

FREEDOM
FORUM



Media Literacy and the First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or

LESSON PLAN: MEDIA LITERACY AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT

Lesson question:

How is media literacy related to the First Amendment, and why does it matter?

Lesson summary

In this lesson, students will begin exploring media literacy by considering how people consume information, what media literacy is and how it's connected to the First Amendment. Students will then explore how news media has changed over time and the different methods used by the media to gain consumers and influence their views. Students will test their own skills at detecting fake or AI-generated media and reflect on how these actions impact their understanding of the world. Students will learn about how traditional media has changed and explore newspaper front pages to find examples of profit-driven news, consolidation of media and the use of news agencies. Students will end by reflecting on how media literacy can help them navigate the media actions that impact them the most.

Lesson objectives

Students will be able to:

- Define media literacy and understand why it is necessary to be a responsible and informed consumer of information
- Explore and use online tools for building skills in detecting fake and AI-generated materials
- Identify and find modern examples from Today's Front Pages to demonstrate their understanding of changes in news media
- Reflect on how they are impacted by actions of the news media and identify media literacy skills to help them be responsible and informed consumers of information lives

Lesson materials

- Student handouts for introduction, activities 1-3 and wrap-up
- Student devices (to access online tools/games and [Today's Front Pages](#), which is also available as an app)

Lesson sequence

1. Introduce students to the lesson question: "How is media literacy related to the First Amendment, and why does it matter?" Ask them to define media literacy and discuss how they think it connects to the First Amendment.
2. Distribute the **introduction handout**. Have students identify the five freedoms in the First Amendment and ask them how these freedoms are connected to the sharing and consumption of information. Then read the introduction.

3. Distribute the **handout for Activity 1** with three historical photos of children consuming information. Have students discuss the images and then brainstorm a list of ways people access information today.
4. Distribute the **Let's learn more! Part 1 handout** and read about the democratization of information. Then have students check their understanding of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda.
5. Distribute the **handouts for Activity 2**. Partner students and have them choose two games to test their misinformation and disinformation detection skills. Students will need to access a device to explore two of the deepfake and AI detection games. The teacher should review all these games to make sure the content is appropriate for their own classroom and is not blocked by school security. The teacher could narrow the choices based on their own assessment.
6. Distribute the **Let's learn more! Part 2 handout** and read about four strategies for being a savvy media consumer: fact-checking, checking additional sources, investigating the source and looking for complexity. Then have students check their understanding of these concepts by choosing strategies for specific scenarios.
7. Distribute the **handout for Activity 3**. Have students learn about the impacts of new media changes on local news by completing a definition match as they check their understanding. Then have students work in pairs to investigate Today's Front Pages at FrontPages.FreedomForum.org or using the Today's Front Pages app. Using the organizer, students will look for certain impacts within the newspapers, including profit-driven decisions, consolidation and reproduced stories. Students will reflect at the end of the activity. The teacher could ask students to share ideas from their reflection.
8. Distribute the **wrap-up activity handouts**. Students will reflect on what they have learned in the lesson about media tactics and on what they can do with their media literacy skills.

Introduction: Media Literacy and the First Amendment

Lesson question:

How is media literacy related to the First Amendment, and why does it matter?

How do the five freedoms connect to media literacy?

Circle the FIVE freedoms listed in the First Amendment. How do the five freedoms connect to the sharing and consumption of information?



Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

What is media literacy?

Media literacy involves active engagement and the development of skills to become critical consumers of media. When we consume media, there are many factors at play and questions to ask about the information we are taking in:

- Who created it?
- Who was the intended audience?
- What is the motivation or purpose of the media?

Why is media literacy important?

New trends in information media have created a need for more savvy consumers of information. With so many voices and media outlets, consumers need new skills for discerning fact from fiction and information from disinformation. In the quest for truth, media consumers must consider the source, facts, context, intended audience and purpose of news media. In other words, they must practice media literacy.

The five freedoms and media literacy

Information media, i.e., traditional, broadcast and digital, are major highways for the exercise of First Amendment rights. The invention of the printing press once transformed how information could be published. Today, the internet, smartphones, blogging platforms and social media have further transformed information sharing. Now, anyone with a phone and an internet connection can create and share news, opinions or commentary – instantly, globally and at little cost.

Lesson Plan: Media Literacy and the First Amendment

The rights to religion, speech, press, assembly and petition all connect to the sharing of information. Freedom of religion allows us to fully explore ideas and create a belief system, but it may also result in people intentionally or unintentionally dismissing ideas that conflict with their beliefs, even if those other ideas are valid or true. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press allow us to convey those ideas to others for comparison, consideration and evaluation, but the “breathing space” the First Amendment requires allows some falsehoods to enter the public discourse. And the freedoms of assembly and petition are a direct means for people participating in self-governance to advance the ideas they determine are the best but may reinforce false concepts if we only align with those who share our values or views of the truth. Media literacy helps us reinforce our truths and check our blind spots.

