

## SPJ/JEA High School Essay Contest - Journalism Education Association

**Media literacy is connected to democracy. What are some top strategies to engage people of all ages with media literacy and democracy? (300-500 words)**

- Media literacy = the ability to critically **analyze** stories presented in mass media and to determine their **accuracy** or **credibility**

In an age inundated with seemingly unlimited information from countless sources, the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood has become all the more important. Failure to do so can have the potential to bring about catastrophic results. In particular, misinformation can significantly threaten education, deterring individuals' ability to discern facts accurately and creating a disability in consuming information. This issue calls for effective solutions for creating a healthier information environment, particularly in social media. Two key strategies may best combat this problem: individualizing social media algorithms based on age and instituting mandatory media literacy education in schools.

Online platforms categorize and curate information primarily by using algorithms, and tailoring content so that it is "best fit" for different audiences. Information is sorted to align with the viewer's historical and statistical preferences. However, before the information is presented through the algorithm, no process checks the factuality or accuracy of that information. Therefore, misinformation may spread without much notice. A solution to this challenge is basing the algorithm on age—the younger the age, the greater the need to rule out unverified and illegitimate sources. Additionally, algorithms should present a diversity of perspectives instead of biased information that reinforces the individual's views. Furthermore, practical strategies include raising awareness of misinformation and nurturing critical thinking skills to empower individuals to form informed opinions independently.

Moreover, it is crucial to integrate media literacy education into the school curriculum. Fostering media literacy is essential in cultivating informed citizens and thus an efficient way to ensure the engagement of people of all ages with media literacy. Much like sex education, which adapts its content for varying age groups, media literacy education should be customized to suit the developing needs of each age group. Katherine Schulten's article "Teenagers and Misinformation" reveals that "asking questions to bring their personal experiences of misinformation on media literacy is the key to earning the ability to discover primary informed data by themselves." Allowing students to reflect upon their private experiences will make the issue personal and motivate students to address it on an individual level. Moreover, it will help them develop the ability to discern truth from distorted information. Media literacy education will promote a sense of identity and instill trust in objective information.

DUE: **Feb. 19, 2024, 11:59 p.m.** Central time/9:59 p.m. Pacific time.

Beyond the considerations of individualizing algorithms and implementing media literacy education, lie the fundamental importance of essential skills—logic, research skills, and receptiveness to alternative perspectives—that are relevant and significant across various aspects of life. Logic is integral to morality and the human comprehension of relationships, society, and the self. Research skills and having an open mind allow for the unlimited growth of knowledge and understanding. As social media usage is increasing, media literacy is assuming a central role in shaping societal dynamics. For democracy to flourish—for citizens to make informed decisions—all citizens must have equal access to information and the ability to discern truth from falsehood.

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### Work Cited

Schulten, Katherine. "Teenagers and Misinformation: Some Starting Points for Teaching Media Literacy." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 20 Oct. 2022, [www.nytimes.com/2022/10/20/learning/lesson-plans/teenagers-and-misinformation-some-starting-points-for-teaching-media-literacy.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/20/learning/lesson-plans/teenagers-and-misinformation-some-starting-points-for-teaching-media-literacy.html).