Unit 1: Media Literacy & Civil Conversations

Content Area: **Social Studies**
Course(s):
Time Period: **Marking Period 1**
Length: **6.5 weeks**
Status: **Published**

Summary

Current Issues is a dynamic, interactive course that examines the pressing political, social, economic, and environmental challenges shaping both domestic and global communities today. The course emphasizes civil discourse, collaboration, and problem-solving, helping students develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of modern society. To do so, students analyze and discuss contemporary events from multiple perspectives, fostering critical thinking, informed decision-making, and media literacy. By engaging with current events and trends, students build their awareness of local and global issues, preparing them to be active, informed citizens in an ever-changing world.

This unit is part of the larger aforementioned course sequence and specifically develops students' ability to critically evaluate media, understand bias, and engage in respectful civic discourse. Students will learn how to identify reliable sources, evaluate digital content (including AI-generated media), cite sources appropriately, and practice civil conversations in both in-person and digital spaces. Through case studies, activities using The Juice, discussion protocols, and Ethics Bowl strategies, students will build media literacy skills and develop as informed global citizens.

The ability to make informed and reasoned decisions as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an increasingly globalized world is essential to students' post-secondary success. The skills and content of this unit and the curriculum as a whole encourage students to think critically about important issues, engage in the processes of problem solving, and develop civic competence as part of preparation for college, career, and/or civic life.

Revision Date: August 2025

Standards

- 6.3.12.CivicsPD.1: Use a variety of sources to analyze current public policies and propose and defend a position.
- 6.3.12.CivicsPI.1: Evaluate the effectiveness of major political institutions and processes.
- 6.3.12.HistoryUP.6: Use diverse sources to analyze the impact of media and propaganda.
- 9.4.12.IML.2: Evaluate digital sources for accuracy, perspective, credibility, relevance, and bias.
- 9.4.12.CI.1: Demonstrate the ability to reflect, analyze, and use creative skills and ideas.
- 9.4.12.CT.2: Explain the potential benefits of collaborating to enhance critical thinking and problem solving.
- RH.11–12.7, 8, 9 – Integrate and evaluate multiple sources in diverse formats, and assess claims, reasoning, and evidence

- RI.PP.11–12.5 – Analyze an author's purpose and rhetoric, including how style and content convey information and advance a point of view
- RI.MF.11–12.6 / RL.MF.11–12.6 – Synthesize complex information across multiple sources and formats to develop interpretations or resolve conflicts
- RI.AA.11–12.7 – Describe and evaluate reasoning in seminal U.S. and global texts, including premises, purposes, and arguments
- RI.CT.11–12.8 / RL.CT.11–12.8 – Analyze and reflect on documents of historical or scientific significance for themes, purposes, and rhetorical features
- W.AW.11–12.1 – Write arguments on substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and evidence (including precise claims, counterclaims, logical sequencing, tone, and coh
- W.IW.11–12.2 – Write informative/explanatory texts on complex ideas—organizing and analyzing content effectively

This unit further reflects the goals of the Holocaust Education mandate where students are able to identify and analyze applicable theories concerning human nature and behavior; understand that genocide is a consequence of prejudice and discrimination; understand that issues of moral dilemma and conscience have a profound impact on life; and understand the personal responsibility that each citizen bears to fight racism and hatred whenever and wherever it happens.

In accordance with New Jersey's Chapter 32 Diversity and Inclusion Law, this unit includes instructional materials that highlight and promote diversity, including: economic diversity, equity, inclusion, tolerance, and belonging in connection with gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, disabilities, and religious tolerance.

The standards in this unit reflect a developmental progression across grade levels and make interdisciplinary connections across content areas including the humanities, technology, career readiness, cultural awareness, and global citizenship.

Essential Questions

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- How do we determine if information is reliable and unbiased?
- Why is respectful discourse essential in a democratic society?
- To what extent does the media shape our perception of reality?
- How can we navigate disagreements without polarization?