Activity 1: Consuming the media

Directions: Look at the historical photographs below of children consuming information and news media. Discuss how they are consuming their information. Then brainstorm a list of as many sources as you can that people use to get information today.



(AP Photo)

Children crowd around the family radio.



(AP Photo/RH)

Children use a computer game.



(AP Photo)

Two children read a newspaper.

How do people access information media today? Brainstorm as many ideas as possible.

Let's learn more! Part 1

Lesson question:

How is media literacy related to the First Amendment, and why does it matter?

The democratization of information

The marketplace of ideas is the concept that if everyone can speak freely, the best ideas will rise to the top and be implemented, to the benefit of all of society. That concept has become more complicated by the democratization of information through technology. This has created space for more voices and new forms of journalism. Blogs, vlogs and citizen journalists have made it so that almost anyone can be a content creator. Social media platforms are now among the most common ways people get their news.

Traditional media vs. social media

Prior to the proliferation of the internet, traditional media outlets like newspapers, television, radio, magazines and books were the main sources of news. Today, these traditional media sources are struggling to keep pace with digital and especially social media. Like traditional newsrooms, social media companies have First Amendment rights, which means they can decide what content to allow or remove based on their own content moderation policies and consistent with their terms of service. But unlike news organizations, platforms generally don't produce original reporting or take editorial responsibility for the posts users share. That's why they're often described not as publishers who create or edit individual posts, but as distributors who can curate, remove or limit posts or the types of posts users see.

The power of algorithms

Media outlets are business competitors; they compete for users and advertisers. Financial competition doesn't just affect how journalists work; it shapes what we, the public, get to know. Social media platforms – even those associated with traditional news outlets – use technology to filter the posts that enter your feed. For example, social media platforms' algorithms use your search and viewing history, shopping habits, profile information and platform usage to suggest news, products and other media content. Algorithms can create filter bubbles and echo chambers where media consumers encounter only information confirming their own beliefs. In these filter bubbles, it's easier to lose sight of the larger context and believe false or misleading stories and harder to see multiple perspectives and fact-check the media.

Pause and reflect

If you know that algorithms are tracking what you like, view and buy in order to filter what information you see in your feed, what could you do to find different points of view outside your “filter bubble”?

How have changes in information media affected the quality of our news?

With so much content available online, it can be hard to know what – or whom – to trust. Experts use the term “information pollution” to describe the flood of misleading or manipulative content that spreads easily across platforms. This includes misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and biased content.

Public trust in the news media is declining. Many Americans say they are worried about misinformation and disinformation, and surveys show fewer people believe journalists are fair or impartial. In this context, it’s important to understand the difference between misinformation, disinformation and propaganda.

Misinformation	Disinformation	Propaganda
False or inaccurate content shared without the intent to mislead. For example, someone might post “It’s going to snow tomorrow” based on an outdated forecast.	Deliberately false content created to deceive, like a false weather alert claiming schools are closed when they’re not.	True, false or misleading information that is used to promote a specific political cause or agenda. Its goal is persuasion, not necessarily deception.

Bias in the media

In each of these cases, and across the internet, bias is also a major concern. Biased content isn’t always false; in fact, it often includes accurate facts. But those facts may be presented in a way that supports a specific point of view through either transparent bias, where the writer openly shares their opinion, or hidden bias, where opinion is presented as objective reporting.

What are deepfakes and cheap fakes?

Deepfakes and cheap fakes are fake or manipulated images, audio or video content.

Specifically, a deepfake is fake audio or video generated when an AI program is fed a series of real examples of a person's image and voice and uses them to produce something new. Cheap fakes are like deepfakes but involve simpler manipulation, such as face swapping, strategic editing of real footage, and speeding up or slowing down of video or audio. The result is a portrayal of someone saying or doing something that never actually occurred.

What is a social bot?

Social bots are automated social media accounts that mirror what humans would be doing on social media. Bot activity can be both helpful and harmful. Bots can perform customer service, regulate harmful content and disseminate important information. They can also spread misinformation and propaganda, drown out human voices, flood social media with misinformation, artificially inflate metrics to make trends seem more popular, and help facilitate scams and phishing.

Using deepfake and AI detection tools

There are many resources for checking images, video, audio and text to help determine if they are AI-generated. A good place to start with an image is a reverse-image search on Google. The [MIT media lab](#) provides support for navigating the world of deepfakes and misinformation.

