



THEMATIC GUIDE
MEDIA LITERACY

Teaching Media Responsibility
and Digital Citizenship
MIDDLE SCHOOL

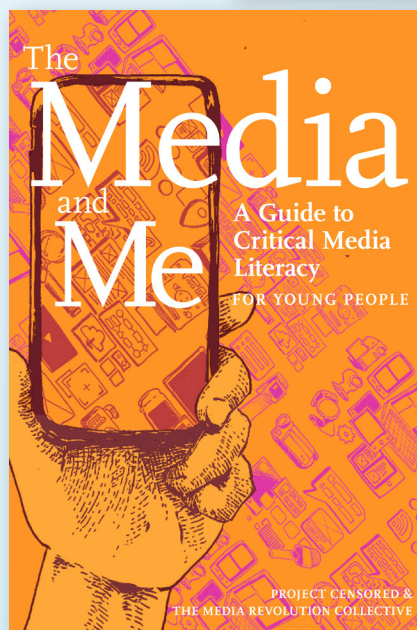
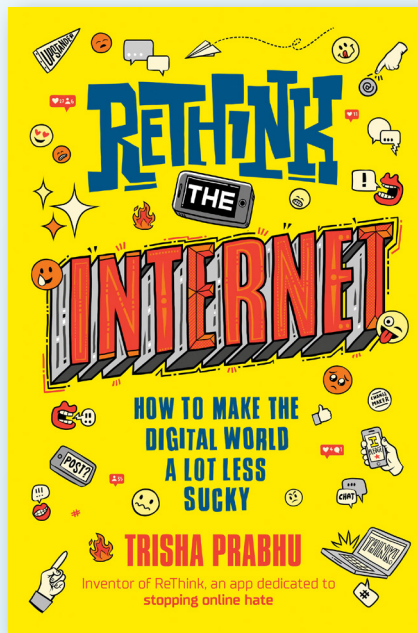
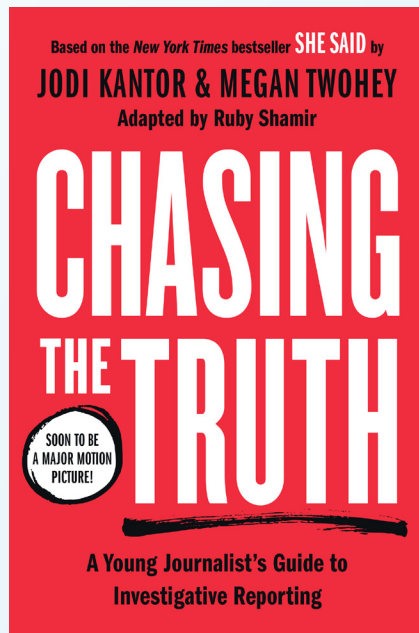


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■ INTRODUCTION

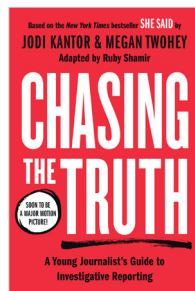
Today's teens are true digital natives, spending hours online and often serving as tech experts for adults. However, according to a much-referenced 2016 Stanford History Education Group study, teens know little about how and by whom online media is produced or how to evaluate the content they see (prhlink.com/stanfordml). In a culture where they regularly encounter Instagram hoaxes, Facebook disinformation campaigns, and sponsored posts disguised as news, middle school students are in need of quality digital citizenship education.

States and school systems are responding. Thirty-five states had pending legislation in 2023 to address concerns over children's mental health and internet communication, including social media. Across the nation, school systems are enacting digital media curricula. Amidst this growing concern, it is imperative for middle school educators to keep two guiding questions in mind: *What does it mean to be media literate? And, what are the responsibilities of critically media-literate citizens?*

The books in this text set are appropriate for grades 6–8 and provide important information about digital citizenship for middle school students. Teachers can choose one or any combination of books and activities to use with whole-class instruction, reading circles, or independent reading as they empower students to become responsible media citizens.

