7.4

Digital News and Social Media

Standard 7.4 Digital News and Social Media

Evaluate the benefits and challenges of digital news and social media to a democratic society. **(**Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) **[8.T7.4]**
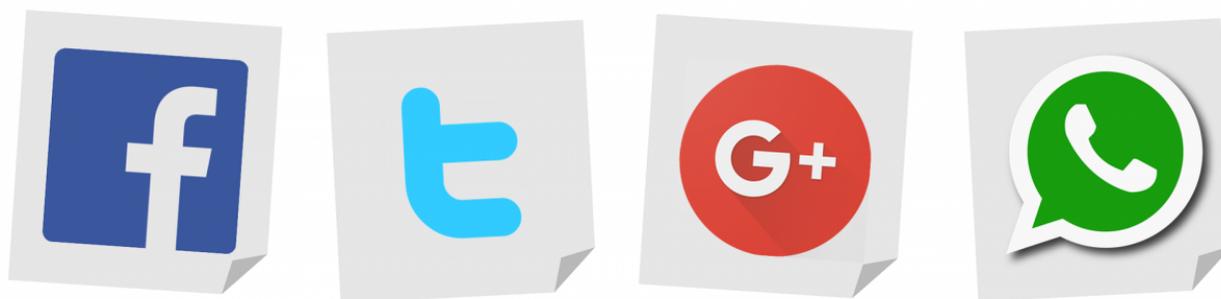
FOCUS QUESTION: What are the Roles of Digital News and Social Media in a Democratic Society?

Mass media and social media are central to the lives of most people in the United States, young and old. **Mass media** involves the communication of information to large audiences through multiple platforms. Before the modern computer revolution, newspapers, magazines, movies, radio and television were the 20th century's most common forms of mass media. Now, even though nearly 96% of American homes have one or more televisions, the **Internet** and **social media** has become the mass media of the present and possibly the future. In 2000, nearly half (48%) of the adults in the U.S. did not use the Internet; in 2019 only 10% of the population were Internet "non-adopters" ([10% of Americans Don't Use the Internet. Who are They?](#) Pew Research Center, April 22, 2019).

Today's students are members of the world's first truly **digital generation**. The oldest (those born between the mid 1990s and 2010) are called Generation Z (or "Gen Z"; "post-millennials"; "screeners"; or the "i-Generation"). Those born between 2010 and 2025 are known as Generation Alpha (Gen Alpha). From the earliest ages, Gen Z and Gen Alpha live media-saturated lives, constantly receiving images and information from televisions, computers, websites, video games, social media sites, apps, streaming services, and smartphones.

Social media has become a fundamental part of U.S. politics. Politicians, political parties, politically-

minded organizations, and interested individuals all use Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other social communication and networking technologies to convey messages and viewpoints to the public. As President, Donald Trump maintains a personal and an official Twitter account—he sent 2,843 tweets to 56.6 million followers in 2018 ([Trump's Twitter Year of Outrage and Braggadocio," *Politico*, December 31, 2018](#)). **Members of Congress, on average, have six different social media platforms** to communicate with the public ([Social Media Adoption by Members of Congress: Trends and Considerations](#), Congressional Research Service, October 9, 2018).

The modules for this topic explore key political dimensions of digital news and social media.

Modules for This Standard Include:

1. [INVESTIGATE: Social Media, Digital News, and the Spread of Misinformation](#)
   - [MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS:](#)
     - [Recommendation Algorithms on Social Media Platforms](#)
     - [Fake News Investigation and Evaluation](#)
2. [UNCOVER: Russian Hackers, Facebook, the Mueller Report, and the 2016 and 2020 U.S. Presidential Elections](#)
3. [ENGAGE: Is the Internet a Human Right?](#)

1. INVESTIGATE: Social Media, Digital News, and the Spread of Misinformation

Where people go to get the news is changing rapidly in today's digital age. Print newspaper readership is declining rapidly, being replaced by online digital news sources accessed through websites, apps, and social media. Even television viewing is being impacted; by 2019, nearly as many Americans got their local news from online sources as from TV channels ([Key Findings about the Online News Landscape in America](#), Pew Research Center, September 11, 2019).

