

LESSON PLAN

Networked News: Understanding and Curating Your Digital News Feed

This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.



LEVEL: Grade 7-12

DURATION: 2-3 hours, plus time for the assessment activity

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Matthew Johnson, Director of Education, MediaSmarts

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Overview

In this lesson, students will focus on how to understand and actively curate their digital news feeds to counteract the tendency for algorithms or single viewpoints to create a distorted perception of reality. Students begin by defining “news” as a genre and distinguishing its essential elements and tropes from related sub-genres like opinion and documentary. They then do a news audit to analyze their current habits, then learn to verify the reliability of both mainstream and independent journalists. The lesson ends with an independent assignment where they create a persuasive presentation to advocate for a reliable news source to their peers.

Learning outcomes

Key concepts/big ideas: Students will understand...

Media have commercial considerations:

- Genre expectations (e.g., news vs. opinion) provide an initial guide for how to interpret information, but these can be manipulated
- Media have social and political implications:
- Relying on a single point of view or a curated algorithm can lead to a distorted or incomplete perception of reality.

Digital media experiences are shaped by the tools we use:

- Consciously curating online news feeds is a vital skill for building a diverse, accurate, and reliable information diet.

Misconceptions to correct: We can be sure that important news will “find” us through our social network feeds

Framework topics: Students will know...

Finding and Verifying:

- Key indicators of reliability for news sources, including a source’s knowledge, process, and motivation.
- The “news finds me” attitude and its potential to limit exposure to diverse information.

Consumer Awareness:

- That news can originate from traditional outlets, wire services, independent journalists, and social media.
- The distinctions between news reporting, opinion, and analysis as sub-genres.

Key vocabulary: Genre, news, independent journalist, objectivity, transparency

Core Competencies: Students will be able to...

- Access: Develop a practical plan to actively curate their online news feeds by identifying reliable sources and seeking diverse viewpoints.
- Understand: Verify the reliability of news sources, including independent journalists, by assessing their knowledge, processes, and motivations for accuracy and transparency.
- Engage: Apply intellectual humility when consuming news, questioning their own pre-existing beliefs and potential biases.

Student-facing outcomes:

- **We will learn** how to tell if news sources are reliable and that news can come from many places like traditional news, independent journalists, or social media.
- **We will think about** how important it is to carefully choose our news online because important stories might not just find us.
- **We will** make a plan to improve what news we see online by finding trusted sources and always remember to question our own thoughts and feelings when reading news.

Preparation and Materials

Prepare to show the following videos:

- [*Reading Media: Genre*](#)
- [*Reading Media: Networked News*](#)
- [*Companion Reading*](#)
- [*Networked News Think-Aloud*](#)
- (Optional) [*How to Train Your Algorithm*](#)

Prepare to distribute the following handouts:

- *News Audit*
- *News, Opinion, Documentary*
- *Networked News*
- *Verifying Independent News Sources*

Prepare to distribute the worksheet *Improving Your News Feed*

Review the teacher backgrounder *News, Opinion, Documentary: Teacher's Version*

Procedure

WHAT IS NEWS?

Start by asking students if they watch, listen to or read news on a regular basis.

After students have shared their responses, ask: How do you know if something is “news?”

Once students have shared some thoughts, explain to students that news is a *genre*. Ask if they know what the word “genre” means, and then show the video [Reading Media: Genre](#).

After the video, ask students if they can now define what is meant by a genre, and what it means to describe news as a genre. Make sure to highlight:

- A genre (such as news) is *not* the same thing as a medium (such as newspapers). News can be in any medium.
- Genres tell audiences what to expect, and tell media makers what the audience will expect to see.
 - Point out that this means that while media makers decide what's in the news, it is audiences that ultimately decide whether or not something is news.

Explain to students that there are two ways of recognizing that a work is in a particular genre. The first is by looking for the *elements* that a work *must* have to be in that genre.

Ask: What are the essential *elements* of news that makes it different from similar genres like *opinion* writing and *documentary*? What do we *always* expect about each genre? What do we *sometimes* see in each one? What do we *never* see in each one?