■ ABOUT THE TITLES IN THIS COLLECTION

Listed below are brief summaries of the books in this guide:



Chasing the Truth:

A Young Journalist's Guide to Investigative Reporting

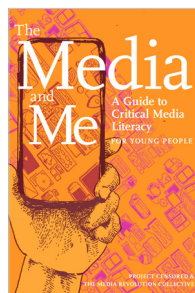
JODI KANTOR and MEGAN TWOHEY; Adapted by RUBY SHAMIR

978-0-593-32700-5

Paperback | Philomel Books | 272 pages | \$12.99 | Lexile:1080L

Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

Chasing the Truth, written by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey and adapted by Ruby Shamir, immerses readers in the groundbreaking Harvey Weinstein investigation. Through narration, annotation, and helpful tips, the authors model how investigative reporting seeks truth and inspires change.



The Media and Me:

A Guide to Critical Media Literacy for Young People

BEN BOYINGTON, ALLISON T. BUTLER, NOLAN HIGDON,

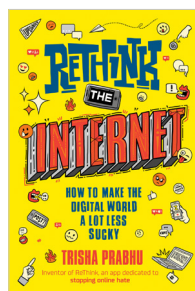
MICKEY HUFF and ANDY LEE ROTH

978-1-64421-194-6

Hardcover | Triangle Square | 272 pages | \$35.00

Also available: E-Book

The Media and Me, from Project Censored and the Media Revolution Collective, is an accessible primer that empowers students to become critically literate citizens who recognize and challenge the forces shaping news, information, and entertainment content.



Rethink the Internet:

How to Make the Digital World a Lot Less Sucky

TRISHA PRABHU

978-0-593-35284-7

Paperback | Philomel Books | 176 pages | \$9.99 | Lexile: 630L

Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

Trisha Prabhu's *Rethink the Internet* is an online survival guide written for young people by a young person. Through interconnected stories and media skills, the guide challenges students to detect and stop internet hate.

■ BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

The books in this collection include content that is new to some students. In order to provide an equitable environment where all students are prepared for reading, the following activities build knowledge, provide access, and generate interest in the texts.

CRASH COURSE

Introduce students to media responsibility with well-known YA author John Green. The “Introduction to Crash Course: Navigating Digital Information” is one of Green’s popular education videos that frame topics in an engaging manner for teens (prhlink.com/crashcoursedigitalinfo). As students watch, ask them to keep a list of all the evidence Green provides as he argues the need for media literacy. Student notes should include “misleading, sensationalized, and downright false information,” disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, echo chambers, and fake news. Discuss with the class Green’s assertion that “the quality of information directly shapes the quality of our decisions, and the quality of our decisions shapes the quality of our shared experience as humans.” *Ask: How might Green’s assertion serve as a definition of or an argument for media citizenship?* Challenge students to look for more on these topics as they read *Rethink the Internet*, *The Media and Me*, and *Chasing the Truth*.

EXPLORE BOARD

To build knowledge around the history and impact of investigative reporting, such as that modeled in *Chasing the Truth*, provide students with a digital explore board. Explore boards are interactive, digital documents (like Google Docs) that hold a collection of multimedia resources. They build background and interest on content students are preparing to read, and they offer choice, as well as a variety of media. Students can work independently or in partners, choosing the topic and media they most want to explore. After research, students can share their learning with classmates via a collaborative whiteboard tool such as Padlet or Jamboard. For more information on explore boards, as well as sample boards and templates, see Ditch That Textbook (ditchthattextbook.com/explore-boards/). An explore board on investigative reporting in America might include:

- Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey’s Hollywood sexual misconduct investigation: prhlink.com/jodikantorvid (video)
- Barton Gellman and Glenn Greenwald’s Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation into Edward Snowden and NSA surveillance: prhlink.com/pbsussecrets (documentary)
- Upton Sinclair’s Chicago meat-packing investigation: prhlink.com/historysafetyreforms (website)
- Murray Marder’s investigation leading to the Army-McCarthy hearings: prhlink.com/bgmurraymarder (obituary)
- Daniel Ellsberg’s leak of the Pentagon Papers: prhlink.com/revealnews (podcast)
- Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein’s *Washington Post* investigation of the Watergate scandal: prhlink.com/watergatecnn (photostory)

