

# Fighting Fake News: Using Peer Discussion Groups to Build News Media Literacy

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines the effectiveness of guided peer discussion in building news media literacy. Our longitudinal study finds that this instructional approach increased students' interest in news headlines, particularly among those with initially low interest. Furthermore, qualitative results show students' increased awareness of the quality and potential bias of news sources. We conclude that guided peer discussion is an effective means of promoting news media literacy.

Identifying trustworthy news across various news sources is a key skill for citizens and emerging political scientists. Yet, students find it increasingly challenging to select appropriate news sources and identify quality articles. Although political science faculty know that it is critical for citizens to follow relevant political news headlines, students may not have developed the interest or skill to do so. This article demonstrates the effectiveness of a simple and practical pedagogical intervention: guided peer discussion used in combination with lecture. Our analysis of the data we collected indicates that this instructional approach increased students' interest in news headlines, particularly among those with initially low interest. Furthermore, qualitative results show their increased awareness of the quality and potential bias of news sources. We argue that guided peer discussion is an effective means of promoting news media literacy.


## BACKGROUND AND DEFINITIONS


In this section we discuss the need for college-level instruction in news media literacy. To position our work within the literature, we briefly examine how other political science instructors have used small group discussion and current events in the classroom. In this section we also define “news media literacy” and “guided peer discussion.”

Familiarity with political news remains an important tool of citizenship and a foundational skill for political science majors. However, newspaper reading has been in decline among most age groups for several decades, and today most young Americans obtain news via social media (Pew Research Center 2016, 2018). There is increasing evidence that low-quality information can spread quickly via social media (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018), and research indicates that many users lack the skills necessary for evaluating source bias in digital media (Wineburg and McGrew 2016). Although faculty may expect that students will start college with some media literacy training, state legislatures are just beginning to require “digital literacy” within state standards for secondary schools (Deye 2017), and the term was only recently emphasized in revised technology integration standards for educators (Trust 2018). This makes incorporating news media literacy an important goal of political science instruction.

Even before the explosion of fake news, many political science faculty members encouraged or even required students to follow news headlines (Ruget and Rosero 2014). Some instructors selected news articles for discussion in class (Huerta and Jozwiak 2008); however, this does not help students develop a habit of skimming headlines regularly, an essential skill of informed citizenship. Although a clipping file or writing a blog develops this habit (Ruget and Rosero 2014), these approaches require time-intensive grading that may create a barrier for instructors with large-enrollment courses.

Drawing on research demonstrating the strong connection between peer influences and behavior (Chung, Ersig, and McCarthy 2017), we implemented guided peer discussion as a means of enhancing news media literacy. For the purposes of this article, we define *news media literacy* as the ability to access and evaluate the

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quality and potential bias of news “in a variety of forms,” whether digital, video, or print (Center for Media Literacy 2022). We define *guided peer discussion* as formal cooperative learning groups in which consistent groups of students are assigned specific questions to discuss and jointly respond to (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 2014). Although several researchers in political science have found that small group discussions are beneficial (Bromley 2013; Feeley 2013; Hamann, Pollock, and Wilson 2012), this approach

assignments. Individual students only received points if they were present and contributed actively to the discussion. Attendance was verified using name tents and a visual check by GTAs, and the instructor circulated throughout the classroom to encourage participation. In-class assignments accounted for 10% of the course grade.

Enrolled students were required to read a *New York Times* (NYT) email newsletter called the “Morning Briefing.” The instructor selected the NYT “Morning Briefing” because all uni-

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has not been widely addressed in the scholarship of teaching and learning in political science. We argue that short, guided peer discussion assignments can enhance student interest in current events without negatively affecting other important course outcomes or requiring extensive preparation and grading.

**METHODOLOGY AND PEDAGOGICAL TECHNIQUES**

Within an introductory political science course at a large public Midwestern university, we conducted a longitudinal study over three semesters to assess both how students acquired political news and their attitudes toward news headlines. Students completed a repeated survey measure at the beginning and end of each semester. Approximately 200 students completed the survey each semester, yielding a total of 606 participants. The total enrollment for the sections studied and response rate for the surveys are shown in table 1. Demographic data for students enrolled in all sections of the course are provided in table 2.