Tips for being a savvy consumer of information

1. Stop. Then think. Then act.
2. Stop sharing before you know more.
3. Use verification tools and online educational resources.
4. Listen to your gut and the advice of researchers and fact-checkers.

Pause and reflect

Have you ever shared a piece of news or a post online that you later found out was misleading or biased? What made it seem trustworthy at the time, and what might you do differently before sharing something in the future?

Check your understanding!

Directions: Circle the type of information best associated with the scenario.

<p>1. A social media influencer who covers local news issues in your city endorses a specific candidate for the mayoral election. They post three positive stories about the endorsed candidate and two negative stories about his opponent.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Misinformation ○ Disinformation ○ Propaganda
<p>2. A local news post on social media reports tomorrow's soccer game will be at 7 p.m. at the high school, but you know the game was just moved to the middle school because the field is flooded.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Misinformation ○ Disinformation ○ Propaganda
<p>3. A social media post goes viral reporting that an unpopular police chief was trafficking drugs out of a local grocery store. There is no evidence that this is true. The police chief's brother owns the grocery store, and she often helps him on weekends.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Misinformation ○ Disinformation ○ Propaganda

Activity 2: Can you spot AI and deepfake content?

Lesson question:

How is media literacy related to the First Amendment, and why does it matter?

Let's try some deepfake and AI detection games!

The following tools are meant to help you practice how to spot a deepfake using what's available to you: your critical thinking and analytical skills.

Directions: Pick two games and use the handout to monitor your progress.

Which Face Is Real?

What is it? Compare two faces side by side. One is a real human, and the other is generated by AI. Click on the real one.

Who's behind it? University of Washington researchers Jevin West and Carl Bergstrom

Spot the Troll

What is it? Look at real social media posts and decide whether they came from a legitimate person or organization's account or from an internet troll.

Who's behind it? Clemson University's [Media Forensics Hub](#)

Odd One Out

What is it? Spot the AI-generated artwork among four options. One is fake, and the others are real pieces of art created by humans.

Who's behind it? Google's Arts and Culture staff

Detect Fakes

What is it? Choose whether five images presented to you are real or AI-generated. With each question, you can share how confident you are in your answer. At the end, you can see how you did compared with other users and share why you thought the images were AI-generated.

Who's behind it? Researchers Negar Kamali, Aakriti Kumar, Karyn Nakamura, Angelos Chatzimpampas, Jessica Hullman, Matt Groh [at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management](#)

Spot the AI Images

What is it? Select the human-created picture or artwork from a series of side-by-side comparisons of real images and images created by AI text prompts. This resource has additional tools for how to spot deepfakes and other AI-generated content.

Who's behind it? *PCMag*, a U.S. technology magazine.

Can You Trust Your Eyes?

What is it? Answer a series of five questions about whether the provided image is AI-generated or real. This resource promotes better understanding of how to detect misinformation and disinformation, particularly in an election year.

Who's behind it? Axios, a national news outlet

Activity 2: Can you spot AI and deepfake content?

Lesson question:

How is media literacy related to the First Amendment, and why does it matter?

Let's try some deepfake and AI detection games!

Directions: Pick two games to play and then reflect on the media literacy skills you are practicing and learning.

First game name:

What did it ask you to do?

How did you do?

What tips or hints did you get to help you improve your media literacy skills?

Second game name:

What did it ask you to do?

How did you do?

What tips or hints did you get to help you improve your media literacy skills?

Reflection: After playing these two games, how would you assess your skills at detecting fake and AI-generated content? What skills did you learn?

Let's learn more! Part 2

Lesson question:

How is media literacy related to the First Amendment, and why does it matter?

How can you be a savvy media consumer?

The First Amendment protects a broad range of speech, including content that may be false, misleading or biased. That means it's up to each of us to become savvy consumers of media. This is where media literacy comes in.

Strategies to evaluate the media you consume	
Fact-checking	See if a fact-checker has covered the story. Sites like PolitiFact, Snopes and FactCheck.org can help verify or disprove viral rumors.
Checking additional sources	Search for and read more stories about the topic to compare coverage of the same story from multiple reputable sources.
Investigating the source	Look for an "About" page, check the organization's mission and funding, and see if the outlet lists real reporters and editors. Search for what other reputable sources say about that source.
Looking for complexity	Most issues are not black and white. Reliable journalism usually includes background, context and multiple perspectives.

Check your understanding! Part 1

Directions: Circle the strategy that best fits the scenario.

