Truth in Stories

Recognize Bias by Examining Point of View in Fiction and Nonfiction

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Can students recognize bias and perspective in written works? In this study, the children focused on traditional stories presented in book or digital book format. This question is not only essential to a child's success in school, but it is also a lifelong skill with far reaching consequences. The news has been filled with instances of inaccurate and misleading information, posted by bad actors, bots, special interest groups, or foreign interests to social media platforms.[1] This information can lead a person to action, which can be detrimental to society and the individual.[2] The skill of identifying misleading or inaccurate information is critical for an informed citizenry.

To address this question, we must define bias and perspective. A bias is an individual's belief, perspective is how one's perception affects their understanding.

Why is this recognition of an author's bias and perspective important for children to understand? Children often perceive that the information that they read is true and accurate.[3] Children are rarely taught to question the author's bias in academic materials, though recently there has been an effort to have information literacy embedded into the curriculum in several states.[4] This lack of understanding of bias is not limited to children.

This skill of vetting the information we receive is critical as we are inundated with information daily. The average American has access to limitless information at their fingertips. Ninety-five percent of American students have home internet access,[5] and 85 percent of American adults have a smartphone.[6]

In a survey from Common Sense Media in 2019, more than half of American children by age eleven had a smartphone and 84 percent of teenagers had their own smartphone.[7] Though they have access to a great amount of information, this information can be not only inaccurate, but also deliberately misleading. As different social media and communication platforms attempt to address this problem, they find bots and foreign interests create an alarming amount of content.[8] According to the Associated Press, Twitter claimed in July 2022 that it was removing 1 million bot accounts daily.[9] And although bot accounts only account for an estimated 5 percent of users, they create 21 to 29 percent of the content in the US.[10]

Smartphones are widely used in China, more than 88 percent of Chinese use mobile devices to connect to the internet according to Chinese state media.[11] However, Chinese citizens are not able to access the full breadth of the internet. Many reputable news sites are blocked and individuals are not exposed to differing viewpoints. More than 90 percent of Chinese children and teens have access to a smartphone, with 97 percent of middle and high schoolers reporting that they have access to a remote device. Though the number is lower for children in grades one to three, the majority of children have daily access to remote internet enabled devices.[12] This is unsurprising due to the widespread use of mobile phones in China as a method to access public transit, order groceries, and pay for anything from vegetables in the

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market to taxi fares. Although the Chinese are connected, they are unable to access sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Netflix, BBC, CNN, and various other sites without a Virtual Private Network (VPN).

There is a great deal of false information on the internet, and this information is dangerous. Countless stories of individuals who believed online hoaxes have caused harm, damaged property, created dangerous situations, and much worse.[13] Many of these instances will be familiar to most readers—PizzaGate, where an armed man entered a family pizza and ping-pong restaurant with the intent of "freeing children" held there by various liberal celebrities. Or the instances of citizens in the UK setting mobile phone towers on fire because they believed the towers were spreading COVID-19.[14] These online hoaxes create a dangerous situation for those who believe them and for innocent bystanders.

The information shared via social media platforms is often designed to mislead, and many individuals are surprised to learn how easily they have been misled.[15] Many adult users of Facebook unwittingly shared false information; in fact, older adults were more likely to share inaccurate stories than teen social media users.[16] How, then, can we prepare children to navigate this vastness of information to find and utilize true and accurate sources?

English Language Learners (ELL) are more likely to struggle with evaluating the information they encounter. Their unfamiliarity with the vocabulary and cultural clues may make it more difficult for them to distinguish what is a joke, hoax, or accurate information.[17] Chinese pupils may find the task especially challenging, as state media is likely the only source they encounter. Chinese students do not have media literacy as a regular part of the curriculum and are not exposed to news outlets sharing information with different points of view. Although the students in the study do have access to a VPN and regularly encounter information not ordained by official government sources, they are rarely taught to question facts that are presented to them. How would these students perform on tasks where they had to question the reliability of sources? Could they be taught skills to critically evaluate information presented to them?

