

## Impacts of Social Media on Democracy

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**Abstract:** Despite the many lessons on digital literacy and on how social media and Big Tech have affected elections, I have not found a unit online that ties the two together. In this unit, I attempt to combine the two in order to explain what happened on January 6<sup>th</sup> and help to make sense of the current political climate. This unit also attempts to introduce the students to the concepts of digital literacy. By shedding light on examples of misinformation/disinformation, hopefully students will be better at spotting misinformation and begin to think through the problems it can cause for democracy and their own decision making when it comes time for them to be active voters. Finally, students will examine additional concepts surrounding digital literacy such as who are Big Tech, cancel culture, and possible solutions that the industry and individuals can attempt to create a more safe and friendlier environment online when it comes to political speech.

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Keywords:** social media, democracy, Big Tech, digital literacy, disinformation, misinformation

**School Subject(s):** US History, Social Science (Civics)

**Objective for Unit:** Students will examine the various ways social media have affected democracy and civic participation in the United States by thinking critically about what they see and read (or what is omitted from that they see or read) on social media and other tech platforms. In addition, students will analyze how manipulated information and content can affect decisions people make in the voting booth.

Ideally this will be taught towards the end of the school year, or at least after enough content has been covered for a basic foundation on how politics and government operate.

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### Rationale:

Teaching virtually during the 2020-21 school year was challenging. The biggest obstacle was low attendance, I was lucky to have half my class login on any given day. But that year brought a bunch of seemingly unending tragic events followed by social upheaval. After each event I would see my class attendance spike. I was honored those students felt they could come to me and allow me to help explain what was happening in America. Then on January 7, 2021, almost every single one of my students showed up on Google Meets with basically the same question..." What the hell happened yesterday?"

I was able to stumble through that day explaining the facts as they were known at the time. But, I have never been able to fully explain why thousands of people rioted in our US Capitol to stop the process of a fair and democratic election, meanwhile thinking they were actually the election. It would be incorrect to lay all of the blame at the feet of social media and Big Tech (after all we still had a President of the United States lying to the nation). Nonetheless, they absolutely played a crucial role in spreading the misinformation that stoked the rage which led to an assault on our nation's Capital. Without understanding the influence of social media and Big

Tech, it is impossible to understand what happened not only on January 6th, but also the divisions in our country before and since that day.

A quick Google search on how social media has affected democracy will quickly lead you down a deep rabbit hole of opinions and conspiracies. Since the 2016 election a fair amount of research in the Behavioral Sciences has been conducted to try to better understand exactly how social media have affected society as a whole. In addition, there has also been a tremendous amount of work in Political Science to better understand how these effects have altered the political landscape and have disrupted democracy.

After reading several articles, one can quickly feel a sense of doom and gloom regarding the future for democracy in the United States. However, I was inspired to write this unit after reading Jay Caspian Kang's Op Ed piece "Fighting Disinformation Can Feel Like a Lost Cause. It Isn't". The number one lesson Kang focused on is the need to teach digital literacy in schools in order to save democracy in the US. In order for our country to move forward, we must prepare the younger generations on how to sift through all of the information they see online in order to spot and dismiss the misinformation and disinformation designed to confuse them or frustrate them out of participating in our democracy. It dawned on me that as a Civics teacher, I was approaching the subject all wrong.

In the article, Kang cited a study from Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) that showed US students as a whole falling behind their international counterparts in spotting disinformation online. The study also tested for disparities among different racial and economic sectors across the country and found that those students who could spot disinformation directly mirrored educational gaps in America: the better your level of education, the better your ability to spot disinformation. Even though some US students did better than others, however, no segment of the US student population scored higher than their peers in Scandinavian countries, who mandate digital literacy lessons in their schools. In short, US students are badly unprepared to interact in the digital space, the forms of communication they will experience in the future.

In terms of preparing our students for the future, this sets our students back from their international peers, which is a huge disadvantage to them competing in the global workspace. In addition, the students I serve are even more unprepared than the average American student. One quote hit me particularly hard: "Students who qualified for free or reduced lunch did about half as well at evaluating evidence as other students." Since my school is a 100% Title I school, this quote directly describes the student population at my school. Therefore, I feel even more of a responsibility to teach digital literacy to my students, especially as it relates to civic responsibility.

