Media literacy in Civics and Citizenship

Using contemporary issues in Civics and Citizenship requires engagement with the media, whether the teacher is interpreting reports to summarise and share with students or if students themselves are engaging directly with media texts. Thoughtful engagement with media is an instrumental part of becoming an active and informed citizen. We are living in a time of media **polarisation**, **misinformation** and **disinformation**. Social media is established as both a source of media content and the key lens through which young people engage with the world, with 75 per cent of Australian teens reporting that they receive news from social media (Notley et al. 2020).

Over the last two decades the rising use of social media as well as its associated ‘24-hour’ news cycle have changed the way that news is produced, shared and used. We know that Australian young people are increasingly accessing their news through internet rather than traditional media sources (NAP-CC 2020). The proliferation of false information, whether distributed by professional media sources or shared by individuals on social media, impact trust in media sources and have had a significant impact on many recent issues (Notley et al. 2020). Social media content is difficult to regulate, which has enabled an increase in false or misleading information being shared. While social media drives the sharing of inaccurate information, mainstream and professional media sources have been guilty of this as well (Manfra and Holmes 2020). Sometimes, this is unintentional and can be caused by haste or carelessness. This is called media misinformation. Disinformation is more sinister and involves the sharing of intentionally misleading or inaccurate information and can be seen affecting our understanding of contemporary issues both in Australia and internationally. All these considerations make the skills developed in this module, such as the evaluation and analysis of media texts, particularly important.

The [Australian Media Literacy Alliance](https://medialiteracy.org.au/) defines media literacy as ‘the ability to critically engage with media in all aspects of life’. Unlike Media Arts, which explores a variety of fictional and non-fictional media texts, in Civics and Citizenship we are often referring to news media literacy, which has been described as ‘any accurate information that facilitates decision-making on both personal and social issues, thus enabling people to more effectively engage in society’ (Vraga et al. 2020). These skills are complex and specific, and can more easily be incorporated if your teaching context engages strongly with evidence-based disciplinary literacy education such as through the [DET Literacy Teaching Toolkit resources for Civics and Citizenship](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/Pages/introduction-to-literacy-in-civics-and-citizenship.aspx#link2).

Developing media literacy (alongside other literacies) through your Civics and Citizenship program will increase students’ ability to engage with contemporary issues as well as increasing their capacity to independently and responsibly engage with media as active and informed citizens. Contemporary issues provide valuable opportunities for students to engage with authentic and meaningful texts throughout the curriculum. When you implement contemporary issues in the Civics and Citizenship classroom, a lot of the information that contributes to case studies will come from the media; it is the lens through which we understand the world.

There are specific content descriptions that explicitly demand media analysis at Levels 9 and 10, but scaffolded instruction to enable students to actively engage with media representations is required at all levels of the curriculum.

It is important to note that, while students develop skills related to media production and analysis through the Media Arts curriculum, the applied interpretation of media content, such as news analysis, is an ongoing skill that can be taught across the curriculum. Young people are immersed in media processes, and you are

encouraged to engage with their expertise and experience in interpreting these messages. For students to achieve the literacy goals of Civics and Citizenship, media literacy needs to be emphasised and addressed explicitly.

Suggestions for developing critical media literacy in Civics and Citizenship include the following:

* Draw on [VCAA’s student-led resources](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/foundation-10/resources/civics-and-citizenship/Pages/Student-ledCivicsandCitizenshipResources.aspx), which include a media video and resource.
* To critically interpret media texts, students need to be able to deeply understand them – so start with general literacy.
* Provide students with lots of well-written, well-researched journalism to build an awareness of what this looks like.
* Evaluate sources with questions like ‘Where did the producer of this media text get their information?’, ‘What expertise do they have?’, ‘How do we know if a source is reliable?’, ‘Who checks the facts of this media producer before the piece is shared/printed/broadcast?’ and ‘Is this media producer obliged to follow any standards such as the [MEAA Journalist Code of Ethics](https://www.meaa.org/meaa-media/code-of-ethics/)?’.
* Develop language using DET’s Literacy Teaching Toolkit [Developing critical media literacy](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/Pages/developing-critical-media-literacy.aspx), including vocabulary such as ‘representation’, ‘genre’, ‘codes’, ‘conventions’, ‘symbolism’, ‘interpretation’, ‘selection’, ‘omission’, ‘manipulation’ and ‘audience’.
* Find space to explicitly teach media analysis skills and embed these in classes regularly.
* Provide students with a suggested list of media sources to use when they are starting to research an issue.
* Find social media examples of news commentary to analyse as a group to build this awareness for students. Ask them to bring in the media that they are consuming.
* Explicitly teach about media issues such as concentrated media ownership, algorithmic content curation (the filter bubble), media regulation and research on media influence.
* Create media representations such as political memes, articles, social media posts or news reports as learning activities.
* Embed the learning by taking an interdisciplinary approach. How are English and Media teachers at your school teaching critical media literacy? Maybe you can share approaches and strategies.

Key terms

**Media polarisation**: The process of media reporting increasingly extreme viewpoints with an adversarial tone. It also refers to the way that audiences consume a ‘bubble’ of media that they agree with that may confirm or reinforce particular viewpoints

**Misinformation**: When incorrect or unreliable information is presented as fact

**Disinformation**: When false information is deliberately presented