Literature Review and Underlying Theories

In recent years, there has been a great deal of research and discussion concerning misleading information. Politicians have declared "fake news" to describe any news that is unflattering or inconsistent with their worldview and have encouraged their followers to dismiss information they do not agree with. However, the issue of actual fake news, deliberately inaccurate and misleading content, is a real problem for individuals and society as a whole.

Concerns have been raised for decades as each new medium—newsprint, radio, television, the internet—creates an environment for people to spread information more widely and inexpensively. The fear is that this information will be more biased and the standard the information is held to is less rigorous. With each new medium, there was always a financial barrier to entry. Rarely were individuals able to disseminate information that reached a large audience without incurring some significant cost. With the internet, individuals are able to spread information across the globe with a small investment of a smartphone and a bit of time.

Now it is possible for individuals with niche interests to share across borders. There are obvious benefits to this community that can be formed—caretakers of family members with dementia, parents with children with food allergies, people with specialized needs—can all connect with others facing the same challenges and support one another.

The concerns are also obvious. Those with hateful world views can find community with others. Groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS) have been very successful utilizing social media to recruit new members.[18] Oath Keepers and other fringe groups also find community and new recruits through social media.

Another concern is the "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles."[19] It is possible to only seek and consume news that fits with your existing worldview. An individual who only reads and hears news that conforms to the beliefs they already hold will easily dismiss information contrary to their beliefs whether or not the source is reputable.

As "fake news" and how to identify and avoid it is frequently in the headlines, some advocates of truth in the media are finding themselves threatened. Sites, such as Brietbart, tell their followers to go after those who question Brietbart's credibility.[20] This not only cultivates an "us versus them" attitude among fringe group listeners and discredits reputable sources, it also puts those who question these biased sources in danger.

Are there people more prone to believing fake news? A study at Stanford with more than 7,000 participants found that age did not always help people to determine whether information shared was accurate and credible. The study looked at high school students, undergraduates, and history professors and compared their ability to assess the news presented to them with professional fact checkers. Though history professors are well versed in research, this newer medium of the internet often stumped them. They did no better than the students. History professors often relied on irrelevant aspects such as domain name and "look and feel" of a website to determine whether it was accurate.[21] In fact, studies have demonstrated that older people are more likely to share inaccurate news stories online, with senior citizens sharing on average seven times more false news stories than those who are eighteen to twenty-nine.[22]

These differences are often found along party lines. According to research published in the journal *Science*, in the US, 18 percent of self-identified Republicans shared at least one misleading news story, versus 4 perecent of Democrats.[23] In a study at The Ohio State University, researchers found that of stories that went viral, only 10 percent had a liberal view. This study found that not only were conservatives more likely to believe false information, they were also more likely to believe that true information was inaccurate. The researchers attempted to discern why conservatives are

more susceptible to false information, but found no conclusive answer.[24] One theory is that this disparity between liberals and conservatives is due to echo chambers that conservatives often, though sometimes unwittingly, place themselves in and that they are more likely to be bombarded with false information.

How, then, do we teach individuals to be accurate seekers and users of information? Sam Wineburg of the Stanford History Education Group found that the most effective method of teaching students to evaluate the accuracy of sources on the internet was to put them in front of a computer and demonstrate lateral reading. Rather than have a checklist or some other sort of tool to determine whether a site is accurate, students were given a laptop and a list of sites to evaluate. Students were taught to look for the sponsor of the site, open another tab and do a google search to determine if that sponsor was credible. This method of lateral reading is effective because students are able to determine quickly whether a site is accurate, even catching the especially difficult "PR firm fake websites"—websites by lobby groups that promote information that is inaccurate for specified special interest groups such as big pharma, oil, and chemical companies.[25]

In a partnership with MediaWise, young adult author John Green has created a ten-part series on Crash Course to follow the curriculum developed by Sam Wineburg and the Stanford History Education Group. Researchers at Stanford followed up with Green to evaluate the success of the course. Students watched the series and participated in website evaluation tasks. Students found the videos informative and entertaining and their performance on website evaluation tasks were markedly improved.[26]

