

Lesson 3

Information in the Digital Age



GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 1 In what way does information influence my decisions?
- 2 How do algorithms personalize my internet experience?
- 3 What are the opportunities and challenges with the internet and social media for democracy?

SUMMARY

Being a responsible citizen involves seeking out information from a variety of sources and comparing perspectives on issues of importance.

In this lesson, students are assigned one of two social media newsfeeds that centre on a controversial issue in the community: the proposed construction of a new solar panel factory. One feed is dominated by posts favouring the factory, while the other includes posts mostly against it. After reviewing their assigned feeds, students vote on whether the proposed solar development should proceed. Next, students review the results of the vote and analyze how the information we consume can affect our decisions. Afterwards, students learn about how the internet has changed the way we

consume and share information, and they evaluate the opportunities and challenges for citizens and democracies.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- By the end of the lesson, students can:
- analyze how news and information can influence our opinions on people, events and issues;
 - describe how algorithms personalize the information they see online;
 - evaluate the opportunities and challenges of the internet and social media for citizens and democracy;
 - describe strategies for being responsible consumers of information.

Starter

Have a conversation about sources of information. Ask students to consider how they would become informed to vote in the following scenarios.

- a) School council election
- b) Local government elections

Discussion questions:

- What actions would you take to learn about the candidates?
- Which sources of information would you rely on and why?
- Do you think it is important to be informed when making a decision that affects others? Why or why not?

Activities

1. Complete the *Feed for Thought* activity found at the CIVIX website newsliteracy.ca. The activity can be completed with online scrollable newsfeeds or paper versions.

a) **Introduce the Scenario.** A solar-panel company has submitted a proposal to build a factory next to the school, and community members will vote in a referendum to decide whether or not the development should proceed. Students at the school will also have the opportunity to vote and express their choice.

Before voting, you will become familiar with the issues surrounding the development and the people involved by reading through a social media feed that has a mix of articles from news outlets and posts from community members and friends.

b) **Read the Feeds.** Without informing students of the two opposing feeds, provide half the class with the "pro" feed, and the other half with the "anti" feed. If you are using the online version, the link provided will randomly assign students one of the two feeds. Give students 10 minutes to review the information.

c) **Vote.** Have students vote on whether the factory should be built by raising their hands or by using paper ballots (Activity 3.1). Tabulate the results and announce them to the class.

d) **Debrief.** Through a whole-class discussion, ask students why they voted the way they did and what information shaped their decision.

Over the course of the discussion, it should become obvious that some students were provided different information than others. At an appropriate point in the discussion, share the fact that there were two different feeds and give students time to review them side-by-side to compare the differences.

Further questions to prompt discussion:

- How did you feel about the results of the vote before you knew there were two feeds? Were you surprised that people voted differently than you?
- How might two people end up with such different news feeds?
- What are the consequences of people consuming different facts and information?
- Do you think people should be exposed to different perspectives or more than one side of an issue before making their decision?

2. Watch the "Behind the Screens – Who Decides What I See Online?" and "Algorithms and Filter Bubbles" videos and/or review Slide Deck 3 to introduce the concepts of algorithms and filter bubbles, and the effects of the internet and social media on democracy. Guiding questions:

- Have you ever noticed information or advertisements online that were based on your previous internet searches?
- How do algorithms personalize your internet experience?
- What are the consequences if we only see information we like or agree with?

Consolidation

In pairs or small groups, ask students to respond to the following questions. Afterwards, discuss the responses as a class.

- What are the opportunities and challenges of the internet and social media for democracy? (This can be completed with a T-Chart.)
- How can we make sure we are informed citizens? Why should we consider different viewpoints before forming an opinion or making a decision?
- How can we be responsible consumers of information?

Suggested Assessment

Ask students to fill out the '3-2-1 Exit Card' (Activity 3.2).

- What are three things you learned?
- What are two actions you will take based on what you learned?
- What is one question you still have?

Extended Learning

Ask students to explore some of the themes in the lesson by completing an online investigation (Activity 3.3). During the activity, students should make notes under the comment section about what they learn through each activity.

- Find out what Google knows about you. For example, find three YouTube videos you watched in January of this year. Select "Filter by Date." (<https://myactivity.google.com/>)

- Find an ad online that has been targeting you. Why are you seeing it? Dismiss it, and click 'why am I seeing this' to learn more.
- Find the 'Terms of Service' for Snapchat – what rights do you give Snapchat when you post a 'Story' that is viewable by 'Everyone'?
- Look into buying a Facebook or Instagram ad. What segment of the population do you want to reach? See how narrow you can target your ad.
- Find a conspiracy theory on YouTube (e.g., Flat earth theory, fake moon landings, 9/11 cover up). How many views does it have? What related content is recommended?
- Go to [google.com](https://www.google.com) and type in "What is". Make note of the options that appear below. Select one option. Now type in "What is" again. How did the list of options change?
- Look at the social media channel of a mainstream news organization (i.e., *The Globe and Mail*, *CBC*, *National Post*). Compare what appears on the social media channel compared to the homepage of its website.

SUPPORTS AND ADAPTATIONS

Language Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide students with terms and definitions in advance. • Share the lesson videos before class discussions and activities. • Ensure that subtitles are on during videos.
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students may come from households with varying degrees of access to the internet, and have different levels of familiarity with social media. Not all students will have prior knowledge of the social media feeds being emulated in the 'Feed for Thought' activity. • Encourage students to share their own experiences with online platforms and social media. • Ensure that you are open and encouraging of diverse viewpoints your students may share.
Accommodations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider conducting the referendum vote through an online platform (e.g., Google Forms, SurveyMonkey). • If working in pairs or small groups in the classroom is not possible, consider using Google Docs for collaborative discussion/brainstorming.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

As citizens living in a democracy, we have a responsibility to stay informed about the issues that matter to us and to society. This is true all the time, but especially when we must make a meaningful choice at the ballot box.

The introduction of the internet and the rise of social media have been significant for news and information, and complicated for citizens.

Where traditional news organizations were once the **gatekeepers** of information and the only ones with the resources to disseminate it — printing presses and TV stations are costly to purchase and operate — the internet allows anyone, anywhere to be a publisher.

The rise of blogging and social media a generation ago was widely viewed as the democratization of

information, bringing new voices into public discourse and leading to positive social change. The reality of online communication has been more complex.

When news came only from traditional or **legacy media** — newspapers, TV, and radio — there was always someone who stood between audiences and information, a person or process that filtered the stories or content, checked facts and packaged stories for public consumption.

Where human editors and producers were once the only gatekeepers who decided what news audiences saw, on the internet, that job belongs to **algorithms**, sets of instructions that tell computers how to perform specific tasks, like sorting information.

Social media algorithms work in such a way that we are more likely to see content that is similar to what we already like or agree with. Our social

media feeds never give the whole picture.

Since people have become such heavy adopters of social media, they now rely on these sites (such as Facebook or Snapchat) for news. The problem is that **social media** platforms never intended to be news organizations, and there are consequences for informed citizenship when people rely on friends and algorithms to find out about what is happening in the world.

Informed citizenship involves seeking out news and information from a variety of sources, comparing perspectives and keeping up with new developments. There are things you can do to make sure you are informed, particularly when there is so much information available online.