Each school year, I start my class off by outlining my yearly objective: to prepare all of my students to become knowledgeable and engaged lifelong voters. After reading Kang's piece it seems impossible to prepare knowledgeable lifelong voters, let alone future leaders, without teaching digital literacy. By providing better digital literacy, we can teach our students to engage in civic dialogue, and filter out disinformation. The goal of this unit started with wanting to explain and prevent another day like January 6, 2021 from ever happening again, but after reading this article I realized that I had to expand my goal to overall digital literacy. In light of that objective, it would be irresponsible not to teach some components of this unit.

A quick note of what I am NOT attempting in this Unit. I am not attempting to cover every aspect of the effects of social media and Big Tech on democracy. There are entire subject areas in both Political and Behavioral Science devoted to studying this topic. (When researching for this project, I was overwhelmed by the amount of information written on the subject). I am also not attempting to use this unit to point out every Pro and Con of Big Tech and social media. I do hope that some of these ideas will have a crossover effect in these areas, but for this unit I have narrowed my scope only to how the new world of social media has manifested itself in terms of democracy and the democratic process.

### **Background and Content Knowledge:**

Since their beginning, social media and Big Tech have completely transformed the way we communicate and share information. They have brought people together who never would have met, and have created wedges between friends and families. At the start, many people thought the social media revolution was going to be a net positive for democracy. It connected like-minded people together to share ideas and aided in organizing events and protests so people could voice their opinions in real life. Facebook and Twitter were even credited for the rise of democratic movements across the Middle East in 2009 now known as the Arab Spring.

But today, it is no stretch to say that democracy is on shaky ground in the US and across the entire globe. Social media have been blamed for contributing to a genocide in Myanmar and a propaganda machine in the Philippines, just to name two examples. Right here in the US, more than 40% of all Americans do not believe Joe Biden legitimately won the 2020 election. The country is so divided that at times it seems like the two sides do not even speak the same language, often argue on different sets of facts, have two different versions of America, different understandings of the Constitution, and a different understanding of our history.

In addition to the widening gap of political viewpoints, mental health issues have been on the rise. In the past three years we have seen horror scenes play out in real time. In the past five years there have been hate driven mass shootings at a Jewish Synagogue, a Walmart in El Paso, TX, and just recently at a supermarket in Buffalo and an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas. One thing many of these incidents have in common is that the men were radicalized in chat rooms. (Some even live streamed their crimes on social media platforms). Studies also show that the increased use of social media contributes to a rise in suicide among teenage girls and can impact mental health in many other areas. These are just a few examples, but many more could be provided.

So...how did we get to this point?

Obviously, we cannot blame all of this violence and division on social media and Big Tech alone, but they do share a large stake in the blame. Social media platforms have allowed extremists a space to spread dangerous conspiracies and outright lies which they sometimes play out in real life.

These societal struggles directly coincide with the struggles of American democracy. As Jonathan Haidt wrote in his brilliant essay *Why the Past 10 Years of American Life have been Uniquely Stupid*, "Social Scientists have identified at least three major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies: social capital (extensive social networks with high levels of trust), strong institutions, and shared stories. Social media has weakened all three."

Democracy created in the Madisonian constitutional framework was designed to slow the speed of democracy down, encourage debate, and cool passions. Now our current day “public square” plays out on social media platforms which are designed to incentivize the exact opposite. Democracy also requires trust in the institutions, and the people who run them. Social media contribute to a steady chipping away of trust in government and the traditional media. There is a study that shows a direct correlation: the amount of time on social media leads to less trust in the information put out by these institutions. The greatest example of this in real life is how the pandemic played out in the US.

This is what happens when people are unaware of the source of the news they are getting, which is often different than the news a neighbor is seeing. The manipulation of who sees what information is a critical problem to creating shared sets of facts and ideals. That is why the duty of civics teachers is to inform students on how and why social media/Big Tech try to control the stream of information.