<p>1. A news story seems to be true but has a clear bias. You're not sure whether the article is excluding details and facts to support the publisher's opinion.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fact-checking ○ Checking additional sources ○ Investigating the source ○ Looking for complexity
<p>2. There is a news story that is spreading everywhere on social media. You think it might be misinformation or include incorrect facts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fact-checking ○ Checking additional sources ○ Investigating the source ○ Looking for complexity
<p>3. While doing research, you come across a news article that would be perfect for your topic, but you have never heard of the source before.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fact-checking ○ Checking additional sources ○ Investigating the source ○ Looking for complexity
<p>4. A serious accident impacted many people. You find a news story online with quick and simple answers that seem impossible for the media to have so soon.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fact-checking ○ Checking additional sources ○ Investigating the source ○ Looking for complexity

Check your understanding! Part 2

Directions: Read the specific situation and decide what you would do first. There may be more than one reasonable answer, so explain your choice.

1. You are doing research on a current conflict in Southeast Asia. You have found three articles that have significantly different facts. What is your next step?

- **Fact-checking**
- **Checking additional sources**
- **Investigating the source**
- **Looking for complexity**

Explain your choice.

2. You are reading a developing story about a chemical spill in your city. You want to know what happened, who is to blame and what you should do to stay safe. Knowing the truth and unfolding details is important. What is your next step?

- **Fact-checking**
- **Checking additional sources**
- **Investigating the source**
- **Looking for complexity**

Explain your choice.

3. You want to find out information about a medical treatment for your sports injury. You go to a website with a lot of information, but you notice several misspelled words and broken links. What is your next step?

- **Fact-checking**
- **Checking additional sources**
- **Investigating the source**
- **Looking for complexity**

Explain your choice.

Activity 3: Using media literacy skills to investigate the front pages

Why is traditional news, especially local news, under threat?

Traditional news outlets, especially local newspapers, have faced steep financial decline in the past two decades. Much of this is due to a loss of advertising revenue as ads have shifted online. As print subscriptions and ad sales dropped, many newspapers downsized or shut down entirely. Some communities are now considered “news deserts,” areas with little or no access to original local news reporting. These financial pressures impact journalism in several ways.

Check your understanding!

Read the impacts and impact descriptions. Underline or highlight the key ideas in the description. Match the impact with the correct description.

Impact on journalism	Description of the impact
1. Fewer reporters means fewer stories	_____ Investigative reporting, especially on powerful institutions, takes time, money and legal support. When newsrooms lack funding, they’re less likely to be able to pursue stories that hold officials or corporations accountable, even if those stories are in the public interest.
2. Profit-driven coverage choices	_____ As staff members are cut, newsrooms have fewer people to report stories. This can lead to more reliance on news releases that present only one side of a story (often from the point of view of those in power), wire services or national content. It can also lead to less original, in-depth local reporting.
3. Loss of watchdog journalism	_____ In some cases, hedge funds or politically motivated owners have purchased struggling news outlets. These owners may cut budgets or influence editorial direction, potentially shaping what is or isn’t covered.
4. Ownership and influence concerns	_____ When revenue is tight, some outlets may prioritize stories that attract reader attention, even if those stories are less impactful. Sensational or emotionally charged content can crowd out nuanced reporting.

Activity 3: Using media literacy skills to investigate the front pages

Freedom Forum receives more than 500 front pages daily from newspapers across the country and around the world. Some days, the stories on the front pages are all very similar; some days, they are very different. With more than 500 newspapers, there are many perspectives and stories to choose from – but fewer than we might assume. As we learned earlier, lack of funding has had deep impacts on independent media sources and local news.

Comparing front pages: Can you find the impacts?

- **Profit-driven choices:** In order to compete, newspapers prioritize stories that attract attention through emotional appeal, even if those stories are less impactful.
- **Consolidation:** Many local news sources have been purchased by larger companies.
- **Reproduced stories:** Local newspapers rely on wire stories from news agencies like The Associated Press and Reuters, instead of hiring local reporters and journalists.

Step 1 — At a glance: Go to FrontPages.FreedomForum.org/. Click on “ALL NEWSPAPERS.” Across the top, you will see dozens of pages with 18 different newspapers per page. Using the numbers at the top, click on several pages and browse through the front pages.

At first glance, what do you notice? Do you see any similarities or differences between the newspapers?

What stands out to you?

Write down two questions you have about the front pages.

Step 2 — Finding profit-driven choices: Find the page or pages that have newspapers from your home state. Look at the major headlines across at least 10 newspapers. Look for headlines and photographs that use emotional appeals like fear, anger, sadness, joy or jealousy. Write down five headlines and describe three images that attract readers through strong emotional language.

