



WHAT WORKS IN EDUCATION
THE GEORGE LUCAS EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

A Program Teaches Students What to Believe in the Digital World

The News Literacy Project helps secondary school students separate fact from fiction online.

BY MALAIKA COSTELLO-DOUGHERTY

It's a jungle out there when it comes to searching for news and information online. A simple search can result in links that appear equally valid but could vary in accuracy, from a reputable newspaper's reported article to a spoof site that includes outright lies. For young students, finding reliable information can be a challenge.

To bridge this gap, in early 2009 the News Literacy Project **(2)** started bringing seasoned journalists **(3)** into secondary school classrooms to help teenagers and preteens evaluate and create reliable information. The program is now in five schools, in Bethesda, Maryland, plus New York City and Chicago, and hopes to extend to Los Angeles by 2010. (Contact the News Literacy Project **(4)** to explore bringing the program to your school.)

Visiting news professionals work with students to answer four questions:

- Why does news matter?
- Why is the First Amendment protection of free speech so vital to American democracy?
- How can students know what to believe?
- What challenges and opportunities do the Internet and digital media create?

To answer these questions, students create projects that vary from a Monopoly-esque board game called Speechopoly, where players land on and purchase spaces representing First Amendment cases, to a mock television show that cautions viewers not to accept everything they read on Wikipedia **(5)**. (See high school students at Bethesda's Walt Whitman High School work on model news-literacy projects in the YouTube video embedded below.)

Evaluating information online is an important digital-age skill. Google research scientist Daniel Russell **(6)** estimates that students can access roughly a million times more content through Internet searches than previous generations could find at a university library.

"Most students today don't have the tools to navigate a way among the tsunami of sources of information available of widely varying purpose, accountability, and reliability," says Alan Miller, the News Literacy Project's founder and executive director, who is also a former investigative reporter. "In the information age, everyone has to learn to think like a journalist."

To that goal, the News Literacy Project provided the following tips for your students to use while evaluating information:

- Think critically about news and information: Who created the information? Can you tell? For what purpose? Is the information verified? If so, how? What are the sources? What is the documentation? Is it presented in a way that is fair?
- Ask yourself, "What is it that I'm viewing?": Is it news? Opinion? Gossip? Raw information? Advertising? Propaganda? How can you tell?
- Look for bias in news and information: Watch for loaded or inflammatory words. Does the author clearly have an agenda? Is more than one side of a story or argument presented? Is the subject of the report given a chance to respond?
- View high-quality journalism as a benchmark against which to measure other sources of information: This step includes an independent and dispassionate search for reliable, accurate information, verification rather than assertion, a commitment to fairness, transparency about how information was obtained, and accountability when mistakes are made.
- Beware of information found on Wikipedia; it can be changed by anyone at any time. This fact makes it uncertain that you are getting accurate information at a given moment. However, the primary sources linked in Wikipedia entries are a rich trove of reliable information.
- Act responsibly with information you share and create: Exercise civility, respect, and care in your online communications; remember that information on the Internet lives forever and you have no control over who sees it or what they do with it. Do not expect emails to be private.
- Do not allow yourself be fooled: Nobody likes to be taken in. If it sounds too good or too incredible to be true, it probably isn't true. Good places to check urban myths are the Annenberg Policy Center's [FactCheck.org](http://www.factcheck.org) **(7)** and [Snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com) **(8)**.

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Links

- 1 www.edutopia.org/news-article-directory-timely-tips
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