

# Teaching Informational Competency in a Changing Political Media Environment

Lanethea Mathews-Schultz, Muhlenberg College ([mathews@muhlenberg.edu](mailto:mathews@muhlenberg.edu))

Jennie Sweet-Cushman, Chatham University ([JSweetCushman@chatham.edu](mailto:JSweetCushman@chatham.edu))

APSA Teaching & Learning Conference 2023, February 10-12, Baltimore Maryland

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss undergraduate teaching strategies designed to enhance students' informational competency—an important skill of democratic citizenship. Informational competency shares some of the broad goals of information literacy (IL) as conventionally understood, including for example, helping students develop the ability to identify, find, evaluate, and produce information. Our concept of informational competency differs in foreground the skills of democratic citizenship outside of the classroom and beyond research activities in the field. Students—citizens—who are informationally competent, not only possess information literacy, but they are also thoughtful curators of political news, intentional and reflective media consumers, and ethical and effective users of social media when it comes to receiving and sharing political information. We discuss strategies to guide students in undergraduate American government courses in cultivating habits of media consumption, developing the skills to evaluate political information and news, and maintaining a healthy skepticism alongside feelings of political trust in a shifting political media landscape. We offer suggestions for classroom activities designed to impart confidence to our students in answering the question: *When can we trust information?*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of a larger project that seeks to center political engagement in undergraduate introductory courses on American government and politics. Using insight from a combined 40 years of teaching, our goal is to develop a holistic approach to teaching American government that places less emphasis on what students ought to know, and more emphasis on what students ought to be able to do. Paramount challenges facing American democracy provide our inspiration. Longstanding social scientific frameworks that we have relied on in the past to help students *understand* American politics have increasingly fallen short in providing tangible guidance for *acting in* the contemporary political world.

Political knowledge, while necessary, is not sufficient for providing an educational experience that will lead our students to political engagement. In addition to *knowing* about politics, democratic citizenship requires a sense of concern and responsibility for collective challenges (*caring*), the ability to make strategic choices and to set priorities (*choosing*), and the inclination to actually engage in politics through meaningful and appropriate actions (*doing*). These four components—*knowing*, *caring*, *choosing*, and *doing*—comprise a framework for democratic citizenship.

Beginning with this framework, we identify five sets of capacities, or competencies—the things that students ought to be able to do. These competencies include the skills and capacities required for holding political institutions accountable (*institutional competency*); the propensity to think and act strategically with different forms of political action (*participatory competency*); the wherewithal to talk to others about politics and to value finding commonalities and points of difference (*deliberatively competency*); the ability to discern the trustworthiness of information and to use news media responsibly (*informational competency*); and the dexterity required to understand the affective dimensions of politics while attending to one’s own emotional health as a citizen of democracy (*emotional competency*). Each of these competencies is applied to the democratic citizenship framework in summary in Appendix I Table 1. This paper focuses on *informational competency*.

Students’ relationships with news media and political information have shifted dramatically over the past several decades. In the not-so-distant-past, we shared with many of our colleagues a general concern that students were simply uninformed. Our response, which we think was also shared with many of our colleagues, was to incentive our students to read the news—perhaps through current events extra credit questions or “pop quizzes” emphasizing *New York Times* headlines. We’re not especially confident that this approach served student learning in the past, but we are certain that it

does not work now. If we once fretted about dwindling newspaper readership as a harbinger of declining political engagement, today we are more concerned that students are consuming too much information and lack the skills to discern the good from the bad. Whether or not our students are reading newspapers, they are inundated with political information in their everyday interactions with multiple forms of media, including platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube. It is difficult to generalize about levels of awareness or even what it means to be “informed” in this context. And while the research on the prevalence and danger of fake news and a spiralizing news media environment are well-documented, there are few materials offering us guidance about how to respond in our introductory American government classrooms—a classrooms that, due to disciplinary content and civic goals, broad student learning objectives, and diverse student enrollment are characterized by a unique set of challenges.

This paper introduces the concept of informational competency, which requires more than simply finding and using “good sources.” Beyond sources, we emphasize methods, offering teaching strategies designed to help students develop the tools to meaningfully engage with news and media on a day-to-day basis (Cope and Flannigan 2013).

#### WHAT IS INFORMATIONAL COMPETENCY AND HOW CAN WE TEACH IT?

It is simply not possible to teach a course on American politics without some attention to the political news media. Even if instructors devote no class time to explicit consideration of the role of contemporary media in American democracy, it is already there, framing students’ understanding of current events and political issues, shaping their receptiveness to learning in the classroom, influencing their trust or distrust toward government and political authority, and at least partially determining

their propensity to engage in politics. Most instructors, of course, do not ignore political news or the media. Our review of introductory textbooks, published materials, and the SoTL in political science, reveals two common paths in undergraduate introductory courses on American government.

The most common path is to follow the points of emphasis set up in introductory textbooks, which typically include a chapter on “knowing about” media. Often, instructors engage students in evaluating the media’s capacity to serve as a linking institution, asking questions about the consequences of an imperfect, largely for-profit, media for American democracy. Additional topics may include the ways that various political actors use media in efforts to persuade, frame, mobilize (or demobilize), and set the terms of public discourse. This path also likely includes discussion of media effects, including the consequences of rapidly proliferating social media and alternative news sources that blur fact and fiction. Lastly, many undergraduate units on media spend some time exploring the concept, consequences, and types of media bias (e.g., ideological bias, anti-political bias, audience confirmation bias, etc.). We are partial to the data and visuals available at <https://adfontesmedia.com/> for engaging students about media bias across a range of media organizations.

If there is a normative message of this first path, it is that given the incomplete nature of political information provided in the news media, students are better off if they gather news from multiple sources and maintain a healthy skepticism about media strategies and effects. We support this idea in principle, but as we discuss further below, simply telling our students they ought to find information from a variety of sources, and to be on the lookout for misinformation, is different than helping them develop the tools to do so.