The learning outcomes for the course described were not limited to news media literacy but included understanding the policy process and policy outcomes in several national contexts. To achieve these broader outcomes and to promote news media literacy, the instructor provided readings and lectures on course content punctuated by small group discussion assignments completed at the beginning, middle, and end of the class period. Students were assigned to permanent teams of three to six people and worked with these teams for at least four weeks.

Some of the guided small group discussion assignments were related to general course learning outcomes, but students engaged in guided small group discussions of news content approximately once a week. In each class, teams reported out to the larger class after spending seven to ten minutes in small groups and submitted a written summary of their discussion afterward. A graduate teaching assistant (GTA) assisted with grading these written team

versity students received a complimentary subscription to this news source. The email newsletter format enabled students to save a consistent source as a reference.

To incentivize the regular review of news headlines, weekly at-home quizzes included one or two questions on current events. Additionally, two tests and the final exam included multiple-choice sections focused on current events. These assignments required students to regularly interact with a quality news source, which supported the goal of developing reading news headlines as a habit beyond the course.

The instructor deliberately designed guided peer discussion assignments to help students read selectively and to foster awareness of the different viewpoints represented by different news outlets. As an initial assignment, students worked in self-selected pairs to choose the most important story of the day. Students received the following criteria to help them sort the important news from content in other articles:

- Something did happen: the story is not just speculation about something that may occur in the future.
- The headline relates to policy, indicating that government has acted or might be expected to act in this area.
- The news can be expected to have a significant effect on the United States or the world.

Using these criteria, students practiced recognizing and taking note of major policy new stories while screening out material

**Table 1**  
**Total Enrollment and Response Rates**

	Fall 2016	Spring 2017	Fall 2017
Total student enrollment	198	203	202
Response rate for Survey 1	90%, n = 179	94%, n = 191	97%, n = 196
Response rate for Survey 2	76%, n = 150	67, n = 137	78%, n = 157

**Table 2**  
**Demographic Data for All Sections of the Course**

Total enrollment for all students enrolled in course sections across three semesters	1,814
Females	789
Males	1,025
First generation	309
International students	161
Underrepresented minorities*	188
Out of state	656
In state	1158

\* Black, Hispanic, Native American.

unrelated to the course. Learning to read selectively can help students develop a sustainable daily habit of skimming relevant news headlines.

After the first assignment, current events discussions varied in content. One early team assignment asked students to work as their team to list a variety of sources of news. The goal of this

subsequent semesters: 38% in the spring and 47% in the following fall as shown in figure 1.

Furthermore, across the three semesters, more than 40% of the enrolled students—43% in the fall, 46% in the spring, and 49% in the following fall—reported that social media was their primary source of news, with the main source of material in their social

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assignment was to make students aware of how different people access information about current events. In a later team assignment, students were asked to compare coverage of headlines in the NYT with coverage in several other national news outlets. On another occasion, students conducted a Google search for more information about a current events story and then were required to evaluate the quality of the source by searching for more information about the publisher, author, and evidence provided. At times, students simply identified the most important policy news of the week or sought a deeper understanding of a complex ongoing story, such as the Rohingya refugee crisis.

**RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

The results demonstrated that this intervention *decreased* reliance on social media for news and *increased* interest in news headlines. The initial fall entrance survey indicated that 47% of students (N = 93) reported either *low or very low interest* in news headlines, despite many indicating plans to major in a field related to political science. Similarly low levels of interest were reported in

media feeds being “whatever friends or family post,” as shown in figure 2.

In analyzing the data, we identified an increased level of interest in news headlines by the end of each semester. The largest shift in interest across semesters occurred among students who had started the course with low or very low levels of interest but subsequently reported a medium level of interest. At the beginning of the first semester, 47% of respondents reported a low or very low level of interest in news headlines, which decreased to 30% by the end of the semester. A smaller shift was observed in the second semester: low or very low level of interest decreased from 38% in January to 33% in May. In the final semester studied, the shift was substantial, with 47% reporting low or very low interest in August and only 32% reporting the same levels in December, as seen in figure 1. An independent sample *t-test* was conducted to examine significance (see table 3). For two of the three semesters studied, there was a statistically significant shift in the level of interest in news headlines, ( $t_{304} = 2.09, p < .05$ , Fall Semester 1; and  $t_{290} = 2.09, p < .05$ , Fall Semester 2).