When getting news from online sources, not everyone is sure just what type of news they are getting. Given a list of six news organizations (ABC News, Wall Street Journal, Huffington Post, Google News, Apple News, and Facebook), just over half of those surveyed felt confident they knew which organizations did original reporting (ABC News, WSJ, and HuffPost) and which aggregate news from different sources. One in four could not correctly identify whether any of the six sources did original reporting ([Measuring News Consumption in a Digital Era](#), Pew Research Center, December 8, 2020). In a related 2020 study, the [Pew Research Center](#) found those who get their news primarily from social media tend to be less engaged civically and less knowledgeable politically.

Young People and the News

Social media is now the **most common source of news** for young people ages 13–18 (Robb, 2017). Similarly, nine-in-ten adults (93%) get at least some news online. Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and YouTube are young people's most popular social media news sources. For example, 75% of Snapchat's news consumers are 18-29 year-olds ([News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2018)](#). YouTube is also an incredibly popular source of news and information; people watch one billion hours of video on it every day ([YouTube for Press](#)).

In [News and America's Kids: How Young People Perceive and Are Impacted by the News](#) study, Common Sense Media found:

- Nearly half (48 percent) of youngsters aged 10 to 19 believe that following the news is important to them
- Youngsters feel neglected by and misrepresented in the news
- Youngsters see racial and gender bias in the news
- What youngsters are seeing scares them and makes them feel depressed
- Youngsters also often are fooled by fake news
- Youngsters trust family for news (but still prefer to get it from social media)

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Impacts of Social Media Platform Algorithms

However, students (and adults) are not always aware of *how the news* is being delivered to them. Social media platforms, like YouTube, employ algorithms designed to recommend videos and other content it thinks readers and viewers will enjoy or want to read in order to keep people on the site as long as possible (to make money). The algorithms are able to "tweak the content viewers receive on an individual basis, without being visible" (Tufekci, 2015, p. 209). So, while watching a video, viewers are invited to view related videos without independently and purposefully choosing what they are going to see next.

Researchers have found that **recommendations from social media platform algorithms tend to**

push selections to the extremes of the political spectrum. For example, a Donald Trump rally video may generate recommendations for white supremacist conspiracy videos. As Zeynep Tufekci noted, extremist political groups now rely on the recommendation engines of social media sites to draw more viewers to their materials ([NPR, 2017](#)).

Media Literacy Connections: Recommendation Algorithms on Social Media Platforms

Algorithms, as integral features of social media, Internet search tools, e-commerce sites, and other digital applications, influence people's behaviors and choices on a daily basis.

While algorithms are simply "instructions for solving a problem or completing a task" ([Rainie & Anderson, 2017](#), para. 2), they can be used to shape thinking and behavior by doing things like suggesting "products, services, and information to users based on analysis of data" ([Voice Tech Podcast](#), Medium, June 25, 2019, para. 2). For example, social media platforms use r**ecommendation algorithms** to determine what you should see on their sites (e.g., posts, sponsored ads, people) based on data about what you have viewed, bought, or done before.

The goal of recommendation algorithms is to keep you on the site, app, or platform as long as possible to make more money. Advocates hail the convenience of personalized digital experiences, while critics worry that users experience only a narrow range of suggestions and choices.

In these activities, you will examine YouTube's recommendation algorithm and then design your own.

- **Activity 1: Evaluate YouTube's Recommendation Algorithm**
- **Activity 2: Design a News Recommendation Algorithm**

