regardless of whether these connections are logical; those who already believe in conspiracy theories are more likely to believe more conspiracy theories, even when they conflict with each other (Enders and Smallpage 2019). To work to correct these beliefs is a major endeavor and prevention seems to be the best option, as exposure to disinformation over time, even if a person knows the information to be false, can lead

them to believe it (Hassan and Barber 8). Especially because so many conspiracy theories in America are political and ideological in nature, the problem has been exacerbated by the rise in false news (Enders and Smallpage 2019). The problems go hand in hand: those who produce content that invigorates and spreads conspiracy theories often rely on the same methods that spread other misinformation through the Internet, which offers the “illusion of explanatory depth” (Caulfield, “Don’t Go Down”). Such conspiracy groups as QAnon are fed by diets of online information, and the consequences spill out into the real world, as evidenced by the significant presence of QAnon theorists at the January 6, 2021 attack on the United States Capitol.

The interactive nature of social media websites further drives the problem of misinformation, as users are both tempted to share interesting headlines (even if they aren’t accurate) and hesitant to correct the posting of false news shared by their social circle. The impulsive sharing of stories—true or not—and the desire to be the first person to share something interesting or shocking, contributes to the spread of disinformation. It often may not be that consumers of social media do not know how to investigate a source or story but rather a lack of concern that it is important to do so. It can be an unthinking reflex, based more on emotional appeal than a conscious decision that the information is important (Caulfield and Waterman 7). When a user does see a post that contains false information, they are typically hesitant to point it out because “there is no clear standard around social prescribed verification requirements” and therefore “calling out errors people make can seem petty”—that is, no one enjoys being corrected (Caulfield and Waterman 7). The fear of confrontation leads people to remain silent rather than speak up to correct misinformation in that social atmosphere, where

people might just prefer to “un-Friend” someone they disagree with. The psychology at work is difficult to overcome: the desire to be liked by one’s community (especially in a place where there is an overlap between friends and Friends, but they certainly aren’t synonymous) and the draw of an interesting post are hard to postpone until after due research, particularly when considering the sheer number of posts a user sees in a given day. The work involved is “out of step with a web that favors speed” (Caulfield and Waterman 7).

Attempts of the social media platforms themselves to reduce the spread of misinformation (for instance, by attaching warnings to some news stories that factcheckers have determined the information is false or misleading) have had limited success. The lack of standards for these digital commons encourages the sharing of “news” in users’ feeds while simultaneously warning against the reliability of it, further adding to the confusion. Websites like Facebook attempt to flag false news to alert users to misinformation, but any false news that is missed is then perceived to be more reliable (Pennycook 4948). It has also been found that telling consumers to be doubtful of “fake” news appears to also increase their disbelief in traditional news sources as well; it seems that encouraging people to be suspicious of some sources leads them to be suspicious of them all (Clayton 1090).

Civic responsibility has placed an overwhelming demand for discipline on consumers who do not recognize facts when they see them, while they struggle to navigate the cacophony of social media and even the many legitimate news sources that allow or even encourage the distinction between fact, opinion, analysis, and conjecture to remain indistinct. While there is clearly a need for clear and effective policies from

social media companies and government regulation, educating citizens is perhaps the most useful and immediately available tool.



## University Student's Backgrounds

At the beginning of every year, students arrive on campus from every country, class, and educational background, making it challenging to predict the extent to which students are media literate when they arrive. Most of them will be familiar with the digital landscape—92% of teens report that they are online every day—but 91% of teens are “often” or “sometimes” using their phone “to pass time” when they are online, which doesn’t necessarily translate to media literacy (Lenhart 16; Anderson and Jiang).

Although the “digital natives” theory, popularized by Marc Prensky in 2001, separates “digital immigrant instructors” from their students, a “population that speaks an entirely different language” because they grew up alongside developing technology, the distinction implies that students’ youth is a sign that they are more skilled users of social media. In fact, the inclusion of technology in public school curriculum is usually limited to what is needed to succeed in the workplace rather than the technology they are already using. Students are thought to

“be well-versed in social media communication (blogs, tweets, posts, and so on) but lack the ability to draft professional documents, letters, reports, memos, emails and proficiently use spreadsheets and presentation programs. Social media competency does not translate to software and professional writing proficiency” (Crist et al.).

Both can be true: students do need professional writing skills to bring with them into the workplace. But they also need media literacy skills to incorporate with the “competency” they may already have in navigating social media. In an assessment by the Stanford History Education Group designed to assess how well students could evaluate evidence, 70% of high school students interpreted an ad as a reliable source and only 9%

of high school students recognized an article as having been provided by a source with personal motives (McGrew et al., “The Challenge That’s Bigger Than Fake News”). Regularly using the Internet doesn’t at all indicate sophistication and skill at understanding how to discern the trustworthiness of, say, online source evaluation; in fact, younger generations’ heavy use of digital resources, including social media, outside of academic work suggests it is even more important that they are taught how to use them wisely.

The social aspect of these formats and its integration with other content may even mean that their generation is more engaged because they share news stories on these platforms, commenting on them and incorporating them into their own profile pages. However, the way they consume news is different than more traditional methods: they consume news alongside other content and give it an entertainment value, making it even more difficult to learn to scrutinize the information.