Project or distribute the handout *News, Opinion, Documentary* and fill it in with students. You can use the *Teacher's Version* as a guide to make sure the most important items are included:

- All three genres are about things that happened in the real world.
- All three things are expected to be accurate.
- Documentaries sometimes include the maker's opinion.
- Opinion pieces always include the maker's opinion.
- News pieces never include the maker's opinion.
- News and opinion pieces are always about something recent ("new").
- Documentaries are sometimes about something recent.

Now remind students that you can also identify a genre by its *tropes*, which are the "toolbox" that makers and audiences associate with the genre.

It can be easier to spot a genre this way, because you don't necessarily have to read, watch or listen to the whole work.

Ask students to list tropes of news they can think of, and make sure the following come up:

- An event that is being reported
- Someone delivering the news (a journalist, reporter, announcer, etc.)
- Sources of the news (people who were interviewed, photos, videos, documents, etc.)
- Facts about the event from those sources

Point out that identifying what genre something is in based on its tropes can be misleading as well: a *parody* of a genre will usually use the same tropes (for instance, parody news sources like *The Onion* and *The Beaverton*) and makers may sometimes use genre tropes in other genres for a particular effect (for example, the famous *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast that used the tropes of radio news.)

Now ask students: How is it useful to know that something is in the news genre?

Explain that we can use what we know about genre, and the news as a genre, to tell whether or not something is intended to be news. That tells us that we will engage differently with it than we might with similar genres like *opinion* writing or *documentaries*.

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR NEWS?

Now distribute the handout *News Audit* and explain that we all get information from lots of different places. Go through the information sources across the top of the table:

- *Professional news*: News outlets that do original reporting and have a process to make sure that what they publish is accurate before they publish it. This includes TV news broadcasts, radio news, print sources like newspapers or news magazines, and the websites of any of those (for instance, the CBC or Global News websites.)
 - Ask students if they have ever heard of *wire services* like Canadian Press or Reuters.
 - Explain that these are news agencies that do original reporting and then license their articles to other news outlets; this is why you will sometimes see the exact same news story, usually with different headlines, in more than one place.
 - If an article is from a wire service it will list the name of the wire service in the *byline* (where the reporter's name would usually go.)
- *Other news*: Outlets that share news but don't do their own reporting, and may not have a process for making sure that what they share is accurate. This includes podcasts, YouTubers, news aggregators like MSN or Yahoo or social network accounts that collect news stories, and satirical news (note that there is a difference between sources like *The Daily Show*, which cover real news with a satirical take, and ones like *The Onion* and *The Beaverton*, which publish totally made-up news.)
- *Social media*: Apps like Instagram, X, Snapchat, etc., as well as messaging apps like WhatsApp, where people might have shared news with you.
- *In person*: Sometimes we get news from other people like friends or family members in person.

Next, go through the different types of news in the left-hand column:

- *Local news*: Things about your community, like school news, street closures, weather, local events, etc.
- *Political news*: News about municipal, provincial/territorial, national or international politics – elections, new laws being considered, things politicians said or did, etc.
- *Sports/entertainment news*: Celebrities, athletes, sports scores, and news about music, movies, video games, etc.
- *Health/science news*: New discoveries, health recommendations, astronomical events like eclipses, etc.

Once you're confident students understand both the news sources and news types, have them write as many examples of news sources they can think of in each box – for instance, if they read a local news story in their local newspaper, have them write that newspaper's name in the box where "Local News" and "Professional News" cross.

When students have finished the chart, have them fill in the three questions below:

1. If you can, list three things you learned from professional news
2. If you can, list three things you learned from other news sources
3. List three things you learned from social media

Now ask:

1. How many were able to list three things they learned from professional news sources?
2. How many were able to list three things from other news sources?
3. How many could have listed more than three things they learned from social media?

NETWORKED NEWS

Explain that most young Canadians are likely to say they heard about a news story because somebody shared it with them on social media or video sites such as TikTok or YouTube, and feel that news will "find them" if it's important. That means that the best way to improve your "news diet" is to *add* sources that you know are reliable to your feed.

Now ask students: How do you know if a news source is reliable – whether it is a mainstream news outlet (or looks like one), an independent journalist or someone reporting on their own experience?

Distribute the handout *Networked News* and show students the video [Reading Media: Networked News](#), then have them either answer the questions on the handout or simply go through them with the class.