To have a functioning democracy, people must be informed to make decisions on how they want their government and society to function. This is why the public school system was created in the first place. But since the creation of social media, the ability of citizens to sort through what information is correct or not, digital literacy, seems more important than ever. As stated above, US high school students have, on average, a lower digital literacy rate than their international counterparts. Therefore, I cannot imagine teaching civics education without requiring a component that teaches our students digital literacy as it relates to civic participation.

Instead of an entire research paper on the effects of social media on democracy (which I am not even closely qualified to do), I decided to pour my efforts into more detailed sections within the unit lessons.

### **School Demographics:**

I teach 11th grade US History and 12th grade Social Science at A. Philip Randolph Career and Technical High School. This Unit will be taught in my 12th grade Social Science class which covers a range of topics including current events, politics, governmental affairs, policy ideas, etc. We focus heavily on the United States Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights.

My overall year long course objective is for all students to become knowledgeable and engaged lifelong voters. In order to do this, I try my best to demonstrate how the issues relate to their lives. Each unit incorporates readings of the necessary content, hypothetical scenarios, current events and Supreme Court cases. I also try my best to connect each lesson to the City of Philadelphia or the local region. Most of my students have never traveled far outside of Philadelphia, and lack the reference of other regions.

The A. Philip Randolph Career and Technical High School is located between the East Falls and Strawberry Mansion sections of Philadelphia. Our school combines technical education and the formal educational academic requirements all in the same building. The students get to choose between eight different technical fields of study. Randolph is 93% African American, 5% Latino and 3% Other. The student population pulls from all neighborhoods in the city, but heavily represents the North Philadelphia, Germantown and Brewerytown sections. We are a 100% Title I school.

Our school is a select school and our students choose Randolph for the technical education. Many of the students are drawn to our school due to the nature of the various career pathways we offer such as Welding, Construction, Auto Body, Auto Mechanics and Fire Academy. Therefore, it makes sense that our students tend to be hands-on learners. We also have a disproportionate number of IEP students who have struggled academically and are looking for other educational opportunities.

### **Educating For American Democracy Connection:**

This unit has been prepared in association with the Educating for American Democracy initiative (<https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org>). It touches upon all seven themes of the EAD curricular Roadmap at different points; however, the majority of the lessons fall within the seventh theme, “A People With Contemporary Debates and Possibilities”. The three overarching thematic questions for this theme are critical components to this unit:

- What are key current events and policy debates in our constitutional democracy?
- What values and principles underpin different positions on them? How do people engage with issues they care about?
- How can we ensure our sources of information about these questions are accurate and fair? What effects can misinformation have on contemporary debates?

This unit will not answer these questions, but will allow the students to contemplate those questions and begin to shape their own views and opinions on the subject.

In addition, EAD offers these sample guiding questions on the 7th theme:

- Why do particular current events and issues matter to you and how can you investigate the issues or news stories that interest you? (CSGQ7.4A of the EAD “Civics Sample Guiding Questions”).
- What role does news coverage play in helping you identify which events and issues matter to you? (CSGQ7.4B)
- How can we combat confirmation bias, personalized algorithms/suggestions (filter bubbles), bad actors (trolls, disinformation agents), and other influences that diminish our ability to think carefully about political issues, find common ground, or to sustain civil disagreement and civic friendship? (CSGQ7.4C)
- What role do our own biases play in our information habits? (CSGQ7.4D)

We will explore the spirit of each of these questions.

### **Content Objective:**

The overall objective for this curriculum unit is to have students analyze and assess the various ways that social media and other social networking sites have affected democracy, democratic institutions and social norms that dictate the ways in which people interact within a democracy.

The Unit will focus specifically on:

- how social media have impacted citizens' involvement with the government and each other
- the various forms of manipulation within the companies
- ways in which outside actors have weaponized the platforms with misinformation and disinformation for their own objectives
- Specific examples of impacts social media have already had on democracy
- Look at potential impacts social media may have on the near and long-term future in the US and around the world.

### **Overview of the content/Strategies:**

I will deliver the unit in a multi-day/class lesson format. Each day/lesson I will post on Google Classrooms a slide deck with all of the content and resources needed to complete the lesson along with a document where all of the answers will be entered. This is our normal routine and it works well with my students. Every lesson I create, I try to construct it in a way that the students can complete without being in class, but they also find it much easier and enjoyable if they are in class. Our school has a low attendance rate and since we are a CTE school, students can often miss classes if an important interview/competition/skill test is coming up.