Figure 1  
Level of Interest in News Headlines on Most Days

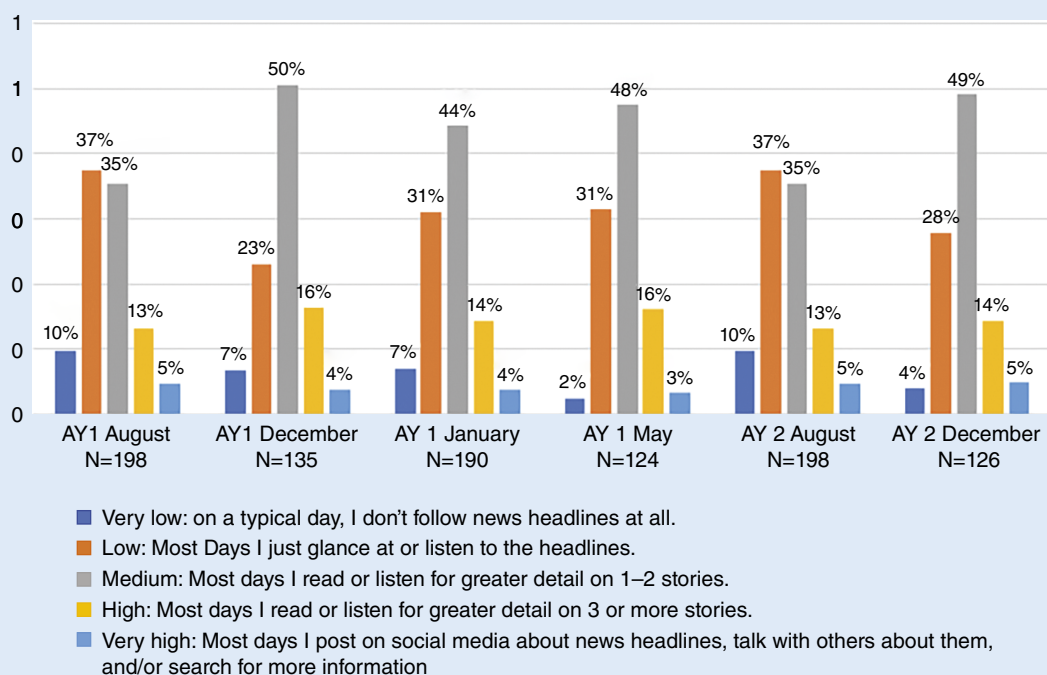


Figure 2

Source of Social Media Posts

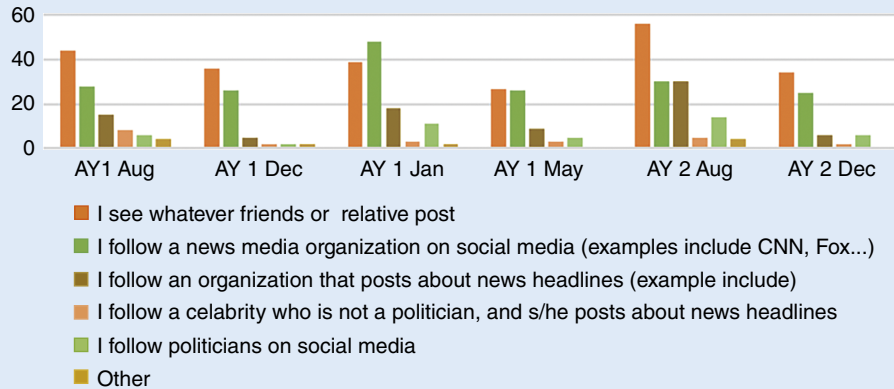


Table 3

Independent Samples *t*-test Results

Semester	Beginning of the Year Survey			End of Year Survey		
	n	Mean	s.d.	n	Mean	s.d.
Fall 2016	198	2.65	0.98	135	2.87	0.89
Spring 2017	190	2.76	0.91	125	2.86	0.82
Fall 2017	198	2.66	0.98	127	2.87	0.87

Semester	t	d.f.
Fall 2016	2.09*	304
Spring 2017	0.96	282
Fall 2017	2.09*	290

\* *p* < 0.05.

