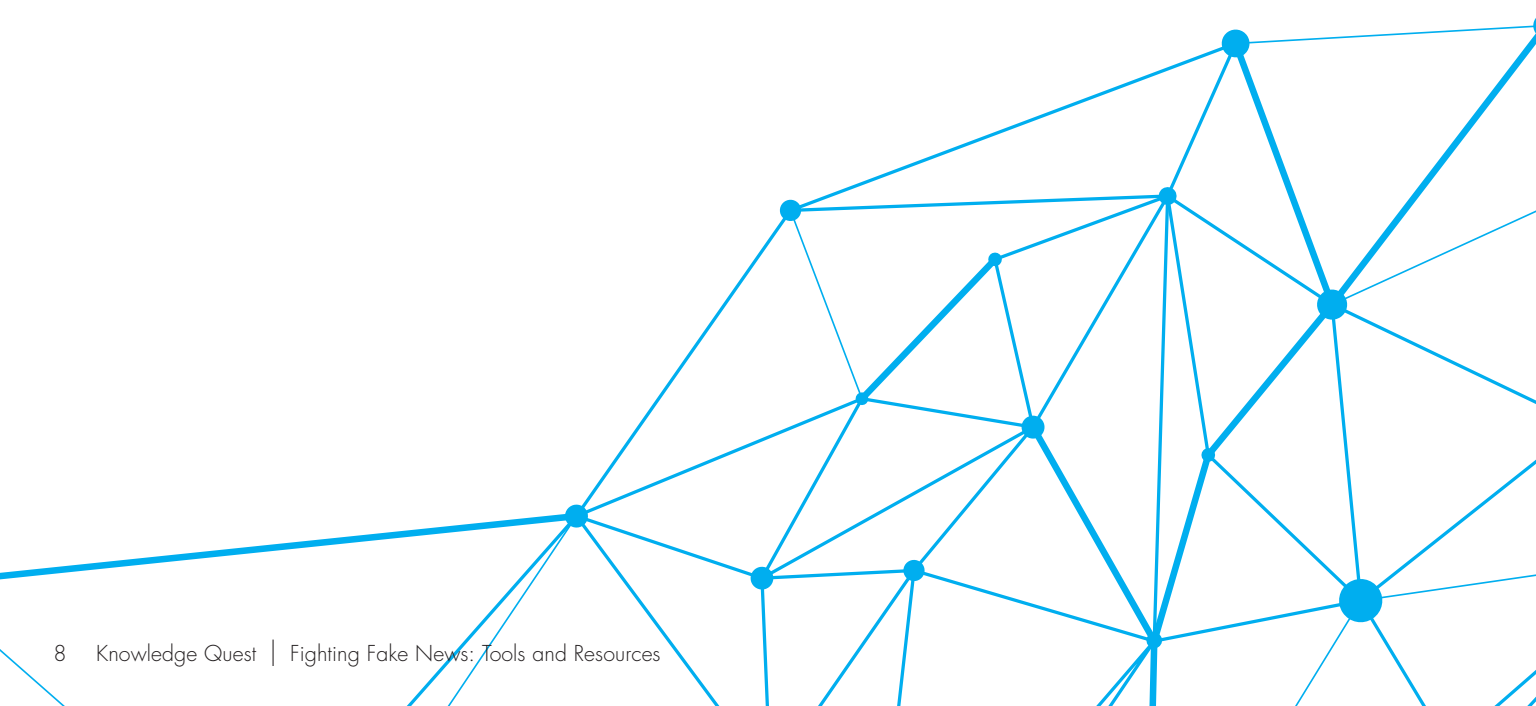


HEURISTICS

*An Approach to Evaluating News
Obtained through Social Media*



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News Obtained through Social Media: A New Frontier



The increasing ubiquity of social media is fundamentally changing the way we access and interpret current events and news. The era of the print newspaper, evening news on only three television channels, and the radio as a popular go-to source for breaking news is in decline. In this new era of information abundance, we have added unlimited news sources—cable news channels, blogs, and news found on social media. According to Elisa Shearer and Jeffrey Gottfried, two-thirds of Americans now read some portion of the news on their social media feeds such as Facebook and Twitter (2017). In addition, a Pew Research study indicates that 95 percent of American teens have access to a smartphone and 45 percent report that they use it almost constantly (Anderson and Jiang 2018). When using their smartphones, these teens are likely accessing social media feeds where they sift through entertainment and sports news, pictures of family and friends, and serious news about the world. For these social media feeds, a consumer of news uses an array of skills to determine credibility and process a huge amount of information. But who has taught us to evaluate this information on social media?