### **Breakdown of Individual Lessons:**

#### **1. Lesson 1: What is “Big Tech”? What are “Social Media”?**

**Objective:** Students will be introduced to the totality of the unit and then examine what the definition of “social media” actually means.

**Rationale:** So often people throw around the term’s big tech, social media, algorithms, etc. It is easy to give examples for each of these terms, but how many people can actually explain exactly what these terms mean? Students will take the time to explore what they think these terms mean versus what they actually mean. They may be correct or not, but it will give the class an opportunity to define what these terms mean, as we will use them in every single lesson of this unit.

#### **Structure of Lesson:**

- Introduce the overall unit objective and then the objective of each lesson by scrolling through the slide deck. Each Lesson will have a slide detailing what will be learned in the lesson.
- Do Now: Ask students to write two sentences explaining what social media are without giving any examples.
- We will review some responses.
- Students will be [given a graphic organizer](#) in which they will try to define key terms on their own.
- The class will review what the students wrote. I will display the correct definition and we will compare what they wrote versus what the definition actually means.
- Students will answer a critical thinking question:

## 2. Lesson 2: Who is Big Tech? Who are Social Media Companies?

**Objective:** Students will examine the top social media and Big Tech companies and will research an assigned company to find their exact business model, some recent news stories, number of users, net worth, and number of employees.

**Rationale:** Who are the major tech/social media companies that dominate the space and how influential are they really? Most people can identify and if they wish join the top three companies, but beyond using the platforms, many people are unaware of the reach of these companies. In order to understand the influence of these companies, it is important to know about them outside of their platforms.

### Structure of Lesson:

- Do Now: Students will list as many social media platforms as they can think of in two minutes.
- The class will review the list and discuss a few companies to decide if they are social media platforms like Reddit and Twitch.
- Students will be assigned [a graphic organizer](#) with 5 different companies on it, and blocks for each of the following: amount of users/accounts, net worth, how they make their money and a current news story.
  - Create groups. Each group will be assigned a Big Tech company/social media company and will fill out the graphic organizer for their assigned company.
- Each group will report out and share on smart board
- Discussion: How much power do these companies have?
- Critical thinking: Free Speech: Do citizens have a “right” to be on social media?

## 3. Lesson 3: How do these companies work? Engagement Strategies. Algorithms, etc.

**Objective:** Students will examine the various engagement strategies of social media and big tech companies, and will analyze how they have been affected by these companies.

**Rationale:** Social media companies use several strategies to manipulate users to spend more time on their platforms. The manipulative tools used are often so subtle that the user does not even realize that they are being manipulated. This lesson is designed to at least teach the students how to spot the ways in which these companies continue to draw users’ attention to the platform and then keep them engaged once logged on. In this lesson students will explore the answer to these questions: Did you know what an algorithm is? How are you affected by algorithms? Do these engagement strategies work on you?

Below are two quotes that sum up the need for this lesson which highlight just two of the issues I will address.

“The wealth of Big Tech companies has come from extracting data about our behaviors and using insight from that data to manipulate us in ways that many see as fundamentally incompatible with democratic values. Algorithms - understood by few. Accountable to even fewer.” (Perrigo, Big Tech Biz Model is a Threat to Democracy)

“The News Feed is designed to enhance engagement. It directly measures what you like and is designed to keep you engaged. When you interact with a person you will get more of their updates. The ranking on a news feed is the probability that you will like a comment, make a comment, or share a story. When you comment on a post, that source gets more weight in your news feed. Shares are worth more than a comment and both are worth more than a like.” (Madrigal, What Facebook did to American Democracy)

**Structure of Lesson:**

- Do Now: How long do you spend on social media each day? Why do you spend so much time on social media?
- Quick teacher-led discussion asking students examine the time they spend on social media and what keeps them on social media for so long each day.
- [Students will watch a Ted Talk which examines social media addiction.](#) While watching, students will answer a series of questions.
- After the video, we will review the questions and compare the answers to the students' use of social media. Is it similar?
- Critical Thinking Question: Do you think you are addicted to social media? Does what you see, hear and read on social media ever make you feel bad about yourself? Explain. Do you have any desire to spend less time on social media? Explain.