RESOURCE: [Algorithms and You](#), an online learning plan from iCivics.
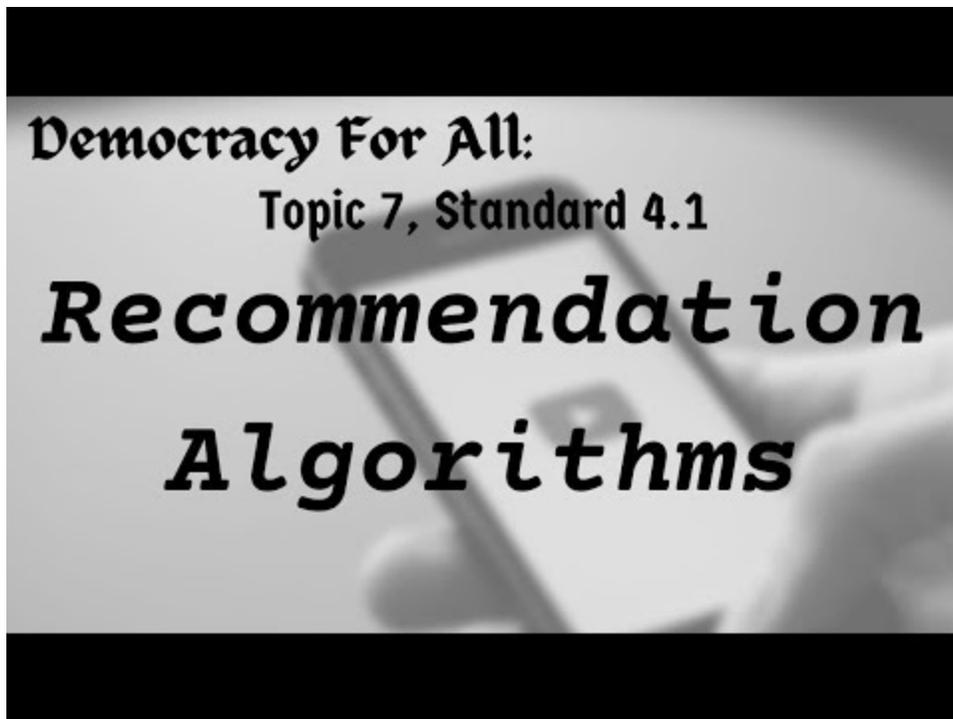
Fake and False News

Adding to the complexity of information sharing on social media is **how easily students can be fooled by false and fake online news.** Stanford University researchers found elementary, middle, and high school students are greatly unprepared to distinguish between credible and unreliable information (Breakstone et al., 2019). In one example, more than half of the students (52%) believed that a video purporting to show ballot stuffing during the 2016 election was "strong evidence" of voter fraud. The video, which was shot in Russia, was fake. Only 3 of 3000 students went online to find the actual source of the video. In general, say the Stanford researchers, students lack the skills to critically evaluate the information they encounter on social media. Read the Stanford study's [Executive Summary: Students' Civic Online Reasoning: A National Portrait](#) to find out more.

Researchers have further uncovered the alarming reality that **misinformation spreads faster and goes further than truthful information** on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms. Correcting misinformation with accurate facts takes far longer to reach a wide audience. To learn more, check out [How Facebook's News Feed can be Fooled into Spreading Misinformation](#), by PBS NewsHour.

To demonstrate how information spreads online, journalist **Natasha Fatah** published two different accounts of her personal experience during a domestic terrorist attack in Toronto, Canada in 2018. In one tweet, she falsely claimed she had been attacked by someone who was "angry" and "Middle Eastern." In her other truthful account, the attacker was "white" and "intentionally hitting people." The false account spread far more quickly and had a wider reach than the truthful one. You can see a visual display of the information flow for Natasha Fatah's post in this article: [How Misinformation Spreads on Social Media—And What To Do About It](#) (Brookings, May 9, 2018).