The second, less common, path emphasizes information literacy skills. Information literacy (IL), following Stephen Thorton (2016) includes “measures designed to assist individuals find suitable information, consider carefully its credibility and provenance, and then to use that information wisely and ethically” (124). Broadly construed, IL includes discerning and assessing the value of different types of information and developing multiple skills for finding, evaluating, creating, using, and communicating information (Sanders 2021). The Association of College & Research Librarians (ACRL) (2015) suggests that IL is a framework of interconnected core concepts and conceptual understandings and includes both knowledge practices (how learners increase their understanding of information literacy) and dispositions (how information literacy is linked to affective and attitudinal aspects of learning) (7-8).<sup>1</sup>

There is, as Williams and Evans (2008) suggest, “an apparent natural connection between political science and information literacy (116).” However, attention to IL is not widespread in our classrooms. In a recent survey of more than 100 political scientists conducted by Stephen Thornton and Douglas Atkinson (2022), over 90% disagreed or strongly disagreed that students arrive at college

---

<sup>1</sup> A growing list of additional literacies are linked to IL, including “news literacy” (the ability to critically understand the role of media in democracy) and its close cousin, “media literacy” (possessing the cognitive ability to discern truth from fake news [Jones-Jang et al. 2021]). “Digital literacy” often refers to being able to meaningfully use digital media and information technologies (Leaning 2019), or to the practical skills for engaging online (Polizzi 2020; also Carillo 2019). “Metaliteracy” has been used to refer to critical thinking and collaboration in a digital age across a variety of technologies and literacy types, including digital, online, computer, verbal, and visual (Mackey and Jacobson 2014). The exponential quality of literacies can be overwhelming; what is perhaps most important is simply recognizing that new information and media technologies create both opportunities and challenges for informed and engaged democratic citizenship. In this way, the overlap of multiple literacies is more important than any subtle differences between them.

with sufficient information literacy (IL). More than one-half also reported that although they believe IL is an important skill, and despite broad consensus that IL is necessary for citizens to develop informed views and to navigate the political world, they devote no time to teaching it (for a general discussion on IL in political science, see Harden and Harden 2020). This is especially surprising given the numbers of colleges and universities that have infused IL into general educational requirements.

When attention to IL is present, is it most often in classes that engage students in academic research, such as research methods and upper-level courses in the discipline, classes in which students are expected to identify, evaluate, summarize, and organize scholarly sources; to comprehend the scientific method; to understand and be able to evaluate statistical findings; and to be able to access, understand, and ethically use data (Shannon and Shannon 2021).

But with the exception of these scholarly strategies—which may be especially important for students who are political science majors—there are few examples of practical pedagogies or teaching tools that provide guidance for developing IL related skills for introductory-level students, most of whom will not continue on to major in the discipline.<sup>2</sup> It perhaps goes without saying that simply

---

<sup>2</sup> Williams and Evans (2008) created an information literacy module in an introductory comparative politics course which aims to meet similar IL student learning objectives and culminates in a student research paper. Cook and Walsh (2010) adopted a faculty-librarian collaboration in an introductory American government course in which students adopted the role of a media consultant for a political candidate. Stevens and Campbell (2008) discuss a librarian collaboration and IL focused pedagogy in their lower division American government course. Jessica Feezel (2021) examines the use of Twitter in an introductory American politics classroom on students' political interest and learning. Each of these examples, similar to those found in upper level and methods classes, emphasize IL skills related to searching for and evaluating scholarly information and research activities. Our focus in this chapter is on students' day-to-day media interactions with political news.

talking about current events and the news is helpful in providing students with broader, more informed, and historically contextual knowledge than they might otherwise have from learning about a political event or issue from a tweet or TikTok video. Siena and Roman (2022) developed an approach using instructor-guided peer discussion of news headlines across a range of different sources (including, for example, the *New York Times* and simple Google searches). Kaufman (2020) suggests that discussion—because it permits exploration, questioning, and reflection—is a preferred pedagogical strategy when it comes to teaching and learning about news media for several reasons, not least of which is that simply telling students they are misinformed or “doing it wrong” is likely to provoke skepticism and strengthen preexisting orientations to social media. Beyond these few examples, political science pedagogy has made limited headway thinking about how to help our students develop the capacities and skills necessary to navigate political news media in their day-to-day lives in a way that fosters political interest and engagement.

Informational competency is an alternative to these approaches. Unlike IL, at least in the classic sense, informational competency seeks to develop students’ capacities for thinking critically about, evaluating, cultivating, producing, and, at times strategically ignoring, information in their *everyday political news environments*. Developing students’ informational competency requires foundational knowledge about the role of media in politics (the first path discussed above); but it also requires elements of IL (the second path).

SO, YOU GET (SOME) POLITICAL NEWS. NOW WHAT? APPLYING INFORMATIONAL COMPETENCY TO THE DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP FRAMEWORK

Democracy depends on informed citizens. What is the best way to get information? Where and from which authorities is information trustworthy? What kinds of information do citizens need and what should they do with it when they get it? The following sections provide a holistic approach for working with students to address these questions with an emphasis on everyday media interactions.

Four caveats provide clarity to our scope. The first is primarily semantic. We make no substantive distinctions between the terms “misinformation,” “fake news,” “disinformation,” “lies.” Similarly, we use the terms “political information” and “news” interchangeably; we use the term “media” to refer to all kinds of media, including social media as well as in-print and digital forms of the traditional, mainstream press. Second, we borrow liberally from skills and dispositions related to information literacy (IL) and a range of associated literacies (e.g., news, media, online, digital, social media literacies), without worrying too much about the distinctions between them. Third, although speech is obviously linked to both media and politics, we do not directly tackle contemporary struggles over First Amendment issues or the regulation of speech on social media. Rather than wading into debates about whether or not regulating speech is a normative good, we focus our teaching efforts on helping students develop the skills to negotiate the kinds of information they are encountering on a day-to-day basis, which includes messy and almost ubiquitous accusations about “wokeness” and “cancel culture.” Finally, we mostly exclude thinking about how emergent media technologies *per se* might be useful in teaching and learning, such as how Natalie Jester (2022) uses Twitter as a community of practice in her classrooms or how Meghann Dragseth (2018) similarly uses social media to build community in the classroom.

In brief, our approach to informational competency includes three broad goals: 1) helping students notice and accept responsibility for the information, news, and media they are already



consuming; 2) encouraging students to create more intentional habits of political news media consumption, in part by cultivating a questioning attitude toward the news; and 3) fostering students' confidence and their likelihood of using of political news and media in different political contexts. Table 5.1 summarizes how our approach to informational competency overlaps with both more conventional knowledge-based approaches to teaching about media.