**4. Lesson 4: Social Media, Big Tech and Politics**

**Objective:** The students will use the knowledge learned in Lesson 3 about the tools used by social media and big tech companies, and apply those principles to how those tools could manipulate politics and potential decisions people make in choosing who to vote for and why.

**Rationale:** Now that the students have thought about the manipulation tactics used by social media platforms, I want them to apply that knowledge to the world of government and politics. How do bad actors use social media to manipulate and divide people? How are these companies set up in ways to allow bad actors to use the platforms? How do unwitting citizens fall into the traps of misinformation and disinformation?

**Structure of Lesson:**

- Do Now: How do you think social media affects how people view politics?
- Students will be given a graphic organizer for each of these words or terms: Misinformation, disinformation, confirmation bias, self-isolation, information bubble, censorship, echo chamber, “flooding the zone”

- Students will define the word or term, give an example of it being used online, describe how it can affect voters' decisions and possible consequences and or remedies of the issue.
- The class will report out allowing the students to fill in the rest of the sheet.
- Students will then [watch this short video on how technology is dividing us](#) and answer what most surprised them about the video.
- The class will have a brief discussion on the video.
- Critical Thinking: In a few sentences, tell me about a time when a social media post affected how you thought about a political issue.

## 5. Lesson 5: What is a disinformation program? How does it work? Zero sum game for politics?

**Objective:** Students will learn what a disinformation program is, and how they work. Students will then examine some examples of how they have been used in the past and see if they are able to spot the disinformation.

**Rationale:** In earlier lessons of this unit, the students have learned about what misinformation and disinformation are. In this lesson the students will examine how they are used and look at some specific examples of disinformation campaigns and how they played out. Many times, my students have trouble linking abstract concepts to real life scenarios. I want them to see how these strategies have played out in the past so they might be able to spot some of the tactics used in future campaigns.

### Structure of Lesson:

- Do Now: Explain a time when you know someone spread false information online.
- We will review the key terms we learned in in the last lesson.
- The class [will watch a short video on Cambridge Analytica](#). (View before showing, some language in the first minute is dicey)
- While watching the video, students will answer a few guiding questions.
- The class will have a teacher led discussion about Cambridge Analytica. I will ask them questions like: How do you think Cambridge Analytica got away with this scheme? Do you think people can do something like this in the future? Do you think something like this is happening right now?
- Then the class will break into groups. I will create a number of scenarios which will include some actual real examples of misinformation and disinformation that have circulated. Students are to write if they think the scenario is true or false and if false, what might be false about it. We will review the scenarios to see what is real or not.
- Critical thinking: Give an example of misinformation you have seen on social media. Explain the misinformation and describe if you know anyone who was deceived and how it affected their thinking on the subject.

## 6. Lesson 6: Woke/Cancel Culture

**Objective:** Students will analyze the phrases “Wokeness” and “Cancel Culture” and begin to examine the issue of possible limits to how far online political speech should be

allowed to go. Students will then look at some specific examples of people being “canceled” and determine whether they agree or disagree with the extent to which the backlash is appropriate for their actions.

**Rationale:** One of the bigger debates surrounding digital literacy is the extent to which freedom of speech applies to online speech and how online speech spills over into real world consequences.

**Structure of Lesson:**

- Do Now: Explain what the terms “wokeness” and “cancel culture” mean.
- We will review the students' answers.
- Introduce the unit.
- [The class will read page 10 of Jonathan Haidt's article “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid”](#) about the term “Warped accountability”
- While reading the article, students will fill out [Guided notes](#) on all three points that Haidt touches upon
- Review the three points as a class
- Break students into groups. Present each group with a real life scenario of someone getting “canceled” in real life.
- The students will determine if the real life consequences of the actions were fair or not.
- Critical Thinking: Do you think people should be allowed to say anything on social media? Should there be consequences for people who speak out of turn on social media?