As an example, show the video *Networked News Think-Aloud* and narrate how you might go through the companion reading steps of this process:

- “The Sick Times” looks like news, but it’s definitely not trying to be objective – it’s advocating for long COVID research and treatment.
- If I search for it on Wikipedia, I find that it doesn’t have an entry, but it is used as a source in other articles. That tells me that it’s not totally unreliable, but I still want more evidence before using it as a source.
- If I search for it and exclude its own website, after its YouTube page, I see an interview with the founders on the blog of the Association of Health Care Journalists. That sounds like evidence that it’s that people in the field think it’s reliable, but first I want to confirm that the Association of Health Care journalists is what it sounds like.
- When I check Wikipedia, I see that it does have an entry, and skimming the article shows me that it is seen as a reliable organization.
- That’s enough evidence for me to decide that “The Sick Times” is reliable enough to be worth *close reading*. Now I can see if they meet our other standards for a reliable independent news source.

Now ask students:

- What are some advantages of getting news from reliable mainstream news sources?
 - What *resources* might mainstream news sources have that would help them get access to news?
 - What *processes* might mainstream news sources have that would help make sure the news is accurate?
 - Highlight that independent journalists often do not have the same resources, processes, or norms that make news reliable.
- When might you want to make sure that you are getting an *objective* point of view on a news story?

- Highlight that social media sources are especially vulnerable to *audience capture*, the reluctance to say anything the audience might not like.
- What are some advantages of getting news from reliable independent journalists?
 - Remind students of the idea of “newsworthiness” from the *Reading Media: Genre* video, and ask them what kinds of stories might not be seen as “newsworthy” but might still be important. Are independent journalists more likely to cover those?
 - Are there times when it might be more useful for news sources to be *transparent* about their point of view, instead of trying to be *objective*?

IMPROVING YOUR NEWS FEED

Have students work individually or in pairs to identify a contemporary independent journalist or non-traditional news source (e.g., a specific podcast, YouTube channel, Substack, or social media account known for original reporting or analysis) that they believe provides reliable news. They will then create a persuasive presentation (e.g., a short video, an interactive infographic, or a formal pitch) for their peers, making a case for why this source should be included in their collective “media diet.”

Make sure students understand that this does not necessarily have to be a source of “hard” news (e.g. news about politics, current affairs, etc.) It can be a source on any topic that interests them (sports, health, video game news, etc.) that they can show has the markers of reliability that you’ve explored as a class.

Students may either find a source or make a case for a source they already follow. For younger students, you may wish to provide some examples for them to evaluate, such as:

Dogo News (<https://www.dogonews.com/>, <https://www.youtube.com/@dogonews> on YouTube)

IndigiNews (<https://indiginews.com/>, <https://www.youtube.com/@IndigiNewsMedia> on YouTube)

Quanta Magazine (<https://www.quantamagazine.org/>, <https://www.youtube.com/@QuantaScienceChannel> on YouTube)

The Narwhal (<https://thenarwhal.ca/>, <https://www.youtube.com/@thenarwhalca/> on YouTube)

EXTENSION ACTIVITY: TRAINING YOUR NEWS ALGORITHM

Explain to students that while adding sources to your information diet is very helpful, if you use apps or platforms that have algorithmic sorting or recommendations (like TikTok's ForYou feed or YouTube's Up Next bar) you can also *train* those algorithms.

Show the video *How to Train Your Algorithm* and ask students what they think they could do to improve the quality of news in their feed.

You can have the class work together to train the YouTube algorithm from scratch. Use the following login:

Email address: Tamealgorithm@gmail.com

Password: Gmsh2tyae!

Then:

- Go to [Myactivity.google.com](https://myactivity.google.com)
- Click or tap YouTube History
- Select Manage History
- Select DELETE, then Delete All Time

Now that the algorithm has been reset, have students suggest how to intentionally “train” the algorithm to give you better quality news.

NETWORKED NEWS: UNDERSTANDING AND CURATING YOUR DIGITAL NEWS

News Audit

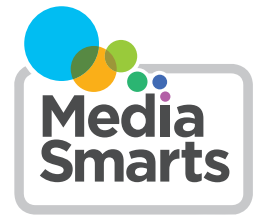
.....

Pick one day in the past week that was a fairly typical one for you in terms of your news and information habits. Using the table below, record all the places you learned different types of news. (Don't limit yourself to English-language sources.)

	Professional News (TV, radio, print, online)	Other News (podcasts, blogs, satirical news, YouTubers, news aggregators)	Social Media (social media apps, texting and messaging)	In Person
Local News	e.g. My local newspaper			
Political News		e.g. A political podcast		
Sports/Entertainment News			e.g. Memes about the new Pokémon game	
Health/Science News				e.g. My friend said there was an earthquake

If you can, list three things you learned from professional news:

If you can, list three things you learned from other news sources:



NETWORKED NEWS: UNDERSTANDING AND CURATING YOUR DIGITAL NEWS

News, Opinion, Documentary

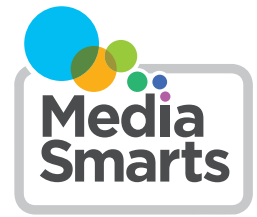
.....
Use the chart below to list the essential *elements* of news that makes it different from similar genres like *opinion* writing and documentary.

- What do we always expect to see in each genre?
- What do we sometimes see in each one?
- What do we never see in each one?

	Always	Sometimes	Never
News			
Opinion			
Documentary			

News, Opinion, Documentary: Teacher’s Version

	Always	Sometimes	Never
News	About things that happened in the real world Expected to be accurate		Include the maker’s opinion
Opinion	About things that happened in the real world About things that happened recently		
Documentary	About things that happened in the real world Expected to be accurate	About things that happened recently	



NETWORKED NEWS: UNDERSTANDING AND CURATING YOUR DIGITAL NEWS

Networked News

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When anyone can make a website that looks like a real newspaper, how can you tell if a news source is reliable?

We can recognize reliable news sources not by how they look, but by how they do their jobs. Reliable news sources have these three things in common:

1. Knowledge

You should have good reason to think they have knowledge about the subject: A news reporting story should be written by someone who has either witnessed the event themselves or talked to people who did.

2. Process

A reliable news source should have an established process for making sure their information is accurate: if the reporter was not actually on the scene, for instance, they should have ways of confirming that the people they interviewed were there.

Do they take steps to be *objective* – not supporting one side of an issue or the other, but giving the best available version of the truth?

Some parts of a journalist's job that support reliability and objectivity:

- Getting photos or video of something that happened
- Interviewing sources who witnessed something that happened
- Making sure those sources are “on the record” (can be printed)
 - Deciding whether to leave a source anonymous if they don't want to be named
- Fact-checking what they were told
- Giving people in the story a chance to respond
- Showing their work by giving you the titles of

articles or studies mentioned and naming experts that are cited

- Publishing corrections when they make a mistake
 - It's not a good sign if they make a lot of mistakes, but correcting errors is a big part of how news source show they're reliable.

If they are *not* trying to be objective, are they *transparent* enough about their point of view that you can see how their reporting is *framed*?

3. Motivation

Does the source have a strong *motivation* to give you accurate information? Is it just trying to be fun? Is it trying to sell you something? Is it only telling its audience things they want to believe?

Ask yourself if the source's audience would care if it made mistakes. If a source is mostly trying to be entertaining or to reassure its audience, find a better source.

VERIFYING INDEPENDENT NEWS SOURCES

Here are two examples of independent journalists who have built reputations for reliability:

Bisan Owda

- Firsthand reporting and transparency: Owda reports directly from Gaza, sharing her personal experiences and observations as events unfold. Her reporting is grounded in her lived reality, offering on-the-ground perspectives.
- Recognition and awards: Owda's work has been recognized with major journalism awards (such as a Peabody and an Emmy), which are typically reserved for impactful, credible reporting.

- Challenging dominant narratives: By providing perspectives often missing from mainstream media, she adds valuable context, building trust with audiences who seek underrepresented viewpoints.

Marisa Kabas

- Source verification and transparency: Kabas broke a major scoop by obtaining and sharing a primary document (an internal memo) and explained her process to her readers, including the steps she took to verify the information.
- Track record and accountability: Kabas has a history of accurate reporting, and when mainstream outlets picked up her scoop, she advocated for proper credit, demonstrating accountability and transparency.
- Independence and critique of mainstream media: Her willingness to critique mainstream outlets and operate independently signals a commitment to serving her audience rather than institutional interests.

