

Fact Check: Educating for The Truth

On Wednesday June 18, 2025, media educator Frank Baker delivered the keynote address at “Fact Check Educating for the Truth,” a professional development opportunity for educators sponsored by OELMA and Kent State University’s iSchool, held at NEONET, Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio.

[Note: following my introduction by OELMA president Gayle Schmuhl, I spoke briefly about my newest book, a graphic novel, [We Survived The Holocaust: The Bluma & Felix Goldberg Story.](#))

Good morning. Thank you OELMA, and the ischool for inviting me here. It is a genuine pleasure to be back in Ohio.

I applaud you all for creating this event around this topic, because THIS is one of THE MAJOR issues of our time (that and book bans, but don’t get me started)

“My students (a teacher told me) don’t care if it’s fake news, “Wow, I said. “If that’s a widespread sentiment, we’d better deal with their apathy.” Perhaps THAT is the “elephant in the room.”

With AI, deepfakes FLOODING/EXPLODING and algorithms INFLUENCING every corner of the Internet, teaching media & visual literacy skills have become more important than ever. We may not know if what we are seeing is real or not, but we can certainly encourage students to be more SKEPTICAL & DISCERNING. That’s exactly what this new campaign, by the respected [Columbia Journalism Review](#), aims to do: [VIDEO](#)

Books like THE ANXIOUS GENERATION and media productions like ADOLESCENCE, THE SOCIAL DILEMMA and the documentaries CAN’T

LOOK AWAY, and TRUST ME have all brought attention to important issues.

Recently, the World Economic Forum identified misinformation and disinformation as a top global risk- they said: "Misinformation and disinformation undermine trust in institutions, including media and government."

An April Global Study found that "Generation Z –those aged 13-28– appear to be the group most vulnerable to misinformation." The researchers blame the low quality of information these younger consumers encounter day in and day out.

Last August, world scientists sounded the alarm: They warned that truth is under attack and highlighted the urgent need for critical thinking and scientific literacy to combat the rising problem.

In 2019, Stanford university published a major study whose startling headline was "High school students are unprepared to judge the credibility of information on the internet"

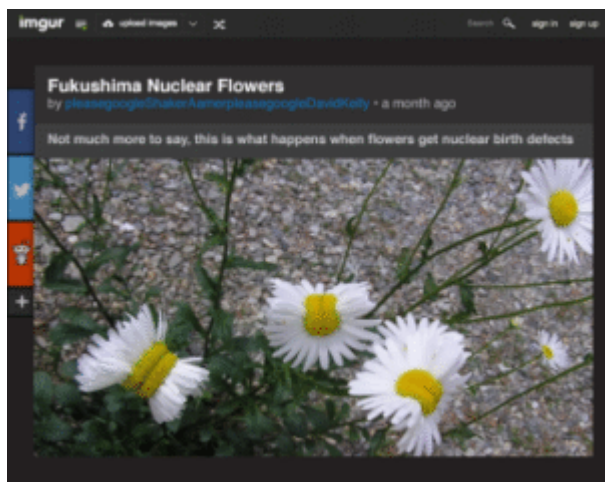
Among other things, 82 percent of middle school students could not distinguish news from ads on a website;

Take a look: they ignored the SPONSORED CONTENT label (in the left hand corner).



By the way 59% of adults couldn't tell the difference either..

They never questioned this photograph—which was NOT what it represented.



The caption indicated they were deformed flowers after a Japanese nuclear plant leak...but they were not.

96% of students did not consider why ties between a climate change website and the fossil fuel industry might lessen that website's credibility. Instead of investigating who was behind the site, students focused on the site's aesthetics, its top-level domain (.org or .com), or how it portrayed itself on the About page

Another task sought to gauge students' ability to evaluate the credibility of a grainy video posted on Facebook that showed clips of poll workers surreptitiously stuffing ballots into bins. Captions in the video tell viewers that the clips depict 2016 Democratic primary elections in three U.S. states, though the clips actually show voter fraud in Russia. Asked whether the video provided "strong evidence" of voter fraud during the 2016 Democratic primaries, 52 percent of the students said yes.

Researcher Sam Wineburg called the results "disturbing" and "troubling". And you may recall they created the excellent [CIVIC ONLINE REASONING](#) resource to help YOU prepare students to better comprehend what they encounter/consume online.