**7. Lesson 7: Free Speech: Do citizens have a “right” to be on social media? Do they have a right to share information that is false? Is it a public forum? Democratic and Republican views on social media.**

**Objective:** Students will examine what a “public forum” means and will apply their knowledge of the First Amendment to the debate on whether or not people should have a right to be on social media and what the limits of speech should be on these platforms.

**Rationale:** For this lesson I want students to examine individual rights for users on social media platforms. I also want students to examine their individual responsibilities while using social media. This lesson is more of a way to explore their thoughts instead of coming to any conclusions. I want the students to think about how the use of social media can have real life consequences. I then want the students to examine how these consequences can affect society as a whole. This is also geared towards having students begin to brainstorm ideas that can answer the final essay prompt.

**Structure of Lesson:**

- Do Now: Answer column A [on the graphic organizer](#).
- The class will have a short discussion about how students have answered the questions.

- The class will watch a short video on Section 230 and answer some guiding questions.
- The class will discuss what 230 does and does not address.
- The students will then answer column B in the graphic organizer to examine if any of their ideas have changed throughout the discussion?

## 8. Lesson 8: What is the future? – Is it going to get much worse before it will get better?

**Objective:** Students will examine some of the possibilities for the future of these social media platforms and discuss some of the possible ways to eliminate some of the divisiveness these platforms can cause. Also, are these possible solutions a violation of the First Amendment or not?

**Rationale:** For the final lesson of the unit, I want the students to start thinking about how to fix all of the problems we went through in the past lessons. Social media are here to stay, but there is no doubt that they need some fixing for the good of society and democracy. I want the students to review a list of possible solutions and maybe come up with some solutions on their own. Not only can this help the students to identify key areas that can be fixed, but it can also help them examine some of the areas that are most abused on the platforms. It also offers a glimmer of hope after spending so much time on the worst aspects and outcomes of social media.

### Structure of Lesson:

- Do Now: After going over all of the problems social media have presented, what do you think can be done to fix some of those problems?
- Students will be broken into groups and be given [a list of possible fixes](#). Each group will be given a suggested solution and will [fill out the graphic organizer](#).
- All groups will report out to the class.
- Critical Thinking: Out of all ten suggested solutions, what one do you think is the most important and why?

## 1. Lesson 9: Final Essay.

**Essay prompt: Were social media to blame for actions of the January 6th storming of the US capitol?**

### Bibliography:

Chakrabarti, Samidh “Hard Questions: What Effect Does Social Media Have On Democracy” *Meta Newsroom*, 22 January 2018, <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/01/effect-social-media-democracy/> , accessed 12 June 2022

Chakrabarti is the Civic Engagement Project Manager at Facebook. In this article he responds to the criticism directed at Facebook for its handling of the 2016 election. He also describes certain steps they planned to put into action for future elections.

Crawford, Matthew “Big Tech’s Threat to Democracy” *Unherd*, 29 June 2021, <https://unherd.com/2021/06/big-techs-threat-to-democracy/>

Crawford is a Senior Fellow at the University of Virginia’s Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. In this essay he outlines the amount of information collected in ways that people do not even assume. He introduces the idea of “algorithmic governance” and compares it to the Administrative State in the US and how and how the power of this governance is in the hands of unelected individuals without any oversight of their powers.

Donald, Brooke “Stanford Researchers Find Students Have Trouble Judging the Credibility of Information Online” Stanford Graduate School of Education. 22 November 2016, <https://ed.stanford.edu/news/stanford-researchers-find-students-have-trouble-judging-credibility-information-online?print=all>

Donald is an Associate Dean of Communications and Public Affairs at Stanford University. In this article she summarizes a study by researchers at Stanford Graduate School of Education on the lack of digital awareness and literacy of students in the United States. The study examined what they called “civic online reasoning” which measures the student’s ability to judge many forms of digital platforms with political messaging that shape public opinion.

Haidt, Jonathan, Tobias Rose-Stockwell “The Dark Psychology of Social Networks” *The Atlantic*, The Atlantic Monthly Group, December 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/social-media-democracy/600763/>

In this article Haidt and Stockwell examine how social media incentivize people to overreact to social, political and cultural issues in order to keep users engaged on their platforms. The two discuss how what they call “The Outrage Machine” has led to a decline in the use of people’s wisdom when discussing these issues online, and more importantly, how these disputes spill over into the real world.