How do you know if an independent journalist is reliable and authentic?

Start by asking, “Is this news?”

- Does their content have enough of the essential elements of the news genre for us to say it is definitely news?
- Does it have enough tropes of news coverage, or follow enough conventions of the news industry, for us to say it is probably news?

If it **isn't** news (for instance, if it's someone giving their opinion about a news story) you can either ignore it or go straight to [close reading](#).

If it **is** news, use [companion reading](#) to find evidence from other sources that they are reliable.

- Do they have a Wikipedia entry?
 - If not, do a search for their name and *exclude* the platform where they publish by adding a minus sign and then the platform's web address. If someone publishes on TikTok, for

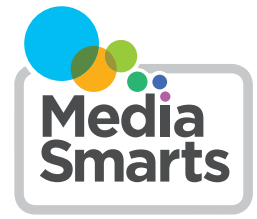
example, search for their name and then add -tiktok.com, like this:



(You can exclude more than one platform in the same way.)

- Have their stories been reprinted by legitimate news outlets? Have they won journalism awards?
- Do they provide original documents, direct footage, or their own personal experiences?
- How long has their account has been active?
 - If they claim to be publishing original photos or videos, check to see why they would be able to access those and if what they're posting is consistent over time. (Sharing supposedly first-hand content from many different places is a big warning sign.)
- Do they claim to be experts in a wide range of issues? Covering too many topics may be a sign they're out of their depth.
- Are they *transparent* about their point of view?
 - Independent journalists don't always try to be *objective* in the same way that most large news outlets do: instead, they give audiences access to voices and viewpoints that would otherwise be unheard. They should, however, be open about their point of view.
 - Saying that they're telling you things “no one else will” should be a red flag.
- You can also ask yourself:
 - Would I trust an independent journalist on the other side of the issue just as much?
 - Am I only following sources who will confirm what I already believe?

Remember: Finding out if a news source is reliable is just the [first step](#) of engaging with a news source. If you find out that it *isn't* reliable, look for better sources on the same news story. If you find out that it *is* reliable, move on to [close reading](#).



NETWORKED NEWS: UNDERSTANDING AND CURATING YOUR DIGITAL NEWS

Improving Your News Feed

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For this assignment, you will identify a contemporary independent journalist or non-traditional news source that you believe provides reliable news. You will then create a persuasive presentation making a case for why your classmates should include this source in their collective “media diet.”

Your source does **not** have to cover “hard news” (e.g. politics, wars, etc.) They can cover any topic that is important to you, so long as they meet the standards we’ve learned for a reliable news source.

1. Once you have chosen your source, start with [companion reading](#) to judge their general reliability. Look at what *other* people say about them, especially neutral sources like Wikipedia or coverage of them in reliable news sources. Look for clues like whether they have been the first to report on stories or have received awards or other recognition.
 - You may have to do some companion reading to confirm that those sources or awards are legitimate!
2. *If* companion reading tells you that they are reliable enough to be worth your attention, you can look at what they say about themselves. Look for an “About Us” or “About Me” page or post or for interviews with them.

Use the handout *Verifying Independent News Sources* for guidance in both these steps.

3. Comparison: Compare your source’s coverage of a specific event with at least one established, reliable mainstream news outlet (such as the CBC, CTV or Canadian Press). The coverage does not have to be exactly the same, but they should cover the same basic facts.

4. Self-Reflection: Ask yourself why you want to believe this source is reliable. Would you trust an equally reliable source on the other side of the issue just as much?

If, after these four steps, you feel confident you can show your source is reliable, go on to step 5. If not, **start over with a different source.**

5. Make your case. Based on your research, your presentation must:
 - Clearly identify your source and how your classmates can access it.
 - Show why you think it’s reliable, referring specifically to the criteria in the *Verifying Independent News Sources* handout.
 - Acknowledge any potential biases or limitations, demonstrating a nuanced understanding.
 - Explain why this source offers unique value to a media diet (e.g., diverse perspective, coverage of underreported issues, authentic voice)