### **Caring: Why bother, it's all bad news! How can instructors help their students care?**

When given time and space to think critically, most students can articulate reasons why media, news, and information are important for a democracy. The notion of media as a “marketplace of ideas” is a concept likely to be familiar to students, even among those with no previous coursework in political science, and it is frequently bound up with their understanding about free speech issues. At least on a surface level, students can point to the dangers of misinformation; they are deeply aware of the ways that social media can foster both communion and division. With a bit of coaching, our students recognize the links between information and political trust.

We are encouraged when students offer these kinds of explanations—it suggests they recognize the value of news and information even if they have devoted little time to thinking about their personal media habits. It is somewhat more difficult for students to translate these relatively abstract arguments into a deeper understanding about why they should be invested in this knowledge or how they can use it as a tool for, or as a mechanism for developing a sense of responsibility about, their own political engagement. The challenge for instructors is not simply that students are overloaded with information, although that is a challenge, especially when it leads students to adopt more narrow information strategies. The bigger problem is that political discourse in general has been

delegitimized, especially as a consequence of disinformation and “fake news” (Hameleers 2022).

Information *can* be empowering but overcoming students’ disaffectedness is difficult.

The goal of “caring” when it comes to informational competency is fostering students’ sense of personal responsibility toward their own news and information environments. After discussing the critical role of news and information to democracy, we suggest engaging students in thinking about why news and information are important to them personally. Even if students respond with nonpolitical reasons—to follow favorite sports teams or musicians, to make informed investment and banking decisions, to learn about events happening in one’s community, to feel connected to culture—it is not difficult to convince them about the value of having good, reliable, accurate information.

It’s likely that many students feel unqualified to participate in politics because they feel uninformed and “don’t know what is going on.” There is some truth to this—some students need more news! Nonetheless, empirical research on news literacy suggests that students are rarely aware of the sheer quantity of political news they are already exposed to on a daily basis; when given opportunities to reflect on their media environments, students may notice that they are in fact surrounded by news but have not been processing it consciously (Klurfeld and Schneider 2014, in Sivek 2018, 131). We encourage working with students in constructing personal media inventories through which they explore how, when, where, and with whom they are already engaging with political news. Mind-maps and class-wide surveys are other strategies for inviting reflection on students’ political news habits (e.g., Swart 2021; Heat et. Al. 2019; Siena and Roman 2020).

The goal of these activities (beyond getting students to notice just how much news they are already getting) is to help students see that they have a consequential role in determining the kinds of

information and messaging they receive. *Why am I receiving this news and information? How does this news help me? What choices have I made that has resulted in this message reaching me? What news media institutions am I participating in and who else is involved?* Informational competency requires recognizing that what feels like an individualized experience of news and media is really a social institution, one that can either sustain, or thwart, democratic engagement.

**Choosing: Information is everywhere and overwhelming! What tools can help students make critical choices?**

Once students are more aware of the political news they already receive on a day-to-day basis, the next step is to guide them in making their choices more intentional. For some students, this may require making a concerted effort to add more political news to their daily media habits or to be a little less haphazard in their relationships to reading and listening to the news. For others, becoming more intentional may require overcoming political alienation and deep feelings of distrust. For most, it will require diversifying news and information sources and perhaps branching out beyond a single platform or technology. Most importantly, for all of our students, making choices about political news is interdependent with developing the skills to discern information for what it is: contextual, historical, constructed, subjective, and related to one's own opinions and perceptions.

Informationally competent students are cognizant of and empowered by their news choices. In some ways, "choosing" within this framework overlaps with the ACRL's emphasis on maintaining an open mind, accepting ambiguity about the value of information, and thinking critically about authority in the context of information. For example, following the personal media inventory suggested above, faculty and students could discuss whether prominent sources of information in their day-to-day media

environment are opinion-based or more fact-based, journalistic sources. The goal of teaching strategies related to choosing when it comes to political news is to first highlight student agency, and second, to show students, as concretely as possible, how to develop and sustain critical political news habits.

This is not easy. Bias and the personalization of information are familiar concepts to most political science faculty, but the unraveling of authority in a post-truth era means that even once trusted sources of information may no longer be trustworthy. Students may be tempted to think about diversifying political news consumption by watching *MSNBC and Fox News*, or by reading a newspaper *and* following friends on Snapchat. Simply adding more is not the solution. Fact-checking exercises—using websites such as FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com to separate truths from mistruths—are also of limited utility; it is simply unrealistic to expect students to fact-check headlines and stories on a day-to-day basis. Some students, like many Americans, are even skeptical of the fact checkers. Moreover, as Ashley (2020) notes, stressing fact-checking can obfuscate the reality that all news is constructed, whether it is true or false.

A more productive teaching strategy aims to help students develop a questioning attitude toward all news. Our suggestions, summarized in the Informational Competency Resource Guide (Box 5.2), draw inspiration in part from Ashley's (2020) *News Literacy and Democracy*, and seek to engage students in thinking about the contexts and construction of news, using questions such as: *Who is sending this message and why are they sending it? Whose interests are served by this information? Whose interests might be left out, or overlooked in this story? What factors likely shaped the creation of this message? What makes this information believable (or unbelievable) to me? How might I assess the intent and possible biases in this message?* Instructors who are interested in developing an activity

or assignment specifically designed to focus on these skills can select or assign news stories in combination with tasks that engage students in identifying the origins of news items, discussing the multiple purposes of stories and signposts of credibility, and the reasons that different kinds of information are interpreted differently by different audiences. Cultivating a questioning attitude toward the news does not, in practice, demand an outrageous investment in time—this is an important point to emphasize given students’ overall high levels of distrust toward almost all information.

We stand by the lessons of our classroom experiences which suggest that our students need guidance when it comes to cultivating a questioning attitude toward news and information. But we also recognize that in some ways, we have a lot to learn from our students, too. Important new research on young people’s engagement with news on social media suggests that many are quite savvy when it comes to filtering their news environments to follow niche interests, using strategies such as liking and un-liking, following and unfollowing, snoozing content, and creating multiple accounts to try to outsmart social media algorithms (Swart 2021; see also Head et al. 2020). From the perspective of a marketplace of ideas and confirmation bias, personalization can be troubling. At the same time, following Swart (2021), young people’s personalization efforts on social media suggest they have a basic understanding of how social media works and are skilled in trying to create more satisfactory media environments for themselves. Students’ choices include what media to consume and also—following Kozyreva et al.’s (2022) concept of “critical ignoring”—what media not to consume, for example, by not clicking on sources or messages of low value. Kozyreva et al. (2022) describes this kind of strategic choosing as “self-nudging” and we find it a useful concept to empower students’ and remind them that they have agency in their own day-to-day media interactions.