INTERNET PLEDGE

The Media and Me and *Rethink the Internet* delve into what it means to be a “digital citizen” or a “media citizen.” Prior to reading the texts, establish a shared understanding of digital citizenship by discussing the responsibilities such a citizen assumes. Post on the whiteboard the definition of a “critically media-literate citizen” from *The Media and Me*: “a person who accesses, analyzes, evaluates, creates, and acts with media to empower themselves and others” (p. 11). Ask students to respond to the quotation by listing the responsibilities an empowered citizen should have. If needed, provide a sentence-starter, such as “Media citizens have a responsibility to...,” and ask students to brainstorm how to complete the sentence. Facilitate discussion and create a class list. Responsibilities generated from the discussion might include:

- To seek truth in what you read and believe
- To think carefully about what you post, like, join, and share
- To understand what’s going on in the world and how we got there
- To understand the power structure and forces behind media
- To be kind to others

Afterward, ask students to read the “Pledge to the Internet” in *Rethink the Internet* (p. 146), comparing it to the class-created list and making additions or tweaks to the class list if needed. Post the list on the classroom wall as a shared pledge for digital citizenship. Students might also keep a copy of their pledge in their personal notebooks.

MEDIA CITIZENSHIP WORD WALL

To ensure equity, access, and engagement, students may benefit from intentional vocabulary instruction for comprehending specific topics and texts. Rather than assigning the entire list at one time, pre-teach only the words that will be important in a particular day’s lesson. Ask students to stop and note when these words are used in the text(s). After reading, have students rephrase meanings with partners or in writing. Words addressed can then be added to the classroom media citizenship word wall, and students can engage in games and activities to solidify their learning. Examples of media citizenship vocabulary appearing throughout this text set include *algorithm*, *bias*, *censorship*, *cherry-picking*, *cognitive dissonance*, *deepfake*, *disinformation*, *fallacy*, *filter bubble*, *ideology*, *inference*, *meta messaging*, *platform*, *propaganda*, *redlining*, *representation*, *slant*, *subvertising*, and *validity*.

■ CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The following activities engage students in reading, writing, thinking, and speaking about media citizenship and the texts in this set.

NEWS BITES

In each of the books in this set, students are encouraged to be informed internet users who seek knowledge and truth. Invite students to select and read one or more posts from Trisha Prabhu’s vlog, #AskTrish (connectsafely.org/asktrish). In her posts and videos, Prabhu discusses internet safety and technology news as well as answers peer questions. Ask students to read one of her news posts, such as the January 30, 2024, post about the Senate Judiciary hearings with Big Tech CEOs (connectsafely.org/ask-trish-senate-judiciary-hearing-ft-big-tech-ceos/). Discuss how Prabhu’s language and format speak to Gen Z more than traditional news media, which often presents context, language, and genre barriers. The *New York Times* provides similarly formatted pieces called “explainers”—students might read one of these, as well. Other sources for bite-sized news include Newsela (newsela.com) and PBS “Daily News Lessons” (www.pbs.org/newshour/classroom/daily-news-lessons). After students have read one or more examples of bite-sized news, ask the following questions: *Why is this type of news appealing? What might be the benefits of reading such news bites regularly?* Finally, ask students to write their own explainer by selecting a current blog post, headline, or online story and writing a bite-sized summary for an audience of their peers. Students can post the news bite on the class website, or the class can create an edublog (edublogs.org) visible to other students, staff, and school community.