Media Literacy Connections: Fake News Investigation and Evaluation

People get news today from sources ranging from social media (e.g., Twitter, TikTok) to legacy news outlets (i.e., *New York Times, Washington Post*) to teachers, parents, family members, and peers. Yet, there is often a difference in quality and reliability among these sources.
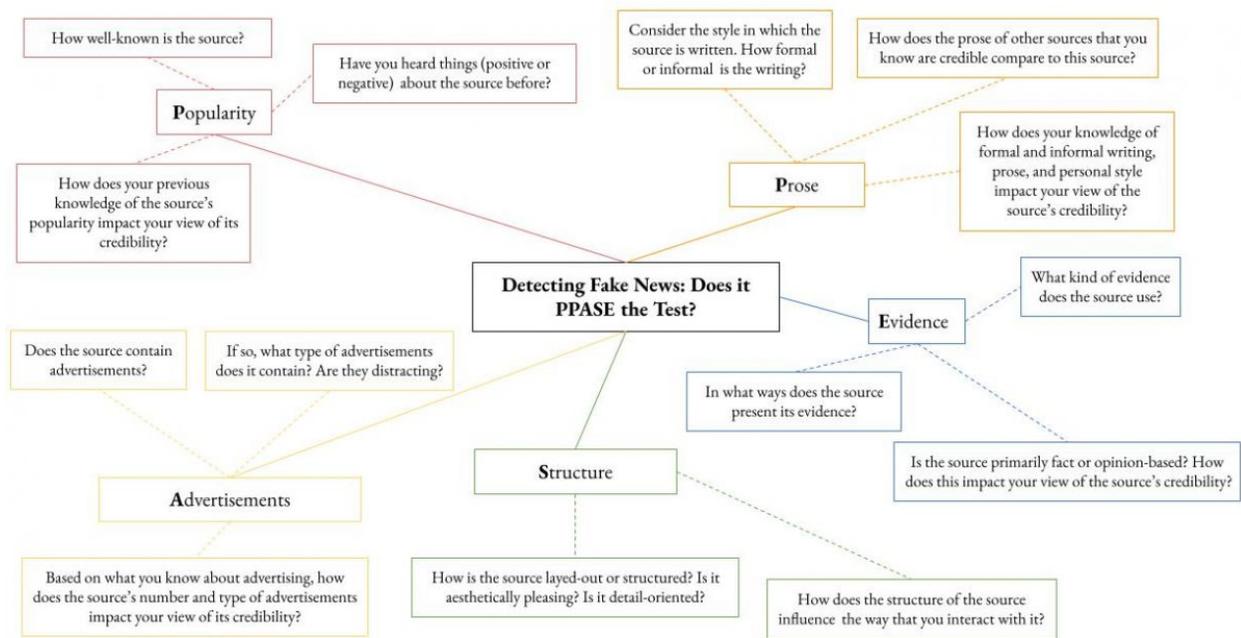
Every individual must be their own fact checker and news analyst - determining for themselves what is credible and reliable information and what is fake and false misinformation.

The following activities are designed to help you act as a critical news evaluator.

- **Activity 1: Analyze Your Online Search Habits**
- **Activity 2: Create a News Evaluation Tool**
- **Activity 3: Evaluate the Benefits and Challenges of Digital News and Social Media to a Democratic Society**

Impacts of Screen Time

The presence of social media in the lives of young people is enormous. The research organization Common Sense Media reported that in 2019 8 to 12-year-olds spent an average of 5 hours a day outside of schoolwork on screens; teenagers about 7 and ½ hours (Tweens, Teens and Phones: What Our 2019 Research Reveals). Researchers disagree about the impact of screen time on children and adolescents:

One large-scale review of multiple research studies on the relationship between screen media and academic performance of children and adolescents in the journal *Pediatrics* (September 2019) found television viewing and video game playing (but not overall screen media) were inversely associated with the academic performance of children and adolescents, with the impact being greater for adolescents than younger children.

Other researchers have drawn different conclusions, suggesting that moderate amounts of screen time can have positive learning impacts for youngsters: Screen Time: Conclusions about the Effects

[of Digital Media Are Often Incomplete, Irrelevant or Wrong](#), *The Conversation* (January 15, 2020) and [Is Screen Time Really Bad for Kids? (](#)*The New York Times Magazine*, December 18, 2019).