Green's Crash Course is relevant and relatable to today's teens. Students have direct experience with fake news and they can understand the connections to their own lives. When the content is meaningful and authentic for the students, they are more likely to engage with the instruction.[27]

Education researcher Joy Egbert implemented an activity designed by the Center of Media Literacy to specifically help English Language Learners (ELL) learn how to identify false information shared online. Students were given common internet hoaxes (in this example, that there are abandoned pet alligators in the New York City sewers) and asked to evaluate whether the information was true. Using a kit from the Center on Media Literacy, the teacher models and scaffolds to support the ELL students. The students used tools such as Snopes at Netrekker to research whether the claims are accurate. The teacher supported with vocabulary and modeled posing a question. Through this process, the ELL students were more successful in identifying inaccurate information.

Green's Crash Course effectively teaches high school students how to recognize bias and find accurate information. The Center for Media Literacy Kit can be effectively used with ELL students. Can we teach even younger students how to find bias? Can primary students recognize bias in fiction and nonfiction works?

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) has developed standards for school media instruction.[28] These standards are comprehensive guidelines for high-quality school library programs. The AASL standards have six core foundations—include, collaborate, curate, explore, create, and engage. Through these foundations, students are taught the skills necessary to be effective, ethical seekers and users of information. These standards guide school librarians in their curriculum. The main obstacle is that only a few states, such as New Jersey and Illinois, mandate media literacy education.[29] And the requirements for library funding and staffing vary greatly from state to state.[30] Though there are great resources and standards for teaching media literacy, many students do not learn these skills.

Methodology

Students (5 classes of 24 students in each class, 120 children) involved in the study were Chinese children in grade 3 at an elite private bilingual school in Shanghai. Most of the students have attended the same English private preschool affiliated with the school, and most were in their third year of the primary program at the school. The students have had foreign teachers since their preschool years; over half of the teachers were from the UK; the others were from Ireland, the United States, Canada, and Australia. All international teachers hold a teacher certification from an English-speaking country; all local teachers are certified to teach in the Shanghai public schools. In the bilingual primary program, 60 percent of the content was in English and 40 percent in Chinese. The children's English fluency was on par with children in English-speaking countries.

The primary students had a forty-five-minute library lesson in English each week delivered by an American teacher librarian. The lesson familiarized the students with library resources, such as accessing the catalog, searching in databases (Gale Elementary) and accessing e-books and information literacy skills. The school was staffed with two certified librarians, both of whom were also certified teachers, and two library assistants.

At the start of the school session, students listened to two versions of Rapunzel read aloud: Paul Zelinsky's *Rapunzel* and *Really Rapunzel Needed a Haircut: The True Story of Rapunzel as Told by Dame Goethel* by Jessica Gunderson.

After the stories were read aloud, students were given a paper survey with five questions:

- From whose point a view is the story of Rapunzel traditionally told?

- How does the story differ when told from the witch's point of view?

- Why is it important to recognize the point of view in a story?

- What do you think could affect the author's point of view in the story?

- Could the author's point of view affect a nonfiction (true) story?

Students were asked the same questions again in December after specific instruction on bias and an author's point of view. (One group did not take the survey again due to closures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.)

In December, students listened to two stories about Christopher Columbus and his voyages to the Caribbean. Students listened to *Encounter* by Jane Yolen and *In 1492* by Jean Marzallo. *Encounter* tells the story of Columbus's arrival from the point of view of a young indigenous boy. *In 1492*, a simple rhyming text, tells of Columbus's voyages. In this instance, the children compared the two nonfiction texts to determine if the author's perspective influenced the story.