Swart's (2021) research also suggests that young people already use a variety of verification strategies across social media platforms to assess the trustworthiness of news, including checking comments below news items; checking numbers of subscribers or followers; expecting platform moderators to remove false information; and talking with friends, colleagues, and family members. Some of students may have experience with crowdsourcing—using Twitter, or Reddit, for example—as a mechanism for evaluating news and information. These skills align with the goals and methods of lateral reading, a key cognitive strategy for verifying information and the credibility of news. The concept of lateral reading remains mostly absent from political science classrooms in our experience, but it is gaining increased prominence in IL circles (e.g., Wineburg and McGrew 2019; Kozyreva et al. 2022; Stanford History Education Group n.d.). The Civic Online Reasoning (<https://cor.stanford.edu/>) curriculum offers a wealth of teaching suggestions for engaging students in lateral reading exercises, for example, using guided questions to evaluate a tweet from a parody Twitter account, or evaluating entries on Wikipedia. Of course, no verification tactics are completely error free, especially because the media environment itself influences how we evaluate information (Head et al. 2020). The more important point here is to demonstrate to students that they have the tools to cultivate a questioning attitude toward political news and information, often using rules of thumb that are already familiar.

### **Doing: Beyond Liking and Retweeting: How can we help students use information for political action?**

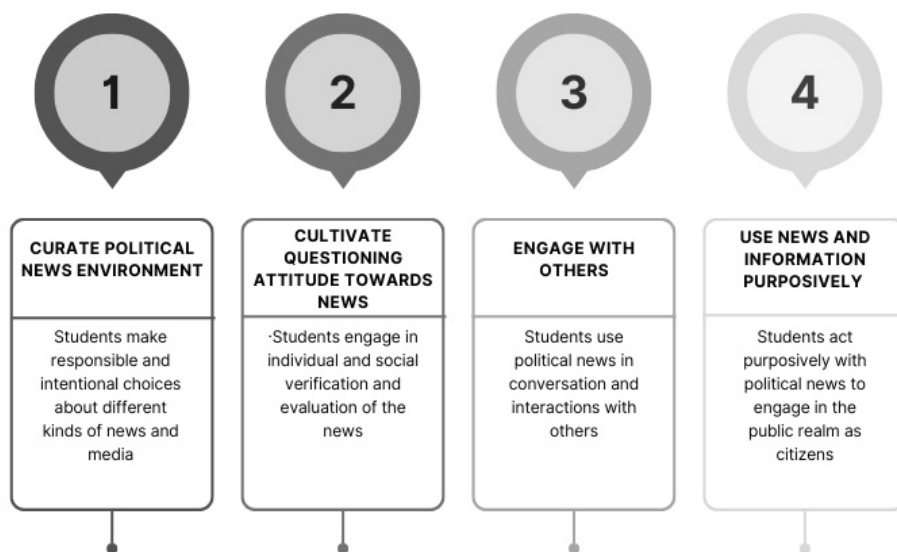
It would be wrong for us to see our students only as passive recipients of a continuous feed of political news and information. Most of our students are actively engaged on social media and have some practice expressing their own views in the public realm (even if rarely in explicitly political ways). Instructors have an important opportunity to help students realize that, in some ways, they are already

engaging with media in ways that have political implications. This is not to say that every interaction on social media is a form of political participation, even if some online engagement has the potential to empower students toward political action. But it is the case that emergent forms of social media and communication technologies have created new opportunities for democratic participation, doing old things in new ways (e.g., messaging an elected official on Twitter) and doing new things not previously possible (e.g., creating memes with global reach or retweeting a snowballing message). Our students are a part of a monumental transformation in political communication; their familiarity with this new media is a citizenship asset. Likewise, with the emergence of social media, evaluating the news and judging its trustworthiness (including the kinds of activities discussed above) are themselves participatory, social endeavors and our students have some experience doing this (Swart 2021). Finally, all forms of political engagement are bound up with the role of media, whether the consequences lead to deepening division or perhaps reflect the democratizing potential of media (e.g., the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street [Stoddard 2014]).

Although like many others, we often fret about the state of youth engagement in democracy, it is the case that many of our students are deeply concerned about political and social issues and see themselves as participants in efforts seeking political change. Advocacy clearly requires skills closely associated with information literacy (Nzomo and Fehrmann 2020). How do our students understand these links? Do students see their own social media “likes” or retweets, as speaking out in favor or against political issues? Could their social media engagement be more efficacious? How do their interactions with the news shape their views of pressing political and social concerns? Stoddard (2014) argues that the skills and dispositions required for 21<sup>st</sup> century global citizenship—examining complex issues from multiple perspectives, understanding government systems, taking political action—also

require that “citizens understand the nature of media and information they engage with, the ability to use media to communication and persuade others, and the most effective ways to organize and take action” (6).

**Figure 5.1 Informational Competency**



The special problems related to local and community news in the 21<sup>st</sup> century offers a useful route for teaching students about the links between their everyday news consumption and political engagement. The decline of local newspapers, concomitant with the global decline of newspaper readership, is old hat to observers of American politics. Our students, on the other hand, have rarely been given opportunity to think about the links between the unlikelihood of their participation in local politics and their media environment. Our classrooms are important spaces for forging these connections, by showing students how their day-to-day news environment shapes their understanding about what issues are important and what kinds of political engagement around those issues is possible. We suspect that few college students will identify local news among prominent sources of



information in a personal media inventory. We further suspect that few students could identify local issues or political controversies among current events. Encouraging students to broaden the kinds of news they receive to include more localized news similarly broadens their interactions with different groups of people and their potential engagement with issues of local concern. An increase in bus fare in a college town, or actions taken by a city council to decriminalized parking infractions, or the installation of crosswalk near campus could be potentially mobilizing issues—if only students knew these things were happening!