Suggested Learning Activities

1. **Collect and Analyze Data: Students' News Survey**
   - Create an online survey about how and where students in their school get the news
   - Include questions asking students about they think the news impacts their roles as citizens and what are their thoughts about/concerns with the news
   - Distribute the survey to students in the school and have students work in groups to analyze the data
   - Have students to present their findings in digital or written form

2. **Develop a Personal News Diet**
   - **A News diet** refers to making a plan for intentional consumption of news. Similar to a healthy food diet, a healthy news diet promotes overall physical, mental, and civic wellness.
   - Set a personal goal to achieve a healthy news diet
     - Review the article: [Improving Your 'News Diet': A Three-Step Lesson Plan for Teenagers and Teachers](#).
     - Conduct a personal news audit.
     - Design a personalized news diet.
     - Create a presentation, video, screen recording, or [podcast](#) to present what they learned and showcase their news diet.

3. **Make a Poster for Alternative Sources of News**
   - There are engaging and reliable online news sources designed specifically for students, including sites that provide the same content written for different reading levels.
   - What are the interesting and inviting features of the following sites? What are the ways these sites might repel students' interests?
     - [NewsELA](#)
     - [TweenTribune](#)
     - [Britannica School](#)
     - [AllSides.com](#)
     - [Newsomatic.org](#)

4. **Dialog and Debate**: **Should There Be Screen-Free Days in Schools?**
   - In response to reports of increasing screen use by students, some schools are now instituting screen-free days to give tweens and teens designated times when they are not online. The principal at one 1-to-1 laptop school explained that screen-free days are times when students "will engage with one another and the world around them without technology" ([Screen-Free Days in a 1:1 School](#)). At that school, no screen technology is used by students for the entire school day ([Screen-Free Time).](#)
     - What are your thoughts about screen-free time?
     - How might screen-free days positively and negatively affect learning for students?
     - After turn off all digital devices for part of a day (at school or at home), how did screen-free time impact your ability to access the news and media?
     - What is the best role of digital technology in supporting student learning?

Online Resources for Social Media and News Diets

- *Historyresourcesforteachers Wiki Pages*
    - [The Mass Media](#)
    - [*1984* and *Animal Farm* by George Orwell](#)
- News Diets
    - [10 Things We Learned About Teenagers and the News: The Results of Our Student News Diet Challenge](#)

2. UNCOVER: Russian Hackers, Facebook, the Mueller Report, and the 2016 and 2020 U.S. Presidential Elections

- Did fake news and Russian disinformation campaigns play a role in influencing the 2016 and 2020 Presidential elections?
- How secure are our future elections from outside hacking and foreign government interference?
- What is the responsibility of Facebook and other technology companies to monitor the truthfulness of what is posted on their social media platforms?

These questions moved to the center of political debate with investigations over Russian government interference into the 2016 Presidential election.

In May 2017, **Robert J. Mueller**, a lawyer and former director of the FBI, was appointed Special Counsel to investigate what happened during the election. Two years later, he issued a [Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election]() (also known as the Mueller Report).

The **Mueller Report** established that Russian cyber espionage agents were responsible for an extensive disinformation campaign in the months leading to the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. More than **150 million people were likely exposed to Russian disinformation**, lawyers from Facebook, Google, and Twitter said in congressional testimony on November 1, 2017. By contrast, only 20.7 million people watched the evening news broadcasts of ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox stations in 2016, according to the Nielsen ratings service (*San Francisco Chronicle*, November 1, 2017). Texts of Russian social-media posts, released during a House Intelligence Committee hearing, were **intentionally inflammatory and designed to exploit divisions** within the country over issues of race, religion, immigration, and political issues.

Building on the findings in the Mueller Report, the Brennan Center for Justice starkly summarized the extent of what happened: "Hackers conducted 'research and reconnaissance' against election networks in all 50 states, breached at least one state registration database, attacked local election boards, and infected the computers at a voting technology company" (quoted in [Election Security](),

2019, para. 1).

Special Counsel Robert Mueller did not bring charges against the President or the Trump campaign for conspiring with Russia or engaging in efforts to obstruct justice his investigation. Still the report did flatly state:

- "If we had confidence that the President clearly did not commit a crime we would have said that."
- "Reiterating the central allegation of our indictments—that there were multiple, systematic efforts to interfere in our election. That allegation deserves the attention of every American."

