# (MIS)INFORMATION CREATION AS A PROCESS:

## A Method for Teaching Critical Media Literacy Designed to Work with Students of All Political Persuasions

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, the dangers to democracy of the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation have become clear at an accelerating pace. While the use of misinformation and disinformation for strategic advantage is not new, the continuing fallout from the role misinformation and disinformation played in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections in the United States has made the issue more urgent—and more contentious. Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, when the Russian Federation launched its widespread coordinated disinformation campaign during, librarians have stepped up to combat misinformation and disinformation in their communities and the larger information ecosystem by applying principles and best practices of information literacy education.[1]

However, librarians walk a fine line on how to educate audiences to become critical consumers of information, particularly on politically sensitive topics. It is all too easy to lose audience members' trust and receptiveness to our message when a component or the entirety of our presentation directly challenges the beliefs of participants, as psychological research has shown and librarians' experiences have confirmed.[2] To be clear, we should teach with the aim of helping students become adept at evaluating the ability of sources of information to optimally fulfill their information needs, and I am in no way arguing we should be "neutral" in our fight against misinformation and disinformation. I do argue, however, that applying more finesse to our instruction can augment our impact and that more subtle approaches to encouraging critical media literacy that educate students and other community members without provoking political defensiveness by naming and shaming a particular individual's source of information.

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## THE APPROACH: "INFORMATION CREATION AS A PROCESS"

I decided to test how the Frame "Information Creation as a Process" from the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* could provide an avenue to remedy this conundrum.[3] This Frame invites students to discover how raw data and observations are distilled into finished information products and identify the people and procedures that modify the raw data and observations along the way and their motivations for making those modifications. Applying the Frame to misinformation and disinformation in the news and on social media, students gain competency to evaluate news sources by examining them in the context of the process through which the finished news product came to be and how that process enables and constrains a news consumer's ability to understand events. The Frame also lends itself well to creating activities that provide students with opportunities for inductive learning, experiential learning, and interpersonal learning.

To test this application of the Frame, I decided that I design a course that would have students look at two processes to improve their media literacy competencies. First, I would have them look at the process of news production. They would explore how the news gets from observations in the field to what is printed or broadcast, and they would identify the people and motivations that shape the transformation of those raw field observations into a finished product. However, I believed that for students to truly be critical consumers of news and social media, they needed to go beyond just the process of news production. They also needed to examine the process of news consumption. They needed to have exposure to the current cognitive and social psychological research about how we evaluate the information we consume and whether we decide we will believe it. Adding this exploration of the processes of information consumption and evaluation to the exploration of the process of information creation would allow them to be mindful of not only of the back-end factors influencing the content of a finished news product, but also of their own thought processes in reading, watching, or listening to the news. They could evaluate news by interrogating how the process of news creation likely affected the content they consume and questioning what factors were influencing their interpretation of the content. Ideally, students could apply these competencies for critical consumption of the news to their consumption of information more broadly.

## IMPLEMENTATION

I put this idea into action while I was the Social Sciences Librarian at the Jane Bancroft Cook Library at New College of Florida, a public liberal arts college in Sarasota.[4] During the month of January, New College has an Independent Study Project period, colloquially referred to in its abbreviated form as "ISP", in which students spend this equivalent of a January term in the intensive, for-credit investigation of special topics of interest that might not ordinarily be covered in regular semester courses. Despite their name, independent study projects may be conducted in a group setting as part of a structured credit-bearing course led by a faculty instructor. These group independent study projects provide faculty with the ability to experiment with creating courses focused on special topics that fall outside the regular curriculum. As (non-tenure-track) faculty at New College, librarians can create and facilitate group independent study projects with the approval of one of the College's three academic divisions (Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities). With the approval of the Social Science Division, I was able utilize the January 2019 Independent Study Project period to take my idea for teaching critical media literacy through induction with the "Information Creation as a Process" Frame, and design and teach a course that would test the effectiveness of the approach.

### *Course Structure*

In keeping with my proposition that students should explore both the process of news production and that of news consumption, I divided the course, which I titled "The Medium and the Message in the 21st Century", into two modules based on each process. The first module covered the process of news production, and the second covered the cognitive and social psychological processes of news consumption. The course explored these topics through readings, guest speakers, and a field trip.

## *Assignments and Assessments*

For formative assessments of readings, I had students take each reading and distill it into a synopsis of 25 words or less and write two-to-three questions for discussion about the day's readings taken together. I gave students credit for these assignments based on whether or not they completed them. Because of the novelty of the course, I was more interested in hearing from the students themselves about what they took away from the course material than scoring students' understanding of the material according to benchmarks that I set. Consequently, I decided to use short, free-response affective summative assessments of course concepts.

