Assignment Purpose

Today, many adults obtain news and information about politics online, including through social media. This may be particularly true of traditionally aged undergraduate students, as this media consumption trend is most prevalent among young adults. They are concerned that the information they encounter is misleading or inaccurate, and evidence from the 2016 election cycle shows that most traffic to "fake news" stories did in fact come from social media. However, not all students are receiving information literacy training before encountering news and information online.

How do students evaluate sources if they have not received sufficient information literacy training? They may filter them through people they trust – such as friends and family on social media, gravitate towards coverage that reflects their pre-existing views, or simply choose the first search results. Outside of class, this may manifest in students being unprepared to participate in political and civic life in an informed manner; inside our classes, this may result in students being unprepared as consumers to evaluate sources of information or as producers of their own research.

How can we address this in our research methods classrooms? Simply giving students a lecture about why their preferred source is not acceptable or why the misinformation they have encountered is false is likely to backfire – students may double down on their previously held beliefs. Lessons also should also not focus entirely on critiques of these sources; young adults are already cynical of news media and this may deepen their distrust. Effective correction of misinformation should instead involve discussion, interactivity, and allow students to understand the implications and relevance to their own lives. A sample activity meeting these criteria is described below.

Sample exercise: Have students write their own headlines

1. Select a recent poll, preferably covering a subject area of interest to your students. This poll should have at least one article written about it, but the activity is best if you have a few from various news media outlets to compare.
2. Print out a copy of the complete poll results for each student group (or send them the URL to access it if computers are available in your classroom or you are teaching in an online setting).
3. Separate students into groups to review the poll data. Each group should be tasked with writing a headline about its results. Allow 15-20 minutes for this task.
4. After students have written their own headlines, compare theirs to the actual headlines used.
5. Discuss as a class any differences in headlines among groups in class or news media outlets.
   a. What topics did each group and media outlet focus on, and why?
   b. What could lead to these differences?
   c. Are the different headlines accurate?
6. In classes discussing survey research methods in more detail, also have students evaluate the poll's methodology. For example, have them review the question wording or sampling method.
7. Bonus: this activity can be adapted to almost any course covering public opinion research, information literacy, or the media. It is not limited to research methods!

Sample exercise materials

Below are two examples that I have previously used in class. Feel free to use these examples or find another original poll with coverage in multiple news sources.

Example 1

- [Poll methodology and results for adults and registered voters](#)
  - Print one copy for each group and hand out for review
- [Original reporting from Marist Poll](#)
  - Headline: "Americans: Trump Policies Favor Wealthy"
- [Coverage in *US News & World Report*](#)
  - Headline: "President Donald Trump is 'out of step' with Americans"
- [Coverage in *The Hill*](#)
  - Headline: "Majority of Americans think Trump's policies favor the wealthy"
- [Coverage in *The Washington Post*](#)
  - Note: As this article discusses several polls, in this case there is no headline referring directly to the poll.
  - They summarized the poll as follows: "Given those sentiments, it's not surprising that a 66 percent majority indicated that the country is going in the wrong direction, according to a [Marist College poll](#) last month — up seven points from the [eve of Trump's election](#)."

Example 2

- [Poll methodology and results](#)
  - Print one copy for each group and hand out for review
- [Original reporting from CNN](#)
  - Headline: "51% Say Senate Should Remove Trump from Office"
- [Coverage in *The Hill*](#)
  - Headline: "Poll: 51% of Americans say Senate should Convict and Remove Trump"
- [Coverage in *Politico*](#)
  - Headline: "Poll: Most Americans want Trump Removed from Office by Senate"