In addition to increased interest in news headlines, data analysis indicates an *aggregate decrease in social media use to access news headlines* across all semesters. In the first semester, the percentage of respondents indicating social media as their primary source of news headlines declined from 43% to 32%; similar decreases were observed in the second and third semesters as shown in figures 3 and 4.

Students were asked at the end of each semester, “To what extent have your news habits changed?” As shown in table 4, 70% of respondents indicated that the primary change was that they followed the news more frequently, and many reported that they valued the quality of the news coverage in the NYT:

I now follow news like I have never before and from new sources as well, specifically the *New York Times*.

I now get my news primarily from much more trustworthy of sources, such as the *New York Times* and other respected news sources.

Figure 3

Social Media as #1 News Source

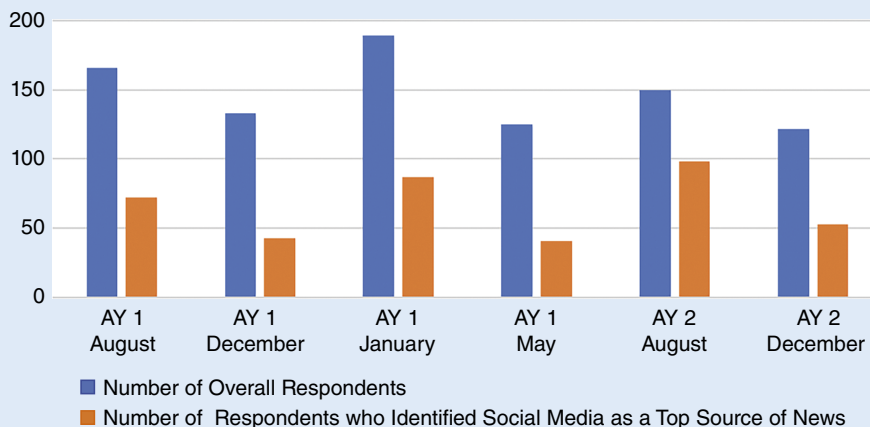


Figure 4

### Percentage of Students Getting News from Social Media

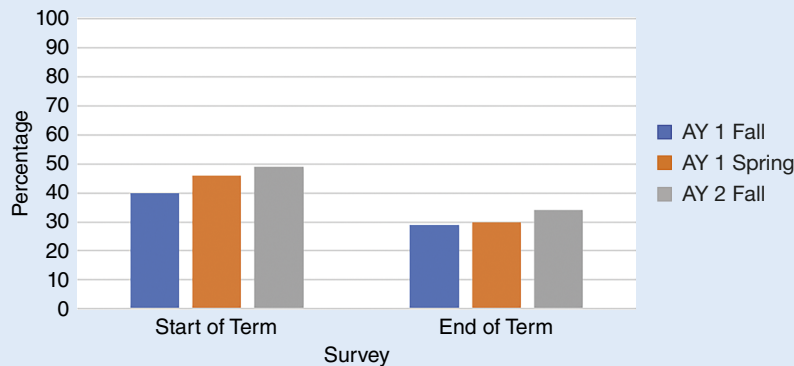


Table 4

### Extent that News Habits Changed as a Result of the Class

	Dec. 2016	April 2017
Not at all	16%, n = 23	14%, n = 19
I follow news more frequently	70%, n = 103	73%, n = 98
I get news from a different source	14%, n = 21	13%, n = 17
Total	N = 147	N = 134

At the end of the semester, students who indicated increased interest in the news were asked to explain how their news habits had changed (table 5). Even though they were required to read only one news source, the NYT, some students reported an increased interest in diversifying their sources of news:

I check liberal and conservative leaning websites in order to get an understanding of both perspectives.

I now consume more varieties of information at a more in-depth level. I want to have multiple perspectives and fact check news sources.

Table 5

### How News Habits Have Changed

	Number of Open-Ended Comments Dec. 2016	Number of Open-Ended Comments May 2017
More frequently seek out news	31	35
Change in source/more concern with quality of source	26	4
Greater variety of sources	23	12
Move away from social media	13	3

Students also reported that they enjoyed the opportunity for social interaction in peer discussion groups and benefited from hearing different points of view from their team members. Overall, students found the peer discussion groups enjoyable and productive:

Multiple people’s opinions are able to [be] heard, and those allow you to see other sides of situations rather than just your own.