Enduring Understandings:

- Reliable information is critical to a functioning democracy. As such, media, including AI-generated content, must be critically analyzed for bias and accuracy.
- Civil discourse allows for productive dialogue in a diverse society.

Objectives

Students will know:

- The definitions of bias, propaganda, and civil discourse.
- The ethical implications of misinformation and digital media.
- The methods of AI-generated content and how it can contribute to misinformation.
- The purpose and function of media in democratic societies.
- The impact of echo chambers and filter bubbles on public opinion.
- Discussion norms and protocols contribute to effective civic dialogue.
- The difference between primary, secondary, and tertiary sources in news reporting.
- Ethical frameworks can be used to evaluate controversial or complex current events (via Ethics Bowl case studies)

Students will be skilled at:

- Analyzing media for bias and reliability and distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources.
- Engaging in respectful debates using discussion norms and protocols.
- Citing sources appropriately in both written and spoken contexts.
- Comparing coverage of a single event across multiple sources to identify bias or framing differences.
- Using tools such as fact-checking websites, lateral reading, and reverse image searches to verify information.
- Creating and presenting evidence-based arguments on current issues.
- Reflecting on their own digital media consumption and identifying areas for improvement.
- Collaborating with peers to explore ethical dilemmas related to media and current events.
- Applying discussion strategies to explore multiple viewpoints.

Learning Plan

This unit focuses on helping students navigate the modern information landscape by teaching them how to evaluate sources for bias, credibility, and intent; understand the impact of social media; and engage in respectful, civil discourse in discussions and debates about current issues. Students will practice reading the news critically using The Juice, explore digital citizenship, and develop the skills necessary for civic dialogue and media analysis.

"What's the Bias?" Source Evaluation Lab -

Students are introduced to the concept of media bias and manipulation through a hands-on, station-based activity. Using printed and digital copies of news articles from a range of sources (conservative, liberal, centrist), students rotate between stations and use a guided worksheet to evaluate each source for word choice, tone, fact vs. opinion, and image framing. This culminates in a group debrief where students categorize the sources and defend their reasoning using evidence.

"Juice Breakdown" Daily Media Analysis -

Students will read an article from The Juice each day, annotate it for source type, main ideas, and bias indicators, then respond to a quick daily prompt or discussion question in writing or in pairs. On Fridays, students complete a "Juice Week Recap" that compares the week's stories, identifies major trends, and reflects on what news they trusted and why. This reinforces source literacy and current events awareness on a routine basis.

"Clickbait vs. Credible" Social Media Sleuths Activity -

Students will be given screenshots or TikToks/Instagram posts that resemble current events or "viral claims" and must determine which are credible and which are misinformation. Students will use fact-checking tools (Snopes, PolitiFact, Google Reverse Image Search) and evaluate links for authority and currency. This leads into a discussion on AI-generated misinformation ("AI slop"), the use of bots, and media manipulation in digital spaces.

"Respectful Disagreement" Roleplay & Workshop -

Students participate in a roleplay dialogue activity where they must respond to controversial prompts (ex: "Should social media be regulated for misinformation?") using respectful sentence starters, body language cues, and active listening techniques. The teacher models both respectful and disrespectful responses. Students will then participate in peer-to-peer debates with coaching on body posture, tone, and language, followed by a self-assessment rubric reflection.

“Media Literacy PSA Project” -

Students will work in small groups to create a Public Service Announcement (poster, video, infographic, or skit) educating peers on a media literacy topic such as: “How to Spot Fake News,” “Why Source Credibility Matters,” or “The Power of the Algorithm.” Students must include at least three sources, demonstrate understanding of their topic, and present to the class. A peer feedback form will be used after presentations.

“Digital Me vs. Real Me” Reflection & Gallery Walk -

Students will compare their online persona to their real-life self by creating two visual “identity maps.” One reflects their social media presence (ex: Instagram, TikTok) and one reflects their full self beyond the screen. Students will write a short reflection on how social media shapes perception, reality, and communication. Identity maps are displayed in a silent gallery walk followed by a class discussion on how online behavior impacts civil discourse and self-image.