While some students do receive media literacy education in middle and high school, the coverage of media literacy is not thoroughly represented in all states. The Common Core Standards, established in 2009 to provide quality, nationwide education standards and to help anticipate the basics of what students should know as they enter college or the workforce, do provide consistency to some extent, but it is up to each state to voluntarily adopt them. Although the Common Core has so far been adopted by all but nine states, each state is then free to change and update them (“About the Standards”). Some of the most important standards in English/Language Arts, such as research skills and source evaluation, overlap with media literacy skills, such as teaching students to “assess the credibility” of “print and digital sources” (“Common Core State Standards”

63). However, the Standards presents these quite narrowly: for instance, the ability to “delineate and evaluate [an author’s] argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence” implies that the student will uncover truth in a text through a deep analysis of the text itself (60).

Furthermore, adoption of the Common Core doesn’t necessarily speak to whether a state provides quality media literacy education; Florida and Texas, despite not having adopted those standards, have some of the strongest legislation supporting media literacy education (U.S Media Literacy Policy Report 8). In Florida, media literacy was first required in ELA standards, and later in all subjects (10). In Ohio, standards were expected to include the “development of skill sets that promote information, media, and technological literacy” (11). Unfortunately, according to a report by Media Literacy Now, the overall picture of media literacy in the United States is not as promising. Only fourteen states “have taken substantial legislative action” to ensure inclusion of media literacy education as of 2019 (“U.S. Media Literacy Policy Report 2020”). Ultimately, neither the adoption of Common Core Standards nor the legislation urging public schools to include media literacy seem to translate to explicit, in-depth media literacy designed to address misinformation.

However, even when media literacy is included in curriculum standards, it isn’t always clear where the responsibility for it will fall. Media literacy is taught through contributions from teachers across subjects, each incorporating media literacy skills in ways relevant to their content. School librarians also contribute significantly to media literacy as part of the information literacy education they provide to students, especially critical thinking and developing effective and ethical research methods (AASL Standards

Framework for Learners). The shared responsibility for media literacy education opens up a new problem: because teachers in different subjects as well as school librarians must all share the duties of media literacy instruction interwoven in their own lesson plans, instruction can be inconsistent. Additionally, coverage of media literacy may be shortened in order to meet the demands of state testing, to which teachers are likely to assign a greater priority, or because it is not thought of as relevant to the subject (Report of the Task Force on Critical Media Literacy 2021). One librarian laments that the limited time available with school librarians, who arguably represent the most focused media literacy instruction through their emphasis on research practices, not only fails to support habit building, but it “reinforces the perception that the research process is separate from (and simpler than) the writing process” and “that, ultimately, literacy in information is only useful if tied to the academic research paper” (Artman et al. 93). While it seems reasonable to expect media literacy instruction across subjects to ensure broad application and experience of these skills, it can also mean the quality of that instruction is difficult to organize and assess (Schilder et al. 34).

Fortunately, the push for media literacy in recent years has resulted in more support for middle and high school students. Many English/Language Arts teachers have been making an investment in media literacy in their classrooms. One teacher assigned a project in which students filmed and edited PSAs, incorporating research outside of the scholarly to match the work “more closely to their experiences, which can often feel disconnected from the world of the classroom” and bringing more engaging, relevant topics to a research project (Moore 32). In another, students blended the global reach of social media with a focus on local action by analyzing texts like Tweets and Instagram

posts and then using those strategies to “act as campaign managers and create a series of Instagram posts” (Pytash and Testa). The ingenuity of course content like this can be complex; guiding young students safely through the Web can be a precarious process. Engaging with “fake news” headlines can mean getting uncomfortably close to controversial or delicate political and social issues that public schools aren’t free to discuss, and the “emphasis educators place on knowledge and analytic reasoning in non-politically charged contexts is not misplaced, but this focus is insufficient if we are to fully prepare youth for democratic participation in an increasingly partisan age” (Kahne and Bowyer 29). There’s also the challenge of maintaining up-to-date media literacy education when the nature of the Internet is characterized by sudden and very frequent changes; legislation and regulation tend to move much more slowly (Schwartz).

Complex though it may be, students' civic engagement is taking place on social media sites like Facebook and YouTube, online platforms and meeting areas that are “reshaping...how we research public policy, communicate with our elected leaders, and organize political protests” (McGrew et al., “Can Students Evaluate” 168). If they can be given guidance on utilizing those systems in effective ways, they can serve as very powerful tools.

## **Media Literacy Research**

No small number of researchers, educators, and even social media companies and government entities have sought solutions to the plague of misinformation even the most casual user must navigate online. Media literacy has been found to be even more helpful than political knowledge in the face of misinformation, as directional motivation (that is, the desire to believe something is true because it agrees with something already believed) is a greater factor for people with high knowledge of politics (Kahne and Bowyer).

Organizations like the National Association for Media Literacy Education and the News Literacy Project have formed to research misinformation and ways to combat it, raise awareness of the consequences, and support legislation ensuring students have access to education; many of them have also assembled curricula and tools to help teach media literacy skills, from lesson plans to entire semester-long courses. Although media literacy has exploded as a topic of interest in recent years, largely as a result of both the “fake news” conflict as well as the rise of social media platforms as a leading source of news for teens and younger adults, it has been an area of study for much longer, though in a broader capacity. A consensus of the definition of “media literacy” itself has never quite been reached and so can apply to a wide variety of literacies (Potter 675). In fact, despite the popular use of the term in connection with online activity, it was used well before the Internet existed to refer to many types of media, including newspapers and television. Because so much of the content we consume now comes to us via digital resources, the term media has come to most often suggest Internet media. Typically, media literacy generally refers to “the ability to decode media messages (including the systems in which they exist); assess the influence of those messages on thoughts,

feelings, and behaviors; and create media thoughtfully and conscientiously (“What Is Media Literacy?”).