We have also had luck engaging students in developing media strategies around a specific issue, event, or policy; this is an accessible activity that foregrounds both sources of information and the tools and methods for using news for a particular goal. During election season, for example, students can be asked to plan a media strategy for being informed about issues, candidates, and parties, or for contributing to messaging about campus voter mobilization drives. Instructors who incorporate public policy into their American government courses, might ask students to similarly map an information and advocacy media plan, inclusive not only of where students believe they will need to find information, but also how and with whom they will use messages and news to advance a policy position or exercise voice in the democratic process.

Instructors can model this kind of purposive and positive engagement in the classroom. For example, Sweet-Cushman's (2019) use of Twitter to discuss emergent political issues in real time with her students fostered greater trust in social media as a source of political news. Students, and especially skeptics, who participated in the Twitter exercise were surprised to find the quality of information available to learn about and engage with others about political topics. We suspect even just the act of demystifying the process of using media to research political issues can improve student

engagement, especially by modeling authentic interactions that are not met with negative social repercussions (since fear of social reproach is a powerful disincentive to engage).

Providing students opportunities to generate their own media content can similarly reinforce a sense of trust and engagement. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University points to young adults' interest in generating and interacting with political content online as a form of political expression (2021), and this engagement can serve as a pipeline for other forms of action. CIRCLE found that young people who created their own media content about the 2020 Presidential Election felt like their political voice mattered; those who did not create their own media content reported feeling unqualified to proactively engage on social media (CIRCLE 2021). Perhaps most importantly, CIRCLE also found that young people who engaged in political voice by generating their own media, had previous media or information literacy education in school—clear evidence that what we do in our classrooms is linked to our students' propensity to engage in politics using news media.

Our students' relationships with news and their lived experiences with social media position them to be opinion leaders, even if many of them are not quite ready to jump at the opportunity. Powerful social norms may discourage young people from engaging in interactions about controversial news items (Swart 2021). It is not easy, and can be intimidating, to try find your voice on a news platform accessible to millions worldwide. Pew Research (2021) reports that a majority of political tweets are retweets, with no additional text from users who are sharing the original language—suggesting that the vast majority of people are more comfortable amplifying than in generating their own news content. Snowballing messages can be effective and there may be instances in which retweeting can be construed as political action. But we think it is important for students to consider

the distinctions between political activism and “slacktivism,” “the online form of self-aggrandizing, politically ineffective activism” (Cabrera et al. 2017, 400). It *is* true that social media interactions can facilitate political protest and citizen mobilization (Smith et al. 2019; Skoric 2012). March for Our Lives could not have organized nationwide school walkouts without social media platforms, for instance. It is also true that there are an awful lot of civically shallow forms of engagement on social media that fall short of meaningful political action. Following, liking, and resharing #blacklivesmatter messages may make students *feel* like they are engaging in change, but this is no substitute for kinds of political actions required to confront racism and racist structures off social media. The distinction between quality and more superficial forms of media interactions hinges on context and this is an important lesson we can impart to our students.

It's understandable that we would equate acting purposively with “doing something,” but in a contemporary media environment laden with misinformation and sensationalism, acting purposively also requires *not doing* some things. Kozyreva et al.’s (2022) aptly named “do-not-feed-the-trolls heuristic” is an accessible concept that draws students’ attention to their role and responsibilities in mitigating the consequences of messages propagated by bad actors (Kozyreva et al 2022). One of the reasons that we like the “do-not-feed-the-trolls” idea is that it foregrounds relationships and social interactions as key features of political news. On this point, some faculty may be interested in developing action-oriented assignments and activities that relate to government and corporate responsibility to foster media that support democratic values, such as public campaigns for news organization transparency.

In sum, informationally competent students seek positive interactions with respect to political news, whether in the form of sharing information, participating in different forms of social verification

on social media, exercising political voice by posting a view or perspective about a political candidate or public policy, or refusing to engage in insincere and damaging forms of engagement.

**Table 5.1 Informational Competency Learning Objectives & Teaching Strategies in the Democratic Citizenship Framework**

	<b>Learning Objectives</b>	<b>Teaching Strategies</b>	<b>Connections to Knowledge-Based Approaches</b>
<i>Caring</i>	Students can articulate why news is critical for democracy and how and why disinformation undermines democracy and trust; demonstrate interest in and responsibility for being informed; and are aware of their responsibility for shaping their own political news and daily media environments	Activities/assignments in which students notice and reflect on their daily media environments; discussions in which students identify the significance of information and political news to their own lives; activities in which students articulate the reasons misinformation is dangerous for democracy	Links to introductory textbook chapters on the necessity of media in democracy; linking institutions and the relationships between institutions, elected representatives, and citizens; content exploring the consequences to democracy of misinformation and “fake news”
<i>Choosing</i>	Students make strategic choices to curate media environments that support democratic values; demonstrate a questioning attitude toward political news and information; and appreciate that all news is constructed and related to their own choices and social interactions	Activities in which students generate strategies for building intentional media habits; assignments in which students deconstruct news items and identify multiple methods—individual and social—for the evaluation of news; activities that show how algorithms work in shaping what we know about politics	Links to knowledge-based content on media bias, media effects, and political actors’ media strategies; links to current events foregrounding examples of “fake news” and media algorithms
<i>Doing</i>	Students use political news purposively, for example, by informing themselves and others, generating positive interactions on social media, and recognizing the limits for different forms of “online” engagement to positively effect change.	Assignments that provide students with practice using news for different purposes; activities in which students create and share political information; assignments in which students examine the role of news and social media in collective mobilization and political action; activities that engage students in actions for accountability and transparency in the news	Links to current events and class content exploring the role of media in shaping the tone and tenor of American politics

## Box 5.2 Sample Assignment: Informational Competency Resource Guide

*Created in collaboration with Jen Jarson, Head Library, Penn State Lehigh Valley*

Depending on faculty interest and class constraints, this resource guide can easily be turned into a series of assignments, or in-class activities, or simply distributed to students for their own reference and reflection. This guide is adaptable for both synchronous and asynchronous classes. The goal of the guide is three-fold: 1) to encourage students to claim responsibility for their own relationship to political news (*caring*); 2) to help students identify and make strategic choices for cultivating a more intentional and critical daily news media environment (*choosing*); and 3) to provide students with some guidance about what exactly to do with the news (*doing*) in support of political engagement. Each section includes an activity, or applied practice, and a series of reflection questions.