Nearly 4 years after the election on August 18, 2020, the Republican-led U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence released its 1,000 page report on [Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election (Volume 5: Counterintelligence Threats and Vulnerabilities](https://)). That report concluded:

- The Russian government disrupted an American election to help Mr. Trump become president,
- Russian intelligence services viewed members of the Trump campaign as easily manipulated,
- Some of Mr. Trump's advisers were eager for the help from an American adversary ([G.O.P.-Led Panel Details Ties Between 2016 Trump Campaign and Russia](https://), The New York Times, August 18, 2020).

The report also found that longtime associate of Paul Manafort, Trump's former campaign chairman, was in regular contact with a Russian intelligence officer who might have been involved in efforts to steal and disseminate Democratic emails.

Looking back at the investigation on the eve of the 2020 election, CNN legal analyst Jeffrey Toobin (2020a) found that Robert Mueller ran a narrow inquiry that did not look at Trump's financial ties to Russia or his personal tax returns. Nor did the Special Counsel subpoena direct testimony from the President. Following Justice Department guidance, Mueller decided that a sitting President could not be indicted while in office. The President, concluded Toobin (2020a, p. 11), who really "never pretended to be other than what he was - a narcissistic scoundrel" was able to survive the investigation "notwithstanding abundant evidence of his personal dishonesty and immortality and the efforts of learned adversaries in Mueller's office and in Congress."

Interference in the 2020 Presidential Election

Despite the findings about the 2016 election, Russia has continued to interfere in American politics. At the beginning of September 2020, both Facebook and Twitter reported that the Russian intelligence service's [Internet Research Agency](https://)(IRA) was engaged in generating false information about the Presidential election, having created a fake liberal-leaning news publication and staffing it with fake editors and AI-generated photos.

The Russian agency then hired unwitting freelance reporters to write grammatically correct fake stories that were, in the words of one social media review firm, "noteworthy for its hostile tone" toward Democratic Party nominees Joe Biden and Kamala Harris ([The Guardian](https://), September 1, 2020, para. 11). The grammatical correctness issue is important. One way to identify fake news stories from 2016 written by Russian sources was the appearance of grammatical inconsistencies in their use of the English language.

New Evidence of Konstantin Kilimnik's Role in the 2016 Election

In April 2021, the U.S. Treasury Department announced sanctions against a number of Russian individuals and entities for their roles in cyberattacks designed to disrupt and influence the 2020 Presidential election ([Treasury Escalates Sanctions Against the Russian Government Attempts to Influence U.S. Elections](#)).

The Treasury's report also included evidence that in the months before the 2016 elections, Konstantin Kilimnik, a Russian government agent, received confidential polling data from Trump presidential campaign chair Paul Manafort and relayed that information to Russian Intelligence Services who used it to help discredit Hillary Clinton and elect Donald Trump.

The implications here are immense, as historian Heather Cox Richardson concluded ([Letters from an American, April 15, 2021](#)). The Treasury report shows there was an open channel, not an unintended connection, between the Trump campaign and Russian intelligence operatives. Russian disinformation, spread on social media, appears to have contributed to Trump's 2016 election victories in key battleground states.

The FBI has posted a $250,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of Kilimnik.

Suggested Learning Activities

1. **State Your View**
   - How does the reliance on social media for the news impact political views and civic engagement?
   - What role should social media play during elections?

2. **Engage in Civic Action: Public Service Announcement**
   - Create a video, [podcast](#), series of memes, or posters to address "What steps can be taken to prevent interference in future American elections?"
   - Use the following resources to develop your conclusions:
     - [Fancy Bear, a Russian Cyber Espionage Group](#)
     - [Who is Fancy Bear (APT 28)?](#)
     - [Did Fake News Influence the Outcome of Election 2016?](#) PBS Newshour Extra, November 16, 2016
     - [Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election](#), Hunt Allcott & Matthew Gentzkow, 2017
     - [Securing Elections from Foreign Interference](#). Brennan Center for Justice

Online Resources for the Mueller Report

- [Robert Mueller Statement on the Russia Investigation](#) (May 29, 2019)
- [Classroom Law Project Resources on Robert Mueller](#)
- [Mueller Report](#), PBS Newshour

3. ENGAGE: Is Internet Access a Human Right?

Human rights are entitlements that everyone has, regardless of gender, nationality, ethnicity,

language, religion or any other status. As set forth in [The Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR)—the foundation for international human rights law—human rights include life, liberty, work, education, and more ([What Are Human Rights?](#) from the United Nations).