CLICKBAIT DETECTIVES

In chapter three of *Rethink the Internet*, Trisha Prabhu challenges readers to be digital detectives on the lookout for clickbait, which refers to sensationalized, trending headlines disguised as news. Ask students if they have ever fallen victim to clickbait, and if so, what was it about the links that captured their interest? Share several sample headlines or links, and ask students to work in partners, determining which are authentic articles and which are most likely clickbait. Sample headlines can be sourced from current social media posts or from Common Sense Education (prhlink.com/sampleheadlines). Students can apply the “digital detective tips” (source, date, author, bias) found in *Rethink the Internet* (pp. 48–49) to help with their analysis. Discuss common clickbait language students came across, attention-getters such as “You’ll Never Believe,” “You’ve Got to See This,” or “Ten Reasons Why.” Ask students to reflect on the role of FOMO (fear of missing out) in our tendency to be fooled by clickbait. Ask the class: *Is clickbait always bad? When might FOMO psychology and other clickbait techniques be used in a positive or helpful way?* Finally, ask students to select a traditional headline from a reputable news site and replace it with a “clickbait” caption that would encourage young people to engage in the news.

E.S.C.A.P.E. EVALUATION

The Media and Me explains how news and social media sources can “frame” or construct content in a way that values power structures or reflects one side more than another. Empower students to evaluate representation using the E.S.C.A.P.E. method of information evaluation. In E.S.C.A.P.E., students work individually or in partners to analyze a source’s **E**vidence, **S**ource, **C**ontext, **A**udience, **P**urpose, and **E**xecution. Before assigning sources for analysis, discuss the idea of representation, emphasizing that responsible consumers of news articles and social media must know whose story is being told and whose voice is left out. Discuss the prevalence of fake news and how unvetted information threatens our democracy by undermining truth and by prioritizing one set of voices over another. Next, distribute two news stories from an online newspaper, Facebook feed, or other source. One of the texts should be from a valid source and the other from a questionable or absent source. Ask students to work individually or in partners to evaluate the validity of each story by applying the E.S.C.A.P.E. protocol. Afterwards, the class should reach a consensus about which story is authentic and which is most likely fake news as a result of bias or sourcing. Ask students this question from page 86 of *The Media and Me*: *How might the framing of media messages influence the way we make sense of real world scenarios?* Encourage students to use this method every time they are reading about or listening to current event news. In this way, they can be informed citizens, ready and able to discuss and defend their point of view. For more information on the E.S.C.A.P.E. method of information analysis, see this from NewseumED (prhlink.com/newseumedposter).

#INTERNET POSITIVITY

In *Chasing the Truth*, Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey emphasize the impact of their investigation on victim’s voices and the #MeToo movement. Speaking out, they assert, is the right thing to do. To highlight the idea that media, even social media, can be used for good, show students the short video “Anti Bullying: It Only Takes One” (prhlink.com/ytantibullying). In the video, middle school students bully a classmate while others film on their cellphones. One student takes a stand, and eventually many more do the same. After the video, ask students to list any action in the film that could be considered bullying or cyberbullying. Answers should include both the physical confrontation as well as the cellphone recordings. Ask students: *What was the intent of all those who were filming? How is posting negative images or videos, or posting without permission, a form of cyberbullying?* Challenge students to participate in *Rethink the Internet’s* “#InternetPositivity” challenge (p. 45) by posting a positive picture (with permission) of a friend or family member, and adding a positive message and the hashtag #InternetPositivity. As an extension, students can look for and film examples of positivity around their school and community, posting (with permission) any upstanding acts they encounter. Posts can be shared on social media sites or on an interactive whiteboard linked to the class website.

FRONT PAGE PHOTOS

In *The Media and Me*, readers learn how photographs are persuasive tools that can communicate intentional messages or reveal hidden bias. Provide or ask students to locate the front pages of three different national news sources and one local source. Freedom Forum provides a good resource for this activity (prhlink.com/freedomforum). Ask students to apply the “See, Think, Wonder” routine to reflect on the image before reading the accompanying story (prhlink.com/seethinkwonder). Students should turn and talk with a classmate, exchanging their interpretations and wonderings. Next, using the questions from page 114 of *The Media and Me*, students should work with their partner to compare how each outlet prioritizes topics and shapes interpretations. Questions include:

- Are the front page images similar or different? How so?
- How does each news source alter or frame the news photographs?
- How does your town’s top story correspond with the top stories in national news?
- How does the caption on each photograph relate to the image and shape shape your interpretation?