Wineburg and University of Wash professor Mike Caufield recently co-authored a book that I highly recommend. [VERIFIED](#) is the title and I would urge you to get a copy and perhaps make it the subject of a book club/study at your school.

Some of you may be aware that I previously worked in broadcast journalism, but back then (I won't reveal how many years that was), fake news was not on our radar screens.

Fake news: that was the stuff on Aprils Fools' day, National Lampoon, The Onion, and the covers of National Enquirer and Mad Magazine.

But all of that changed, when candidate Donald Trump began his first run for office. Do you recall when he first used the phrase "fake news." I do.

What he successfully did was to change the definition.

When he pointed his finger at the media what he was really saying was: I disagree or don't like you (to a reporter or group of reporters) and I don't like your news organization or ownership (pick one). Trust in the media, already low, took another hit.

News stories that reported on Trump's fake news claim... called for media literacy education in schools and elsewhere.

And many of you responded. You realized the new responsibility. As information literacy specialists, you also recognized that our young people are NOT getting their news from traditional reliable sources. Today, it's social media.

So what's wrong with getting news from social media? Everything. How about UNRELIABLE to begin with.

A study just published in the journal MEDIA found that "individuals with low critical thinking skills are significantly more vulnerable to fake news generated by artificial intelligence (AI), especially among young adults."

A recent survey found that while many young people rely on social media for their news, they do not regard it as a trusted source.

To encourage students to trust news on social media, we need a RENEWED focus on “media literacy education, including verifying information, recognizing potential biases, and understanding how social media algorithms shape news consumption. They should be taught to cross-reference information with multiple, reputable sources, including mainstream news outlets. Additionally, encouraging critical thinking and skepticism towards sensational headlines and emotionally charged content is crucial.”

Recently experts called on students to think like FACT CHECKERS:

- Fact-checkers verify claims by consulting multiple sources, not just by reading a page’s content.
- Learning lateral reading helps people spot false or biased info more accurately online.
- Checking a source’s bias, funding, and transparency strengthens media literacy skills.

I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention the role of emotion in what we and our students are consuming online. The more emotional the message, the less critical thinking exists. I read (quote) “emotional content, such as news headlines, can trigger specific emotional states, even without reading the full story, and can influence how we perceive and remember information.” (end quote)

And if you think emotion isn’t effective-just ask advertisers.

Media Literacy- as you know- that is something I have been teaching and advocating for, for more than 20 years.

In fact, I presented at several OELMA annual conferences. (How many of you have heard me previously?)

There is much confusion over what is meant by media literacy—the mainstream media have been using it when they really mean information literacy, or news literacy or digital literacy.

Of all of the definitions, this one, from my colleagues in Canada, is my favorite:

“Media literacy is concerned with helping students develop an informed and critical understanding of the nature of mass media, **the techniques** used by them, and the impact of these techniques. More specifically, it is education that aims to increase the students’ understanding and enjoyment of how the-media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they construct reality. Media literacy also aims to provide students with the ability to create media products. ”

So what do I mean by media literacy? I define it simply as “applying critical thinking (and critical viewing) skills to all media messages.” (Media literacy also involves giving students opportunities to make media.)

The problem –or challenge is—most of you received no actual media literacy instruction in your college of education OR school of library science and professional development has been infrequent. In fact, a workshop (or speech) from me is just touching the surface: educators need continuous and effective media literacy PD.

When I first recognized media literacy, I was working for the Orlando Florida School District. The year was 1987. I learned that there was a [Center for Media Literacy](#) and it not only sponsored conferences, it also promoted these critical thinking questions. Here they are:

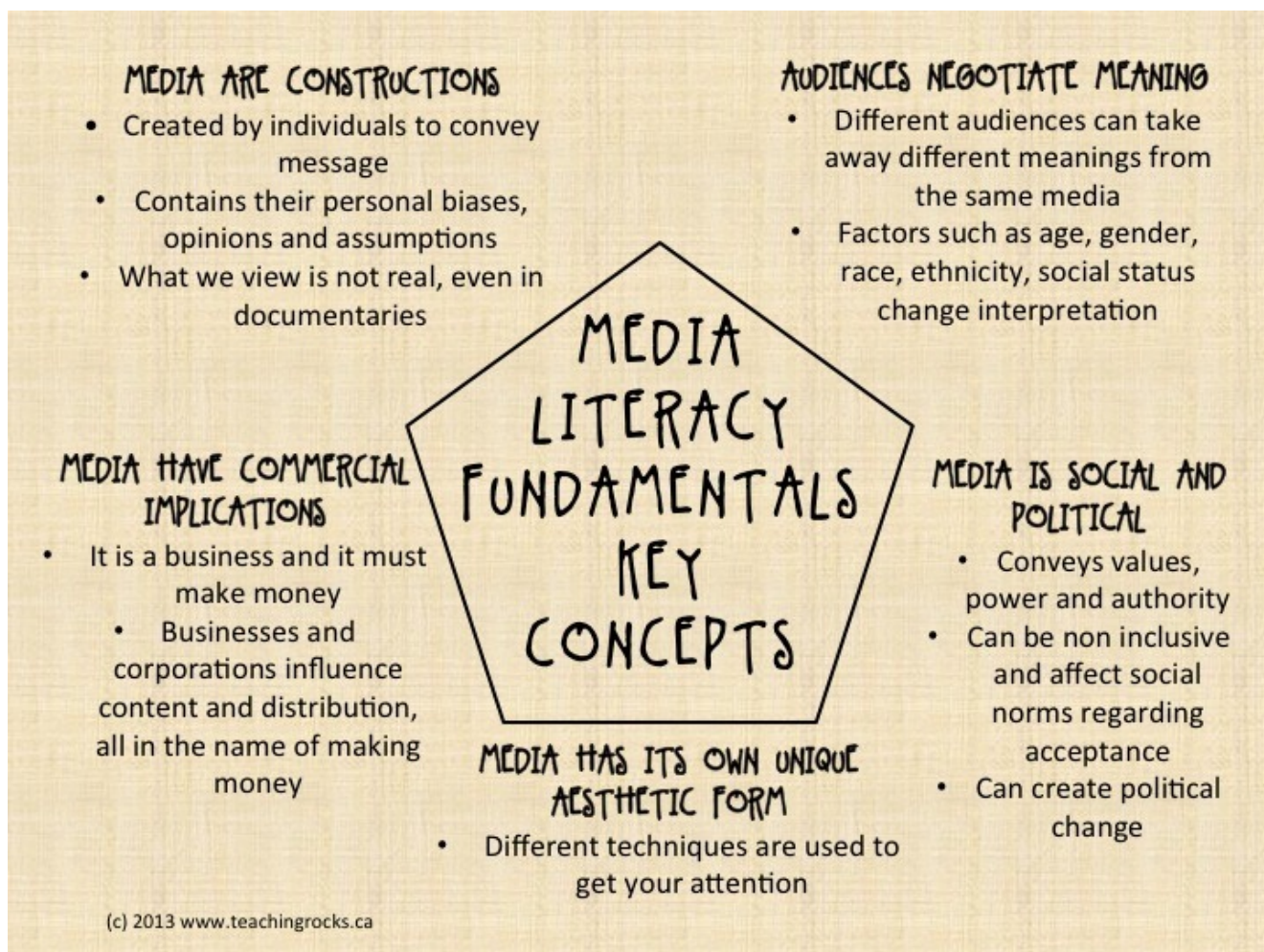
Five Key Questions of Media Literacy

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- 1. Who created this message?**
- 2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?**
- 3. How might different people understand this message differently than me?**
- 4. What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?**
- 5. Why is this message being sent?**

How many of you have seen this previously? Ok, so here is an opportunity & recommendation: take this graphic (or one similar) and post it adjacent to every computer at school so that students see. Better yet, make it a poster and put in your classroom or media center.

Our colleagues in Canada have a similar one that I like very much:



A couple of years ago, I created a resource website entitled [STUDENTS SHOULD KNOW](#)—which consists of short media literacy related videos. In that collection, courtesy of my colleagues in Canada, are videos which explore each of their 5 concepts.

SHOW: [Media Minute](#)

I recently testified in SC for a media literacy bill and I said to those lawmakers: Thankfully the school library media specialist community is teaching and is preparing students for the new media environment we and they find themselves in.