- Short essay questions for Module 1:
  o What new information have you learned about the process through which news gets from observations in the field to what you consume?
  o How has what you have learned affected the way you understand misinformation and disinformation on the Internet and in other media?
- Short essay questions for Module 2:
  o What new information have you learned about the social and cognitive psychological processes through which we evaluate the news and other information we consume?
  o How has what you have learned affected the way you understand misinformation and disinformation on the Internet and in other media?
- Reflection paper
  o What are the most important concepts you took away from this course?

The course's capstone assignment, however, was for students to create a media product or design a regular-semester independent study course syllabus that examined an issue of their choice that related to misinformation and disinformation in the news and on social media. As part of this assignment, I required that students meet with New College's Educational Technology Services department to familiarize themselves with the technologies New College had available to help them create their media product or, if they were designing an independent study, design their course shell on Canvas course management software.

## *Curriculum*

The course covered topics such as the different landscapes and procedures of print, broadcast, and other types of media; how reporters and news organizations distill interviews into news stories; the role of the news media in a democracy; current cognitive and social psychological research on human biases; the economics of information; search engine algorithmic biases; automated and curated fact-checking, and information wellness. While the course did have assigned readings, the main avenue for content delivery to students was through question-and-answer sessions with guest speakers, who were practitioners or experts in some aspect of the information production or consumption process. These included:

- An alumna of New College who ran for political office, who discussed her experience interacting with the media during her campaign.
- An alumna who had been a reporter at a local Sarasota newspaper, who discussed the operations and workflow of print journalism and her interactions with public officials and candidates (including the aforementioned alumna).
- A political science professor who was a former state representative, who discussed the role of the media in a healthy democracy, as well as his experiences interacting with the media during his time in office.
- A professor of cognitive and social psychology, who discussed the cognitive and social psychology of biases and information evaluation.
- And the other three faculty librarians at New College, who discussed:
  o How the search algorithms of Google and other search engines express designer and user biases in search results, as well as ways websites seek to manipulate search algorithms to achieve higher rankings in search results.

      o    The economics of scholarly communication and other forms of information creation.

      o    Algorithm-based tools for flagging information as unreliable.

The course also included a field trip to Sarasota's local ABC affiliate to observe the taping of a 7:00pm newscast.

Beyond media literacy, I utilized the course to promote information literacy skills more broadly, especially since many of the students were first-year students. To that end, I provided general instruction in how to utilize the Library and physical and online resources, including how to find and evaluate scholarly sources, and I demonstrated how to use Zotero, a citation management software, to save, organize, and cite their sources. Students also created online Zotero accounts through which they shared the sources they were finding for their final projects and commentary on their selection of those sources. This allowed the individual students and me to prepare for one-on-one check-in meetings. I also had my students visit the library's January Research Café, an event the library periodically hosted to give our campus's students exposure to the various services available to them at the library.

## *Rationale for Method of Curriculum Content Delivery*

The model of mixing the discussion of assigned readings with guest speakers and the field trip allowed students to gain access to a broader and deeper well of expertise on the subjects covered in the course than I could have offered by myself.[5] While there were many class topics on which I had strong expertise and on which I could therefore teach the class session on the topic myself, there were many aspects of media literacy on which I believed that students would gain better proficiency if they heard from experts and practitioners first-hand or, in the case of the field trip to the television station, if they had an opportunity for experiential learning.

Hearing from experts and practitioners and observing the inner workings of a television newscast for themselves would provide students with first- and second-hand reinforcement of the course paradigm—that examining the news through the lenses of the news production process and of the social and cognitive psychology of our news consumption processes—that would be more impactful than readings and lead-instructor-driven discussions alone. The incorporation of the other three librarians also let students know who else at the library was available to address their information needs, and the inclusion of the other faculty at New College and the outside experts and practitioners gave students potential contacts for future projects, in addition to building relationships between the library and the faculty and between the library and the college and the outside community.

# RESULTS

## *Observations of Impactful Class Sessions*

### Field Trip to Television Station

Three class sessions had a particularly strong impact on students. The first was the field trip to the local Sarasota ABC affiliate to watch the taping of the 7:00pm newscast. The field trip was facilitated by two political science professors (including the aforementioned guest speaker) who frequently appeared as commentators on the newscast's Friday evening analysis of current issues and events. When we arrived at the station, the newscast producer conducted a tour of the newsroom, studio, and control room, showing us the various steps of the process for selecting and then broadcasting the content of the newscast. He explained how reporters find stories (increasingly via Twitter, especially accounts run by government offices) and corroborate their findings; how producers and others gather, edit, and splice together footage into segments and decide whether to run a story; and how producers and technicians operating from the control room and the on-air personalities stay in communication during the broadcast to keep it moving forward (as well as tricks for taking up more time when the broadcast is running shorter than required). We then watched the broadcast from the control room.