In today's digital age, many people and organizations, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, believe that [free and open internet access is now a basic human right](#). In the United States, not everyone has free and open access to the Internet. More than 30% of Americans lack the broadband speeds and digital devices necessary to access and utilize the most up to date, educationally important online resources. This is known as the **connectivity gap**.

There are four types of broadband: DSL (digital subscriber line), fiber-optic, cable, and satellite. Fiber-optic is considered the fastest Internet connection; satellite is the slowest. There are three ways to get online with broadband: a television cable box, a satellite connection, or a telephone line. For many people, access and speed depends on price. High speed access is expensive, more than many families can afford.

According to the digital advocacy organization [Education Superhighway](#), while 98% of school districts have high speed broadband, there are still millions of students lacking access in school and outside of school - in homes, after-school programs, libraries, and youth centers. This persistent connectivity gap threatens to leave behind students who cannot access the online resources and digital tools they need to complete their homework and achieve success in school (see the Homework Gap video below).

Watch on YouTube https://edtechbooks.org/-CTPv

Suggested Learning Activities

- **State Your View:** Should Internet access be considered a human right?
    - If so, what policies and practices are needed to ensure open access for everyone and every school?
    - For background, read:
        - [Why Internet Access is a Human Right](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
        - [Looking at Science and Technology from a Human Rights Perspective](#), University of Minnesota

- **Write a Social Media Post**
    - Develop a written statement, bumper sticker, meme, Instagram post, or poster that makes the case for Internet Access as a basic human right.

- **Propose Educational Action:** Ways to address the "connectivity gap."
    - Watch the [Homework Gap Video](#)
    - Discuss the following questions:
        - How do you access the Internet outside of school?
        - How does your access influence your ability to do your schoolwork?
        - What steps would you take to improve Internet access for all students?

- **Argue For and Against**
    - **Flipped Classrooms** are an instructional strategy which depends on students having access to the Internet at home so they can complete assignments before coming to class.
        - If all students were able to access online resources/lessons at home and practice/application of the material was done at school, would students prefer this?
        - What are the benefits of flipped learning? What are the limitations?

- **Review and Summarize**
    - Explore the **[Internet Health Report](#)**
    - Is the Internet safe? How open is it? Who is welcome? Who can succeed? Who controls it?

Standard 7.4 Conclusion

This standard shows that there are both benefits and challenges to social media and digital news. **INVESTIGATE** had students and teachers consider the kinds of news that is available on social media platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, and Reddit, as well as student-centered sites such as Newsela and Tween Tribune. **ENGAGE** asked if access to the Internet should be a basic human right. **UNCOVER** examined how and why Russian hackers and Facebook had roles in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, including what the Mueller Report says about foreign interference in our elections. The 2016 election demonstrates how politicians, political campaigns, huge technology companies, and governments are using social media for political purposes.
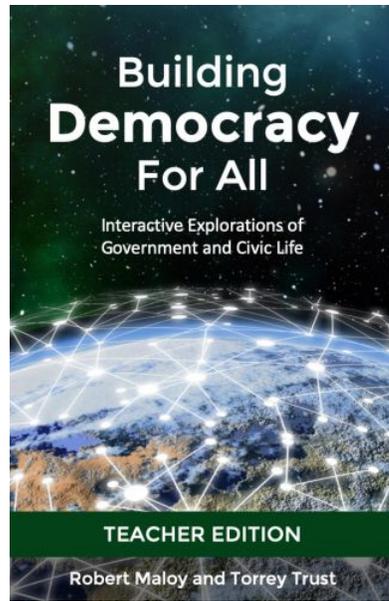
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