Afterwards, discuss as a class how visual media can be manipulated to shape our thinking, including to mislead and misinform. As an extension, students might read about and discuss the proliferation of fraudulent media images and AI videos, known as deepfakes (prhlink.com/tsdeepfake).

CLARIFY, CHALLENGE, CHANGE

Using the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an example, explore how learning about topics prior to posting on social media can lead us to clarify, challenge, and even change our thinking. First, share with students the online opinion article published in *The Hill* entitled “Why is Gen Z so pro-Palestine and anti-Israel?” (prhlink.com/thehillgenz). In it, author Juan P. Villasmil writes, “Polls, hashtags, Instagram stories and college demonstrations show that my generation, Generation Z, is more skeptical of Israel than older Americans. Most of these bite-sized videos seem to be filmed by teenagers who have about as much knowledge of the conflict as I do (not a lot).” Ask students: *Is the author right? What do you already know?*

Next, share the inflammatory anti-Israel Instagram post that model and influencer Gigi Hadid later acknowledged contained misinformation that she failed to fact check before posting (prhlink.com/nypostml).

Discuss with the class: *What is your responsibility to yourself and to your audience when posting, liking, or reposting political memes online?* As an extension, students might read *The Guardian*’s explainer article “What are the roots of the Israel-Palestine conflict?” (prhlink.com/guardianconflicthistory), which provides a brief but comprehensive history of the conflict. Afterward, ask students: *How does reading historical background clarify, challenge, or change your understanding of politics and the world?*

ADVERTISEMENT ANALYSIS

In *The Media and Me*, students are encouraged to “see through advertisers’ tricks” (p. 148) by recognizing emotional appeals, persuasive strategies, and common logical fallacies. Review fallacies and tricks with the class, using *The Media and Me* (chapters 2, 6) or a source like Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab (prhlink.com/owlpurdue). Project an advertisement on the whiteboard and invite students to analyze it for appeals and fallacies. The advertisement might be historic, such as this Camel cigarette ad (prhlink.com/camelsimage) or a more recent ad like Charli D’Amelio’s TikTok post for Muse health drinks (prhlink.com/ttcharlidamelio). Invite students to identify the fallacies or tricks used in the selected advertisement, and share their answers on the whiteboard. For the TikTok post, students should recognize the beautiful people and testimonial techniques, as well as fallacies, such as correlation and hasty generalization. In addition, the popular TikTok influencer fails to mention the post is actually a sponsored ad.

Next, discuss the difference in misinformation (misleading due to fallacies, but may not be intentional) and disinformation (intentionally deceptive). Ask students: *Is this advertisement or post an example of misinformation or disinformation? Why?* Finally, challenge students to find their own examples of ads, posts, memes, or articles that contain logical fallacies or advertising tricks. Students can create a class slide deck or digital bulletin board using Padlet or Jamboard. Afterward, discuss with the class: *What are digital media citizens responsible for when it comes to online claims and advertisements?*

META MESSAGES

In *The Media and Me*, “meta messaging” is described as “not just what you say or message someone but how you say or message it” (p. 109). Ask students: *When sending texts, how do you help your intended audience understand your meaning and tone?* Students will most likely answer emojis, memes, and slang. Next, ask: *Have you ever encountered wording, phrasing, or punctuation from someone else, either in texts or emails, that has caused confusion or anxiety?* Students are likely to characterize adults as guilty of offensive or confusing messages due to punctuation, length of paragraphs, and more. Provide students a link to the *Washington Post* article “Gen Z came to ‘slay.’ Their bosses don’t know what that means” (prhlink.com/wpgenzemojis) and ask them to read and annotate the article on a shared, interactive document such as a Google Doc or Padlet. Students can respond to one another’s ideas, connections, and questions as they read, and through their digital discussion, they should recognize the article’s big idea: in order to prevent misinterpretations, critically literate citizens need to know how to shift language gears when the environment or occasion calls for it. Provide students formal language samples to “translate” into text-talk, and then ask them to reverse the practice by formalizing texts. One resource for samples is Read Write Think (prhlink.com/formalinformal). Emphasize that being aware of how our messages may be received is an important skill, but we must strive not to fall into a bias trap where we judge others based on language alone.