*Caring:* Claim responsibility for and get invested in your personal news media environment

Activity/Application	Reflection
<p>Over a period of approximately three days, <i>construct an inventory of your daily media interactions.</i></p> <p>Include information about the technologies (e.g., smartphone, laptop, TV, print newspaper) and platforms (e.g., <i>New York Times</i>, TikTok, YouTube) from which you receive information.</p> <p>Note the topics of the information you engage with each day, for example, sports, entertainment, arts and culture, politics.</p> <p>Note the time of day and frequency with which you are interacting with information and news. Note the volume of information you are interacting on an average day (e.g., number of media-related notifications you receive, number of videos you watch, number of headlines/sources you reach).</p>	<p>What do you notice about your daily media interactions? Do you engage with more, or fewer, pieces of information about politics on a typical day than you previously thought? Do you interact with many, or just a few, different topics? Are your interactions with political news intentional or incidental?</p> <p>How and why is the information you receive important to you? How important is it that this information is trustworthy</p> <p>Whose voices and perspectives are represented in the messages you receive on a typical day—and whose voices might be left out? What kinds of information and news are missing from your daily media environment?</p>

*Choosing:* Be intentional and cultivate a questioning attitude toward political news

Activity/Application	Reflection
<p>Taking another look at your media inventory, identify the general themes of the information you receive most frequently. Note the presence of messages that are negative (or angry) and messages that are positive (or</p>	<p>How does your daily media environment shape the way you think about politics? How does the way political information is framed impact your reactions?</p>

<p>inspirational or hopeful). Identify the intended audience(s) present in your media environment.</p> <p>Select a news item about a political topic from your day-to-day media environment—this could be from a TikTok video, an Instagram post, or a news story from a traditional news organization. Take note of your initial response to this news item. What makes you inclined to believe (or not to believe) the content of this news item?</p> <p>Identify the authority behind this news item. Who has created this information? What purposes does it serve? Identify the evidence offered in support of the news item.</p> <p>Search another source for information about the same topic (for example, if you initially selected a TikTok video search for information about the same topic using a Google search or the <i>New York Times</i>). Evaluate differences in the content, tone, support offered, and implications of the messaging across different sources.</p>	<p>How might you make different choices that would lead to different kinds of messages in your media environment? What kinds of information do you need to feel confident in your role as a citizen?</p> <p>Think about the signposts of credibility in your daily media environment. What makes you trustful, or distrustful, of different sources of news and information? Do different people value different signposts of credibility—and if so, why?</p> <p>What is your role in determining the credibility of the news you receive? What strategies do you use—could you use—to evaluate the news and information that seems suspect or surprising to you?</p> <p>How can you tell if this message or news item is “biased” --and what exactly does “bias” mean? How do your personal beliefs and experiences shape the way you interpret this news story or message?</p> <p>What steps could you take to challenge—or alternatively support—political news items in your daily media environment?</p>
<p><i>Doing:</i> Act purposively with the news; use political news and information in a variety of political contexts that support democratic citizenship</p>	
Activity/Application	Reflection
<p>Take a final look at your media inventory. Identify information in your media environment that is of high value, consistent with democratic values. Identify information that is potentially damaging.</p> <p>Identify opportunities to participate in politics through an intentional media environment, for example, by joining social movement media campaigns, connecting to hashtags, signing online petitions, or communicating with elected officials</p>	<p>How can you use the information and messages you’re receiving? How could you share information with others in a way that would be personally and socially useful? What can you do to discourage the sharing of fake news, or misinformation? What are the potential ethical issues at stake when it comes to sharing information?</p> <p>How might you use, and generate, news media to collaborate with others on issues that are important to you? What are the limits of news</p>

<p>Engage in the social construction of news in one of the following ways:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Generate original content in response to a tweet or post on social media. Using information from additional sources, offer support for, refine, or challenge the original social media message. Forward/repost/post and keep track of replies, reposts/retweets, etc.</li> <li>2. Submit an article, op-ed, or letter to the editor of your school paper (or local paper) about a social or political issue using information from your media environment as support or evidence.</li> <li>3. Generate a headline or advocacy message about an event or issue that is important to you, noting your choices with respect to framing, potential audience, interpretation of the event/issue, and various points of view about the event/issue. Describe the evidence you have to support your headline/message.</li> </ol> <p><i>Note to instructors:</i> Option #3 is a useful option for students who are reluctant to publicly share or publish their personal views, and for faculty who are uncomfortable requiring their students to engage on social media. The headline example in #4 is adapted from Berry et al. (2021)</p>	<p>and social media for the kinds of changes you'd like to see?</p> <p>What kinds of assumptions and values are embedded in the news you constructed (in one of the options from 1-3)? How do you imagine different groups of people will receive and respond to the news and messages you've created? How have you anticipated different points of view in the news you've constructed? What outcomes do you hope to see?</p>
<p>Note on assessment: Because these activities and reflection questions focus on enhancing students' self-awareness and metacognitive skills, it may be most useful to focus on the degree of engagement with the activities and prompts and depth of students' analysis for grading purposes. Alternately, treating these activities and reflection questions as formative, or diagnostic, assessment to inform in-class discussions may be useful.</p>	

## CONCLUSION

As we write this paper, following Elon Musk's troubled purchase, Twitter is spiraling downward. Scores of academics and journalists have abandoned the site, many of whom previously had been characterized as "heavy tweeters," people who logged in six or seven times per week and who tweeted three to four times a week or more (Dang 2022). Several media outlets reported that immediately following Musk's takeover, a quick change in content regulation and mediation rules, and drastic workforce cuts, hate speech, impersonations, and parody accounts took off, fueling significant distrust in the site as a trusted source of information. The consequences are not only symbolic. An individual behind a parody Eli Lilly account tweeted, "we are excited to announce insulin is now free," sending Lilly's stock falling and inspiring a host of parody copycats, including a fake LeBron James account which suggested the basketball player was requesting a trade from the Lakers (Lee 2022). If humorous in hindsight (the individual behind the Eli Lilly post has apologized), these examples highlight the challenges of a 21<sup>st</sup> century post-truth news media environment in which it can be difficult to verify the authenticity of the news and in which conventional source verification is of limited utility. The spread of misinformation can become viral within minutes and does not require ill-intention. A false claim that Iran planned to execute 15,000 protestors circulated widely on social media thanks in part to amplification from well-meaning celebrities and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Goggin 2022). If a prime minister can retweet "fake news" is it any wonder our students lack confidence when it comes to making evaluative judgements about the trustworthiness of information? Our students are unlikely to be engaged in politics or to have feelings of political efficacy if they do not have confidence in their ability to make reasoned judgements about political news and information.