This definition, however, is not representative of all uses of the term “media literacy,” and other terms have also been used by other scholars to refer to similar literacies. This is the term and the definition that I have chosen to use here to avoid limiting the applications to the specific concerns of the researchers who use other terms, such as “critical online reasoning,” which refers to “students’ ability to critically use information from online sources and to reason on contentious issues based on online information” or “news media literacy” which refers to the ability to “access, evaluate, analyze, and create news media products” (Nagel et al.; Ashley et al. 7). I have also chosen the use of this term to follow the suggestion of Media Literacy Now, who prefer the use of “media literacy” in order to unite the field’s “most relevant, up to date, evidence-based curriculum resources” (“U.S. Media Literacy Policy Report 2020”). Despite the broad application that “media literacy” can have, the use here primarily refers to the ability of students to discern misinformation from reliable information when reading online texts.

Checklists of qualities to look for in an online text have been a common resource provided to students to guide them through the process of navigating the Internet, and this strategy was particularly prevalent in the early days of the Web. The CRAAP test may be one of the most well-known examples of this approach and consists of five qualities that a student should check to verify the reliability of the information: Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose (Warner). This is just one iteration of a handout published in 1998 and that has circulated widely, still sometimes used as a guide

on evaluating sources (Kapoun). To apply this strategy to online information, students were taught to determine, through analysis of the information itself, whether it was current, relevant to the topic, provided by an authoritative source, supplied accurate information and the purpose or intent of the information.

It seems that this method was adapted from the analog-style research that preceded the Internet, and so relied upon existing systems of publication to serve as a “gatekeeper,” providing readers with the assurance that the information passed the review of qualified authorities. With the free, personal publishing that accompanied the advent of the Internet, there was not necessarily a gatekeeper to ensure the quality of the information readers had access to.

The approach that attempts to isolate qualities that betray misinformation or disinformation for what it is, assumes that there will be some outward sign for readers to locate, but this isn’t always the case. Not only could the information be well-disguised as a quality text (through, for instance, correct grammar and good-quality graphics), these lists of questions can take time that students are not likely to spend in analysis. Considering how complicated it can be to pinpoint all of the potential ways a news story might be identified as unreliable, such checklists can be quite long, and if the verification process is too labor-intensive or time-consuming, students are more likely to disregard it entirely (Caulfield, “The Problem with Checklist Approaches”). Furthermore, drawing attention to the text itself as in more traditional source evaluation runs the risk of losing focus on the reason for fact checking itself: to discern whether a claim is true. It may be appropriate for students to invest time in uncovering the truth about a text that is traditionally published, but using the same approach with online texts rather than



determining the accuracy of the claim can be a waste of time and effort. One media literacy scholar calls this “fact-checking the mailman”:

To put this in perspective, you got a dubious letter and just spent 20 minutes fact-checking the mailman. And then you actually opened the letter and found it was a signed letter from your Mom.

“Ah,” you say, “but the mailman is a Republican! (Caulfield, “How ‘News Literacy’ Gets It Wrong”.)

One of the most widely spread checklists came in April of 2017, when Facebook pinned an article entitled “Tips to Spot False News” at the top of users’ news feeds. The article, still in Facebook’s Help Center, consists of a list of ten tips to help users determine the accuracy of a post or news story that appears in their news feed:

**Be skeptical of headlines.** False news stories often have catchy headlines in all caps with exclamation points. If shocking claims in the headline sound unbelievable, they probably are.

**Look closely at the link.** A phony or look-alike link may be a warning sign of false news. Many false news sites mimic authentic news sources by making small changes to the link. You can go to the site to compare the link to established sources.

**Investigate the source.** Ensure that the story is written by a source that you trust with a reputation for accuracy. If the story comes from an unfamiliar organization, check their “About” section to learn more.

**Watch for unusual formatting.** Many false news sites have misspellings or awkward layouts. Read carefully if you see these signs.

**Consider the photos.** False news stories often contain manipulated images or videos. Sometimes the photo may be authentic, but taken out of context.

You can search for the photo or image to verify where it came from.

**Inspect the dates.** False news stories may contain timelines that make no sense, or event dates that have been altered.

**Check the evidence.** Check the author's sources to confirm that they are accurate. Lack of evidence or reliance on unnamed experts may indicate a false news story.

**Look at other reports.** If no other news source is reporting the same story, it may indicate that the story is false. If the story is reported by multiple sources you trust, it's more likely to be true.

**Is the story a joke?** Sometimes false news stories can be hard to distinguish from humor or satire. Check whether the source is known for parody, and whether the story's details and tone suggest it may be just for fun.

**Some stories are intentionally false.** Think critically about the stories you read, and only share news that you know to be credible (“Tips To Spot False News”).

Almost all of these tips suggest that the answer to whether a post is reliable can be uncovered by spending time with the post itself; only two of the suggestions mention going in search of the information itself posted elsewhere or doing a separate search on that source itself to learn about their reputation and credibility. Deeply analyzing an online text simply tends to yield poor results. Because more effort is needed to identify a bad source than a good one, simple and straightforward strategies are likely to yield better results (Perez et al. 61). Not only does intense investigation cost time and energy,

as we spend more time with information—even when we confirm its reliability, even when we know it is false—the more familiar it becomes and the easier it becomes to begin accepting it (Lazer et al. 3).