I enjoyed learning about other people’s viewpoint in a safe environment.

### DISCUSSION

In this section, we explore the implications of our study for enhancing news media literacy and provide more general insights about active learning through peer discussion groups. Turning first to news media literacy, some instructors may be reluctant to address current events and controversial topics in the classroom because of potential student complaints about political bias (Wood, Kiggins, and Kickham 2017). Guided peer discussions are likely to be perceived by students as less biased than other approaches because participants are comparatively free to express a variety of perspectives. Faculty may want to consider offering specific guidance on how to deal with differences of opinion within peer groups. Addressing this consideration is beyond the scope of this article, but numerous resources are available (Schwartz and Ritter 2019).

The instructor used the NYT because it was free to students, but in today’s political atmosphere, it may be desirable to vary the assigned news sources. The *Wall Street Journal* also offers a free daily newsletter. Other alternatives to consider include *Axios* (<https://www.axios.com/newsletters>) and “Daily Chatter,” a bipartisan newsletter focused on international news that is available free for university students (Daily Chatter 2020). Whatever news sources are chosen, we recommend that instructors acknowledge their political leanings and assign small groups of students to compare content in a variety of news sources.

Future research on news media literacy in political science should explore how political science instructors can train

students in the effective use of social media (Caliendo, Muck, and Chod 2015; Head et al. 2018). Given generational tensions, instructors should approach this topic with caution: students may tune out anything that sounds like a repetition of “digital citizenship” lessons learned in middle and high school (Quartararo 2018). Resources available to help lead this instruction include Stanford University’s Civil Online Reasoning cur-

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riculum and fact-checking sites such as AP Fact Check, American Press Institute, Detector de Mentiras Lie Detector, FactCheck.org, PolitiFact.com, and Snopes.com (Spratt and Agosto 2017).

Guided peer discussion has relevance beyond the promotion of news media literacy because it is a practical and effective approach to active learning. Active learning occurs in classroom situations in which “the instructor and instructional activities explicitly afford students agency in learning” (Lombardi and Shipley 2021, 17). Short, guided small group discussions can enhance student interest in and comprehension of topics covered in lectures without requiring extensive preparation and grading, which are major barriers to faculty implementation of active-learning strategies (Michael 2007). Additionally, peer discussion may be more effective than other active learning practices in reaching underserved groups (Snyder et al. 2016). By increasing student agency through guided peer discussion, students can become more self-reflective, which, in turn, “can ... influence how students approach new learning challenges” (Lombardi and Shipley 2021, 30). Guided peer discussion is a key instructional strategy to enhance independent critical thinking among all students in political science courses.

An additional benefit of peer discussion is its feasibility within face-to-face, blended, and fully online contexts. For synchronous online situations, instructors can create breakout rooms using video-conference software such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams to engage students in guided peer discussion; however, guidelines for participation in online small groups should be clarified at the beginning of the course (Hogan and Sathy 2020). Online small group synchronous discussions can help students develop a sense of community (He and Huang 2017), and students tend to prefer the format to fully asynchronous discussions (Hamann, Pollock, and Wilson 2012). In courses that meet asynchronously, students can discuss news-related questions using traditional text-based group discussion boards (Boettcher and Conrad 2016); however, social presence among students can be increased through channel-based interactions within tools such as Microsoft Teams or Slack (Sabin and Olive 2018) or through short video recordings within Flipgrid (Lowenthal and Moore 2020). Guided peer discussions can also take place within HyFlex classroom contexts (Abdelmalak and Parra 2016), but the instructional strategies used may require flexibility in the learning structure, distributed roles for students, a reduction in task complexity, and setting group rules and expectations (Zydney, Warner, and Angelone 2020).

## CONCLUSION

Today there is nearly universal recognition that developing news media literacy is an urgent challenge for educators (Posetti et al. 2018). Our study demonstrates that the regular use of guided peer discussion increased students’ interest in news headlines and suggests that this approach also enhanced students’ awareness of the quality of news sources.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Susan Siena’s brother is a Senior Editor at Daily Chatter, one of the news resources mentioned in the article. Tiffany Roman has no conflicts of interest to declare. ■

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