These are the kinds of experience that infuse our students' media lives, that shape their receptiveness of our efforts to teach them about American government and politics. These realities ought to be reflected in our classroom teaching strategies. The approaches we set out for teaching informational competency support the development of students' responsibility to be intentional and thoughtful consumers of information. Drawing on the assets that students bring to our classroom, informational competency builds on skills for cultivating a questioning attitude toward the news and practicing the use of news and media for democratic goals. Knowing when we can trust information is ultimately related to all other aspects of citizenship, including knowledge about government and important social and political issues; the motivation to be politically engaged, and the efficacy to know that one's participation matters and can make a difference.

## REFERENCES

Ashley, Seth. 2020. *News Literacy and Democracy*. New York: Routledge.

Association of College & Research Libraries. 2015. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education." The Association of College & Research Libraries, a Division of the American Library Association, Chicago, IL. <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>

Association of College & Research Libraries. 2021. "Companion Document to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education: Politics, Policy, and International Relations." The Association of College & Research Libraries, a Division of the American Library Association. [https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/Framework\\_Companion\\_PIR.pdf](https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/Framework_Companion_PIR.pdf)

- Baker-White, Emily. 2022, November 7. "TikTok May Be Suppressing Videos About the Midterms and Voting, Research Suggests." *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emilybaker-white/2022/11/07/tiktok-suppressing-gotv-election-messages/?sh=4a6442d84583>
- Berry, R. Alan, Jennifer L. Bonnet, and Judith E. Rosenbaum. 2021. "Teaching News Literacy in a Pandemic: Adapting to the Virtual Learning Environment." *Teaching Media Quarterly* 9 (1).
- Bluemle, Stefanie R. 2018. "Post-Facts: Information Literacy and Authority after the 2016 Election." *Libraries and the Academy*. 18 (2): 262-282. [10.1353/pla.2018.0015](https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2018.0015)
- Cabrera, N. L., Matias, C. E., & Montoya, R. (2017). Activism or slacktivism? The potential and pitfalls of social media in contemporary student activism. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 10(4), 400–415. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000061>
- Carillo, Ellen C. 2010. *MLA Guide to Digital Literacy*. New York: Modern Language Association of America.
- Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. 2021, October 28. "Media-Making about Social and Political Issues Builds Confidence in Teens." <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/media-making-about-social-and-political-issues-builds-confidence-teens>
- Cook, Peg and Mary Walsh. 2010. "Politics & Information Literacy: A Problem-Based Learning Approach." LOEX Conference Proceedings 2010. 17. <https://commons.emich.edu/loexconf2010/17>

- Cope, Jonathan and Richard Flannigan. 2013. "Information Literacy in the Study of American Politics: Using New Media to Teach Information Literacy in the Political Science Classroom." *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian* 21 (1): 3-34.
- Dang, Shelia. 2022. "Exclusive: Twitter is losing its most active users, internal documents show." Reuters. October 26. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/exclusive-where-did-tweeters-go-twitter-is-losing-its-most-active-users-internal-2022-10-25/>
- Dragseth, Meghann R. 2018. "Building Student Engagement Through Social Media." *Journal of Political Science Education* 16 (2): 243-256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2018.1550421>
- Feezell, Jessica T. 2021. "An Experimental Test of Using Digital Media Literacy Education and Twitter to Promote Political Interest and Learning in American Politics Courses." *Journal of Political Science Education* 17 (sup1): 634-648. DOI: [10.1080/15512169.2019.1694531](https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2019.1694531)
- Goggin, Ben. 2022. "False claim about Iran protester executions goes viral with help from celebrities and politicians." ABC News. November 15. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/misinformation/iran-protesters-death-sentencing-viral-verify-iran-rcna57261>
- Hamleers, Michael. 2022. "'I Don't Believe Anything They Say Anymore!' Explaining Unanticipated Media Effects Among Distrusting Citizens." *Media and Communication* 10 (3): 158-168. DOI:10.1745/mac/v10i3.5307.

- Harden, Melissa and Jeffrey J. Harden. 2020. "Embedding the New Information Literacy Framework in Undergraduate Political Science Courses." *PS: Political Science and Politics*. 53(2), 344-348.  
doi:10.1017/S1049096519001756
- Haung, Kalley. 2022. "For Gen Z, TikTok is the New Search Engine." *New York Times*. September 16.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/technology/gen-z-tiktok-search-engine.html?smid=url-share>
- Head, Slison, Barbara Fister, and Margy MacMillan. 2020. "Information Literacy in the Age of Algorithms: Student Experiences with News and Information, and the Need for Change." Project Information Literacy. <https://projectinfolit.org/>
- Head, Alison J., Erica DeFrain, Barbara Fister, and Margy MacMillan. 2019. "Across the Great Divided: How Today's College Students Engage with News." *First Monday* 24 (8).  
<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i8.10166>
- Jester, Natalie. 2022. "Twitter as Higher-Education Community of Practice: A Political Science Perspective." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 55 (4), 815-819.  
doi:10.1017/S1049096522000427
- Jones-Jang, S. Mo, Tara Mortensen, and Jingjin Liu. 2021. "Does Media Literacy Help Identification of Fake News? Information Literacy Helps, but Other Literacies Don't." *American Behavioral Scientist* 65 (2): 371-388, DOI: 10.1177/0002764219869406.
- Kaufman, Chelsea. 2020. "Civic Education in a Fake News Era: Lessons for the Methods Classroom." *Journal of Political Science Education* 17 (2): 326-331, DOI: [10.1080/15512169.2020.1764366](https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2020.1764366)