Students were particularly struck by the relatively scripted role of the news anchor and the talent of other on-air personalities, particularly the meteorologist, to speak more extemporaneously. This fed into the students'

main takeaway from the field trip: the impact that time limits and the live nature of the broadcast had on the scope of its content and the pace of its delivery, as well as the fact that there was no room for error among those involved in the broadcast (which in turn, underscored their talent and professionalism).

## Reading a New College Communications and Marketing Article about the Course

In the other class, I hosted two alumnae guest speakers. One had been a candidate for local office. The other was a former reporter for a local Sarasota newspaper, who at the time of the class was working in the New College Communications and Marketing Department. The former reporter had interviewed the former candidate when the latter was running for office. The two speakers provided insights into the journalistic process from the perspectives of a politician and a print journalist, including a post-mortem account of the interview the former reporter conducted with the former candidate.

The presence of the two guest speakers had been arranged by New College's Communications and Marketing Department, which, during that January term, was writing stories about various group independent Study projects. A videographer from the Communications and Marketing Department recorded the session (with the camera placed in front of the students), and the department staff member who arranged the presence of the guest speakers observed the session and wrote a piece about the session for *New College News*, the Communications and Marketing Department's ongoing series of promotional stories about activities on campus.[6]

I had students read the article in *New College News* about the class session, and we discussed how the content of the article varied from what they observed during the class session. The students were surprised at the narrowness of the article, which tended to focus on the post-New-College careers of the two alumnae. The article included little about the content and subject matter of the course, and none of the students' questions to the two women were mentioned in the article. One student noted the irony of the article's treatment of the former candidate's description of her first interview as a candidate, which was conducted with a reporter over the course of 40 minutes but from which the news article drew only a soundbite about young people in politics that ended up helping her opposition create the narrative they would use to ultimately defeat her. The student noted the irony that our discussion with the two alumnae lasted for 60 minutes, and that the biggest soundbite that made it into the article in *New College News* was about a 40-minute interview being distilled into a short soundbite.

The students had been excited about the prospect of reading about the session but ultimately somewhat upset about how the session was ultimately depicted. I asked them to think about the purpose of *New College News* and who the publication's intended audience is. Once they recognized that the stories Communications and Marketing writes are meant to promote the college to alumni, prospective students, the Sarasota community, state legislators, and potential donors, the students grasped profoundly how the motivations of the individuals processing raw observations into published news will affect how the public understands events and issues.[7] In their summative assessments, the students unanimously mentioned that one way in which the course had changed their views of the news media was the realization that the vast majority of raw information gets cut from the final story for the simple reason that there is not enough space or time to provide all of the details of a story, and ultimately, various individuals make editorial decisions, incorporating various motivations and biases, about what a published news story will include and what it will exclude, with most of the public none the wiser.

## Discussion of Information Wellness

The contemporary conversation about the problems plaguing public discourse focuses on misinformation and disinformation, what was once referred to as "fake news" before the term was misappropriated into meaningless. However, it is the real news that truly distresses people. It was evident toward the end of the course that the subject matter was having a disconcerting impact on the students. The course subject matter had induced skepticism, but also cynicism, which I feared would negatively affect the students' mental health and negate their capacity for informed civic engagement and the benefits thereof. Noticing my students' moods, I changed the schedule to have a counselor from New College's Counseling and Wellness Center visit the final regular class session for a discussion of healthy information consumption habits and general healthy lifestyle habits.

## *Student Projects*

With guidance from me on finding sources for content and input from Educational Technology Services on choosing technology to manifest their projects, students created polished and insightful final projects for the course.

