

Critical Thinking and the News

Introduction

According to Scriven (2017), “Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.” A 2019 study by Mindedge of 1,000 millennials found that 44% of the respondents received an “F” in critical thinking and that 55% of them rely on social media for news and forward that news to others. It also reported that only 26% of those surveyed consider themselves properly trained in critical thinking.

Do not be deceived into believing it’s just the younger generation that has trouble with critical thinking. In 1997 Paul conducted a research study of randomly selected teaching faculty at 38 public and 28 private colleges and universities across California. It included prestigious universities as San Francisco State, Cal State Fullerton, UCLA and the California State University System. He found that while 89% of the study subjects claimed that critical thinking was a primary objective, but according to their answers to 40-50 open-ended questions, only 9% of the study participants were teaching for critical thinking in their class.

In this digital age where anyone with access to a computer and internet can create and instantly publish news stories, using the scientific method of critical thinking can help to distinguish between real and fake news stories so we can make intelligent decisions that impact our lives and those we care about. Carl Sagan (2016) defines scientific method as, “a way of thinking, a way of skeptically interrogating the universe with a fine understanding of human fallibility. If we are not able to ask skeptical questions, to interrogate those who tell us something is true, to be skeptical of those in authority, then we’re up for grabs for the next charlatan — political or religious — who comes ambling along. The people have to be educated, and they have to practice their skepticism and their education otherwise we don’t run the government, the government runs us.”

Identification of the Problem

The purpose of this project is to equip people to distinguish between what are legitimate, valid news artifacts, and what is unsupported opinion and or fake news. According to a study by Mindedge (2017), “Given the fact that 55 percent of millennials receive and share news through social media, the ability to accurately filter facts accurately is necessary.” It is not just with social media that we should exercise skepticism of. On March 11th, 2021, the Washington Post quietly released a correction on a story from January 9th after being caught fabricating a story that President Trump had directed the Georgia Secretary of State to “find the Fraud” in the election. This false story was later used by the United States congress in Trump’s second impeachment trial.

Intended Audience

The intended audience for this course is adults who want to develop skills to be able to better discern and evaluate the legitimacy of news items. This is a free course and is open to anyone.

- The learning audience will be diverse in age and from a wide variety of background.
- This course will assume that the learner has none, or very limited exposure to Critical Thinking
- Fluency in English, both written and verbal
- Learners must work well independently
- Computer skills necessary for this course is limited to the basic ability to use a computer
- The course is offered every month, beginning on the 5th of the month, and is limited to 40 students

Learning Context

The instructional setting for this course is online. Learners may be physically located wherever they find best for them to take this asynchronous course. The course will be built in Google Sites as the LMS and will be accessible anywhere, anytime, provided they have internet access. The course will adhere to the standards of Americans with Disabilities.

Description of the Proposed Solution

This course will teach basic critical thinking skills by focusing on content from a variety of types of news media. The final course will consist of several micro-modules.

Upon completion of this course, the learner will be able to:

- Discriminate between news stories based on the source and seek news from a variety of sources to determine truth with 70% accuracy on quizzes.
- Recognize biases and hidden agenda of “news” stories with a 70% accuracy on quizzes.
- Evaluate social media news like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or blogs with skepticism with 70% accuracy on quizzes.
- Recognize their own biases and prejudices and how they play a role in your thinking by creating counter arguments to your beliefs with 70% accuracy on quizzes.
- Demonstrate the use of scientific methods to analyze the validity of news by participating in a discussion form, with 70% accuracy

Project Timeline

Contact Information of Field Supervisor

My Field Supervisor is Dr. Michael Butler, a Lecturer in the Philosophy Department at UTRGV. Dr. Butler teaches a course in Critical Thinking. He has helped me by giving my access to the Critical Thinking class he teaches in the fall, Philosophy 1300 via Blackboard. He can be reached at (956) 665-3562 or Michael.butler@utrgv.edu.

Summary

Critical Thinking is a process by which we skeptically interrogate information to determine its value. It also requires that essential questions be examined such as identifying obstacles to rational thought, analyzing, acknowledging person biases, asking essential questions and using the scientific method thinking. The benefit is that you make better decisions because you are making them based on sound information.

References

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