- Kozyreva, Anastasia, Sam Wineburg, Stephan Lewandowsky, and Ralph Hertwig. 2022. "Critical Ignoring as a Core Competence for Digital Citizens." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.
- Lee, Bruce Y. 2022. "Fake Eli Lilly Twitter Account Claims Insulin is Free, Stock Falls 4.35%." *Forbes*. November 12. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2022/11/12/fake-eli-lilly-twitter-account-claims-insulin-is-free-stock-falls-43/?sh=4694bfb241a3>
- Lupien, Pascal, and Lorna E. Rourke. 2021. "(Mis) information, information literacy, and democracy: Paths for pedagogy to foster informed citizenship." *Journal of Information Literacy* 15 (3).
- Mackey, Thomas P. and Trudie E. Jacobson. 2014. *Metaliteracy: Reinventing Information Literacy to Empower Learners*. Chicago: Neal-Schuman.
- Nzomo, Peggy and Paul Fehrmann. 2020. "Advocacy Engagement: The Role of Information Literacy Skills." *Journal of Information Literacy* 14 (11). <https://doi.org/10.11645/14.1.2695>
- Polizzi, Gianfranco. 2020. "Information Literacy in the Digital Age: Why Critical Digital Literacy Matters for Democracy." Chapter 1 in *Informed Societies: Why information literacy matters for citizenship, participation and democracy*, ed. Stephanie Goldstein. Facet.  
doi:10.29085/9781783303922
- Sanders, Jennifer Epley. 2021. "The Politics of Identity and Teaching Information Literacy in Political Science." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Political Research Pedagogy*, eds. Daniel J. Mallinson, Julia Marin Hellwege, and Eric D. Loepp. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shannon, Amanda and Vaughn Shannon. 2021. In *Teaching Research Methods in Political Science*, ed. Jeffrey L. Bernstein, 28-42. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishers.

- Shearer, Elisa. 2021. "More than Eight-in-Ten Americans Get News from Digital Devices." Pew Research Center. January 12. <https://pewrsr.ch/2MZqns7>
- Siena, Susan, & Roman, Tiffany. (2022). "Fighting Fake News: Using Peer Discussion Groups to Build News Media Literacy." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 55(4): 821-827.  
doi:10.1017/S1049096522000609
- Sivek, Susa Currie. 2018. "Both Facts and Feelings: Emotion and News Literacy." *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 10 (2): 123-138.
- Smith, Brian G., Arunima Krishna, and Reham Al-Sinan. 2019. "Beyond slacktivism: Examining the entanglement between social media engagement, empowerment, and participation in activism." *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 13 (3): 182-196.
- Stevens, Christy R. and Patricia J. Campbell. 2008." Collaborating with Librarians to Develop Lower Division Political Science Students' Information Literacy Competencies." *Journal of Political Science Education*, 4:2, 225-252, DOI: [10.1080/15512160801998114](https://doi.org/10.1080/15512160801998114)
- Stocking, Galen, Amy Mithcell, Katerina Eva Matsa, Regina Widjaya, Mark Jurkowitz, Shreentia Ghosh, Aaron Smith, Sarah Naseer, and Christopher St. Aubin. 2022. "The Role of Alternative Social Media in the News and Information Environment." Pew Research Center.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2022/10/06/the-role-of-alternative-social-media-in-the-news-and-information-environment/>

Stoddard, Jeremy. (2014). The Need for Media Education in Democratic Education. *Democracy and Education*, 22 (1), Article 4.

<https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol22/iss1/4>

Swart, Joelle. 2021. "Tactics of News Literacy: How Young People Access, Evaluate, and Engage with News on Social Media." *New Media & Society* 0(0):

<https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211011447>.

Sweet-Cushman, Jennie. 2019. "Social Media Learning as a Pedagogical Tool: Twitter and Engagement in Civic Dialogue and Public Policy." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 52:4, 763-770.

Thornton, Stephen. 2011. "Try to Learn (Politics) in a Data-Drenched Society: Can Information Literacy Save Us?" *European Political Science* 11: 213-223. <https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2011.20>

Thornton, Stephen. 2016. "Promoting Information Literacy and Information Research." In *Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science*, eds. John Ishiyama, William J. Miller, and Eszter Simon, 121-131. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishers.

Thornton, Stephen and Douglas B. Atkinson. 2022. "Everywhere and Nowhere: Information Literacy in the Political Science Classroom." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 55(3): 597-604.

doi:10.1017/S1049096522000397

Vercellotti, Timothy and Elizabeth C. Matto. 2015. "The Role of Media Use in the Classroom and at Home in Improving News Consumption and Political Knowledge." *Journal of Political Science Education* 12 (2): 151-168.

Williams, Michelle Hale and Jocelyn Jones Evans. 2008. "Factors in Information Literacy Education."

*Journal of Political Science Education* 4 (1): 116-130, <https://doi.org/10.1080/155121607018162>



Appendix I. Table 1. Democratic Citizenship Framework and Citizenship Competencies

		Citizenship Competencies				
		Institutional	Participatory	Deliberative	Informational	Emotional
		<i>Where does change happen?</i>	<i>How does change happen?</i>	<i>Who can we talk to?</i>	<i>When can we trust information?</i>	<i>Why should we care?</i>
Democratic Citizenship Framework	<b>Knowing:</b> <i>What do we need to know?</i>	Basic knowledge about the design of American national government, and that rationale behind that design	Work in Process		Media frame our understanding of politics, trust in government, and propensity to engage	Political emotion is linked to possibilities for democratic action; feelings and emotions (and opinions) are shaped in part by processes of political socialization; emotional cues are central to politics
	<b>Caring:</b> <i>Why should we care?</i>	Political institutions shape interactions with government, depend on citizens for accountability, and are required for social and political change.			The news we receive is a product of choices and shapes our relationship to politics; misinformation undermines democratic trust.	Political emotions can have positive or negative effects on possibilities for political action and can change; antipolitical sentiment undermines democracy
	<b>Choosing:</b> <i>What choices do we have?</i>	Some routes for exercising political voice are more appropriate than others since power is horizontally and vertically integrated/fragmented			An intentional media environment and questioning attitude toward the news can support efficacious relationships with government.	There is a difference between experience and responding to political emotions; citizens have agency in choosing to channel emotions through different kinds of political action
	<b>Doing:</b> <i>What can we do as citizens?</i>	Engaging with and in institutions to exercise influence over collective decisions and hold government accountable			Using news as a tool for collaborating with others, engaging in collective forms of action, resisting misinformation, and seeking change.	Engaging in political action with emotional-awareness, linking expressions of emotions to concrete political goals and actions
	Classroom practice	Notice and comment assignments, visiting elected officials, being “in” institutions at different levels of government			Assignments that engage students in news creation, mapping media strategies, connecting news to different forms of political action	Narrative and reflection exercise inviting examination of the causes and consequences of political emotions, assignments building understanding about difference and compromise