So let me say in front of you today, right now THANK YOU. KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK. As you know propaganda, fake news, disinformation and the like is not going away. Our students ARE exposed to it: and they may share it with little consideration to the source or its legitimacy.

That's where you come in: we must teach them to STOP, THINK,

VERIFY, FACT CHECK before moving on. It's not rocket science.

So here is a strategy I recommend: bring fake news examples into the classroom AND help them DECONSTRUCT it.

Let's practice that right now: (and you have it as a handout)



Now I challenge you to find at least 5 things that make you skeptical about this quote "news story." What are the RED FLAGS, you hope your students would notice.? Turn to your neighbor and take a minute.

Did you notice AND circle the URL at the top of the page (that's an important clue too) it reads www.abcnews.com.co

Now if we returned to those media literacy questions, they come in real handy here:

1. Who is the author
2. What techniques make it believable

3. How might others see this differently from me
4. What do we know, what do we not know?
5. Why was this sent/ what's its purpose?

So perhaps we ask students to BRING IN FAKE NEWS examples that they encounter and spend some time helping to question and debunk.

Many of today's recommendations—in dealing with fake news—suggest media literacy be combined with fact checking. Hopefully you and your teachers already know about the various fact check websites that exist:



VERIFY have you heard of it. It is regular news segment on TV stations owned by TEGNA around the country including Ohio. TEGNA laid off its nationwide fact checking team but said it would continue at the local stations.

By the way, you can locate previous VERIFY news segments on YouTube.

In a recent article published in MEDIUM, writer Shana Peebles suggested: “Instead of just fact-checking after the fact, **teach students to recognize disinformation tactics** before they encounter them.”

What are those disinformation tactics? Here is a list:

astroturfing, the [deceptive](#) practice of presenting an [orchestrated](#) marketing or public relations campaign in the [guise](#) of unsolicited comments from members of the public.

Example: Pharmaceutical companies may sponsor patient support

groups and simultaneously push them to help market their products. Bloggers who receive free products, paid travel or other accommodations may also be considered astroturfing if those gifts are not disclosed to the reader.

conspiracy theories, a belief that some secret but influential organization is responsible for an event or phenomenon.

clickbait, (on the internet) content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page.

culture wars, a conflict between groups, especially liberal and conservative groups, that have different cultural [ideals](#), beliefs, or [philosophies](#).

echo chambers, an environment in which a person [encounters](#) only beliefs or opinions that [coincide](#) with their own, so that their existing views are [reinforced](#) and alternative ideas are not considered.

hoaxes, a [humorous](#) or [malicious](#) deception.

Common online hoaxes often involve scams and fake news. These include phishing emails, romance scams, charity scams, and hoaxes that spread false information, often targeting older adults or children. Examples include [fake virus alerts](#), [chain letters](#), and [hoaxes about drugs in school](#).

fake news, false or misleading information claiming the aesthetics and legitimacy of news.

propaganda, information, especially of a [biased](#) or misleading nature, used to promote or [publicize](#) a particular political cause or point of view.

pseudoscience, a collection of beliefs or practices [mistakenly](#) regarded as being based on scientific method.