School librarians and teachers use and teach systematic processes to determine the credibility of news in academic situations, in which students typically learn how to determine a topic or research question, evaluate the information, and, finally, create a product that synthesizes what they have learned. Among the more popular approaches are the Information Search Process

(Kuhlthau et al. 1990) and the Big6 (Eisenberg and Berkowitz 2017). Furthermore, the *AASL Standards Framework for Learners* (AASL 2018) provides the underlying foundation upon which to build systematic information-seeking processes. These processes are effective means to conduct in-depth research, but do teens encountering the news through social media approach what they read in the same manner? Can we expect teens to take the time to use a systematic process each time they come across news on social media?

Heuristics: A Decision-Making Process for Use in Real Time

The context in which teens come across news every day has changed. One can reasonably infer that teens are obtaining much of their information about current events on their smartphones. When teens use these devices, do they critically analyze each piece of information as they would for a research assignment? We argue that they do not. As an educational leader and an educator of school librarians, we know that we certainly do not. Rather, we argue that both teens and adults can use heuristics, which are a set of low-level cognitive decision-making processes that lead to an interpretation or conclusion. Applied to this context, heuristics are rules of thumb that are developed over the course of interactions with news obtained through social media.

For example, a teen might see a news article that has ten thousand “likes” or one thousand “comments,” which might be interpreted as an endorsement of credibility. Perhaps the teen has seen a trusted friend or family member “share” a piece of information. This heuristic utilizes specific credibility cues (a clue that a person can use to determine the trustwor-

thiness of information) because they may indicate that the information is trustworthy. While some may think of using this heuristic for determining credibility of news obtained through social media as trusting someone else’s judgment (which may be faulty), the heuristic may be quite useful for determining the credibility of entertainment news or milestones in a person’s life such as a marriage or the birth of a child. There is a wide array of heuristics—of varying value—that a teen can employ when evaluating information on social media in real time.

Importance of Context in Social Media

Understanding the context in which teens obtain information allows educators to prepare their students for the rapid-fire world of information and news on social media. While the government and social media companies are actively addressing and attempting to eliminate misinformation on social media, students must also understand their roles as evaluators of information and misinformation. Pushing the responsibility of news evaluation onto government and social media companies is not enough. To sift with fidelity and competency through the tremendous amount of information attained through social media, teens must have an understanding of how to quickly evaluate news. This means teaching context-specific skills that students can use in real time, in addition to teaching students systematic approaches to research. Schools must continually adapt to changes in technology, and teaching students real-time approaches to evaluating news obtained through social media is an extension of this philosophy.


Content, Motivation, and Credibility Cues: Setting the Stage for Evaluation of News Obtained through Social Media

Our recent study (conducted by Spencer Johnson and supervised by Ann Ewbank) (2018) has established three underlying concepts that school librarians and teachers should address before teaching students how to use heuristics to evaluate news obtained through social media in real time: content, motivation, and credibility cues. First, educators should understand and discuss the different ways their students obtain information. As discussed previously, within the context of social media, there are many different types of information, and each type requires a distinct skill set for evaluation. For information obtained through social media, these concepts will set the stage for students' evaluation of factual and misleading news.

Content. One of the most important components when evaluating news for trustworthiness is understanding the underlying concepts relevant to the news item or current event. For news obtained through social media that is political, students should have a basic understanding of the role and function of government, especially if they are approaching voting age. For example, when students encounter news from social media about the passage of a mill levy, they must ask themselves if they even understand what it means and how it will impact them. Students must learn to engage their prior knowledge or seek context to inform their opinion. Therefore, we recommend that content can be connected to real news that students will inevitably encounter on social media. School librarians and teachers should continue to incorporate authentic content into curriculum so that students have an understanding of the underlying concepts of news and current events.

Motivation. When teaching about propaganda, school librarians and teachers should discuss bias and how messaging plays into these biases. For students to effectively navigate all of the information that they come across, they should be aware of their own biases. Rather than discussing bias as a problem, educators should teach students to be aware of biases and to learn to push back against these biases so learners are not manipulated into believing or not believing information based on the person or entity posting that information on social media. We must teach students that social media feeds can create "echo chambers" that play on biases and motivations. Therefore, teaching students that they have biases and then teaching them how to recognize their biases is a tremendously important skill that will assist learners in evaluating information.

Credibility Cues. Credibility cues are pieces of evidence that indicate the trustworthiness of a social media post. For example, if a social media



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post has ten thousand “likes,” should we believe the evidence to be true? Many of us might answer with a resounding “NO” because social endorsements may be unreliable. How do our students know this? Who has had this conversation with them? *What should we look at to determine credibility?* Spencer’s survey of secondary teachers produced two general types of credibility cues that secondary teachers believe to be the best options to look at when addressing the credibility of news obtained through social media. Students must look at the *reputation* of the author of the information and must determine if they can *confirm* the information elsewhere (Johnson 2018). Social media contexts produce social endorsements that may be construed as credible evidence. For example, students may look at the number of “likes” on a post to determine whether it is credible. Though social endorsements such as “likes” may be an excellent way to determine if a piece of music is good, we found that teachers do not believe that social endorsements are as effective as looking at the reputation of the author, and then confirming the information elsewhere (Johnson 2018).