Although, as we've seen, some deep-analysis strategies to media literacy are still used, current methods in supporting media literacy have more often used the intervention or inoculation strategy (so named because it is intended to work similarly to a vaccine, preparing readers to make independent decisions regarding whether a source is trustworthy). Media literacy interventions typically suggest to readers how to investigate a source rather than what to look for, and by design are typically short and compact in order to best incorporate into surrounding material. Michael Pfau has studied this strategy in a variety of circumstances, including televised political debates and the marketing of credit cards to students (An and Pfau 2004; Compton and Pfau 2004). Others have explored ways to improve the efficiency in the application of inoculation; for instance, several studies have shown that correcting misinformation can be made more successful by also revealing the way in which it was made to be convincing (Cook et al. 15).

As helpful and effective as this simple strategy may be, the media literacy intervention does come with challenges. The degree to which students are warned that misinformation is a threat, for instance, plays a factor in whether an intervention is successful: multiple studies have shown that too much encouragement to be skeptical of online sources can result in readers becoming excessively cynical, doubting all news, including traditional news sources (Guess et al. 11542; Pennycook et al. 4948). Among those who are “ideologically predisposed to be skeptical” about a topic, there is a risk in

offering too little correction, and thereby strengthening the reader's belief in the misinformation (van der Linden et al. 5). In addition to how long and how in-depth an intervention should be, there is also the question of how much general knowledge is needed to form a foundation of understanding about topics in the news. Evidence suggests that not only do readers need some understanding of how news is published, but that they should also have a foundation of social, political and cultural knowledge as well, which suggests that sufficient media literacy education may also need to be more comprehensive than just learning how to navigate Google search results (Vraga et al. 71).

Perhaps most importantly, a single-session intervention has been found to be insufficient. Real, lasting progress requires repeated exposure to the material; in cases when students were given one-time instruction, the positive results of the intervention diminished over time—even in as little as three weeks later (Guess et al. 11542; Perez et al. 62).

Of recent inoculation studies, a series by the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG), led by Sarah McGrew and Sam Wineburg, is commonly cited. In their studies, SHEG uses the term “civic online reasoning”, which they use to describe “the ability to evaluate digital content and reach warranted conclusions about social and political issues” (McGrew et al., “Improving University Students’ Web Savvy” 487). By comparing how trustworthy sources and reliable information are determined by college students and professors as opposed to professional factcheckers, they discovered that both students and teachers determined the accuracy of online information with less speed and accuracy (McGrew et al., “Improving University Students’ Web Savvy” 486). The researchers refer to these more successful strategies used by professional factcheckers as

“core competencies” which ask three questions: “Who is behind this information? What is the evidence? And what do other sources say?” (486). To answer these questions, factcheckers used methods like lateral reading and click restraint—leaving a website to research the source itself and reviewing more than just the first few suggested links from a search engine—thereby utilizing the connectivity of the Internet to learn more about the information and its source rather than relying on a deep examination of the information itself. These practices were then developed by SHEG into a curriculum that could be incorporated into a K-12 classroom. The intent is to provide students with the tools they need to make their own judgments about the content they encounter online. Checklists, on the other hand, “[underestimate] just how sophisticated the web has become” and lead users to focus on the content rather than using the whole web to investigate it (McGrew et al., “The Challenge That’s Bigger”).

A leading voice in media literacy, Mike Caulfield also prioritizes using the entirety of the Web in order to verify information. While Internet users often scrutinize web pages to determine whether they are reliable, he says, this is “a process without any clear end: one could spend five minutes or two hours in investigation without knowing if they had done enough” (Caulfield, “Heuristics for the Online Curator” 7). In an intervention-style, college-level approach, Caulfield developed a model similar to SHEG’s COR curriculum called SIFT, an acronym for four “moves”: “stop; investigate the source; find better coverage; and trace claims, quotes, and media to the original context” (Warzel). It aims not to be the “arbiter of truth but to instill a reflex;” quick and simple, making it appropriate not only for research but for everyday use in scrolling through social media feeds (Warzel). In part because it was inspired by a conversation

between Caulfield and SHEG’s Sam Wineburg, Caulfield’s SIFT method works as a condensed version of SHEG’s COR curriculum, focusing the same practices and concepts in catchy, memorable ways. For instance, while COR teaches “click restraint” in several lessons as a way to obtain the highest quality of information, SIFT teaches “trading up”—seeking out a better, more reliable source to verify truth. Other elements are practical shortcuts that students can utilize, such as “just add Wikipedia.” By using keywords from a social media post or questionable headline in a Google search, and then following the phrase with the word “Wikipedia,” students can evaluate the information more quickly and efficiently.

The field of media literacy, as it develops an identity closely tied with online texts, is far from united in identifying the best practices to teach students. But emerging trends point to the importance of involving students in skills like navigating the Web and understanding the tools to do so, as well as altering their everyday online habits to ensure those skills last. These studies contribute to a general understanding of how students develop as citizens through media literacy education, and it begins in the classroom.

## **Compatibility with First-Year Composition**

Writing is discourse, communication between writer and reader, and one of the roles of first-year composition is to teach students how to participate in that discourse in an informed, effective way. That is a skill which is not only valuable to college students learning to produce academic and professional writing but for citizens participating in civic discourse. After all, social media extends to anyone the opportunity to write, read, and share anything with others. Especially because younger generations spend more time in this environment than older ones, the FYC classroom is an ideal setting for students to learn media literacy, analyzing the writing of others while forming their own position on the topic at hand.