Haidt, Jonathan, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid” *The Atlantic*, The Atlantic Monthly Group, 11 April 2022 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/>

This is one of the best articles I have read in the past ten years and one of two articles that spurred the inspiration for this unit. In this article Haidt writes “red America and blue America are becoming like two different countries claiming the same territory, with two different versions of the Constitution, economics, and American history.” He then asks how did this happen and what does it mean for America? The essay examines this essential question by looking at the role social media has had in contribution to this fracturing. Haidt outlines how this fracturing caused by our modern media environment has directly contributing to the erosion of our democratic institutions, economy and cultural wars. Finally, Haidt outlines some possible changes that could be made to reverse these trends and personal responsibility people can take.

Kang, Jay Caspian “Fighting Disinformation Can Feel Like a Lost Cause. It Isn’t.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, 7 March 2022,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/07/opinion/fighting-disinformation-education.html?smid=em-share>

This article is the second of the two articles that inspired the writing of this unit. Kang argues that despite the overwhelming feeling of partisan rancor, all is not lost. His thesis is that what is really needed to change the political infighting is to better educate our youth so they can grow up digital literate. In the article Kang cites studies that show American students are far behind their peers in ability to spot online misinformation, and the gaps among digital literacy directly mirrors the gaps in other areas of our educational system such as race, class, and geography.

Lemon, Jason “Just 21 Percent of Republicans Say Biden ‘Probably’ or ‘Definitely’ Won in 2020: Poll” *Newsweek*, Newsweek Digital LLC, 30 December 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/just-21-percent-republicans-say-biden-probably-definitely-won-2020-poll-1664390>

In this article Lemon summarizes the finding of a December 2020 poll conducted by the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The poll found that only 21 percent of all Republicans polled believed that Joe Biden legitimately won the 2020 election. The article goes on to debunk the idea that Joe Biden did not win the election and pokes holes in the arguments that Trump supporters claimed to support their beliefs that Donald Trump was the real winner of the election.

Madrigal, Alexis C. “What Facebook Did To American Democracy” *The Atlantic*, The Atlantic Monthly Group, 12 October 2017 <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/10/what-facebook-did/542502/>

Madrigal wrote this article just about one year after the 2016 election. It is one of the first long form article that explains how algorithms for Facebook’s Newsfeed disrupted the distribution of news on the Facebook platform. He goes over the history of the Newsfeed and how several right-wing media outlets first discovered how to use the algorithm to spread very slanted, if not flat-out false news stories, and allow those stories to be shared thousands of times over. It also details how false news stories outperformed stories from the top news agencies in America. Finally, Madrigal explains how Facebook did not see the Russian disinformation campaign or the spreading of false news stories coming because they falsely assumed that their platform would only be used for good causes, and the company is equally naïve that the changes they claim to put in place will alter the ecosystem, because it goes against the entire engagement structure that produces their enormous profits.

Muhlenberg College. “Muhlenberg College Pennsylvania 2020 Post-Election Poll: January 2021” *Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion*, January 2021, <https://www.muhlenberg.edu/aboutus/polling/politicselectionssurveys/archivedpolls/pa2020post-electionpoll/>

This article is a summary of a post-election survey by Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion nearly one year removed from the 2020 election, looking specifically at the confidence of Pennsylvania voters in the outcome of the presidential election. The main headline of the poll is that one in three Pennsylvanians were not at all confident in the election results. It then goes into detail of several aspects of where that distrust may come from. The article is a good mixture of explanation of the results and raw numbers of the questions.

Nteta, Tatishe “Toplines and Crosstabs December 2021 National Poll: Presidential Election & January 6th Insurrection at the US Capitol” *University of Massachusetts Amherst Department of Political Science*, 28 December 2021 <https://polsci.umass.edu/toplines-and-crosstabs-december-2021-national-poll-presidential-election-jan-6th-insurrection-us>

The article is the published results of a University of Massachusetts Amherst poll that was examined by the above Newsweek article. It is a good mixture of summary of results and raw numbers that were gathered from the polling.

