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## Confirmation Bias and Media Literacy

There's no doubt: fake news, biased sources, trustworthy information are the hot topics of our day, thanks to President Donald J. Trump, the person who's done more for calling attention to the need for media literacy education than any leader in recent memory.

These hot topics lead to deeper discussions, as well. What is the truth? How do we seek it out? What is censorship? What should be – or not be – censored? What is bias? To what extent is bias present? What is character? How does character factor into our judgments? Whom do we trust? Should we trust that democracy provides us with the best path to success, freedom, fairness, and justice? Is “power to the people” worthy of our confidence?

This issue of *Connections* explores some of these issues by focusing on confirmation bias and the role it plays in our decision-making. As that august source of information (Wikipedia) says: “Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses.<sup>[1]</sup> It is a type of [cognitive bias](#) and a systematic error of [inductive reasoning](#). People display this bias when they gather or remember information selectively, or when they interpret it in a biased way. The effect is stronger for [emotionally](#) charged issues and for deeply entrenched beliefs.”

Confirmation bias is endemic: it is human and it is unconscious. It is a heuristic that media literacy – through a cognitive heuristic process that can be taught and learned – is designed to challenge, at the very least. Through the internalized filtering system that media literacy education can provide, children and adults can learn to be skeptical consumers and responsible producers of information and media messages. The idea is to encourage citizens to be risk managers rather than just fact checkers – people capable of working with imperfect information (since information is always imperfect), yet making wiser choices in their own self-interest, and that of society.

We owe it to ourselves and to society to reexamine our relationship with media, and to question ourselves regardless of our political affiliations and preferences. As Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, Oliver Wendall Holmes Jr., said, “When men have realized that time has upset many fighting faiths, they may come to believe even more than they believe the very foundations of their own conduct that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas—that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market, and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out. That at any rate is the theory of our Constitution. It is an experiment, as all life is an experiment. Every year if not every day we have to wager our salvation upon some prophecy based upon imperfect knowledge. While that experiment is part of our system I think that we should be eternally vigilant against attempts to check the expression of opinions that we loathe and believe to be fraught with death.”

We must ask ourselves: is a story about policy and principles, or about personalities and character? Is a story based on fact or opinion? Is it about entertainment and emotional reactions or about information and reporting? Is it about clickbait or about thoughtful sharing? We must confront ourselves and the news sources we depend upon – and share with others - - and remind ourselves that in spite of our best efforts, we bring our bias to every story and every situation we engage with, simply because we are human.

The facts can sometimes surprise us. Here, for example, are some thoughtful content analyses of coverage of President Trump's early days in the presidency, conducted by highly reputable sources, the Pew Research Center and the Harvard Kennedy School Schorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy – analyses that may come as a surprise:

<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/04/early-coverage-of-the-trump-presidency-rarely-included-citizen-voices/>

<http://www.npr.org/2017/10/02/555092743/study-news-coverage-of-trump-more-negative-than-for-other-presidents>

<https://shorensteincenter.org/news-coverage-donald-trumps-first-100-days/>

In this issue of *Connections*, we invite you to explore the idea of confirmation bias with Jason Ohler, a professor emeritus of educational technology and virtual learning, as well as a distinguished President's Professor, University of Alaska. When he is not playing with his many grandchildren, he is a professor in Fielding Graduate University's Media Psychology PhD program. Our MediaLit Moments activity, *Feed for Thought*, asks students to consider their own media diet and what they are feeding to others.

## Research Highlights

### What's the real problem with fake news? We're wired to believe it.

*This issue of Big Ideas is reprinted with permission. Issue #16, July 2017 by Jason Ohler, PhD (CML's interview with Ohler begins on page 7). Research and Spanish translation by Eugenia Tamez*

A football game in 1951 inspired what would become a landmark study in psychology. Dartmouth and Princeton squared off in an end of season match that turned ugly, resulting in a broken nose, a broken leg and a flurry of penalties. The game's lack of sportsmanship became the topic of much public debate, with each side blaming the other for the lack of civility on the field.

Psychologists Drs. Hadley and Cantril, from Dartmouth and Princeton respectively, decided to study the differing responses to the game as a perceptual problem. They administered a questionnaire to a sample of students from each of their universities. They also showed a recording of the game to separate samples of their students. In both cases the question the researchers essentially wanted the participants to answer was, "So, being as objective as you can possibly be, what did you see?"

The results? Participants overwhelmingly "saw" a version of the game that was not aligned with reality. Further, participants "saw" the game's nastiness as the other team's fault. The researchers' conclusion, which appeared in their report titled *They Saw a Game: A Case Study*, reads as follows: "It seems clear that the "game" actually was many different games and that each version of the events that transpired was just as "real" to a particular person as other versions were to other people."

### Confirmation Bias - Fake News' Best Friend

This is just one of many studies over the years that has rediscovered the following essential truth about human nature: we see what we want to see. More importantly, we look for evidence that supports the belief systems we already have in place using perceptual myopia as a means of limiting our input. The psychology community has given this phenomenon a name: *confirmation bias*. Without confirmation bias we have to continually test our beliefs and hope we can survive the emotional chaos that results as we reshuffle our worlds. The reality is that we will do just about anything to avoid the confusion and powerlessness that comes with chaos. Advertisers know this only too well. In their quest to get us to feel rather than think, they craft simple, powerful emotional messages that confirm biases that we already hold dear.

### Test Your Own Bias

To drive home the reality of confirmation bias to my Media Psychology PhD students at Fielding Graduate University, I ask them to observe their media input for a few days: TV programs they watch, newspapers and magazines that they read (paper and otherwise), email

listservs they hear from, people they talk to, social media sites they frequent, YouTube videos they watch, newscasts they listen to...everything. Then, I ask them to use the power of objective inquiry they have hopefully developed as social scientists to infer the confirmation bias they use to build their worldview based on their choice of media sources. Every one of my intelligent, self-aware, well read students is surprised, often shocked, at the constraints of the filter bubbles they live within, all of which confirm rather than challenge their biases.

We are all in the same boat. We gravitate toward information that supports our worldview; whether the information is real or fake often isn't even on our radar. Then we go about our business convinced that our worldviews are informed and complete, and that we are responsible and balanced in our decision making. But we are blinded by what McLuhan called "ground" – the environment of our perceptions that we can't see to question. These limitations seem to form the bedrock of the human condition.

### **Circumventing Critical Thought**

All of this provides some insight into how fake news works. The brain, always on the lookout for ways to save energy, prefers to use habit, mental coasting and unprocessed "team think" rather than engage in critical thought. The result is that when we are faced with a new issue our response typically is not to pause, check our sources and then consider our options, particularly if those options threaten to challenge or broaden our perspectives. Doing so is simply too much work in an already overcrowded day in which we are forced to evaluate prodigious amounts of information on the fly. Instead, we leap for a familiar habit of the mind or latch on to whatever "the team is thinking" as a way of keeping afloat in the oceans of data and ideas in which we are continually immersed. The goal is to think as little as possible. Using confirmation bias is a quick and easy way to meet this goal and to deal with a world overwhelmed with options.

This is just the top layer of how fake news works. It goes much deeper if we consider the tools that all mediasts use to construct media, whether fake or real. Did you know that regardless of how adept a critical thinker you might happen to be that you are much more inclined to believe text written in certain fonts, and in certain colors? And believe information portrayed through camera shots taken at particular angles? And accept news and ideas as more believable simply because they are repeated? We don't care too much about these perceptual loopholes when used by honest journalists. But now imagine these tools in the hands of those deliberately spreading "truthiness" in order to promote an agenda, particularly one with which you don't agree. However, this is a topic for another day.

### **What's Our Response?**

If this sounds dire, that's because it is. The mediascape is like any other community in that it only works as well as its citizens' commitment to facticity, diversity and the common good. Given there are many who would abuse the privilege of living in community, we have to be ever vigilant, even suspicious, not only of those who deliberately mislead, but those who spread fake news simply because they have been duped by others.

When it comes to helping our children, we should insist our schools teach media literacy and digital citizenship as a matter of course. Whether our children are consuming or producing media, they should be able to distinguish entertainment from journalism, and opinion from factual presentation. They should be able to effectively inquire about a news source's agenda and means of presentation. Developing this skill set needs to become a staple of education's curriculum, not an add-on when convenient.

And we should teach character education from day one as a way to help students live media-based lifestyles that are informed, inspired and responsible. From the Talmud comes a saying made famous by Anais Nin which seems to explain so much: **"We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are."** The message for us is clear: we need to teach our children not only how to think, but also how to be. After all, the quality of our news is determined by the quality of the people who create it.

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## CML Interview with Jason Ohler, PhD

*Professor emeritus of educational technology and virtual learning, as well as a distinguished President's Professor, University of Alaska. Professor in Fielding Graduate University's Media Psychology PhD program.*

**Tessa Jolls (TJ):** Jason, in your essay (published above) you explained how we as humans are hardwired to believe fake news. There's this notion of confirmation bias, but how do you see these ideas playing out in our work in media literacy?

**Jason Ohler (JO):** It's probably more accurate to say we're wired to believe ideas that we already subscribe to, whether they're fake or not. That is, if we hear some news that supports our worldview then we don't stop to question whether it's real or fake – we just accept it as true. The way we come at media is we tend to look for those information sources that already support our biases. It doesn't make any difference what side of the aisle you're on; this is part of the human condition. It's a phenomenon known as *confirmation bias*, which is just a fancy way of saying that we see what we want to see. It happens mostly in two ways. First, we limit our input to those information sources that are supportive of ideas we already subscribe to. We can see this in the news sources we choose, the blogs we subscribe to, and so on. And second, when we hear something that doesn't support our worldview, we tend automatically to spin it, deflect it or simply reject it out of hand without considering it. If we consider it at all it's to look for what's wrong with it. The goal is not to find the truth but rather to keep our worldview intact. Once our worldview crumbles, we have chaos and the mind will do anything to avoid chaos. It's a rather amazing phenomenon that we engage in. It's not as though we listen to information objectively, and then make a decision about it. We've already made our decision before we've heard the information. It's just a matter of how we will massage what we hear to fit our previously-held beliefs. In that sense, we're all somewhat like the Catholic Church in the time of Galileo.

To demonstrate this to my media psychology PhD students at Fielding Graduate University I have them make a list of their information inputs. Any Media. Radio. Podcasts. TV. Facebook. Even their friends. It doesn't matter – whatever information sources they regularly use. They only need to spend a couple of days doing this. Then they use the objectivity of a social scientist to infer what their bias is towards the world as though they were observing someone else. Many are shocked. I mean, they're all very smart, aware people and they can't believe they're as biased as they are. Almost none of them take the approach of listening to Liberal and Conservative sources in order to compare them. They find sources that support what they already believe. It's a big aha moment for my very smart PhD students.

**TJ:** I can imagine. That's a really wonderful kind of exercise to go through for all of us.

**JO:** Yes.

**TJ:** Where do you help them go from there? Once they have that aha moment? What can we do to address our bias? We all share that inclination to believe what we want to believe and to hear what we want to hear. Where do we go with that?

**JO:** That is the \$64,000-question, isn't it? Once you know how guided you are by your biases, most of which are invisible to you -- how do you respond? I hope what students do is find other media sources to bounce their ideas off of. A great resource for doing this is something like Google news, because it usually will provide four or five different sources for the same story. (See the graphic [Blue Feed/Red Feed](#) from the Wall Street Journal).

On a good day, the stories don't just come from US news sources but also from India, Canada, the UK, and so on. It's always fascinating to me to see how people not invested in the immediate news culture in the United States respond to a news story about the United States. We know very well that an important aspect of media literacy is being able to read between the lines to try to detect what writers and editors haven't reported in a news story. I'm not saying these are bad people. But they have only so many column inches, so to speak. When they report about an important issue or incident they have to squeeze their story into a rather short space. In the process, what they choose to eliminate or include exposes their bias. Sometimes you can read about a story from three or four sources, and you'd swear you were reading about a different event. If the story is at all controversial, it takes at least three or four sources to knit together what might be a fairly good representation of what actually did happen and why we should care about it. So, I hope my students do that and I would encourage everyone to do that.

**TJ:** Yes, that's a great media literacy practice because it does give us a fuller picture of the whole mosaic of reporting that covers a particular event. Yet at the same time, in regards to that mosaic, it does take time and effort to put those pieces together. We also come against the very human limitation of how much time do we have, how important is the issue to us in terms of going after that mosaic and where will it possibly lead us.

**JO:** Well, it all begins with a desire to know what the truth is. I'm afraid there are fewer and fewer people who put truth-seeking at the top of their to-do list. There's much more a sense of subscribing to a particular "team" viewpoint. If you're a fan of a particular sports team, and there is a close call in a game, you root for your team regardless of the truth. That's fine! Doesn't hurt anyone. But when we're talking about political events and important decisions that truly affect people and their lives in important ways then rooting for your team regardless of the facts does become important. Everyone does it - Republican or Democrat, Conservative or Liberal, or whatever, it really doesn't matter. There is so much information coming at us and the world is so confusing and overwhelming at this point, the fallback position for most people is, "Well, what's my team thinking?" If you're a Republican or a Democrat and the team is thinking a particular way about an issue, well that's the way you think about it, without actually thinking about it. To me, it's the opposite of critical thinking. Certainly, a desire to belong to a team drives this. As does a desire to take a break from the



hard work of critical thinking. We are in a time crunch. We're busy. I can't think of a better activity to spend our time on than finding out the truth about something. But understanding the truth takes time. It takes determination. In an average day, as the information comes pouring at us like water out of a fire hose, we use heuristics, and team think is a popular one that simplifies the process of decision-making for us. The price we pay is that the quality of decision making is greatly reduced.

**TJ:** You mentioned the word heuristic and so certainly with media literacy, we're trying to encourage a heuristic that is geared toward a process for critical thinking. Behavioral economics experiments have shown us that there are heuristics that work against good judgment and there are heuristics that enable good judgement.

**JO:** As you're pointing out, be careful what heuristic you subscribe to – and one of the heuristics that may lead to poor decisions is confirmation bias. Another one is tribalism – a more extensive, visceral form of “team thinking.”

The fact of the matter is we're all incredibly busy and we are overwhelmed with information and decisions we need to make. One of the jobs of the brain is to conserve energy. One of the ways to do that is to just go with your habits – no thinking necessary. If I'm going to use some form of habitual thinking, it saves me a lot of energy that I would have to spend if I were going to use critical thinking. Critical thinking takes work. It takes energy.

**TJ:** Yes, and it's all the more important then that we help children form habits of critical thinking from a very early age, because if it's a habit and it's ingrained, then that makes it much easier to turn to that internalized heuristic in those moments of quick decision-making.

**JO:** Yes. Have you ever seen Shermer's Baloney Detection Kit?  
<https://michaelshermer.com/2009/06/baloney-detection-kit/>

**TJ:** No.

**JO:** He's wonderful. He's the head of the Skeptics Society. He points out -- and I completely agree with him -- that it would be great if we all had the time to check the sources of the information that comes at us, but we don't. His baloney detection helps us with that. To me, there are two different kinds of information checking: slow and fast. Slow is better and more in depth, but takes time most of us don't have. We need to do fast information checking, in real time, if we are going to keep up with the flow of a day. People are talking to you, the news is on, and the buzz of the mediasphere comes at us relentlessly. We have a short window to decide whether we doubt something; if we don't then we buy into it, keep rolling, and pass it on as credible. What we just heard becomes part of the narrative that we share with others. I teach my PhD students all the time, check your sources. But in an average paragraph that we read in a news report, we'd need a half an hour to do that and we don't have that time. What do we look for? What are the alarms that ought to go off when you're consuming information

in real time? Shermer's kit helps with that.

**TJ:** We can't be in denial of the fact that it takes time to check out sources and not everybody has the time. So what do you do? What do you do? This is where the rubber meets the road and where media literacy has an important role to play in preparing people for those split-second moments because we have to be prepared.

**JO:** Character education, digital citizenship and media literacy are all part of a genre of approaches that help us make better decisions about many things, including the information in our lives. They are unfortunately not very present in schools. I know schools are busy, but I can't think of an issue today that is more important than fake news. Every problem we want to solve in the world depends on having good information, facts, insight based on solid research. Problem solving depends on knowing the truth. Without the truth, we can't hope to move forward.

**TJ:** I especially like your emphasis on the role of character education, because to make good decisions, we humans have to be in touch with our values. What are they? How do they get formed? How does character get formed and how can we help parents, and teachers and any person who is responsible for character formation with children, to understand the impact that character has? How can we encourage the kind of character formation that will lead to being a responsible and ethical citizen?

**JO:** Character education is more important now than it has ever been. It has always been with us in some form, but has come into its own in modern times. I write a good deal about how to modernize it even further, to apply it to the digital era. In many ways, digital citizenship is a very specific focus of character education, developed specifically to deal with digital era issues. Media literacy is a foundation for digital citizenship. Media literacy is a wonderful, highly relevant application of character education. It speaks to the reality of digital youth. Media literacy provides a way to talk about ethics and values that resonate with students, and ought to be infused throughout everything we do in a K-12 environment. Unfortunately it's still seen for the most part as an interesting add-on that schools get involved with when they've got time, or when there is real leadership that pushes for it. In 2017 going forward, it ought to be upfront. It ought to lead the discussion of what it means to be educated.

**TJ:** Also, one of the values that is so important in a democratic society is the value of trust. A lot of the conversation that we're having now comes to the whole issue of trust. Who do we trust? What information do we trust? Why do we trust it? How do we know? We don't want to encourage cynicism, and yet at the same time, to avoid cynicism, we have to be able to look at that issue of trust and understand it much better. When we become aware of confirmation bias, we realize that as human beings we can't totally trust ourselves, and that's part of being human. We have to acknowledge that, forgive ourselves for it, but also be aware of it.

**JO:** I believe it was E. B. White who said, and I'm paraphrasing, "I arise in the morning torn

between a desire to save the world or savor the world.” I experience the same quandary for myself and as a teacher. How do we teach our students to be basically suspicious of everything they read, hear and see, and, at the same time, to truly enjoy the world and all that it has to offer? It’s suspicion in a healthy way, in a discerning way, in a critical thinking way, but it is suspicion nonetheless. How do we balance those two? That is the dance I think, especially in 2017 and going forward, when information is so plentiful and there are so many conflicting viewpoints.

**TJ:** Yes. We have to keep that faith and trust in our fellow citizens, in our society, in our government, in our social interactions. Without that kind of trust, I don’t believe democracy is possible. Yet at the same time, we have to have healthy debate. We have to have the skepticism. We have to have the questioning. We have to have all the discernment that we can possibly get so that we can make some good decisions. It’s a tricky balance. There’s no real formula for it.

**JO:** No, but we can certainly promote an awareness of needing that balance. We can make achieving that balance a goal. I’ll tell you what I think is really unfortunate as I visit schools: we don’t give kids an opportunity to just sit and think. To find that balance. It’s always go, go, go. Very little reflection time.

I’m all for giving students 15 minutes to just sit and think about whatever it is that they’re doing in class, whatever’s in the news, whatever is important. We emphasize engagement -- and I love engagement. Who doesn’t love engagement? But I’m also a proponent of disengagement. I want students to pull back from the screen, to reflect and to put everything they’re doing in a larger context, to be driven by community interest and personal fulfillment, rather than simply a need to achieve. I don’t see that our education systems value that very highly.

Can I tell you a pet peeve? As people get older, they develop allergies to gluten, dairy and so on. I’m developing an allergy to the statement that we need to reinvent education. I hear it all the time. Reinvent education! Hurry! Most who use the phrase don’t define what it means. The reality is that if I look at what states are telling educators to do in order to fulfill mandates to get their funding, schools are doing a good job; they are following their mandates. They don’t have a mandate to reinvent education. To reinvent education, we need to reinvent ourselves. That’s where it begins – with us. We need to be the voice that goes to our legislators and says, “I want something new out of education.” Then schools will follow. There are plenty of studies that tell us that business and society are looking for graduates who are creative problem thinkers, collaborators, entrepreneurs and so on. But states don’t demand schools pursue ways to develop these attributes. Instead, they demand schools test for skills that are at best limited, at worst obsolete, and have little to do with these attributes.

So, here is an exercise in owning the future. What if tomorrow our legislatures were to say to schools, “We have a new policy that’s called 75/25.” 75% of the criteria by which we judge you

will be based on all the standard stuff- test scores, literacy achievement, so on. But 25% you get to invent yourself. Each school or district would be able to define that 25%. It could be service learning, media literacy, art and design, digital citizenship – whatever they wanted. Each school could be different. They would be assessed on how well they fulfilled the mandates they invented. Then we would see real innovation in education. We aren't using our imaginations to take this incredible K12 education system we've built to go forward into a fundamentally new world. If I had that 25%, I'd lobby for my school to pursue a combination of art, digital citizenship and media literacy. But that's me.

Instead we have the Common Core. When the Common Core came out, I almost wept. Not for what it does, but for what it doesn't do. It does a great job of defining literacy as it was practiced years ago. It is disconnected from many elements of present day literacy.

The Common Core is the de facto standard for literacy and there's almost no media literacy, no emphasis on creativity, design, or what I like to call "art the 4th R." In our multimedia, transmedia world, the new baseline literacy is no longer the 3Rs. It's not just the essay and the math problem. It's the media collage, spread out over multiple channels of media distribution. And there's certainly no, what I like to call, creatical thinking, blending creative and critical thinking. Even though we know business and society are looking for other qualities of being educated, we double down on standardized tests and incomplete approaches to literacy. I've been in this business 35 years. Things haven't changed. I don't get it. Left on the table is this question: What is the role of schools in teaching students how to understand and use the media tools of the day? It is largely unanswered.

**TJ:** What would you like to see, Jason?

**JO:** What would I do if I were in charge? I'll tell you where I'd start. In addition to including the 4th R, creatical thinking, design thinking, maker spaces and other movements that are breathing life into education, I would make character education one of the foundations of the educational process, and express that with large doses of digital citizenship and media literacy. When you get right down to it, media literacy and digital citizenship are both expressions of character. They speak to the skills that good citizens should have. They speak to how we feel our students ought to behave as people. Education is not just about creating smart people. It is about creating good, creative, wise people. We need to build education systems that will produce graduates we would want as neighbors. Good neighbors will be media literate.

These days, teaching media literacy has become more involved than it once was. There was media literacy 1.0, as I call it, and that was basically media literacy during the mass media era – TV, radio, print. We weren't making media. We were ingesting media created by giant media corporations. Media literacy 1.0 was all about developing the skills and perspectives we needed to understand the persuasive nature of mass media. The assumption was that media was always trying to sell us something – whether an idea or a cultural value or a product –

and we needed to understand how they were trying to get us to buy whatever they were selling. Fast forward a couple of decades and now we're all actually making and disseminating media, and our students are using persuasive media techniques themselves! Now what do we do? There is only one thing to do and that's help students develop "good character" because if they're going to use these persuasive tools, then we want them to use them for good purposes, purposes beyond simply achievement and personal abundance. We want them to use the new media for local and global community advocacy. They need to have those good media skills but they need to know how to be good stewards of persuasion. Character education really comes to the fore at that point. Recalling our earlier discussion about fake news - it's not just important for students to be able to detect fake news. It's important that they not create it and disseminate it themselves. These are issues of character, not technology.



CML fellow | Mission: Media Literacy

CERTIFIED AFFILIATE

### Introducing Michele Johnsen, CML Affiliate

Michele Johnsen is a Fellow of the Center for Media Literacy (CML) and president of the strategic communications company Ignite Global Good, LLC, a CML affiliate company located in Los Angeles. She is an award-winning communications expert who specializes in media literacy, social change, human rights and public diplomacy.

Along with more than two decades of communications strategy and messaging experience, Michele holds a Master of Public Diplomacy degree from the University of Southern California's (USC) Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism. Her studies include research on international and domestic communications tools and techniques, including propaganda used during the Cold War era. Find bio [here](#).

Read our interview with Michele on the following page.



### CML Volunteer Michael Barnes Has a MediaLit Tattoo

"I've wanted to get a tattoo for at least ten years, but I never found a design that really struck me as something I would want on my body for the rest of my life. Then I found it. The picture shown is of my tattoo on my shoulder. It depicts a tug-of-war with the human brain between a TV set and a book. The TV set has three sets of arms and therefore has the advantage over the book with just two arms. To me, this is an "old school" message of how powerfully addictive television and technology inherently are over books or knowledge. It's making a statement about our culture, that favors technology (the ease of having information handed to you) versus knowledge (the task of finding one's own information and learning how to interpret it)." *Michael Barnes, 2017*

### About Us...

The Consortium for Media Literacy addresses the role of global media through the advocacy, research and design of media literacy education for youth, educators and parents.

The Consortium focuses on K-12 grade youth and their parents and communities. The research efforts include nutrition and health education, body image/sexuality, safety and responsibility in media by consumers and creators of products. The Consortium is building a body of research, interventions and communication that demonstrate scientifically that media literacy is an effective intervention strategy in addressing critical issues for youth.

<http://www.consortiumformedia literacy.org>

**CONSORTIUM**  
for **MEDIA LITERACY**

*Uniting for Development*

## Resources for Media Literacy

### Interview with Michele Johnsen, CML Affiliate

**Tessa Jolls (TJ):** Michele, I officially want to welcome you aboard as a new affiliate to the Center for Media Literacy. We're so pleased and proud to be working with you. Welcome!

**Michele Johnsen (MJ):** Thank you. I am equally thrilled. I am interested in moving the field of media literacy forward, and I can't imagine a better organization to be affiliated with as I'm doing that.

**TJ:** Thank you! Please tell us how you came to media literacy and what prompted your interest in the field.

**MJ:** I have over 20 years of experience doing a combination of media relations, public relations and journalism work. So media, communications and the flow of information are familiar to me. Then a couple of years ago, I graduated with a Master's Degree in Public Diplomacy from the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communications. It was during my studies there that I really became aware of the gap between what people know about evaluation of media messages, fact finding and the way information flows these days. I also received a historical perspective by studying the use of propaganda during the Cold War era. The first time I heard the words *media literacy*, I was in a class called "Media and the Foreign Policy Making Process." I had a professor who brought up the words media literacy. He suggested that it was a subject that should be taught from the elementary school level. Of course, I agree with that. But I also think that it needs to be taught to adults who are out of the education system, yet making big decisions like voting. I decided that I wanted to use the combination of my education and my years of experience to do something about that and now, I'm moving forward to apply my knowledge and experience to today's issues.

**TJ:** You saw the relevance to your own life, your own career but also saw a fast-forward in terms of, okay, well how can you take these ideas and put it into action?

**MJ:** Yes, especially because so many people erroneously think that what is being called "fake news" is a current phenomenon. The words media literacy are just starting to become familiar to the public. Even the Oxford Dictionary's 2016 Word of the Year, "post-truth," gives the picture that this is a whole new phenomenon. But in fact, manipulation of information has been around as long as information itself. It's

just the methods and speed of information flow that have changed. Also, today we have these echo chambers that provide mostly information that individuals agree with, without offering much exposure to opposing views. Yet media literacy skills provide people with a way to make themselves better critical thinkers and less susceptible to false, misleading or biased information.

**TJ:** Absolutely. Would you mind giving a few examples of the types of programs that you've delivered or been involved in? What are you seeing with the different audiences that you're addressing?

**MJ:** The audiences I've been addressing have primarily been adults and university students at UCLA, UC Irvine, and recently for the Center for Media Literacy, at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina. I've also spoken with non-profit organizations who are interested in doing social good. Next, I plan to expand my media literacy outreach for corporate and international organizations.

I give one-hour presentations that introduce people to media literacy, starting with a historical perspective on information and misinformation beginning with examples from the United States government. For example, "Voz de la Liberación" was a US government-run radio program that was used as a tactic to overthrow the Árbenz government in Guatemala in 1954. In the 1980s, The U.S. Office on Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean used what they called "white propaganda" to influence public opinion, and encourage Congress to continue funding the Reagan administration's military campaign against Nicaragua's Sandinista government.

I also cover ideas such as the democratization of information and citizen journalism. Today - especially those of us who are adults - we've gone through school being taught to read things pretty much the same way as when a newspaper landed on our doorstep once or twice a day, or at the very least, we had to wait until 5:00 to see what aired on the TV news. That kind of information was produced with the advantage of having editors -- paid gatekeepers or fact checkers, people who paid to hold information and accuracy to a certain standard.

Now everyone and anyone can be a journalist. Anyone who owns a smart phone can take a photograph of an event, write 140 characters and put it up on Twitter. This information is not checked by anyone, and the majority of the public does not have the media literacy skills to check information out in a meaningful way. That's what I'm advocating that we, the public, must change.