Much of the business of first-year writing is already compatible with what experts say is needed to teach media literacy. Through reading and writing traditional essays like personal narratives, rhetorical analyses, and argumentative papers, students analyze how authors construct convincing arguments. Students respond to other writers by incorporating supporting voices in their own writing, building logical and persuasive arguments of their own. Annotated bibliographies and essay proposals exercise research strategies and source evaluation while reading responses encourage reflection upon what makes successful writing. Because FYC prepares students to successfully access, document, synthesize and incorporate research, it provides an excellent opportunity for students to also learn how to spot misinformation and disinformation.

What's more, the discussion-based structure of many first-year writing classrooms is not only equipped but well-suited to accommodating the often controversial topics of misinformation. In public school, it can be complicated to discuss misinformation

explicitly and as a result, many of the tools created by such groups as the News Literacy Project's Checkology virtual classroom rely on simulated online experiences rather than real encounters with false news in their real-world context. FYC cultivates an environment that is open to more direct conversation, the freedom to discuss news stories and current events explicitly in a university classroom translates to clearer and more productive classes.

Already the importance of media literacy in FYC is recognized, but has recently gained much more attention. In 2020, the NCTE formed the Task Force on Critical Media Literacy, which convened to investigate what was being implemented in K-12 English studies to support media literacy and what could be added ("Report of the Task Force on Critical Media Literacy"). Months later, in 2021, the NCTE hosted a screening of the documentary *Trust Me* and a panel discussion of the film. In the introduction of a recent issue of *Pedagogy* entitled "Reading and Writing in the Era of Fake News," guest editors Carillo and Horning explain that the number of submissions received in response to the call for essays on misinformation and false news exceeded their capacity by "roughly four times" (200). With so many voices adding to the discourse at such a pace, and as recent as the surge in interest has been, it would be difficult to capture every contribution. New questions regarding online research by students have prompted such conversations as how students can be safe when doing research online and how real online texts can be turned into class materials (Gelms; Richter). Adjustments to traditional pedagogical methods have been proposed based on such findings in how comprehension of printed texts differs from on-screen texts (Rodrigue; Downs). John Duffy adds that "mutual honesty" is a crucial element of successful writing and that



ethical issues like intellectual honesty have traditionally been an important part of teaching FYC (“Post-Truth and First-Year Writing”). One collaboration between FYC teachers and librarians, who traditionally teach information literacy, recognized that the fact-checking practices suggested by SHEG are ideal for “helping students hone a process that goes beyond academic writing” and “[enabling] them to be rhetorically savvy” in the face of fake news (Kazan et al.). It is becoming evident that media literacy is not just appropriate for first-year composition, but rather one of the best places for it.

However, some of the best practices aren’t yet well-established, suggesting room for further development of media literacy education in FYC. As it stands, first-year composition may have less media literacy education than high school, even though FYC can be more direct and in-depth in its coverage (Schmidt 65-66). The emphasis on scholarly sources in college writing encourages students to be familiar with peer-reviewed research in scholarly databases, but what about the sources they use outside the classroom to make decisions? FYC teaches academic writing and therefore how to work with academic resources, but how should students navigate the real-world resources they most often use when the skills that apply to evaluating scholarly sources don’t translate, or when they aren’t corralled within simulated situations? Incorporating further instruction in media literacy can demonstrate to students the usefulness of writing instruction and practice outside of academia and to therefore see the value in other skills learned in FYC, providing them not only with better practices to use in their personal lives but in future classes as well.

Even when media literacy is incorporated in FYC, the methods do not always reflect the suggested practices supported by recent research. In the WPA Outcomes

Statement for First-Year Composition, there are three main elements that encompass qualities of strong discourse: rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and composing; and processes. Each of these elements contributes to online discourse as much as any, but the practices in critical thinking and critical reading are especially useful for media literacy. This is already recognized to a certain extent: the Outcomes specifically include being able to “locate and evaluate (for credibility, sufficiency, accuracy, timeliness, bias and so on) primary and secondary research materials, including journal articles and essays, books, scholarly and professionally established and maintained databases or archives, and informal electronic networks and Internet sources.” However, students aren’t often invited to exercise source evaluation in a way that conveys the best practices of media literacy; sources used most often in FYC classes are scholarly articles, which students have no need to analyze for quality. Writing handbooks do not typically include lateral reading as a strategy to verify a source. One popular handbook relies upon a version of the CRAAP test, telling the reader that “the same strategies for evaluating library sources” can “apply to evaluating Web sources” and addresses only the scholarly research that can be done with the Internet without addressing misinformation that students encounter outside of academic work (Troyka and Hesse 562;565). The discussion of online texts often seems to be incorporated into multimodal composition and visual arguments (because they are more likely to be found online) which is only a part of media literacy education.

As in the Common Core Standards, the importance of being able to use technology tends to rest in learning how to use it in an academic or professional setting for such purposes as creating more modern (visual) texts. While there is sufficient

representation for technology literacy in both the Common Core Standards and the WPA Outcomes Statement, it shouldn't be mistaken for media literacy. More is needed to support the connectivity and interactivity of modern technology. Like any text, online texts must be considered in their own contexts, which includes its place in the Web. In FYC, emphasis on online research most often looks to databases of peer-reviewed journals or the university library website as the primary source of academic research; even textbooks themselves often include online or mobile features, encouraging students to use technology but still not providing content about how to determine reliable information within the “wilderness” of the Internet. To do so could create more work for educators in some ways—the Internet is not a static text and websites used in lessons may disappear from one semester to the next—but lessons could be far more effective.