Figure 1. Students That Recognize Bias

Summary of Findings

Analyzing the October results, we found that less than half (42 percent) of students believed that an author's point of view could affect the story. In one class group (3B), only 29 percent of students believed an author could have bias. Students stated "nothing can affect nonfiction information" and "a fact can't be changed." After several weeks of weekly information literacy skills lessons, including other examples of narratives told from different sides, lateral reading in print and digitally, students were given the survey again.

In December, there was marked improvement in the students' ability to recognize bias with more than 90 percent of children in all classes (mean 93.7 percent) stating that an author's bias could affect both fiction and nonfiction stories. Children responded: "everyone has their own opinion" and "a nonfiction story can have a point of view."

In this survey, children were presented with information through traditional book formats or e-books. Further study is needed to conclude whether the students were able to apply what they learned to information found in other formats, such as news media, and to critically analyze the news media that is presented to them. Although more than half the children initially believed that facts could not have a bias, after six weeks of information literacy lessons, the children gained an understanding of how bias can affect a story whether fiction or nonfiction.

Discussion of Findings' Significance

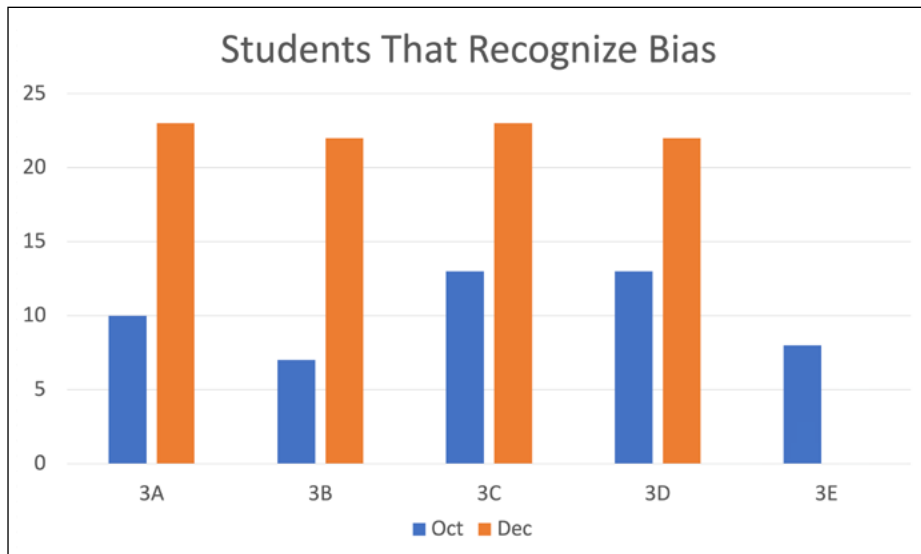This survey's results are similar to other's findings: many people of all ages are unable to identify bias in written works without specific instruction. Also similar to other research, once individuals are given the skills, they are much more effective at identifying bias.

As we hold our students to high standards in literacy and math, it is important to also include information literacy skills in state curricula. As a society, we need citizens who are critical seekers and users of information. We have seen numerous examples of how when indoctrinated with poor quality or misleading information people can become radicalized or driven to participate in dangerous activities. It is crucial that we educate all people to recognize bias and to identify inaccurate information.

Implications of Findings for Practice

A full spectrum of information literacy skills must be included in our schools' curricula. Every student should be taught skills such as identifying bias, lateral reading, citing sources, and preventing plagiarism. School librarians are uniquely placed to deliver this instruction, yet school librarians are in a precarious position due to budget shortfalls in public school districts.

The National Center for Education Statistics reports a 15 percent drop in school library positions between 2009 and 2016.[31] In 2011, the Pennsylvania School Library Study found that in schools with a certified librarian, students performed better on standardized tests. Low-income students in schools with a certified librarian were twice as likely to graduate high school as similar students with no librarian in their school.[32] The Stanford Research Group's study demonstrated that after just six hours of instruction on identifying false information online, the high school students in their survey improved markedly on the tasks.

The evidence is clear—every student should receive an education that includes information literacy skills. Every school should have a library staffed with a certified professional librarian. **&**

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