The goal has always been “breaking news,” so we’ve sacrificed accuracy for speed. CNN brought us 24-hour international news from news professionals. Facebook and Twitter brought us 24-hour international news from ANYONE. That’s all fine and good because, to some degree, it democratized and diversified the voices we hear. But when everyone is in this race to be first, they aren’t necessarily giving careful consideration to their posts. My goal is to give people skills so that they themselves are able to analyze and evaluate.

**TJ:** Michele, you’ve spent time in Ecuador, and you’ve done other work in Latin America. Tell us a bit about that so we have some context on your work and your interest in Latin America. Certainly being an Angelino, that’s an important context to have.

**MJ:** It’s clear that the need for media literacy and for media literacy education is not just a United States issue. This is a global issue. I am near fluent in Spanish, so my first experience with misinformation in Latin America was in Colombia. I went as a delegate for an organization that works to increase understanding about the effects of US policies on Latin American populations. For two weeks, I lived with indigenous Colombians in a rural area who were struggling to reclaim their ancestral lands that had been stolen from them by large owners of agribusiness, oil palm producers, cattle ranchers, etc. Our purpose was not to take any action in Colombia – but simply to witness, document and support the actions of the indigenous people. Obviously, the business people held most of the power in this situation, and it appeared they worked with the small local radio station to further their interests. Racial division was a persuasive tactic they used. So, I remember hearing on a local radio station that “blonde, blue-eyed North Americans were going in and threatening to kidnap the new occupiers of the land.”

Strangely, the first thing that came to my mind was, “I don’t have blonde hair and blue eyes.” But of course, the real issue was that there was nothing close to kidnapping going on. Our job was not to actually do anything, but to document and support the indigenous people who took the action, and then report what we saw to the US Embassy in Bogotá. The people living there were just participating in peaceful protests -- nothing to do with kidnapping. So there we were, 11 people from the US, with our note books and cameras and medical supplies, taking notes and photos and giving bandaids to kids, while being called potential kidnappers on the radio. So, that was my first Latin American experience seeing how misinformation is used through creating a picture with words that were inflammatory and simply inaccurate.

Then in Ecuador, just this past July, I met with an organization called Fundamedios. They've been around for ten years, and they work on freedom of expression and the protection of journalists. They've been active during the Correa administration in Ecuador. They were threatened with being shut down by the Ecuadorian government several years ago. With what's going on in the United States now, with all of the claims of fake news and the divisiveness, for the very first time, Fundamedios is planning to open an office in the United States in Washington D.C., to share their knowledge with the U.S. That is very interesting from a public diplomacy and exchange standpoint.

Very often with public diplomacy and exchange programs, people think of the United States as the entity passing on knowledge to countries in Latin American. Of course, that's not always true. In this case Ecuador, a small Latin American country, is passing knowledge on to the US because they simply have more experience managing the specific issues being addressed -- issues that, here in the US, many perceive as happening for the first time.

**TJ:** Tying media literacy into that, Michele, where do you see the connections? What strikes me is raising the bar of the citizenry's knowledge, to be able to discern and to be able to look at those media messages and hopefully make wise choices. Is that where you see things going?

**MJ:** Absolutely. Media literacy isn't a perfect solution to avoiding informational manipulation. But, it can greatly minimize the vulnerability of populations to misinformation, whether it's here in the United States, in Latin America or anywhere else in the world. What I've discovered is passing media literacy legislation very often falls apart when it comes to obtaining funding. My belief is that there are several reasons for that. One, entities seeking power, seeking financial gain -- you can even think about advertising with this -- it's not always in their interest to have a well-informed, media-literate population that can sit around the kitchen table, take apart their messages and discern what is actually accurate and productive. Sadly, for a lot of entities, having people who are easily misinformed is a benefit. I think that it's going to take global action and a lot of pushing to get the funding and also the buy-in from lawmakers and decision makers around the world. It's up to the public to demand media literacy education. We cannot count on other entities to do this for us. We are the ones with the power. We are the ones who have to have the skills to fully understand media communications for ourselves. We need to supply our citizens, both in the United States citizens and around the world, with the skills to protect themselves and discern for themselves whether information can be trusted

and whether or not it is a good idea to share it. Of course, individuals will make different choices, but they must at least possess the skills to make informed choices for themselves.

**TJ:** If we wanted to flip the coin and look at it as an empowerment of the population, what we're really looking at also is not only a transfer of knowledge but a transfer of power because the old saying, "Information is power," is certainly true. We're looking to empower people and literally empower them by helping them have the skills of discernment and being able to make those choices that are hopefully in their self-interest that adds up to the greater good. That certainly is the ideal.