The good news is that not are only the concepts are well-suited for FYC; there is a natural compatibility to existing courses, making inclusion of media literacy relatively easy. As an example, Irene Clark's “three-pass approach” to teaching rhetorical reading asks students to read a text three times: first to consider the main idea and the context, then reading for meaning, and finally to “actively engage [the text] with a critical dialogue” (Clark 10). When reading an online text, this process can naturally include, lateral reading as part of the first pass. In fact, Kahne and Bowyer suggest that media literacy, taught on its own, is not as effective as supporting it with such activities like engaging “students in debates of controversial issues,” and having “students write research papers that examine controversial issues,” which is well within the strengths of FYC (26).

In much the same way that writing is taught as a process, not a product, identifying misinformation is less a checklist of steps but a process of application. It's a skill. By further incorporating updated findings into the curriculum, the class can expand what is already being taught in ways that can benefit students both inside and outside of the classroom.

## **Application**

While resources like Michael Caulfield's SIFT and SHEG's COR curriculum are available, few of the lesson plans available can be readily applied in first-year writing in the way they are packaged. Most are made for middle- or high-school students and require some retooling in order to suit a college classroom. Some require time to be set aside during the semester to make room, which is particularly difficult for instructors who already have reliable and preferred methods or for courses that are otherwise not flexible in their schedule. There are also practical concerns: websites and social media posts can suddenly disappear. For instance, when testing Caulfield's technique for finding an academic's scholarly works by searching Google for the person's name followed by the word "scholar," I was unable to reproduce his results even when using the same person's name. The Internet changes quickly and without warning; the same tools, programs, and resources won't be available indefinitely. After all, this is why checklists of a website's qualities aren't useful—they can quickly be outdated. It's also important to incorporate new elements as they evolve and bring attention to how information can be decoded in new ways. Perhaps most importantly, most pre-constructed lessons and activities are intervention strategies designed for one-time instruction so that they can be easily installed in a variety of classes. While this can be a handy approach that allows for greater flexibility, practice over a longer period of time has been shown to provide better results and promote building habits.

So how can an instructor of first-year writing incorporate media literacy education in a way that is most efficient and effective, and that provides the best instruction without redesigning their course or sacrificing other content that is also important? It can be

easier, more efficient, and more effective to incorporate media literacy education in first-year writing as a series of small changes and additions over the course of the semester. While existing media literacy programs or curricula may not allow for those challenges, a meaningful improvement can still be made through small changes throughout the semester. Although it can represent a small addition to planning time, this method doesn't require as much actual course time. This section breaks down some of the best available research and practices in order to make them more accessible to all first-year composition courses. This strategy allows instructors to implement whatever and however many changes or additions they can or prefer to accommodate.

It's important to keep in mind that, even by making small changes to existing FYC courses rather than altering the entire course, adjustments are likely to be needed from semester to semester, for example, to ensure the links to the needed materials are still active. This is one potential challenge faced in any effort to teach media literacy: the fluid, temporary nature of the Internet means that almost nothing will stand the test of time. What follows are suggestions for content that can be added to a first-year composition course without the need for large changes. It represents, through the application of the previously discussed research, how students should approach and interact through the Internet in order to cultivate their best media literacy skills.

## **Understanding the Machine: Context, Patience, and Mindfulness**

When students are made aware of certain characteristics of online activity, they are more prepared to handle some of the most common stumbling blocks thrown in the paths of everyday users. For that reason, it's important that students perceive the Internet for what it is: a web of information and resources that should be treated as a whole and while exercising patience, empathy, adaptability, and awareness of how "bad actors" can and do manipulate information. Informing students' perception of the Web is crucial: if students don't understand the characteristics of online participation, they are at the mercy of those who do.

The Internet is not just the page that is on the student's screen: it is the vast connections that work together and inform each other, the context of the single page they happen to be reading. This is what makes lateral reading a necessary part of teaching online research and source evaluation; because we tend to read a webpage vertically and, following that, move in a chain from one hyperlink to the next, it can be difficult to keep that perspective in mind. But the awareness that each piece of online text is very closely tied to everything else around it, is necessary in order to use the Internet wisely. This is why lateral reading is central to curricula from Caulfield and SHEG, as well as a practice of professional factcheckers: it's a core component of responsibly and effectively using the Internet for any kind of research. Lateral reading can be incorporated into FYC instruction on research very naturally; it is just another step of the process of verifying a source. When reading a peer-reviewed journal or a published book, students can be assured by the methods which are used to publish it that the source is trustworthy, whatever the author's perspective might be. But we must vet our own sources when a

text has been personally published online. The distinction between this kind of source and online sources is crucial to discuss and where the “I” of Caulfield’s SIFT method provides the ideal combination of simplicity and effectiveness, while also being easily applicable to freshman college students.

The term “investigation” has connotations of deep, exhaustive research, but Caulfield uses simple techniques to get accurate results quickly, making Google search work in an easy but sophisticated way. The primary suggestion he makes is a trick he calls a “source verification omnibar hack” that is performed as quickly as typing “Wikipedia” after the name of the website in the Google search bar (the use of Wikipedia as a research tool is another Caulfield recommendation (“Just Add Wikipedia”). By doing this, the search results typically return a Wikipedia page about the website instead of pages from the website itself. For example, if a user wanted to examine a website called entrepreneur.com, it could be incredibly difficult: many of the search results would be from the website itself, and the rest are likely to be about the actual topic of entrepreneurship. However, if a user performs a Google search for “entrepreneur.com Wikipedia,” the first search result is a Wikipedia page about Entrepreneur, a magazine. From there, the user can use further information about the source to continue a more in-depth search or perhaps return to the social media post from Entrepreneur.com they had originally seen with the new information that it seems to be a legitimate publication.

When performing a Google search, it’s not uncommon to receive hundreds of thousands of results, and the first on the list is not necessarily the best. “Click restraint” is the term used by SHEG to describe the careful review of search results before selecting the best match. A tactic used by fact checkers, who often scroll through two or more



pages of search results before choosing which result best fits their needs, click restraint helps students stay mindful of relevance and accuracy in their research. Students often impulsively click on the first result of a search in the belief that it is the most relevant result, but this isn't always true: pausing to read through not only the titles of the search results but the URLs and the "snippets" before proceeding (McGrew et al., "Improving University Students' Web Savvy" 486). Not only does having this patience mean that users will likely pick the best search result from the bunch, but it also translates into a broader understanding of the topic at hand.

The Internet is driven by the attention of its users; social media platforms and most websites use some form of advertisement in order to make a profit, and the more time users spend there, the more money is made. Websites are therefore painstakingly designed to keep our attention for as long as possible, making it difficult for us to navigate our own path but rather pulling us along and directing our attention for us. Without taking responsibility for how we spend our attention, we allow our emotional responses to be weaponized.

## **The Human Element: Perspective, Cynicism, and Empathy**

It might seem that gullibility is the foundation of the misinformation problem, but skepticism is the bigger issue. As Caulfield notes, the reaction to the flood of misinformation is that “students have a moderate distrust of most everything they see online,” because if “nothing can be known and all producers of knowledge are seen to be compromised, there is no truth, only power” (Caulfield, “Recalibrating Our Approach to Misinformation”). The Internet removes the gatekeeper, creating a “counterfeit reputation” to those who create disinformation, thereby levelling educated professionals with conspiracy theorists (Caulfield, “Recalibrating Our Approach to Misinformation”). Essentially, the Internet complicates who to listen to and why, and as a result, most people have concluded that nothing online can be trusted, not even professionals. Since studying misinformation could potentially cause students to lose faith in traditional sources as well, it’s important to emphasize not to dismiss everything or nothing; just to know how it works.

Even a text originating from an opinionated source has value. Students recognize that a writer is influenced in what they write by their own feelings on a matter, but it’s important to remember that the human element can’t be entirely removed from any text. The preferences that a person has might not be bias, but preference, and the key is to keep those perspectives in mind as a part of critical reading. Context is an important part of a text, and having knowledge about the source is part of understanding it. By addressing liberal and conservative perspectives, for example, as simply a difference in how people see the world and ways to solve human problems, we can avoid defensive responses.

This can be a challenge because the Internet is not known for being an environment thriving with empathy, but this is another concept that FYC teachers can nurture in students. One instructor, Paul Corrigan, made this a central part of his own FYC course. His approach was “not to make students impervious to being fooled, not to give them the tools to always know what is true and what is not,” but instead to guide his students to “internalize habits of heart and mind” through “empathetic information literacy” (Corrigan). These habits, referred to as the five “moves,” are “pausing, asking, caring, checking, and acting.” This approach to teaching FYC humanizes strangers on the Internet and reminds students to consider perspective when doing research. There is an additional depth to Corrigan’s approach: by incorporating the fifth move—“acting”—students come away with a sense of reality found in the issues they research, demonstrating

“the ‘truth stakes’ in these stories, what’s at stake in knowing the truth in any given situation. Sometimes it’s just the humiliation of being fooled or the gratitude of knowing what’s what. Other times literal life and death are on the line” (Corrigan).

The dissociation that comes with having a world of information and billions of voices contained in the palm of a hand then becomes a real experience.

## **In-Class Activities and Assignments**

As important as it is for students to be aware of how the Internet works as well as how to best use it, there is still the question of practical ways in which FYC instructors can incorporate this knowledge. After all, part of the challenge with existing lessons and curricula that can be acquired is that they are made for a younger group of students or require that instructors pause their planned coursework to integrate them. However, there are a variety of ways that FYC can incorporate media literacy practice into existing coursework.

One approach may be to have students work directly with the news in a way that aligns with other FYC course goals. For instance, Kelly King-O'Brien of Cornell University, in her first-year writing course entitled "Writing Back to the News," assigns her students the current news articles from *The New Yorker*. As she and her students discover fresh news stories together, they discuss as a class such issues as "writers' choices about evidence and details" or "proper citation methods" (295). What's more, they compare the news stories they read in *The New Yorker* with other news sources, like Fox News, to see what they do differently and discuss why (301).