Examples: include astrology, flat-earthism, and certain

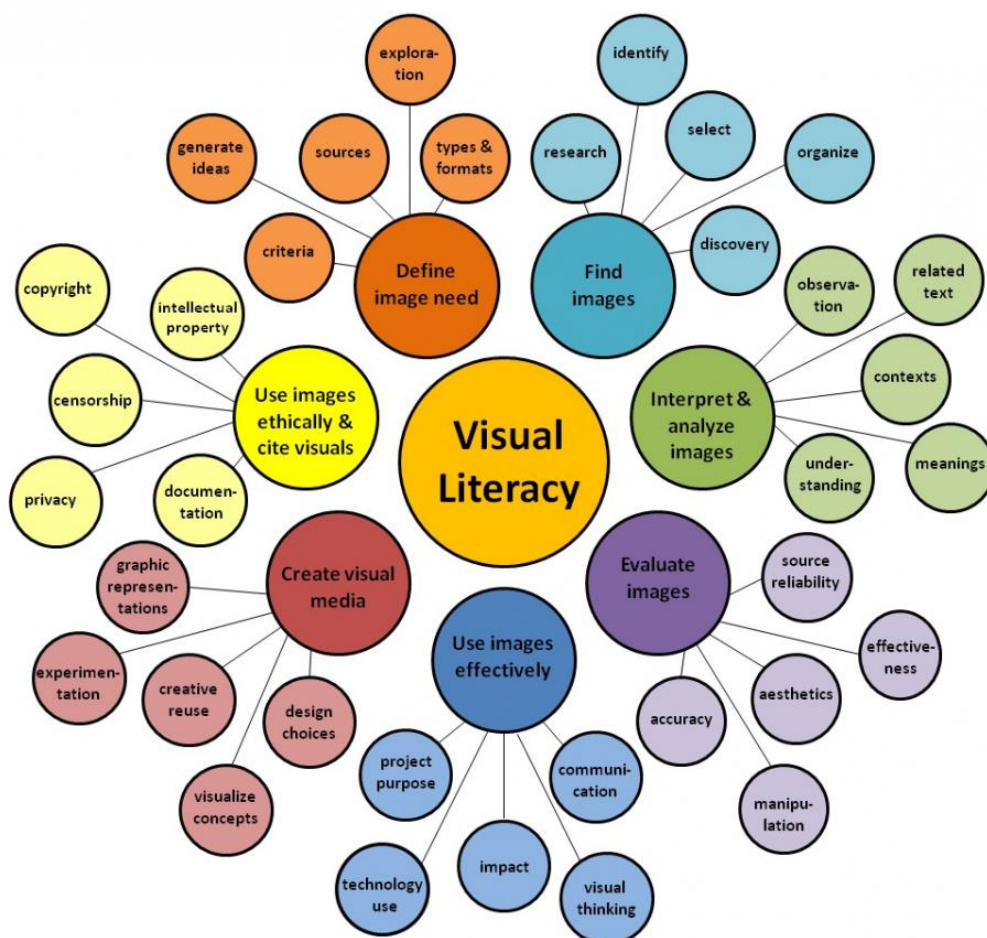
alternative medical practices like HOME EOopathy. These practices often lack testable predictions, reproducible results, or a willingness to be disproven by scientific evidence.

AND rumors a currently [circulating](#) story or report of uncertain or [doubtful](#) truth.

So up to now, I've talked a good deal about media literacy. But I'd be remiss if I did not address VISUAL literacy. I understand that it IS covered primarily in the elementary grades, but seems to fall off in the secondary arena, unless of course it's in art class.

The American Library Association (ALA) has developed a framework for visual literacy, emphasizing its role as a tool for learning, reading development, and critical thinking.

Take a look at this graphic:



Considering those GREEN & PURPLE circles, (interpret & analyze and evaluate images) I'd like to now share with you this brief video, that I use as an introduction in my visual literacy workshops:

Video [Interrogating the image](#)

Recently the producers of a new documentary—about the importance of visual literacy— wrote: “We spend years in school learning to read and write, but almost no time learning how to practically understand the camera and critically analyze images – even though they dominate our lives,”

Have you seen my activity for students entitled [VERIFY THE IMAGE](#). Briefly, it contains a large number of images. The goal is not for them to reveal whether the image is factual; rather it tasks them with documenting the steps/ the process they used to determine its authenticity. I hope you will consider using it with your students

So obviously, we have plenty of opportunities to engage students in interrogating images because they are everywhere.

Before I conclude, I want you all to be aware of my web page on [FAKE NEWS RESOURCES](#) that resides on the Media Literacy Clearinghouse. The page has curricula, book, periodical recommendations and much more.

In closing, we have our work cut out for us. I want to urge every one of you in this room (and listening) to consider RECONSIDER how you approach the teaching of AI; algorithmic literacy AND fake news. I ask you now: what steps will you take to guarantee media literate young people?.

Thomas Jefferson never said these exact words but he did imply— the health of a democracy depends on an informed electorate. What happens if the electorate is MISINFORMED? Think about it.

Finally, a quote from UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy and Digital Competencies Unit:

"By helping young people distinguish between fact, opinion, belief, and narrative, and by empowering them to assess credibility in a noisy digital world, we are not just teaching skills, we are nurturing active, informed citizens."

THANK YOU

Frank's books:

[Close Reading The Media](#)

[Media Literacy In The K-12 Classroom](#) (2nd edition)