ARTICLE ANNOTATION

In *Chasing the Truth*, Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey provide readers with “Tips on *Chasing the Truth*,” such as “follow the facts,” “be specific and precise,” and “find sources,” among others (pp. 233–241). Afterwards, they include a copy of their groundbreaking investigative story, “Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades” (pp. 242–256), annotated with the specific places they applied these reporting tips. Ask students to partner-read the story, along with the aligned annotations. Afterwards, discuss: *How do the annotations build understanding of the authors’ writing choices? How does the inclusion of these notes build trust and transparency in the reader?* Next, ask pairs of students to select a recent online news article and annotate it in a similar fashion, noting places the authors apply Kantor and Twohey’s tips or other trust-building techniques. Students should also note the absence of these tips and techniques, annotating the impact that has on reader trust and source credibility. As an extension, share with the class the eight trust indicators, as outlined by The Trust Project (thetrustproject.org/). Discuss how newspapers and sites across the globe are joining this effort to build trust with the reading public.

PERFORMANCE TASK

In *Chasing the Truth*, Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey immerse readers in the techniques they use to “get (their) story out into the world” (p. 11). Challenge students to produce a multimedia product illustrating their media citizenship learning with others in the school and community. As a focus, students can address the guiding question: *What are the responsibilities of critically media-literate citizens?* The product should illustrate students’ cumulative learning over the course of the unit, and should cite at least one authoritative source, such as one of the texts in this set. If helpful, students might be provided a sentence starter, such as “As a critically media-literate citizen, I am responsible for.” Students should select a specific angle for their answer and product, such as sourcing their materials, being wary of media tricks, looking for diversity in representation, being kind, etc. One engaging tool for a multimedia product is Flip (info.flip.com/en-us.html), where students can record, edit, and share video projects. While flips can be short and informal, challenge students to use the link and edit features to create an intentional and thoughtful post. Other formats that work for the performance task include infographics, web pages, podcasts, and vlogs.

■ DISCUSSION AND WRITING PROMPTS

The following questions integrate themes found throughout the texts in this set and can be used for journaling, essays, small-group discussions, and large-group seminars.

1

What does it mean to be a responsible digital citizen?
What responsibilities do media consumers have to themselves and to others?

2

What are the responsibilities of journalists to their stories, their subjects, their sources, and their audience?

3

How can we verify sources quickly and accurately before determining an article, image, or site is authentic?

4

What are some signs that a headline, post, or ad may be clickbait?

5

What does it mean to be an “upstander” on social media? Who are some examples of upstanders or influencers using social media for good?

6

What constitutes cyberbullying?

7

What impact has investigative journalism had on our country and culture?

8

In what ways has technology enabled the spread of hate? How do we combat this trend?

9

What questions should we consider prior to posting or reposting a meme, image, or post?

10

How can digital media hold the powerful to account?

■ RESOURCES

The following resources provide more information and ideas for engaging students in media citizenship education.

Be Internet Awesome! Google Digital Safety and Citizenship Curriculum

prhlink.com/gstaticsafety

Civic Online Reasoning Collection

cor.stanford.edu/curriculum

Decoding Media Bias

prhlink.com/pbsmediabias

9 Resources for Teaching Digital Citizenship

prhlink.com/istedigitalcitizenship

Quick Digital Citizenship Activities for Middle and High School

prhlink.com/csdigitalcitizenship

■ ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Laura Reis Mayer is a professional learning consultant from Asheville, NC. She develops content and facilitates learning for national education organizations. A twice-renewed National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT), she taught middle school, high school, and college English, speech, drama, and literacy. She has written more than thirty teacher guides for multiple publishers.

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