Lesson 3
Informed Citizenship

❶ How does information influence my decisions?

❷ What are the opportunities and challenges of using online platforms?

❸ What actions can I take to be an informed, responsible citizen?

OVERVIEW

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

In this lesson, students experience the relationship between the information we consume and the decisions we make through a hands-on interactive activity. Before participating in a mock municipal election, students learn about the candidates and election issues by reviewing information from one of two polarized social media feeds. After the vote, students discuss how what they read may have influenced their decision. Next, students learn about how the internet has changed the way we consume and share information, and discuss the implications of getting information from online platforms.

LEARNING GOALS

By the end of the lesson, students will:

- understand how news and information can influence our opinion on people, events and issues;
- explore issues related to being a responsible and informed citizen (Citizenship Education Framework - Attributes).
- develop an understanding of the complex relationships and systems in the digital world (Citizenship Education Framework - Structures);
- consider and respect others' perspectives (Citizenship Education Framework - Identity).

SUCCESS CRITERIA

I can...

- analyze how news and information can influence our opinion on people, events and issues;
- explain how algorithms personalize the information I see online;
- describe strategies for being an informed citizen and accessing multiple viewpoints.

Curriculum Links

Starter

Start with an opening conversation about making informed decisions. Ask students to consider how they would become informed to vote in the following scenarios.

a) School council election
b) Government election

Using a Turn and Talk protocol, ask students to discuss the following questions with a partner.

- What actions would you take to learn about the people running for election?
- Which sources of information would you rely on and why?
- Is it important to be informed about the options before making a decision? Why or why not?

Activities

1. Complete the *Feed for Thought: Election Edition* activity found at the CIVIX website newsliteracy.ca (free registration).

   > **TEACHER NOTE**
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   > A paper version of *Feed for Thought* is also available at newsliteracy.ca. As an alternative to the online activity, you can print and distribute the two different feeds and ask students to vote using a show of hands or by using paper ballots (Activity 3.1).

   a) **Introduce the Scenario**. There is a high-stakes election coming up, and you are going to vote in it. There are two candidates to choose from, and people in your community feel strongly about who should win. It is expected to be a close race. Before you cast your ballot, you will learn about the candidates and election issues by reviewing information on social media to help make your choice. The social media feed has a mix of articles from news media and posts from friends and community members.

   b) **Read the Feeds**. Distribute the provided link to students and it will randomly assign students one of the two feeds (each feed more favourably supports one of the two candidates). Do not inform students about the two different feeds. Give students 10 minutes to review the information.

   c) **Vote**. Have students vote for the candidates using the online voting button located at the bottom of the social media feed. You can access the results from your newsliteracy.ca dashboard. Announce the vote totals 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 apparent that some students were provided with different information than others. At an appropriate point in the discussion, share the fact that there were two different feeds. You can also review the feeds side-by-side to compare the differences (preview links are available newsliteracy.ca).

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 by the outcome? Why or why not?
- How might two people end up with such different news feeds?
- What are the consequences of people consuming different facts and opinions?
- 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?" video and/or the "Algorithms and Filter Bubbles" video, and/or review Slide Deck 3 to introduce the concepts of algorithms and filter bubbles, and the effects of online platforms on democracy.

> **TEACHER NOTE**
> The content in the "Behind the Screens: Who decides what I see online?" and "Algorithms and Filter Bubbles" videos is very similar. You can choose to show either option, or both.

3. Divide students into pairs or small groups for a discussion about their own experiences.

Key questions:

- You have probably observed information or advertisements online that were based on your previous internet searches or content that you read or watched. Can you share an example from your own life of when this has happened? Are there other times you have noticed algorithms personalizing your internet experience?
- What is your understanding of how recommendation algorithms work?

4. As a class, briefly discuss the implications of online personalization.

Key information and questions:

- Information environments that are tailored to individuals can have an impact on informed citizenship and democracy.
- What might happen to our understanding of people, issues, and events if we only see news or information we like or agree with?
- What impact might 'filter bubbles' have on discussions of divisive political issues?
- Should we make an effort to avoid ending up in a filter bubble? What steps might we take to become exposed to different perspectives?

Consolidation

Ask students to fill out the Exit Card (Activity 3.2).

- WHAT? Describe what you learned today. What stood out? What was your 'a-ha' moment?
- SO WHAT? Identify the implications. What does it mean for you? How does it affect you?
- NOW WHAT? Define a course of action. What actions will you take?

Alternatively, ask students to record one 'a-ha' moment from the discussion on a sticky note and attach it to the board.

ADAPTATIONS AND SUPPORTS

Language Learners	• Provide students with terms and definitions in advance (e.g., online platforms, algorithms, filter bubbles). • Share the "Behind the Screens" and/or "Algorithms and Filter Bubbles" videos before class discussions and activities. • Ensure that subtitles are on during the videos.
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	• Students may come from households with varying access to the internet, and have different levels of familiarity with social media. Keep in mind that 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 & Accessibility	• If working in pairs or small groups is not possible, considering 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, which are 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 TikTok) 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 the results of 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.