Headline	Emotion
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
Image description	Emotion
1.	
2.	
3.	
<p>Reflect: How do you think profit-driven choices to focus on emotionally charged headlines and stories impact our understanding of the world?</p>	

Step 3 — Noticing consolidation of the local news: As mentioned above, several large media companies have bought out many local news sources. What appear to be different news media outlets are actually owned by the same company. Examine the top and bottom of the front page. Look for evidence that the newspaper is owned by a larger corporation. Find three newspapers that are part of each group and write down some basic information in the space below. If you think you've found one, look for others owned by the same corporation.

Find three newspapers that are owned by a particular larger corporation.

1. **Newspaper name** _____ **State:** _____

Lead story: _____

2. **Newspaper name** _____ **State:** _____

Lead story: _____

3. **Newspaper name** _____ **State:** _____

Lead story: _____

Do these newspapers have anything in common?

Find three newspapers that are owned by a different larger corporation.

1. **Newspaper name** _____ **State:** _____

Lead story: _____

2. **Newspaper name** _____ **State:** _____

Lead story: _____

3. **Newspaper name** _____ **State:** _____

Lead story: _____

Do these newspapers have anything in common?

Reflect: How do you think consolidation and control of local news by national and international companies impacts our understanding of the world?

Step 4 — Finding reproduced stories in local news: As mentioned above, local newspapers have fewer reporters. They rely more on news agencies, like The Associated Press, or on their parent company, like USA TODAY. When reading multiple newspapers, you might think you are getting multiple perspectives, but this might not be true. Choose three front pages. Look at the byline on the articles on the front page. Write down the information below.

Newspaper 1 name _____

Article topic	Author (if listed)	Agency or affiliation	Is the author local? Why?
SNAP benefits	Geoff Mulvihill and David A. Lieb	Associated Press	No. The AP is a news agency that sends wire stories worldwide.

Newspaper 2 name _____

Article topic	Author (if listed)	Agency or affiliation	Is the author local? Why?
SNAP benefits	Geoff Mulvihill and David A. Lieb	Associated Press	No. The AP is a news agency that sends wire stories worldwide.

Newspaper 3 name _____

Article topic	Author (if listed)	Agency or affiliation	Is the author local? Why?
SNAP benefits	Geoff Mulvihill and David A. Lieb	Associated Press	No. The AP is a news agency that sends wire stories worldwide.

Reflection: How does this impact my understanding of the news media?

- **Profit-driven choices:** In order to compete, newspapers prioritize stories that attract attention through emotional appeal, even if those stories are less impactful.
- **Consolidation:** Many local news sources have been purchased by larger companies.
- **Reproduced stories:** Local newspapers rely on wire stories from news agencies like The Associated Press and Reuters, instead of hiring local reporters and journalists.

1. Write down which impact on news media above that you think most affects your understanding of the news. Explain why.

2. Now that you know more about how media sources make choices and reproduce stories, how will that impact your approach to engaging with the news?

Wrap-up

Lesson question:

How is media literacy related to the First Amendment, and why does it matter?

In this lesson, we have learned about factors that influence the way you consume the news media. Just knowing that these factors influence your understanding of the world is a media literacy skill. Once you know they exist, you can use your media literacy skills to navigate information to be a knowledgeable and responsible consumer of information.

Part 1 directions: Review the following factors that influence how you consume the news media and pick three that you think impact you the most.

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Algorithms | <input type="radio"/> Filter bubbles | <input type="radio"/> Propaganda |
| <input type="radio"/> Disinformation | <input type="radio"/> Misinformation | <input type="radio"/> Bias |
| <input type="radio"/> AI-generated content | <input type="radio"/> Profit-driven choices | <input type="radio"/> Consolidated news outlets |
| <input type="radio"/> Reproduction of news | <input type="radio"/> Social bots | <input type="radio"/> Deepfakes |

How do the factors you chose impact your consumption of news media and your understanding of the world?

Part 2 directions: Review the following media literacy skills discussed in this lesson. Pick two that you will try to practice more often. Explain why.

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Investigate the source | <input type="radio"/> Check additional sources | <input type="radio"/> Listen to educational researchers |
| <input type="radio"/> Look for complexity | <input type="radio"/> Learn more before you share | <input type="radio"/> Listen to your gut, then learn more |
| <input type="radio"/> Fact-check | <input type="radio"/> Be aware of your filter bubble | <input type="radio"/> Look beyond your social media network |
| <input type="radio"/> Use verification tools | <input type="radio"/> Stop and think before posting | <input type="radio"/> Slow down and review media carefully |

Why do you want to practice these media literacy skills more often? How can they help you be a more knowledgeable and responsible consumer of information media?