**MJ:** A lot of those seeking influence -- through "fake news," misleading websites, biased reporting, etc. -- write stories and post articles and headlines that are designed to shock or anger people. That emotional response -- that "OMG, that's appalling!" -- compels people to share, share, share. We can empower ourselves by learning not to react so quickly to our emotions, and to engage our intellect first. We can go through the steps that CML does such a great job of teaching -- the steps of analysis, asking ourselves the key questions and staying aware of the key concepts. It takes practice to learn to engage those skills -- to feel our emotions, but allow ourselves to take a break from them before taking action. Then, we can be more discerning in what we like, tweet, or share. That's where we have power, because guess what happens when creators of fake or biased news get more clicks and more shares? They make more money! They are able to earn more ad revenue. If we want to stop these sorts of things from being such a large part of our information stream these days, we have the power to do that. Don't "like," don't share unless you know what you are sharing is true. Take a moment to verify. Don't react just on your outrage or the fact that you feel appalled or saddened. Of course, it's all very normal, human and natural to have those feelings, but we need to engage our intellects as well.

**TJ:** When we react only from emotion, we are actually disempowering ourselves and empowering the message-maker. Then, of course, when we share on top of that, we're actually leveraging that message-maker's power and we're contributing to that person's power, so it becomes exponential.

**MJ:** Yes. At that point, we simply become a tool to enhance that person or entity's power. It's really important to recognize that, and consistency takes practice. As human beings, we have evolved with a "fight-or-flight response" to feeling threatened. And for good reason! When we are in danger, we need to react fast. To

recognize those instincts and delay action is a real shift, and perfection is probably not realistic. But we can get a lot better!

**TJ:** There's a certain amount of impulse control that's involved.

**MJ:** Yes. Here's a quote to remember: "Junk news is kind of like junk food. It feels good, but it's just not very good for you." It's the same way we discipline our diet, like, "I really want that cheeseburger right now, but I think, instead, I'm going to have a piece of salmon." It takes some thinking to do that.

**TJ:** What kind of services are you and your company offering through your affiliation with CML? What are you looking forward to?

**MJ:** My company's name is Ignite Global Good, which is now an affiliate of the Center for Media Literacy. Ignite Global Good is a communication strategy company that focuses on serving organizations that work on global human rights and social good. That encompasses everything you would imagine for a communications, public relations, and marketing agency, including digital communications. Since I graduated from my Master's program, I have added media literacy training as one of the services I offer. I've been doing that on my own. But now that my company is an affiliate of the Center for Media Literacy, I'm looking forward to incorporating the tried and true, evidence-based skills and techniques into what I'm teaching about a changing information environment.

That provides a great foundation for media literacy. I am really looking forward to putting all the pieces together and offering the strongest presentations possible, as well as expanding my one-hour training into a full-day workshop with plenty of activities that allow participants to learn from doing.

**TJ:** Is there anything you'd like to add?

**MJ:** Just a reminder that anyone can increase their media literacy skills and become a smarter information consumer. It's simply a willingness to become educated in media literacy, practice new skills, and be more discerning when you use, watch, listen, or read, and especially when you "like" and share. Media literacy skills can make us more powerful than we think.

## Additional Resources for this issue on Confirmation Bias

[4Four Big Ideas for the Future- Understanding Our Innovative Selves](#), book by Jason Ohler.

[The Big Ideas](#) newsletter from Jason Ohler.

Shermer's Baloney Detection Kit: <https://michaelshermer.com/2009/06/baloney-detection-kit/>

Wall Street Journal graphic: [Blue Feed/Red Feed](#)

## Med!aLit Moments

### Feed for Thought

Since millions of Americans get their news from Facebook, it makes sense to examine how that news is dispersed on the social network. *The Wall Street Journal* created a chart called [Blue Feed/Red Feed](#) showing side-by-side Facebook feeds for users classified as “very liberal” or “very conservative” by Facebook’s algorithm. In other words, a computer classified users as liberal or conservative based upon previous Facebook activity (likes, shares, etc.). The WSJ graphic illustrates the very real concern about “echo chambers” among Facebook users.

*Ask students to examine their Facebook feeds to see what’s included and what’s not.*

**AHA!** Someone else is deciding what I see!

**Grade Level:** 10-12

**Key Question #3:** What values, lifestyles and points of view are included or omitted?

**Core Concept #3:** Media have embedded values and points of view.

**Key Question #5:** Why is this message being sent?

**Core Concept #5:** Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

**Materials:** Smart Phones or Computers

**Activity:** Show students the WSJ [Blue/Red graphic](#). Choose a subject from the menu (i.e. President or Healthcare) that is best suited to your particular class/grade level.

Then ask students to make a list of the articles and trending topics that appear on their personal Facebook pages. Have students pair up and share their assessments of their feeds using the Key Questions and Core Concepts for media literacy.

Discussion questions: What’s included in your feed? What’s missing from your feed? Is it OK for companies like Facebook to determine what you see? Or to categorize users as *liberal* or *conservative*? Why would Facebook bother to categorize its users? (KQ#5), Do you think the ads you see are associated with the category Facebook determined for you? What is the benefit of seeing stories from different angles and sources? What can you do to seek out other sources of information?

The Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions of media literacy were developed as part of the Center for Media Literacy’s MediaLit Kit™ and Questions/TIPS (Q/TIPS)™ framework. Used with permission, © 2002-2017, Center for Media Literacy, <http://www.medialit.com>