Bringing social media texts into discussion can also serve as a bridge between FYC and media literacy. The inclusion of sources cited in essays that aren't exactly traditional or scholarly, like tweets or YouTube videos or social media posts can demonstrate that the research they do in their personal time is not as separate as they think from scholarly research rather than demonstrating that these skills can be put to use outside of research papers. It places students in the familiar part of the Internet and lets them practice sorting through sources they're comfortable with, strategies they can use

both in and out of the classroom. In fact, this could be expanded even further by incorporating these types of sources in an annotated bibliography that includes a short description of what makes the source reliable. This addition is an opportunity for students to be explicit about their decisions regarding each source's reliability as well as its value. The inclusion of less traditional, non-scholarly sources not only helps them get used to judging whether the sources are trustworthy, but it also allows them the chance to practice the construction of citations. Databases frequently provide citations that students can copy and paste into their Works Cited or References, but using less conventional sources can encourage students to become more familiar with style handbooks and how to locate the information they're looking for. One lesson that incorporated the use of social media looked at Instagram posts as texts deserving of close reading. Following an analysis of those posts "to help students deconstruct how these images, captions, and hashtags worked together," students then created their own series of posts in a project to promote their city (Pytash and Testa 43). By utilizing the same characteristics, students learned to

"use social media sites, such as Instagram, to analyze the underlying messages that people are trying to convey. As students grow in their understanding of how to craft short texts and how to pair them with stimulating images, they learn to represent their causes and concerns in ways that will persuade others to engage as well (Pytash and Testa 43).

By acknowledging these texts as texts, students can become more accustomed to using the same approach with online texts as they do with texts they analyze in the classroom.

Even though bringing social media into first-year writing may require some small adjustments to the classroom, research continues to show that it strengthens the skills that students need to recognize bad information when they see it. Of course, more traditional assignments are compatible with media literacy skills, too, if integrating brand-new course content is not an option. Argumentative essays offer an opportunity to practice empathy by spending time with the counterargument. The rhetorical analysis gives students a chance to see how pathos can be used to drive our emotions, sparking outrage and anger to convince us to click or share; discussion of ethos brings up the question of expertise and qualifications of an author, to understand how the sense of authority and experience can pull a reader in.

Plenty of online resources exist that could be easily shared with students as a list of handouts, such as websites that quiz students with simulated social media posts to determine how well they can identify misinformation and provide tips on how to tell the difference in the future. Among these, [spotthetroll.org](http://spotthetroll.org) and [newsliteracy.ca/fakeout](http://newsliteracy.ca/fakeout) stand out; [getbadnews.com](http://getbadnews.com) is a game that positions students as trolls themselves and challenges them to build up their influence by posting disinformation and manipulative content. There are also websites devoted to showing the disparity between the news diet of both major parties and that share news from both perspectives at once to aid in overcoming potential motivational bias. For instance, [theflipside.io](http://theflipside.io) sends a daily newsletter with headlines from conservative media and liberal media sources as well as the general perspectives of those parties, and [allsides.com](http://allsides.com) performs the same function but as a constantly updated website. As the need for media literacy continues to become more

evident and continuing research reveals more effective methods to provide it, more resources are sure to become available.

## **Conclusion**

While writing this thesis, I found that there was one common response I received when I described it to inquiring friends and family. The immediate response was most often a nod and a change of subject, which was sadly unsurprising. The issue of misinformation is closely tied to political issues, and in a time when almost half of adults in America have stopped discussing politics with someone they know “because of something they said,” even getting close to political conversation can be a threat to a relationship (Jurkowitz and Mitchell).

While this is disappointing data, showing that polarization has grown so sharply that it is interfering with civic discourse, it also reflects hope. The unwillingness to continue down that path of political conversation for fear of conflict shows just how committed we are to maintaining relationships with loved ones across party lines—even as the tension between parties grows, we would rather protect our personal connections with those we love than challenge them by confronting their political views.

I also noticed that, once the people around me knew that I was studying, in part, how to spot online “fake news” and misinformation, topics such as Internet scams, conspiracy theories, and partisanship came up more frequently, if somewhat indirectly. More than one close contact casually mentioned a rumor they had seen online, seemingly unsure whether it was reliable news or misinformation. Curious myself, I would exercise some of the fact-checking strategies that I had learned. Each and every time, I was able to determine that the rumor wasn’t based in any fact. Over time, I began to realize that

the reason that these rumors always turned out to be false because the person who mentioned them to me already suspected they were. They just sought confirmation that they either didn't want or didn't know how to acquire.

What I hope this thesis can convey is not only how future generations of students can be taught media literacy skills to combat misinformation, or even that they should be taught to do so, but also that they should want to. In two years of working with college students in first-year writing, first as a tutor and then as their instructor, I have at times brought up the topic of misinformation while discussing source evaluation and online research. The most memorable experience: when I brought up in class the QAnon conspiracy theory details that I'd heard on NPR coming to work that morning. They had been details that I was hearing for the first time—something about drinking a miracle solution to cure COVID-19—but more than a dozen voices chimed in to explain the entire conspiracy to me in the middle of class, clarifying for me that the solution, called MMS, either was or contained bleach. I saw that, even though they didn't believe this theory, they knew the content of it and they knew it well. They had passively consumed it, even when they had dismissed the theory overall.

As reassuring as it felt to see them roll their eyes at these claims, I heard then what I would also hear from friends and family over the course of months, when I described what I was researching: “you can't believe anything on the Internet.” As vast a source of knowledge and shared experience as the World Wide Web, dismissed as lost to the trolls and hackers. It's important that, as teachers of academic research and critical reading, we contribute to the strengthening of media literacy skills of our students to prevent their belief in misinformation, false news, and even conspiracy theories. But



more than that, as teachers of the humanities, it's important that we support truth and critical thinking in an era that has begun to wonder if there is any truth at all.

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