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On the Front Lines

Connecting with Students Through Media Literacy Instruction

Introduction

Virtual environments have become increasingly inundated with misleading information, deceptive posts, and manipulated images. It's hard to spend time online without growing concerned about the amount of misinformation that exists on the internet, especially on social media. As more and more people rely on social platforms as their primary source of news, media literacy becomes increasingly important.

It was that concern that led me to evaluate how I, as a librarian, was contributing to my students' understanding of media messages and their ability to decode those messages. Realizing I could do more, I began to develop a lesson on how students can detect misinformation online and how they can fact-check what they read. In this article, I will share how I developed the misinformation workshop for high school students and how I adapted it for a college setting in my current role at Western Carolina University.

About Western Carolina University

Western Carolina University (WCU) is a regional comprehensive university with approximately 12,000 students. It was founded in 1889 as a secondary school to train teachers in the region, and in 1972, it joined the University of North Carolina System. WCU offers over 120 undergraduate programs and more than 40 graduate degrees at the main campus in Cullowhee, the instructional site at Biltmore Park, and online. As the sole university library, Hunter Library serves the entire WCU community and uses a subject librarian model, with a single point of contact for students, faculty, and staff in each discipline. Subject librarians provide information literacy instruction, research support, and collection development for the disciplines they serve.

Developing the misinformation workshop

I first started presenting misinformation sessions when I worked as a school librarian, seeing a need to help keep my high school students from falling for false information online. Early sessions were lecture-based presentations on media literacy best practices, which in turn led to a lot of bored faces and blank stares.

To increase student engagement, I decided to pivot from lecture to active learning. The revised workshop included both thoughtful discussion and instruction. I began by asking students to share their own examples of spotting misinformation on their feeds or hearing a peer say something they knew wasn't true. After the discussion, I moved into sharing ways that they could think more critically about what they read on social media and how they could use lateral reading to fact-check claims.

This method proved far more effective for connecting with the students and allowing them to conceptualize the issue in their own lives. They were excited to share their experiences and collectively groan about frustrating examples of times they saw misinformation spread online or in person. This approach was more engaging and increased their comprehension by calling on their existing expertise.

Adapting the misinformation workshop

As the Humanities and Social Sciences Librarian at WCU, I support English, Political Science and Public Affairs, Anthropology, Sociology, and Communication. When I moved into this role, I was excited to update my misinformation workshop for an older audience. I saw the workshop as a complementary extension to Hunter Library's existing information literacy program. Working with college students in my subject areas has allowed me to discuss complex

topics and facilitate hands-on activities that weren't possible in phone-restricted environments.

Now, I begin my sessions with examples of how online misinformation can have real-world consequences. I start with three stories: one personal, one related to pop culture, and one concerning national news. The personal story includes my own experience of hearing misinformation repeated by family or friends in conversation. The pop culture example is timely and describes when internet personalities or celebrities spread misinformation or find themselves victims of misinformation. Finally, I tell the story of the 'Pizzagate' gunman who entered a Washington, D.C., pizza restaurant, believing that children were being held there based on claims he read online. Before each story, I show a single photo related to that event, allowing the students to explain who or what is in the picture if they are familiar. If they don't recognize the image at first, they often connect the dots as I begin to explain, and I circle back to check recognition again when I've finished the story.

Using storytelling at the beginning of my sessions allows me to not only capture students' attention but also relate to them with cultural examples they may already be familiar with, activating prior knowledge and making the session more memorable and applicable to their daily lives. I want the class to be informative, but I also want the students to be interested in and engaged with the content.

In addition to being more engaging, narrative is also a powerful way to alter attitudes and increase the chances of students utilizing the fact-checking methods I teach in the session. As I tell the stories, I define misinformation and disinformation and then reinforce the definitions afterward by reviewing meaning and showing examples in different contexts. I show cases of misinformation or disinformation spread through a post or a comment on social media, and I also share an example spread verbally during a podcast or speech.

I apply the same narrative treatment when I begin outlining the SIFT Method,[1] which is an information evaluation strategy developed by Mike Caulfield. As I go through the steps of the method, I demonstrate fact-checking an Instagram post. The post changes depending on the session, and I try to choose an example that is timely or related to the subject of the course I'm visiting. This way, students can see an example of the method in action and make that prior knowledge connection.

The session culminates with students trying the SIFT Method themselves using an activity I borrowed from Poynter's Misinformation Resilience Toolkit for Libraries.[2] This activity connects what students have learned in the session to course content. Using their phones, students scroll through their social media feeds looking for a claim related to that class that they want to investigate. For example, if it is a sociology course on aging, students can locate a post on age or ageism. Then, they follow the steps of the method: Stop, Investigate, Find better coverage, and Trace the claim to determine if the information in the post is true.

I work closely with the class instructor to plan this portion of the session. Based on the length of the class, we decide when the students will locate a post to apply the method. Some instructors prefer students choose a claim to investigate prior to class, while others don't mind them locating one during the activity.

After applying the SIFT. Method to their chosen post, students volunteer to share the claim they fact-checked, the social media platform where it originated, their investigation process, and if they determined the claim to be true or false. Many of their examples spark comments and discussion from classmates who have seen the same claim online and are enthusiastic to share what they found as well. Oftentimes, this is the portion of the session that students seem to enjoy the most, and sharing flows naturally. However, if the instructor indicates that the class tends to be more reserved, the activity can also be performed in groups with a designated speaker for each table to encourage participation. After this activity, I close the session by touching on additional fact-checking tools and sharing ways they can contact me. My goal is for students to walk away from the misinformation workshop feeling like they

[1] Mike Caulfied, "SIFT (The Four Moves)," Hapgood, last modified June 19, 2019, https://hapgood.us/2019/06/19/sift-the-four-moves/.

[2] "Be MediaWise: A Misinformation Resilience Toolkit for Libraries," Poynter, accessed February 13, 2026, https://www.poynter.org/mediawise/misinformation-resilience-toolkit-libraries/.

have learned something new, are better equipped to navigate the online world, and know how to find help when they need it.

Conclusion

These sessions have taught me a lot about our students and their media consumption habits. It's easy to assume that young adults consume media passively, but their insightful commentary and discussion reveal that they have a better understanding of the digital landscape than popular opinion would have us believe. The workshop provides students with a framework to bolster their existing understanding and allows them to assess the veracity of online content more effectively. While it is unrealistic to believe that after the session, students will pause and fact-check every single post that they come across online, I hope it can help them think more critically about what they see as they scroll.

Author Note

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