These included:

- A website about the persistence of debunked news, focusing on the continued inclusion in psychology textbooks of the retracted story of a "bystander effect" surrounding the 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese and the continued insistence by some, including former President Donald Trump, of the guilt of the exonerated "Central Park Five"
- A magazine about Russian disinformation campaigns in Western Europe
- A website comparing how California's and Florida's environmental policies and climate change denial rhetoric differ
- An independent study syllabus on the invocation of violent video games after mass shootings to distract from conversations about gun control
- A website about the decades-long disinformation campaign by the tobacco industry
- And political cartoons comparing efforts to shape media narratives in the respective 1840 and 1992 presidential campaigns of William Henry Harrison and Bill Clinton

## *Free Response Short Essay Assessments*

In students' short essays and reflection papers, several points stood out. Students expressed a profound reorientation in their thinking about the news from their observations of how news organizations' editorial decisions on what information to include or exclude affect the public's perception of events. They also indicated an increased awareness of how to detect bias in the information that they consume and in their own processing of that information. Furthermore, their responses demonstrated a stronger sense of agency and resolve to scrutinize news and social media in the future and to educate others on how to do the same. Additionally, the students expressed greater comfort and proficiency in using media technology and in utilizing the library's resource.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I created the course as an experiment and did not know what outcomes might result. As such, I did not set a specific metric to measure the effectiveness of the course's approach to improving students' media literacy. Instead, I relied on the students themselves to indicate what they had learned through their responses to the prompts in their short essays at the end of each module and their reflection papers at the end of the course. It was clear from those responses, condensed above, that the "Information Creation as a Process" Frame was an effective approach for improving the students' media literacy. Students indicated that the learning activities in both the information production module and the information consumption module had profoundly changed how they will approach news consumption in the future. The pedagogical approach to applying the Frame provided students with multiple threshold concepts, outcomes that fulfill the intent of the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*.[8]

However, in addition to the insights I sought about the effectiveness of applying the Frame to critical media literacy, my experience teaching the course yielded unanticipated derivative insights into teaching media literacy and information literacy more broadly. First, the noticeable disillusionment that students demonstrated toward the end of the course signaled to me that the integration of a discussion of healthy information consumption is essential to teaching critical information literacy. To that end, I am currently working with graduate students at Syracuse's iSchool to create a workshop on healthy information consumption for members of the university community during one of the university's Spring 2021 semester wellness days.

In terms of the mode of delivering course contents, my observations and student feedback indicated that utilizing guest speakers and the field trip for content delivery enhanced the course content by adding improved

expertise and by strengthening student comprehension of course concepts through the empathetic storytelling of the guest speakers and experiential learning of the field trip. The inclusion of guest speakers and the field trip also built relationships with others on campus and with the members of the outside community.

I hope to have the opportunity to teach a revised version of this course again. Should that opportunity arise, I plan to cover information wellness first to prepare students for the rest of the course content. In addition to a television station field trip, I would also include field trips to print and radio news outlets. Because of the rise of deep fakes and other more insidious forms of disinformation, I would incorporate a discussion of the tools and methods of digital diplomatics and how they can verify the authenticity and provenance of digital objects. Additionally, because their profession has been detecting (and creating) misinformation and disinformation for centuries, I would include a guest speaker who has worked in the Intelligence Community to share their insights on how to adapt to an information environment in which we will all need to learn how to be on guard against deceptive information practices.

## NOTES

1. Saoirse De Paor and Bahareh Heravi, "Information Literacy and Fake News: How the Field of Librarianship Can Help Combat the Epidemic of Fake News," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 46, no. 5 (September 1, 2020): 1, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2020.102218; Jorge Revez and Luís Corujo, "Librarians against Fake News: A Systematic Literature Review of Library Practices (Jan. 2018–Sept. 2020)," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 47, no. 2 (March 2021): 1, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2020.102304.

2. Jonathan T. Cope, "The Reconquista Student: Critical Information Literacy, Civics, and Confronting Student Intolerance," *Communications in Information Literacy* 11, no. 2 (2017): 264–82; Alex Pfundt and Abigail Morris, "Breaking Free of Curricular Confines: Seeking New Opportunities to Teach Critical Media Literacy in the Era of 'Fake News'" (ACRL 2019, Cleveland, Ohio, April 13, 2019); Charles G. Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper, "Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 11 (November 1979): 2098–2109, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.37.11.2098.Civics, and Confronting Student Intolerance,\\uc0\\u8221{} {\\i{}Communications in Information Literacy} 11, no. 2 (2017

3. Association of College and Research Libraries, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education" (Association of College and Research Libraries, February 9, 2015), http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

4. Jane Bancroft Cook Library also serves University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee.

5. I credit Professor Emeritus Terry Weech of the School of Information Sciences at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for my decision to use this model, which he utilized in a course on International Librarianship.

6. Liz Lebron, "Disinformation in Modern Media," New College of Florida, January 2019, https://www.ncf.edu/stories/isp-examines-disinformation-in-the-modern-media-landscape/.

7. In response to students' observations that their questions were not mentioned at all in the article, I noted that, in addition to their editorial considerations and guiding motivations, the Communications and Marketing Department also had to adhere to the student privacy regulations set out in the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99).

8. Association of College and Research Libraries, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education."