“Is This AI?” Media Spot-the-Bot Challenge -

Students are shown various types of AI-generated content (news articles, images, quotes, essays) and must determine which are human vs. machine-created. After discussing what AI is and how it can both help and harm civic understanding, students create a checklist for identifying AI-generated content. They conclude with a Socratic Seminar on the ethical implications of AI in journalism.

“Ethics Bowl Mini-Case: Social Media & Free Speech” -

Students will participate in their first Ethics Bowl-style case using a structured format. In groups, they analyze a hypothetical involving censorship of a student’s social media post by their school. Students prepare opening statements, ask clarifying questions, and respond to opposing points. Teachers guide students through how to respectfully challenge ideas while staying on-topic. Rubrics are used for feedback.

“Credibility Olympics: Source Showdown” Game -

Using digital or physical cards, students are presented with pairs of sources (ex: a .gov site vs. a blog, or a social media post vs. a newspaper article) and must argue which is more credible, citing reasons like domain, author credentials, and publication date. The class votes on each round, and students earn points for justified reasoning. This is a high-energy, formative review activity to reinforce sourcing skills.

“Civic Conversations Roundtable” Final Discussion Task -

As a culminating activity, students will choose a current issue (ex: climate change legislation, digital privacy laws, protests in the U.S.) and participate in a structured roundtable discussion. Students must submit a written prep sheet with 2–3 sources, key talking points, and 2 open-ended questions. During the discussion, students are evaluated on listening, respect, and thoughtful contributions—not on which “side” they take. This promotes confidence in speaking up while maintaining civility.

Source Credibility Portfolio -

The Source Credibility Portfolio is a culminating project designed to help students demonstrate their mastery of media literacy skills through hands-on evaluation and reflection. Throughout the unit, students will collect, analyze, and assess a variety of information sources—including news articles, social media posts, videos, and websites—using established credibility criteria such as author expertise, bias, currency, and evidence. The portfolio will include annotated article comparisons, fact-checking investigations, a personal source tracking log, and reflections on how media consumption shapes public perception and personal beliefs. This project challenges students to think critically, ask meaningful questions, and develop lifelong habits for evaluating information in a digital world.

Assessment

When taking a Social Studies course, students demonstrate differentiated proficiency according to their ability to answer the essential questions through formative and summative assessments. Many of the performance tasks below can be implemented as formative and/or summative assessments. As teachers strive for students to demonstrate proficiency, they will need to create additional or alternative assessments based on demonstration or absence of skill.

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Formative:

- Daily responses to The Juice articles
- Media bias worksheets
- Exit tickets: civil conversation reflection

Summative:

- Group PSA or Infographic project
- Ethics Bowl-style argument presentation
- Final: Source credibility portfolio

Alternative:

- Podcast episode: "How I fact-check"
- Skit or video demonstrating respectful disagreement

- Infographic: Media Literacy 101 for young students

Materials

The design of this course allows for the integration of a variety of instructional, supplemental, and intervention materials that support student learners at all levels in the school and home environments. Associated web content and media sources are infused into the unit as applicable and available In addition to the materials below, the following link connects to district approved textbooks and resources utilized in this course: Core Book List.

The following are approved resources that teachers can include to further unit related objectives:

- The Juice
- World A-Z
- NHSEB Ethics Bowl Resources
- New York Times Learning Network
- C-SPAN Classroom

Any additional resources that are not included in this list will be presented to and reviewed by the supervisor before being included in lesson plans. This ensures resources are reviewed and vetted for relevance and appropriateness prior to implementation.

Integrated Accommodation and Modifications

This link includes content specific accommodations and modifications for all populations:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Pp6EJOCsFz5o4-opzsXpQDQoa6aClW-bkRGPDRHXVrk/edit?usp=sharing

These additional strategies are helpful when learning Social Studies content and skills:

- Provide choice in topics or formats (infographic vs. podcast vs. presentation)
- Use of graphic organizers for comparing sources

- Sentence starters for civil discussions
- Tiered reading levels for articles from The Juice or World A-Z
- Scaffolded debate outlines