

**Critical Thinking and Media Literacy in an Age of Misinformation:  
One College's Attempt to Tackle the Problem  
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Introduction:

Critical thinking is gathering and analyzing information to make a rational judgment. It depends on reasoning to make that decision logically or rationally. To be a critical thinker, we must understand our own biases but be open to new ideas and perspectives. We must continue to ask questions and seek additional information and approach decision-making with logic rather than emotions. We must have a healthy skepticism about information and its origin as well as be able to follow the evidence to a rational conclusion. According to a recent poll from the Pearson Institute and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, about three-quarters of US adults say misinformation is leading to more extreme political views and behaviors such as instances of violence based on race, religion or gender. 91% believe that the spread of misinformation is a problem with 74% of that number believing that it is a major problem

As political science faculty, perhaps more than faculty in any other discipline, the responsibility of teaching our students how to distinguish between factual and fake information is taking up more of our time in the classroom. This requires teaching more critical thinking skills and incorporating appropriate assignments into our courses. This paper will focus on the pedagogical tools used in the classroom in a small, rural West Texas community college and the approaches to these challenges. The bottom line is that we can no longer teach the way we used to – it is imperative that our students take ownership of their own learning experience beginning with their first entry into the college classroom.

Background Information:

Our students today have grown up with digital news media and social media mostly on their smartphones. The spread of misinformation has coincided with the rise of social media. Fake news is not new, although it certainly spiked after the 2016 presidential election in this country. The use of yellow journalism began in the 1890's as a way to sensationalize the news in newspaper reporting to attract readers and increase circulation. The term "fake news" was first used to describe satirical shows and publications and the concept meant made-up news for entertainment, not for informing or deceiving. Some scholars are interested in the nature of misinformation contained in this fake news with the goal of being able to better detect it and distinguish it from real news. Others want to focus on the users and why people fall for fake news and stress media literacy to protect ourselves from this vulnerability. (Molina, et al, 2021)

Research from the Harvard Kennedy School suggests that more efforts should be devoted to improving acceptance of reliable information rather than fighting misinformation (2022). The report goes on to provide some useful definitions:

- (1) Real news acknowledges that journalism is not perfect, but it has provided credible and objective information which includes hard news (breaking news) and soft news (less timely information);
- (2) False news is information that is intentionally false and may include malicious stories promoting conspiracy theories;
- (3) Polarized content is not completely false, but it is characterized by its “goodness-of-fit with a particular ideology” where objectivity is not the goal. It asserts truth through arguments that justify their own position and if this agrees with an individual’s prior knowledge or belief, it is more easily accepted;
- (4) Satire is an intentionally false story meant to be perceived as unrealistic, using parody to mock issues and individuals;
- (5) Misreporting is unintentional false reporting from the professional news media organizations. They do not intend to be deceitful, but misreporting can occur;
- (6) Commentary contains opinions and should not be confused with hard news;
- (7) Persuasive information or promotional information is masked as a news article and could be content produced by a political party, campaign, government or public agency;
- (8) Citizen journalism is where any person can “report” information by sharing opinions, photos, observations, or activities using their cell phones, blogs or websites.

There are concerns that misinformation combined with the current political polarization leads to less trust in democracy and our government (Hollyer, et al., 2019). Our students are struggling to determine if an article is fake or reliable (Head, et al., 2018). From the same Pearson-AP poll mentioned earlier, 75% of US adults believe that misinformation is leading to more extreme political views and behaviors like violence based on race, religion, or gender. And, political party affiliation does not make a difference – 80% of Democrats and 70% of Republicans believe that misinformation increases extreme political views.

All of this is a concern for those of us in the classroom trying to teach our students critical thinking and media literacy. We want our students to have the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to be successful in the world today, and we as educators are trying to determine the best ways to develop their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values effectively. We all have so many decisions to make every day, so we need to save our critical thinking for the things that matter. We are helping our students determine when they do their best work in order to make the best decisions. We teach reflective judgment, asking them to think about a problem or argument just a little longer. Where they rush to judgment, we must convince them to take the time to develop a solution or conclusion. We want them to consider alternatives to overcome their own bias and remove emotions from their thinking.

### The Project:

On our campus, we have researched and created active-learning classrooms which are configured differently from a traditional classroom. Desks and chairs are easily movable, there are multiple movable whiteboards and numerous screens linked to the internet. There is no “front of the classroom”, and the atmosphere is much more relaxed allowing students to interact with each other easily. Although, this type of classroom is not necessary for active learning, it is a real asset for students. There are many benefits of active learning. Course material is introduced

through thinking, writing, talking and problem solving between the students. There is frequent and immediate feedback which helps the students overcome misconceptions and develop a better understanding of the material. By working on activities, they develop relationships with their peers and the instructor. This interaction also helps to create a sense of community in the classroom. It also allows the instructor to observe the students to gain insight on how they learn best. In my classrooms, we have focused many of our activities on media literacy and critical thinking. The lack of information and acceptance of fake news is alarming.

In my position at Midland College, I also serve as the Director of the Honors Program and as Advisor for our chapter of Phi Theta Kappa (PTK), the International Honor Society for Community College Students. One of the major requirements for PTK is to implement a College Project which directly supports the mission of the college. Four of the students and I began meeting during the summer of 2022 to decide on our project. I told them about a presentation that I saw at the Southwestern Political Science Association where a couple of political scientists and a philosopher from Georgia State University presented a paper on critical thinking during these times of misinformation. The three of them had created an interdisciplinary module to address the intersection of critical thinking, misinformation, democracy, and higher education. Using this work as a starting point, the students decided to put together learning modules that would address critical thinking and media literacy. The General Education Curriculum Committee at Midland College was already in discussion about media literacy, so they gave their support to the project in addition to our college president, the vice president of instruction, the Teaching & Learning Center, and the department chair of Student Success. At this point, the students began researching and ultimately decided on eight learning modules that were created in Articulate 360 Rise. They are now part of every faculty member's Canvas account and can be easily dropped into their courses where they can choose a module separately or as a complete module containing all eight. The modules were tested during the fall of 2022 in all of my government classes and in five of the Effective Learning classes. The students made a presentation at the January Faculty Convocation to demonstrate the modules and allow faculty to ask questions and offer feedback. Beginning this spring semester (2023), the modules will be incorporated into all of the Effective Learning classes which are required for all students at Midland College.

The learning modules are entitled "Learning to Think for Yourself: In An Age of Misinformation" and the eight sub-modules are:

1. What is Critical Thinking?
2. The Critical Thinking Process
3. Understanding Cognitive Bias
4. Fallacies and Bias
5. How to Identify Reliable Information
6. How to Identify Satire and Fake News
7. The Rise of Social Media and the Dangers
8. Conspiracy Theories.

They are currently working on a ninth module on Artificial Intelligence. Feedback from the fall classes has been very positive. In my classes, we had great discussion on the modules after the

students had completed them. I had them complete all eight modules for a participation grade and it worked seamlessly in Canvas. The modules will be viewed during one of our sessions in Baltimore.

Conclusion:

The most exciting thing about this project is that it was created by students for students. This fits in so well with the literature on active learning discussed above. They did all the research and chose activities that they believed would be interesting to other students. Their work was so well received by faculty and administration, and we are enthusiastic about the conversations that these modules can foster in the classroom. We believe that faculty from all disciplines can benefit from one or more of the modules. Because these topics are integral to our discipline of political science, all the faculty in my department are using all eight modules. Some faculty are beginning their classes with the critical thinking modules and then dropping in the others as they cover different topics. We look forward to your feedback.

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