Social Media Credibility Heuristic

Little evidence has been found to suggest that students are being explicitly taught how to evaluate news obtained through social media. Our research indicated that in addition to the current systematic approaches used to teach students how to evaluate information, a social media credibility heuristic may be a pragmatic tool that students can use while browsing social media (2018). While systematic processes are clearly more rigorous, it is unrealistic to expect students to systematically analyze every piece of news that they come

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS: INCORPORATING HEURISTICS

Below is an outline school librarians can use when providing professional development for teachers so that they may incorporate teaching about heuristics into their curricula.

- 1 Explain what heuristics are and why teens need to be explicitly taught heuristics.
- 2 Use graphics and projected screenshots while giving an overview of most of the popular social media platforms, including the similarities and differences.
 - a Instagram
 - b Twitter
 - c Snapchat
 - d Facebook

across, so a heuristic (rule of thumb) may be needed. This heuristic combines content, motivation, as well as the reputation of the author of the information and confirmability of the information. Students should be introduced to this strategy and also have the opportunity to practice this skill frequently enough that they begin to use it instinctively. Ideally, this heuristic should be reinforced until it is second nature to students.

School Librarians: Leading the Way through Teacher Professional Development

Our research suggests that teacher professional development in media literacy should balance the needs of a structured curriculum alongside the changing dynamics of the social media world (Johnson 2018). Understanding that students may use a different set of critical-thinking skills when using social

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Provide the following social media news heuristics checklist for teachers to use when teaching students to evaluate news obtained through social media.

- a** Content: What do I know about the topic in the news post? Have students jot down their prior knowledge of the news post's content.
- b** Motivation: Do I need to do more in-depth research, or is the information in the news post sufficient? Have students articulate why they made the decision to research further or proceed with applying the heuristic.
- c** Reputation: What is the reputation of the person or organization that posted the news on social media? Have students articulate what they know about the person or organization.
- d** Confirmability: Can I find the same news elsewhere? Have students perform a simple search on <https://news.google.com>.
- e** Evaluation: Have students determine whether or not the news seems credible based on the heuristic and articulate why.

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Give teachers tips for implementing heuristics in the secondary curriculum.

- a** Provide practice examples of accurate and inaccurate news on social media. Then have students access their own social media feeds to evaluate the news posted using the heuristics checklist.
- b** Have students reflect on the process of using the heuristics checklist and articulate situations in which they may use heuristics versus a systematic process.

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Students must practice working through the checklist often enough that they can do it fairly quickly and think of the activity as a heuristic or "rule of thumb."

- a** Remember that, although students will learn this skill in school, they will use it on their own time when browsing social media. Instruction on systematic research processes should continue for use in the school setting.
- b** As new social media platforms gain popularity, students will inevitably switch, so this process should be adapted to whatever social media students are currently using.



media is not a novel idea. However, as educators we should embrace how students are evaluating information in new and changing contexts. Middle and high school librarians undoubtedly see the ubiquity of students using smartphones. School librarians can specifically address the smartphone and social media context and explicitly provide professional development for teachers that suggests ways to incorporate teaching heuristics as a part of media literacy education.

One of the more complicated issues of social media use may be that the specific set of skills students need may change as quickly as teens' preference for social media platforms. For example, Facebook may require a certain set of skills, but those skills may be slightly different for Instagram, Snapchat, or Twitter. Inevitably, teens will move to a social media platform that may present news in a different manner than did the previously preferred platform. For example, Facebook is no longer the dominant platform for teens, although adults indicate Facebook as their preferred platform, with two-thirds of American adults using Facebook regularly (Gramlich 2018). This means that not only can school librarians provide professional development for teachers about how to teach students heuristics for evaluating news obtained through social media, school librarians should also provide professional development that familiarizes teachers with the various social media platforms with which students engage.

Conclusion

One of the primary responsibilities of school librarians is to teach students to evaluate the credibility of information. As avenues for giving

and getting information evolve, so must ways of teaching students so that they will be prepared for college, career, and life. In addition to teaching systematic approaches to information evaluation, we contend that heuristics can be an efficient means to teach middle and high school students how to evaluate news obtained through social media in real time. We live in a constantly connected world that is poised to become even more dependent on social media platforms for both information and communication. By incorporating heuristics into the school library and classroom, we are setting students up for success when they encounter news obtained through social media.



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