Perrigo, Billy “Big Tech’s Business Model is a Threat to Democracy. Here is how to Build a Fairer Digital Future” *Time Magazine*, Time USA LLC, 22 January 2021, <https://time.com/5931597/internet-reform-democracy/>

In this article Perrigo examines the different business models of various Big Tech companies and how those incentives do not align with democratic traditions. He details how tech companies have built their wealth from extracting data about our behaviors and using insight from those data sets to manipulate users in ways that are fundamentally incompatible with democratic values. Using the examples Myanmar and Cambridge Analytica, he shows how fragile these values can be and how they present an existential threat to American democracy.

Ratnam, Gopal “Senate Report Outlines ‘Grave’ Russian Threat In 2016 Election Interference Probe” *Roll Call*, Fiscal Note, 18 August 2020, <https://rollcall.com/2020/08/18/senate-intelligence-committee-russian-interference-2016-election-report/>

In this Roll Call article, Ratnam summarizes the findings of a Senate Intelligence Report on its investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 elections. In the headline of the report it states that there were enough contacts between the Trump Campaign and the contacts from Moscow to pose a grave counterintelligence threat, and they also refute Trump’s claim that the investigation was a ‘hoax’. But in the end, it surmises that they did not find any evidence of a coordinated scheme between the campaign and the Russian Government.

Schanzer, David “Can Lawmakers Save Democracy From Big Tech?” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 7 September 2021, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2021/09/07/can-lawmakers-save-democracy-from-big-tech/>

In this article Schanzer argues that the unhealthy accumulation and concentration of power that Big Tech has acquired is causing grave problems to our society and democratic institutions and that if Congress does not act soon, it may be too late to reverse these trends. In the article he details how the problems of Big Tech used to just be centered around issues of privacy, but now they have migrated to the power of information control, who controls the data mined from the users and how that data is being used against the well-being of the people it is mined off. Schanzer details what laws are being leveled against these companies in Europe and how they could work in the US. In the end though, he is not very hopeful that our current political culture will be able to rise to the moment.

Stanford History Education Group “Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning” 22 November 2016. *Stanford History Education Group*

<https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:fv751yt5934/SHEG%20Evaluating%20Information%20Online.pdf>

This resource is the executive summary of a study by the Stanford History Education Group that tested a number of assessments created by the group to measure students “Civic Online Reasoning,” or their ability to evaluate how credible the information they receive through their phones, tablets and laptops. The study also evaluates the differences in ability to judge based on quality or education based on economic and racial disparities. The outcome of the research gives a bleak outlook of American student’s ability to succinctly judge the material they see online. In addition, this summary shows the assessments used and samples of student’s responses.

Sustein, Cass R. *#Republic: Divided Democracy In the Age of Social Media* Princeton University Press, 2017

In this work by Sustein, he examines the entire spectrum on how social media and Big Tech are disrupting democracy and democratic institutions in the US. Among the many topics Sustein analyses are algorithms, cancel culture, polarization, freedom of speech, and regulations. He often discusses the idea that a democracy is held together through shared experiences, and social media, by catering to peoples specific interests, has shattered shared experiences and instead creates different world views based on our preconceived beliefs.

Resources:

The following websites provided resources and ideas used for the lessons within this unit. They also provide resources for teachers on many of topics within the fields of civics, government, US History and digital literacy.

<https://get.checkology.org>

<https://constitutioncenter.org>

<https://cor.stanford.edu/curriculum/>

### **Applicable Social Studies Academic Standards:**

#### **PA Civics Standards**

5.2.C.B. Analyze strategies used to resolve conflicts in society and government.

5.2.12.D. Evaluate and demonstrate what makes competent and responsible citizens.

5.3.C.D. Evaluate the roles of political parties, interest groups, and mass media in politics and public policy.

5.3.C.G. Analyze the influence of interest groups in the political process.

5.3.C.H. Evaluate the role of mass media in setting public agenda and influencing political life.

## Common Core Civics Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3

Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertainty

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1(5): Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.3(6): Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.8(7): Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.1(8): Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence