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A Rhetorical Approach to Assessing Source Credibility: Digital Natives, Lateral Reading, and the Need for Media Literacy Curriculum

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This Thesis, "**A Rhetorical Approach to Assessing Source Credibility: Digital Natives, Lateral Reading, and the Need for Media Literacy Curriculum**," by Sanna Fogt, has been approved for submission for the Degree of Master of Arts in English (Writing**)** by:

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A Rhetorical Approach to Assessing Source Credibility: Digital Natives, Lateral Reading, and

the Need for Media Literacy Curriculum

Abstract:

The overwhelming amount of (mis)information housed online and on various social

media platforms in the age of "fake news" requires the development of a first-year writing

curriculum that supports students' ability to assess source credibility. While both Millennials and

Generation Z, or "zoomers," have been labeled as "digital natives," recent research indicates

that, though these generational groups have grown up with constant access to technology, they

are not necessarily experts when it comes to evaluating the credibility of online sources (Belinha

59). In fact, according to the Stanford History Education Group, "young people's ability to

reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: *bleak*" (Wineburg

and McGrew, "Evaluating Information" 4). Many students surveyed for the case study described

herein expressed that while they are aware of the amount of misinformation available online,

they are unsure of how to effectively sift through the content available to them. One challenge of

media literacy is teaching students to not only think and write critically about written sources,

but also about images, videos, and audio files. Therefore, as Thoman and Jolls suggest, "If our

children are to be able to navigate their lives through this multimedia culture, they need to be

fluent in 'reading' and 'writing' the language of images and sounds just as we have always

taught them to 'read' and 'write' the language of printed communications" (180).

The common first-year writing curriculum in CORE English I courses at Seton Hall

University requires that faculty focus on a rhetorical genre approach to teaching reading and

writing. Over the course of the semester, students in CORE English I are exposed to a rhetorical

genre vocabulary that transfers well into an approach for media literacy and serves as a framework for students to follow as they sift through information. After posing a research paper prompt to a select group of first-year writing students, this case study examined the effectiveness of transferring the rhetorical genre approach to evaluating source credibility for online news platforms. Using this familiar approach allowed students to apply their knowledge of the rhetorical situation to identify and analyze the author, sponsor/publisher, genre, medium, audience, stance, purpose, design, tone, and content of online platforms. To gather the information necessary to complete this case study, I utilized personal interviews, student writing samples, student in-class pre-writing activities, and anonymous surveys. At the end of their interviews, consenting students were also asked about their consumption of news and how likely they are to continue thinking about the rhetorical genre strategies when consuming news as a student in their other courses and as an informed citizen beyond their higher education. I assessed the impact and longevity of the project on students' own personal lives as informed citizens by asking about the likelihood of applying the rhetorical genre framework to their own personal consumption of news. This case study draws on this data, as well as on research from the fields of information literacy, media literacy, and media education.

1. Introduction

Following the attack on the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, the media spotlight on disinformation became even more pronounced. An article from CBS Evening News titled, "'It was a drug': Capitol riot exposes reach of QAnon disinformation," focuses on the scope and influence of QAnon and other conspiracy theories on social media, outlining that "disinformation reached new heights in 2020. A recent study showed Facebook users interacted with deceptive posts more than 1 billion times in October, November and December — about twice the total

leading up to the 2016 election" (Garrett). Karen Kornbluh, the leader of the German Marshall Fund's Digital New Deal Project, added, "'That even when people were increasing their news consumption overall online, their consumption of the set of information from the deceptive sites was even greater'" (Garrett). Recent political events coupled with an intense public interest in media bias has revealed the importance of teaching first-year writing students key elements of media literacy, which can be defined as "the ability to access, understand, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms" (Belinha 25). In other words, media literacy focuses on students' ability to think critically and reason about the news they encounter, especially in the digital space they so often occupy and where they primarily find their news. Throughout their educational careers, students are often warned by various teachers to "use credible sources," but more often than not students are not sure what that even means other than staying away from crowdsourcing sites such as *Wikipedia* (Student 2, 1:47-1:54). In an interview with Student 2, when asked if they had ever completed a project or paper focusing on media literacy, they stated "[teachers] always told us to use 'reliable sources,' but… we never really looked into it as much as we did in this class" (Student 2, 1:47-1:54). So, students are left with the question, what are credible sources and how do I go about finding and evaluating them? Though students use the internet for research purposes, their training on how to find and evaluate sources is insufficient and, in some cases, may be absent altogether. Possibly, students are not being taught about evaluating sources in the digital space because many assume that Millennials and Generation Z, "who've never known a world without screens" would be proficient at fact checking online news sources, but as Wineburg and McGrew warn, "don't be so sure" ("Why students can't google their way to the truth" 38).

It is essential that students have legitimate techniques in place for evaluating and analyzing the information they come across online. Not only is media literacy an important skill for their future academic careers, but also for their futures as informed citizens who will, likely, continue to find most of their information online. The conversation regarding credibility online is ongoing and one of the arguments being made specifically about social media focuses on the responsibility of the company (i.e., *Facebook*, *Twitter,* and so on.) to police content versus the responsibility of the individual user to make decisions about the information presented. In an article from BBC News about fact-checkers employed by *Facebook*, titled, "Matter of fact-checkers: Is Facebook winning the fake news war?" Dave Lee quotes one fact-checker who states, "'there's only so much that can be done without input from both sides'" (Lee). Students cannot only rely on the internet and on social media sites to point them to credible information. Rather, in order to find accurate information, they need to use their own rhetorical reasoning and perform the "heavy lifting." In order to be a well-informed citizen of the world, it is imperative that students are given the tools necessary to effectively evaluate the information they come across online.

2. Review of Relevant Literature

The first-year writing program at Seton Hall University, a medium-sized R2 research university, focuses on the rhetorical genre curriculum, which is defined as promoting "the ability to analyze contexts and audiences and then to act on that analysis in comprehending and creating texts" ("Writing Outcomes Statements"). One main aspect of this curriculum is teaching students to effectively analyze the various aspects that compose a writer's rhetorical situation. Lloyd F. Bitzer defines the rhetorical situation "as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence" (Bitzer 6). Grant-Davie further develops this

definition and states that "we might define a rhetorical situation as a set of related factors whose interaction creates and controls a discourse" (Grant-Davie 265). The rhetorical genre curriculum requires that students think critically about various elements that affect an author's message. Within the CORE English I classroom, students are taught specifically how to identify and analyze various aspects of the rhetorical situation, including author, genre, medium, audience, stance, purpose, design, tone, and content. In "Rhetorical Situations and Their Constituents," Grant-Davie discusses the importance of understanding all aspects of a writer's specific rhetorical situation, noting that "writers who know how to analyze these situations have a better method of examining causality. They have a stronger basis for making composing decisions and are better able, as readers, to understand the decisions other writers have made" (Grant-Davie 264). Therefore, the better students can analyze and effectively evaluate their own rhetorical situations, the better prepared they will be to analyze rhetorical aspects of other works they come across in various classes or even in the news articles that appear as notifications on their phones. The rhetorical genre curriculum requires that students think critically about the information presented to them and utilize all aspects of the rhetorical situation to understand how arguments are assembled. In analyzing news sources within the conceptual framework of the rhetorical situation, students interrogate the source itself and are required to evaluate the information through further research. Understanding and evaluating rhetorical terms creates a foundation that prepares students to engage with principle concepts in critical media literacy.

Clear associations exist between rhetorical concepts and the Five Core Concepts of media literacy from the Center for Media Literacy (CML). The CML identifies the Five Core Concepts as the foundation of the pedagogical framework for media literacy ("Five Key Questions"). These concepts are listed as "1. All media messages are 'constructed.' 2. Media messages are

constructed using a creative language with its own rules. 3. Different people experience the same media message differently. 4. Media have embedded values and points of view. 5. Most media are organized to gain profit and/or power" ("Five Key Questions"). In addition to the concepts, the CML also developed Five Key Questions that align with the concepts. The Five Key Questions are "1. Who created this message? 2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention? 3. How might different people understand this message differently from me? 4. What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in; or omitted from, this message? 5. Why is this message being sent?" ("Five Key Questions"). Each of these concepts and questions correspond to vocabulary in the rhetorical genre curriculum, respectively author/rhetor, design, audience, content, and purpose ("Five Key Questions"). The foundations of the Five Core Concepts are already being incorporated into the framework of the CORE English I classroom and are therefore easily transferable to media literacy education for first-year writing students. These Five Core Concepts are labelled "the cornerstone of the media literacy process" because they "provide a shortcut and an on-ramp to acquiring and applying information process skills in a practical, replicable, consistent, and attainable way" (Thoman and Jolls 191). The Five Core Concepts are a starting point, but the implementation of the rhetorical genre curriculum expands upon these concepts and includes sponsor/publisher, genre, medium, stance, and tone. Within the rhetorical genre framework, the basics of media literacy education can be seamlessly incorporated into the classroom.

The straightforward transition from rhetorical knowledge to media literacy is critical since many students do not have a basic understanding of how to evaluate online content. According to Hargittai et. al. one of the reasons students do not receive a comprehensive media literacy education is because of the increasing familiarity with technology for each passing

generation. However, as mentioned above, a familiarity with technology does not necessarily transfer to media literacy skills. Although "children are exposed to online media at an increasingly early age, studies have shown that many adolescents do not possess the expertise required to search the Web efficiently or critically assess the credibility of what they find" (Hargittai et al. 470). While many students have been told for years that they need to use only "reliable sources" in their academic papers, knowing what makes sources reliable requires a practiced proficiency in the field of media literacy. Media literacy begins with where students find their information. Hargittai et.al. detailed that, when looking for sources online, students often mistake relevance ratings from search engines with credibility ratings. Students depend on search engines "to guide them to what they then perceive as credible material simply due to the fact that the destination page rose to the top of the results listings of their preferred search engine" (Hargittai et. al. 486). Therefore, once students perform a search through *Google*, according to Hargittai et. al., they view the top results as most credible, even though both *Google* and *Yahoo!* rank the search results in terms of relevance, not credibility. Sorenson reached a similar conclusion in her article, "Beyond the Google search bar: Evaluating source credibility in contemporary research," stating "college students are likely to rely on sources that appear at the top of a list of results, regardless of relevance or credibility" (82). The differentiation exists between students' technical literacy versus the need for media literacy.

The effect of social ties on the perception of media credibility has also been recognized by researchers Samuel-Azran and Hayat. In their article, "Online news recommendations credibility: The tie is mightier than the source," Samuel-Azran and Hayat focus on how "the rise of online social networks has revolutionized the consumption of news" (72). In their research, Samuel-Azran and Hayat noted that, "When assessing the items' credibility, the receivers can

assess both the legitimacy of the news source, which is often part of the so-called old or traditional news media, as well as the extent to which he/she trusts the person sharing the content" (72). At the end of the study, they found that "while the tie strength between the recipient and the content sharer has nothing to do with the actual credibility of the content, our findings shows [*sic*] that the tie strength biases the recipient perception regarding the shared content" (Samuel-Azran and Hayat 79). In other words, if a news story is shared by a close social tie, the perception of that source is perceived as more credible than if shared by a less strong social tie. Students are wrongfully relying on the web address, search engine result ratings, and their own social networks to provide them with credible information. However, these methods of evaluation and analysis are often proven to be misleading and unfounded.

In their study out of Stanford University, Wineberg and McGrew detailed how students need to be taught to read news articles differently. They explain that "if undergraduates read *vertically*, evaluating online articles as if they were printed news stories, fact-checkers read *laterally*, jumping off the original page, opening up a new tab, Googling the name of the organization or its president… fact-checkers use the vast resources of the Internet to determine where information is coming from before they read it" (Wineburg and McGrew "Why students can't google their way to the truth" 38-39). Lateral reading calls for students to read differently than they have with print sources and fits well within the rhetorical approach. In order to analyze and effectively evaluate information from a source, like the author's background and sponsorship information, students need to leave the original page and search for information elsewhere.

3. Research Design and Setting

CORE English I Composition Courses, sections 1201AA and 1201AI

At Seton Hall University, the first-year writing curriculum aims to have students write in

real-world genres. Included in the resources for incoming faculty, the Mission Statement for

CORE English and Basic Skills states that students in the first-year writing program should,

> take on projects that give them the experience of joining a community of writers and
>
> thinkers, encouraging them to partake in an extended inquiry–about a topic (or topics) of
>
> concern to young adults–which moves from peer-based and familiar to increasingly
>
> rigorous, critical, and text-based. These projects prepare students not only for academic
>
> work but also for participation in the wider community, in each case encouraging them to
>
> challenge and interrogate their own and others' texts (Mission Statement).

In order to align with the mission, set out by the above statement, faculty often assign the

students essays that fit into a "real-world" genre. These "real-world" assignments ask that the

students "learn to write for purposes in addition to self-expression and academic analysis and for

audiences other than the instructor and other students" (Mission Statement). Part of writing

within a real-world genre is writing to an audience other than the professor. As Booth notes in an

anecdote about an academic paper one of his students submitted, "he knows that he has no

audience except me. He knows that I don't want to read his summary of family relations in

Utopia, and he knows that I know that he therefore has no rhetorical purpose. Because he has not

been led to see a question which he considers worth answering, or an audience that could

possibly care one way or the other" (Booth 142). The "real-world" genre approach opens the

audience beyond the academic setting and students are encouraged to think about appropriate

venues for various papers. The "real-world" approach to assignments aligns with the rhetorical

genre curriculum and students become increasingly familiar with an analysis of the rhetorical

situation while becoming comfortable with using the vocabulary of author, sponsor/publisher,

genre, medium, audience, stance, purpose, design, tone, and content to analyze essays read in class.

The ability to think critically about information gathered online is certainly a task of "real-world" critical thinking and writing for students. Most students find their news online and when polled, all surveyed students responded that they read news articles at least one to three times each month (Figure 3). However, when students turn to their phones, computers, or tablets to find facts on the latest breaking news story, they need to be equipped with the tools necessary to find accurate information. As already mentioned, students cannot simply rely on the web address, *Google* search result ratings, or their own social network to provide them with credible news sources. Instead, students need to be equipped with the proper tools so when they encounter vast amounts of (mis)information they know what steps to follow to accurately assess a source's credibility.

Wineburg and McGrew's ideas concerning lateral reading lend themselves to the rhetorical genre curriculum that first-year writing students are already familiar with from ENGL 1201. For their research papers, students were asked to evaluate the author, sponsor/publisher, genre, medium, audience, stance, purpose, design, tone, and content. Searching for information about many of these terms requires leaving the source page and performing outside research. Students left the original source page to find the author's *Twitter*, research the sponsors of their chosen sources, and/or look at other stories published by their authors to uncover possible political leanings or biases.

The research paper assignment sheet required that students pick a specific news story, either from a pre-made list or they could choose a story not listed and send it to me for approval (Figure 1). The premade list of stories included the death of Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader

Ginsburg; the outcome of the court case regarding Breonna Taylor; alleged hysterectomies being

performed on ICE detainees; or Day 1 of the Amy Coney Barrett Supreme Court Justice

Hearings. Some of the stories I approved that deviated from the pre-made list were drive-thru

voting in Harris County, TX during the 2020 election, the Flint, MI water crisis, and the spread

of misinformation on *TikTok* during the 2020 presidential debates. Once students chose a story,

they needed to evaluate how the story was told from two sources. One of their sources could be

CNN, *Vox, Huffpost, New York Times, Washington Post, The Advocate, DailyMail, Washington

Examiner, New York Post, The Blaze, Fox News,* or *Breitbart.* Students would then compare their

chosen source with coverage of their chosen story from the *Associated Press* and either support

or reject the placement of the two sources on the Interactive Media Bias Chart from *Ad Fontes

Media*. The Interactive Media Bias Chart has numerous news sources plotted on a graph and

organized by political bias on the x-axis and a news value reliability score on the y-axis. The x-

axis ranges from "Most Extreme Left" with a score of -42.0 to "Most Extreme Right" with a

score of 42.0 and the y-axis ranges from "Contains Inaccurate/Fabricated Info" with a score of

0.0 to "Original Fact Reporting" with a score of 64.0 ("Interactive Media Bias Chart"). The

Associated Press is one of the more neutral sources included in the chart. On the Media Bias

chart, the *Associated Press* has a reliability score of 46.93 and a bias score of -1.54. Students

were tasked with comparing how their chosen source and the *Associated Press* portrayed the

same story using aspects of the rhetorical genre curriculum to guide their analysis (author,

sponsor/publisher, genre, medium, audience, stance, purpose, design, tone and content). By

comparing the same story told by two different media outlets, students found nuanced

differences in the rhetorical situations of their respective news stories. The rhetorical terms

served as guidelines which led students through a "process of discovery involving 'a series of

questions, operations, and perspectives used to guide inquiry and knowledge creation'" (Goering 86).

4. Methods

The research paper prompt listed as Figure 1 was distributed to two sections of CORE English I, 1201AA and 1201AI, in Fall 2020. Included on the research paper prompt was a disclaimer stating that I may use "the information generated from these papers as case studies for my own educational research" (Figure 1). I ended up with 22 total research papers to use as potential case studies. I utilized letters A-V to refer to anonymized student class work and research papers. After the semester ended and grades were finalized, I sent out a consent form to all students in my 1201AA and 1201AI sections asking them to participate in a brief survey and one-on-one interview about their experience with the research assignment. I received a total of 8 signed consent forms from students who wanted to participate in the study further (3 from 1201AA and 5 from 1201AI). I used numbers 1-8 to refer to students who consented to participate in the survey and one-on-one interview.

I distributed anonymous surveys to 8 students through Qualtrics. The questions and results can be found in Figures 3-6. Interview questions can be found in Figure 2. I conducted interviews with 8 students one-on-one and the interviews generally lasted around twenty minutes. It is important to note that, though the Fall semester had ended by the time I conducted the interviews with consenting students from ENGL 1201AA/AI, there are two students, Student 3 and 7, who had enrolled in my upcoming ENGL 1202 sections in the Spring. There is an undeniable and unavoidable power dynamic between me and the students which could result in pressure to positively respond to questions such as, "How likely are you to continue thinking about source credibility in rhetorical terms now that you have completed the research paper for

ENGL 1201AA/AI?" (Figure 2). While grades for ENGL 1201AA/AI in the Fall semester were already submitted, there is still a professor-student relationship between me and the student and further between myself and the students who were enrolled in my ENGL 1202 class during the Spring semester when the interviews were being conducted.

The research paper assignment was designed to give students an opportunity to apply the rhetorical genre curriculum to real-world content. In order to fully understand and be able to analyze another writer's rhetorical situation, it is imperative that students first and foremost are able to identify their own rhetorical situation when writing (Grant-Davie 264). In preparation for writing their research papers, students were prompted to respond to a Blackboard Discussion Board Forum during class time with the following prompt: "Please answer ALL of the questions on pages 479-480 in *Everyone's an Author* under the headline, 'Consider Your Rhetorical Situation' about your research paper and your own rhetorical situation. Answer every question (Audience, purpose, genre, stance, context, media, and design)" ("Research Paper Prewrite"). For the audience, students were encouraged to think about the proper venue for this paper and where, realistically, this paper could appear. Many students chose the school newspaper, *The Setonian*, for their venue. A specific student noted how his audience, venue, and tone all affected each other, stating "My audience will be students who are reading *The Setonian*. I want to to [*sic*] target the article to their language while keeping it formal as it would be shown to parents and staff members who attend the college as well" (Student 5, "Research Paper Prewrite"). Another student who wrote their paper on the dissemination of political information through *TikTok* during the 2020 election responded to the question of audience and even addressed audience expectations, noting, "Audience: University/high school students will be reading what I write. I feel like they might expect me to say how *TikTok* can affect the lives of the youth and

how they are spending so much time on it. They will consider my source of *The New York Times* credible" (Student V, "Research Paper Prewrite"). After analyzing the rhetorical situation throughout the semester using various non-fiction texts, students began to understand how all aspects of the rhetorical situation affect each other in turn. As the students noted above, venue affects audience, audience affects tone, and the audience also brings specific expectations to a given text. Students were also very clear on the purpose of this paper, one student noting, "I hope to highlight any differences that might be present in multiple versions of the same news story. I will be analyzing these differences and trying to explain why different sources come at the same event in different ways and emphasize the fact that reading one news story is never enough" (Student E, "Research Paper Prewrite"). According to Grant-Davie's article, "Rhetorical Situations and Their Constituents," "teaching our writing students to examine rhetorical situations as sets of interacting influences from which rhetoric arises, and which rhetoric in turn influences, is therefore one of the more important things we can do" (264). Understanding that each element of rhetorical analysis affects each other is key to understanding how not only media messages are put together, but how all messages of various mediums are assembled.

Apart from the rhetorical analysis, students were also required to incorporate the Interactive Media Bias Chart from *Ad Fontes Media* into their papers. As stated on the Research Paper Assignment Sheet distributed to students, "The conclusion of your research paper should discuss if the news source you are researching is fairly placed on the Interactive Media Bias Chart found on Blackboard. Provide your reader with a brief justification of where you think the source should be placed" (Figure 1). Students, therefore, were not only tasked with completing an in-depth analysis of their two sources, but then needed to consider the placement on the

Interactive Media Bias Chart and provide justification for either keeping the source in the same place or moving it elsewhere on the chart based on their own perceptions of reliability and bias.

The goal of this case study was not only to teach students about the importance of source credibility but also to investigate the effectiveness of the rhetorical genre approach as a pedagogical tool to teach media literacy. By bringing the same analytic approach to online sources that students have been practicing all semester in ENGL 1201, the researcher posited, their familiarity with various terms should be instrumental in sifting through information online. Will the rhetorical genre approach act as a research roadmap that guides them down avenues for further research? Further, how helpful will the rhetorical genre curriculum be in shaping how these ENGL 1201 students approach sources as students outside of ENGL 1201 in their other courses and generally as informed citizens?

5. Findings

When asked during one-on-one interviews if they were aware of the amount of (mis)information available online, many students stated that, yes, they were aware. Student 8 clearly said, "Definitely. I think most of it came from the whole fake news meme. So, I kind of realized that a lot of people tend to give information based on their political agenda" (Student 8, 1:04-1:18). When asked the same question, Student 7 responded, "I was aware that there could be some bias, but I never realized just how much" (Student 7, 1:19-1:24). Then when students were asked "What criteria, if any, did you use to assess the credibility of a source before ENGL 1201AA/1201AI?" many of the students struggled to produce a viable answer. Student 7 stated, "to be honest, like not really much… [while] reading it I would see if it favored a president kinda seeing which way it leaned, but I never did that much background [research] on it" (Student 7, 2:30-2:46). Student 1 answered the same question, stating, "so where I get most of my

information from is online. So [teachers] taught me to trust websites that end in … dot-org. Like those were pretty reliable sources" (Student 1, 3:28-3:42). Relying on the web address to be a signal of credibility is a common mistake among young adults. In the article, "Trust Online: Young Adults' Evaluation of Web Content," Hargittai et. al. shows that the "[dot-org] domain is as freely available for registration as dot-com and is not for nonprofit organizations only as might have been its original purpose. Some participants expressed more trust in dot-org sites than in their dot-com counterparts even though, theoretically, this is not justified" (Hargittai et. al. 483).

Another way students assess credibility relates to how students are finding information online. In anonymous surveys, 7 out 8 students reported that they perform a *Google* search to obtain news articles (Figure 5). Research projects conducted by Hargittai et. al. and Sorenson both concluded that students wrongfully rely on search engines, like *Google* and *Yahoo!*, to provide them with credible information. Since most surveyed students are using *Google* to find news articles, there is the possibility of mistaking the search engines relevance ratings for credibility ratings. Additionally, in their one-on-one interviews, some students stated that they simply look at the source name and rely on how recognizable and familiar they are with that news source in particular (ex. Have I heard of it? Do my friends/family members trust this source?). Student 8 specifically mentioned that she used word-of-mouth through both in-person and social media connections to identify biases in sources (Student 8, 4:01-4:19). As Hargittai et. al. showed in "Trust Online: Young Adults' Evaluation of Web Content," social ties can have a significant effect on how users view the credibility of sources. Hargittai et. al. specifically focused on how social ties on social media networks affect credibility. When polling eight students who took part in an anonymous survey, the data reflected that students are indeed using

social media for sourcing their news. When asked which platforms students used to find news articles for personal use, 100% of students responded that one of their main sources for finding articles was through social media, selecting either *Instagram*, *Twitter,* or *Facebook* (Figure 5). While students are using social media to consume their news, they can be influenced by social ties. When asked how they analyzed source credibility before the research paper in ENGL 1201, Student 6 in my study noted that they ask themselves, "have I heard of it? And do I know people that also read it?" (Student 6, 2:00-2:27). As Student 6 noted in their response, knowing people who trust and read from a certain source may affect how users analyze the credibility of the news they come across online. Before being assigned the research paper, the students studied were not aware of how to accurately assess the credibility of the information they came across online. Though students were aware of the amount of (mis)information present online, none of the students communicated that they had a reliable method to assess source credibility.

In their papers students used the rhetorical genre curriculum as a framework to lead their analysis. Students were very methodical in how they moved through the papers and many made connections between and analyzed how every aspect of the rhetorical situation affected each other. Providing students with the rhetorical genre curriculum and guided questions ensured that they were well-equipped to sift through the amount of information included in their sources. And, as Student 3 stated in her interview, having the rhetorical vocabulary "was helpful because rather than just glazing over the whole article… I understood more why the author would choose to do certain things, and what their purpose was for the article" (Student 3, 4:17-4:37). By researching two stories from two different sources, the research paper served as a catalyst for how students' approach, understand, and consume the media they encounter. Conducting research for this paper required that students read online sources differently. When interviewing

students, it is clear that in order to assess credibility before completing the research paper in ENGL 1201AA/1201AI, many students only read vertically down the page instead of laterally as Wineburg and McGrew suggest ("Why students can't google their way to the truth" 39). When asked if students used any criteria or strategies to assess credibility before the research assignment, Student 3 responded, "Honestly, no. I'd never looked into it as much as before the paper. Normally it would've just been if I had heard of the name… If it was a big name then I would consider it more credible" (Student 3, 2:27-2:48). When reading through student papers it is clear that many learned that in order to successfully analyze a source's credibility, they needed to read laterally, researching the sponsor/publisher of the newspaper, looking into the author's work history and social media accounts, and reading two articles covering the same story side-by-side.

Student papers mapped out the various aspects of the rhetorical genre approach outlined on the assignment sheet: author, sponsor/publisher, genre, medium, audience, stance, purpose, design, tone, and content. Below, I have included the most notable examples from student work for each rhetorical aspect. Though many students addressed the rhetorical terms listed above, I chose to display the most significant student examples. When analyzing and performing research on the author of the piece students searched for other articles the author published. By performing this research, students were able to both get a sense of the author's own credibility and expertise on the subject as well as any biases the author may be bringing to the piece. Thoman and Jolls also noted the importance of researching the author's background, mentioning that the question: "*Who created this message?* opens up a whole series of other questions: Who is the author? How many people did it take to create this message? What are their various jobs?" (192). In their interview, Student 5 discussed performing background research on the author,

stating "I would never really look at the author until I started taking [this] course" (Student 5, 2:24-2:28). And when asked about what the research taught them, Student 5 responded, "[it] definitely had me look a lot of research up on each author because I never really understood how you could just *Google* an author and find so much about them, like you can find their *Twitter* [and] see their biases" (Student 5, 3:18-3:20). Similarly, when Student 7 was asked, a bigger picture question of, "What, if anything, did this research paper teach you about source credibility that you didn't know before," they responded that they've learned to "look at it deeper, like an article or video deeper into it… like who the writer is and like other stuff that they've written to see where they've stood in other situations" (Student 7, 3:37-3:56). Performing research on the author background was one of Student 7's main takeaways for the paper and again speaks to the potential benefits of teaching students to read *laterally* instead of *vertically*. Student A, who authored a paper on how Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's death was reported, mentioned that she dug into the background of the author, Linda Greenhouse, stating, "Greenhouse won the Pulitzer Prize in 1998, writes on the Supreme Court and the law, teaches at Yale Law School, and reported on the Supreme Court for the New York Times from 1978 to 2008" (Student A, 2). In addition to finding general information about the author, many students also looked into past articles by their author, with one student mentioning that,

> The author of this piece is Megan Henney, a reporter who covers politics for *Fox News Business*. She typically writes about political events and how they impact the economy, most evidently common issues such as student loans and the growing wealth gap. Her political tendencies seem to lie slightly to the right as most of the articles that she writes have to do with President-elect Joe Biden and how his plans to eliminate student debt are unrealistic (Student E, 2).

Looking into the author's background provided students with a snapshot of their credibility, work history, and potential biases.

Not many students focused on an in-depth analysis of the genre of their articles. The reason for this could be that there were not any students who chose to analyze opinion-based pieces such as op-eds or letters to the editor. In one paper, Student P identified the genre of their article, which focused on the alleged hysterectomies being performed on detainees at an ICE detention center. When discussing the genre of the *CNN* article titled, "Whistleblower Alleges High Rate of Hysterectomies and Medical Neglect at ICE Facility," Student P noted that the article is "an investigative genre of journalism as it focuses on reporting… [on] the alleged unethical hysterectomy and gynecological practices being performed on non-consenting detainees" (Student P, 2). Though the student does note that this piece is likely investigative journalism, the student did not connect the genre with other aspects, nor did they note how the genre of the piece informs other aspects of the rhetorical situation. When discussing genre, in a paper about alleged voter fraud in Harris County, Texas, Student E stated,

> The genre of this article is expository as the author focuses on informing the audience about the possibility of voter fraud rather than trying to convince them about which side to choose. Although there are some points where the author's beliefs can be seen, she is not trying to persuade the reader's opinions. Even though the author does include some of her opinion in this piece, the informative nature of the article makes it seem much more professional and credible than a persuasive article" (Student E, 2).

Student E pairs genre with purpose. Stating the purpose of this expository piece is strictly to inform the audience, which is vastly different from a persuasive genre.

Since all students were working with online news stories, none of them focused on or analyzed how the medium affected the message. Medium will be addressed further in the "Possibility for Further Research" section.

While students could get an idea about the potential audience of a particular source by using the Interactive Media Bias Chart, students made interesting connections between the audience and other aspects of the rhetorical situation. Student B wrote about the allegations of hysterectomies being performed on detainees in an ICE detention center and one of their sources was an article from *Fox News* in which they analyzed the audience and author's stance stating,

> The fact that the author takes a political stance when writing this article makes it less
>
> credible and narrows its audience to people who will believe anything that the right wing
>
> has to say. Although this article does not try to completely disprove the allegations made,
>
> it does try to make them political and the tone seems to suggest that this is not something
>
> that people should be overly concerned about (Student B, 2).

Specifically, here, the student noted how both tone and stance play into the specific audience for this news piece. The student also recognized how tone can be used as a rhetorical method to sway the audience. Once students identified the target audience for their source, at least in terms of political leaning, they could move one step further and analyze how other aspects, like tone and stance, were used to target audiences of a specific political leaning.

When considering an article about the death of Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Student F noted the crossover/interplay between stance and tone. Student F recognized that an article from *NPR* remains "informative while talking about [Ginsberg's] achievements. This tone remains the same throughout the entire article which is important to maintain a neutral stance" (Student F, 5).

Analyzing purpose is helpful for students to understand why a piece of news is being distributed. When addressing articles written about the spread of misinformation on *TikTok* during the 2020 election cycle, Student V noted,

> This article's purpose was to inform left leaning *TikTok* users that many of the posts
>
> regarding what is going on in the U.S. presidential election, specifically by Republicans
>
> are not completely true. In the article '*TikTok*: false posts about US election reach
>
> hundreds of thousands', one of the examples that [the author] includes is,
>
> 'Misinformation in these videos included false narratives that claimed ballots being
>
> counted for Joe Biden were fraudulent, and that poll workers were handing out markers
>
> [Sharpies, specifically, for filling in ballots] to Trump voters so their votes would go
>
> uncounted' (*The Guardian*). This example informs the readers what kind of videos to
>
> look out for when looking for information about the U.S. presidential election. It helps
>
> them become more aware about which videos are spreading real information and which
>
> ones are spreading misleading information (Student V 3-4).

Here Student V identified the purpose of the article and used a citation from the article to identify said purpose.

Students also analyzed the design of the articles, which included pictures, videos, hyperlinks, and any other elements embedded in the news source. In a paper covering voter suppression in Texas, Student E analyzed articles about drive-thru voting in Harris County, Texas from *Fox News* and *Associated Press.* The student pointed out that there were no major design choices in the *Fox News* source. However, they noted that,

> [The *Associated Press* article] differs from the one published by *Fox News* because it
>
> includes photos that represent people's reactions to the Republican party's attempt to

nullify their votes. The photos show people in Houston protesting voter suppression and

holding signs that exclaim 'count every vote' (Merchant). The inclusion of these images

is very effective to the message of the piece because it presents the idea that voters should

not be suppressed because of the method that they chose to vote (Student E, 5).

This student acknowledged the use of images in the story and identified how the images used

serve as their own argument through a visual medium. Similarly, Student H noted the use of

photos in articles from *VOX* and *Associated Press* that covered the alleged non-consensual

hysterectomies being performed on detainees. When discussing an image early in the paper,

Student H stated,

This article is also introduced by a picture with people protesting in front of an

immigration cell. This picture provides the basis of the story that Merchant introduces

with a very capsulating paragraph that details Mileidy Cardentey Fernandez unbuttoning

her jail jumpsuit to reveal the dreadful scars from her surgery. This picture provides the

needed shock factor that Merchant intended for his audience to face the reality and the

severity of this story head on (Student H, 5).

Student H, therefore, did not just mention the design used, but also went into an analysis of the

leading content included in the article. This student identified that both the image of protestors in

front of an ICE detention center coupled with a paragraph detailing a hysterectomy scar from an

individual serve as a shock factor for the reader. Student H also went a step further in their

analysis to show their understanding of how design can affect the intended audience. Student H

mentioned the use of links embedded in an article from *VOX*, pointing out,

Although Narea's intentions are to reach this story to everyone, her writing style feels as

though the article is more appealing to a younger audience. This is because the hyperlinks

also included links to *Twitter* tweets (posts) from political figures and *Buzzfeed*, who generally has a very young audience such as college students and millennials. Narea most likely leaned towards a younger audience because young people use social media in order to spread news stories in order to make a change and gain exposure (Student H, 3). Student H identified a fundamental concept of the rhetorical genre curriculum here, which is understanding that all aspects of the rhetorical situation affect and influence each other. Student H rightfully stated that *VOX* usually or primarily is aimed toward a younger audience by seeing what the design of the article was and who it seemed to be targeted towards.

Student S chose to write their paper about the outcome of the Breonna Taylor case and, again, noted how design can play into a reader's emotions and establish pathos with the audience. When discussing an article from *CNN* titled, "Breonna Taylor Grand Jurors Say There Was an 'uproar' When They Realized Officers Wouldn't Be Charged with Her Death," the student noted the use of a photo showing Breonna Taylor's mother, "as she 'marches with Black Lives Matter protesters in Louisville in September'" while an article about Breonna Taylor that appeared in the *Associated Press* only included a photo of the "[Kentucky Attorney General] at the live press conference" (Student S, 5). Student S identified the different emotional responses to these photos, showing that adding a photo of Breonna Taylor's mother "makes a left leaning audience feel even more distraught about the outcome of the case" (Student S, 3). Overall, students pinpointed the use of various design choices. Whether the design was a photo, hyperlinks, or embedded tweets, analyzing the various stylistic elements were key in revealing other factors in the rhetorical situation.

In a paper about the alleged hysterectomies being performed on women in ICE detention centers, Student P identified the author's tone, stating,

Her tone regarding the ICE detention centers is clear in her statements. For example, she

describes the way the detention centers are dealing with COVID-19 by stating that 'They

include treating Covid-19 symptoms with… [a] lack of social distancing…' which

depicts a disapproving tone (Alverez [*sic*]). Alvarez describes the investigations

Homeland Security is taking to investigate this complaint and uses quotes from

Democratic politicians' disapproval of this breech [*sic*] of rights of detainees (Student P,

2).

Student P not only identified the author's tone, but the argument on tone also included arguments

about the content of the article. This student noted that the author's tone is disapproving of the

situation in the ICE detention centers and by disagreeing with the current state of the detention

centers and utilizing quotes from democratic politicians aligns the articles with a democratic

audience. Though minds can differ on whether the tone of the news article was truly

disapproving in the piece, the student did delve into the content and attempted to make

connections between content and tone.

In terms of content, many students focused on the examples, quotations, and overall

language used in the article. An example from Student P focused on the lack of emotionally

charged language in an article from the *Associated Press,* explaining "In this case, the

[*Associated Press* article] uses quotes to not develop a pathos rhetoric but to report on the stances

of those involved with the allegations" (Student P, 4).

In their conclusions, many students touched on the "so what" question and were

encouraged to think about the importance of media literacy for their audience. In other words, if

students identified the school newspaper, *The Setonian,* as their venue, why should fellow

college students, prospective students and their parents, alumni, and staff care about source credibility and their findings? In thinking about these questions, Student V stated,

> In conclusion, people should care about source credibility enough to read this essay
> because it can help them identify which new sources will provide them with the most
> reliable information. It is important to care about source credibility because by
> identifying which sources are credible, they will be able to form their own opinions on
> topics based off the information being provided by the credible sources. If they do not
> care about source credibility, then they could potentially form an opinion or perspective
> that is based off misleading information or biased opinions (Student V, 5).

Similarly, Student O appealed to the readers and urged their audience to follow this rhetorical genre "roadmap" approach, stating, "It is important for readers to understand where their news is coming from. Who is writing it? Why is it being written? Are they reporting a story or sharing their opinion? These are all questions one should ask themselves when looking for information" (Student O, 5). At the end of this paper, by answering the "so what" questions, students assessed their own purpose and therefore reflected on the importance of media literacy as a whole. Student M recognized the importance of being a well-informed student and citizen, noting that assessing credibility is a responsibility left up to the reader and "with social media, fakes [*sic*] news can be spread much faster and across many people" (Student M, 5).

Research paper conclusions also contained justification on whether their chosen source was placed fairly on the Interactive Media Bias Chart. Not many students disputed the placement of their sources on the chart. Many students agreed with their source placement and offered justification for agreeing with the placement. For example, Student V noted that

*The Guardian'*s placement on the Interactive Media Bias Chart is accurate because of

how reliable the news source is. *The Guardian* reports many facts in the article like how

many videos were posted, how many views it got, how the problem was being taken care

of and analyzed how much of an effect TikTok has on its users… Overall, the placement

of *The Guardian* on the Interactive Media Bias Chart was fairly accurate because of the

way it addressed the situation using quotations and overall reliability" (Student V, 5).

Though the placement was specifically addressed by many students, like Student V, students did

not dispute the placement. One possible reason for the lack of debate on the placement of sources

could be that first-year writing students are uncomfortable critiquing and disagreeing with a

document their professor provided them. As first-year writing students they may not feel that

they have the ethos to dispute a well-circulated source.

6. Conclusion

These papers from my CORE English I classes moved well beyond the structured Five

Core Concepts addressed earlier. Thoman and Jolls determined that these concepts "are only

starting points as inquiry tools… Expansion of the questions allows for more sophisticated

inquiry" (195). As previously stated, the Five Core Concepts can be easily translated into the

rhetorical genre curriculum as author, design, audience, content, and purpose ("Five Key

Concepts"). These Five Core Concepts, however, do not address the imperative terms:

sponsor/publisher, genre, medium, stance, or tone. While the Five Core Concepts are a useful

starting point, the other rhetorical terms left out of the concepts were beneficial to students in

understanding the rhetorical situations and connecting all aspects of the piece.

When considering pedagogical frameworks for media literacy, Wineburg and McGrew

state that "none of this is rocket science. But it's often not taught in school" ("Why students can't

google their way to the truth" 39). The way media is received by students continually through various modes of technology "demands a new kind of literacy rooted in the real world of instant information, global interactivity, and messages created on multiple media platforms" (Thoman and Jolls 202). Though students are well-acquainted with technology, educating them on media literacy can create a foundation for the responsible consumption of media. When students were asked, "What, if anything, did this research paper teach you about source credibility that you didn't know before?" Student 4 stated,

> For me the biggest one was researching and doing background information on the authors… just looking at their stances and stuff like that where they stand and like what news sources they're affiliated with and what other news sources they've worked for are very important to look at because then you can kind of get the sense like are they telling me what I need to know or what they want me to know? (Student 4, 3:42-4:21).

Student 4's answer to the overall question of the research paper shows students executing the lateral reading and lateral research techniques that Wineburg and McGrew call on students to perform. Not only are students opening up new tabs to look at an author's *Twitter*, but they are looking at previously published articles, and then even further conducting research on previous news organizations and organizations' biases. Student 3 also praised lateral reading, stating that what she learned from the research paper was to "compare [and] to not just read one [article] and then go with it but look at multiple things under the same topic so that you get a fuller look" (Student 3, 3:16-3:26). And Student 2 mentioned that, "now that we did that research paper it's pretty easy for me to see when articles are opinionated" (Student 2, 3:53-4:01). By reading laterally students sharpened their research skills by jumping between tabs and verifying information on various pages. Therefore, reading rhetorically directly facilitated lateral reading

for students. Performing outside research on various aspects of the rhetorical situation directly encouraged, arguably even required, lateral reading. An important catalyst for students' media literacy education is schools and colleges; "Schools cannot remain indifferent to the massive amounts of media content that our students absorb. Schools are obligated to help students learn and understand their media-saturated world. Ignoring this point is detrimental to the continued progression of learning" (Belinha 26). Teaching students media literacy allows them to practice critical thinking skills, while applying the rhetorical genre curriculum they practiced all semester.

When asked how helpful the rhetorical genre terms were in helping students assess credibility, Student 8 stated, "it was definitely really helpful because I felt like I didn't know where to start when reading an article and identifying if it is credible or not. So, I felt like that gave me an outline… And I think that's also how I structured my research paper (Student 8, 7:01-7:20). This framework not only helped students physically structure their papers, but taught them real-life skills that they can use when they encounter media in the future. Attempting to evaluate all the information offered to a student in a quick *Google* search can be overwhelming, especially if there are not strategies available to effectively sift the wealth of information. The rhetorical genre curriculum is an effective tool for students because it offers lead-in questions about various aspects of sources that can guide analysis.

One of the big questions I had for students after they completed the research paper was whether they were going to continue thinking about news sources they come across in the future in the rhetorical terms we discussed in class and on the research paper. While all students agreed that they were not going to write a paper after reading an article in their spare time, many students did mention that there were helpful terms included in the rhetorical-genre list that they would carry over. Student 3 mentioned, "I think the thing that I would think of the most is the

purpose of the article" (Student 3, 8:01-8:04). When answering the same question about taking

the rhetorical genre approach into the future as an informed citizen Student 1 stated, "I actually

think about it a lot more than I used to. So, I see a lot of social media on things that are

happening so that's where I get most of my information from. But I don't want to have the

wrong information… Everything we talked about during our course last semester I think about it

a lot more… I don't want to be misinformed" (Student 1, 9:59-10:28). Student 8 even shared

that, "it is definitely important to look at it through [the rhetorical genre] lens… it was really

helpful to me because it definitely opened my eyes on how to identify credibility" (Student 8,

10:56-11:37). Student 6 stated that they are likely to carry over the rhetorical genre approach,

"Just because I want to know what audience this is towards… and then what genre it is and what

the author's stance is… I'll probably look into the author more to understand their credibility as

an author and a writer" (Student 6, 9:02-9:24). Students did, in fact, find that the rhetorical genre

curriculum was not only helpful in crafting their academic research papers, but can also help

them navigate the vast amount of information they come across online and through their social

media networks.

  One of my final questions for students was if they think media-literacy should be

considered an integral part of first-year writing education curriculum. During their interviews

students often stated that they had not completed a project focused on source credibility and

navigating the digital space before being a student in my class. Student 3 stated,

  I definitely think it is [important]. Because outside of professors or teachers or maybe

  friends, we get all of our information online so everything that we know or think we

  know is from stuff that we read. So, if that's wrong or not reliable I think it's important to

know how to look out for it and be able to differentiate real [news] and [misinformation].

So, I think it is a skill that should be taught (Student 3, 9:35-10:06).

Student 1 also noted that "it's so important to be well-informed and educated on a topic that you maybe know nothing of… especially with everything that's happening in the world. You don't want to be reading things that are written by people who know nothing [about] the subject" (Student 1, 12:17- 12:39). Student 8 thought about the role of media literacy in her future life and career, noting that "if I want to make a change, I have to understand what's going on in the world. And the only way to really do that in a good way is by understanding credibility. And I think in any classes that I go into I think it will definitely [be] a big factor in how I learn" (Student 8, 14:00-14:44). Finally, Student 6 noted that media literacy is important in order to "understand the difference between fact and opinion… [and] to know where you're getting your information from and it can help in any class that you need… I think it's important just because it's hard to rummage through all the information we have nowadays" (Student 6, 11:02-11:40). Students noted that media literacy is a skill that will transfer into their daily lives as they scroll through their phones, but they also noted that it is an interdisciplinary skill that they can easily transfer to other courses.

Findings from this case study suggest that media literacy is an integral tool missing from CORE English curriculum. While the current rhetorical framework already covers many vital topics, the tenets of media literacy are crucial to provide students with an education that reflects how they source information. The framework of the rhetorical genre curriculum is already in place in CORE English curriculum at Seton Hall University and provides an easy transfer to the basics of a media literacy education. As mentioned throughout the paper, many educators believe that students' knowledge of technology transfers to a knowledge of media literacy. However,

based on student responses, they are lacking guidance on how to properly assess online sources. First-year writing students use the digital space to source information and their education should be reflective of the medium. Faculty can prepare students to be informed digital citizens by adding media literacy to the CORE English curriculum.

    7. Possibility for further research

Two aspects of the assignment that can be improved in the future is further emphasizing the Interactive Media Bias Chart with students in addition to opening the assignment to include various mediums. Within student papers, argument for or against the placement of sources on the Interactive Media Bias chart seemed to be an afterthought in their conclusion paragraphs and students were quick to agree with the placement rather than offer a critique based on their own research. Possible revisions to the research assignment could include using the Interactive Media Bias Chart further as a framework for the analysis throughout the paper rather than only asking students to use it to make an argument about placement.

When interviewing students, I asked them the question, "Which term from the rhetorical-genre approach listed in question 3 was most influential/most helpful in analyzing the credibility of your source? Which was the least helpful?" Overwhelmingly, the answer I received from students was that medium was the least helpful term included in the list. One student noted that medium was least helpful in an interview, "because everyone chose an online article, so the medium is kind of hard to use" (Student 6, 7:00-7:05). Many students noted this same idea, that all of the mediums were the same, they all found online news articles. Therefore, if I were to revise this assignment, it would help to have students consume news stories through various platforms. Belinha states that the media now "[includes] television and radio, newspapers and magazines, advertising, movies and videos, book publishing, and photography, as well as various

networks, platforms, outlets, and forums on the Internet. To put it briefly, the media are vehicles for mass communication" (Belinha 25). For example, instead of using two online news sources to compare, I would require that students look at one news story from different mediums. Possible ways can include podcast episodes, television news segments, written news articles, radio broadcasts, and/or social media posts (*Twitter* threads, *Instagram* stories, *Instagram* live). By choosing various mediums through which to consume news, students would gain skills in analyzing the rhetorical situation of other mediums. In their interview Student 6 stated, "seeing what an opinion article sounds like or what a social media post sounds like compared to how the other one is written, I think it is just easier to see [bias] in terms of comparison (Student 6, 6:10-6:19). Comparing mediums can teach students about how specific messages are constructed outside of print-journalism. As Thoman and Jolls suggest, media literacy has "[expanded] the concept of "text" to include not just written texts but any message form—verbal, aural, or visual—(or all three together!)—that is used to create and then pass ideas back and forth between human beings" (181). Broadening the assignment to include a more diverse range of media would better allow students to utilize all aspects of the rhetorical genre, while also encouraging them to interpret the media they may encounter more often than print media. As Thoman and Jolls state, "It is important to learn how to 'read' all kinds of media messages in order to discover the points of view that are embedded in them and how to assess those points of view as part of the text rather than accepting them as a given. Only then can we judge whether to accept or reject these messages as we negotiate our way each day through our mediated environment" (194).

Based on survey responses gathered for this case study, students are overwhelmingly using *Google* and various social media sites to gather their information (Figure 5). A rhetorical genre curriculum paired with media literacy education can engage students in an analysis of

sources they may come across regularly online. With a focus on media literacy in the classroom, educators can play a pivotal role in students' understanding of the messaging that surrounds them. I will include the media literacy curriculum in future coursework and expand the research paper assignment to include various media platforms. While younger generations have become increasingly familiar with technology from a young age, many students would benefit from strategies and guiding practices that will aid them in sifting through the infinite amount of information housed online. I look forward to improving the assignment in the future and assisting in building students' media literacy, analytical, and critical thinking skills.

Figure 1.

Professor Fogt
ENGL 1201 AA/AI
Fall 2020

Research Paper Assignment Sheet

Due to the overwhelming amount of (mis)information that can be found online (through a quick *Google* search or even through various social media outlets) it is important to analyze sources for credibility. For the final paper in this course you will write a 5-6 page research paper analyzing a specific news story from a news source. In writing this paper please think about the questions below: the questions you can interrogate about the article can include, but are not limited to:

- Who is the **author**?
- Who is the sponsor/publisher of the site?
- What is the **genre** and **medium** of the article? In other words, what is the author writing and where are they writing?
- Who is the intended **audience**?
- What is the author's **stance**?
- What is the **purpose** of this text?
- What are some of the presentation features – e.g. visual, layout/ **design**– of the content? (Leporati 250)
- What is the overall **tone**?
- **Content**: Does the article use direct quotations or statistics to support the argument?

The conclusion of your research paper should discuss if the news source you are researching is fairly placed on the *Interactive Media Bias Chart* found on Blackboard. Provide your reader with a brief justification of where you think the source should be placed.

You may pick a current event from the list below OR email me a **specific topic** that you would like to research for approval no later than class time on Wednesday, November 4th:

- Death of Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg
- The outcome of the court case regarding Breonna Taylor
- Hysterectomies being performed on detainees
- Amy Coney Barrett Supreme Court Justice Hearings Day 1

You should then find a story about the current event you chose from one of the sources listed below OR if you would like to research another news source, please email me for approval no later than class time on Wednesday, November 4th:

- *CNN, Vox, Huffpost, New York Times, Washington Post, The Advocate, DailyMail, Washington Examiner, New York Post, The Blaze, Fox News, Breitbart*

You will then find reporting of the same story through the *Associated Press* in order to compare how the story is presented. You should interrogate the *Associated Press* article using the same questions as listed above (author, genre, medium, audience, etc.).

Your paper should strictly follow MLA guidelines, contain an interesting title, arguable thesis, and include a Works Cited page with citations in proper MLA format. For reference, please refer to page 119-169 in *The Little Seagull Handbook* which includes MLA citation examples.

News Source, Story Choice, and Venue: Wednesday, November 4th

By class time, upload your choices for news source, story, and your venue to the appropriate Blackboard discussion board labeled "Source, Story, and Venue." When thinking about venue, think about where your essay could be published in order to raise awareness about source credibility for other students.

Rough Draft Due Date: Wednesday, November 11th

We will be peer-reviewing essays in class, so please upload your rough draft to Blackboard by class time on Wednesday morning for your peers to mark up with their comments and suggestions. I will also provide comments/suggestions on Blackboard.

Final Draft Due Date: Wednesday, December 2nd

For the final draft, please upload your essay to Blackboard by 11:59pm on Wednesday, December 2nd.

Writing Center

I encourage you to continue using the Writing Center at any stage of your writing process. For more information on how to make an appointment, please refer to the syllabus.

Please read the following:

It is possible that I will use the information generated from these papers as case studies for my own educational research as part of my master's thesis. If this project is approved, the data analysis will not take place until after the semester is completed and grades are submitted. In addition, I would anonymize any data (your identity would not be revealed), and I would not use any of your data if you are under 18. I will send a separate consent form. You will not be invited to complete it until after the semester is over.

Figure 2.

Interview Questions:
1) Were you aware of the amount of (mis)information that can be found online before your research paper assignment?
2) What criteria did you use to assess the credibility of a source before ENGL 1201AA/1201AI?
3) What did this research paper teach you about source credibility that you did not know before?
4) How helpful was the rhetorical-genre approach in assessing the credibility of your source? In other words, did the vocabulary of audience, purpose, tone, design, stance, medium, and genre assist in your understanding of analyzing sources for credibility?
5) Which term from the rhetorical-genre approach listed in question 3 was most influential/most helpful in analyzing the credibility of your source?
6) How likely are you to continue thinking about source credibility in rhetorical terms now that you have completed the research paper for ENGL 1201AA/1201AI?
7) Do you think the ability to assess source credibility is a skill every first-year writing student needs to be taught? Why or why not?
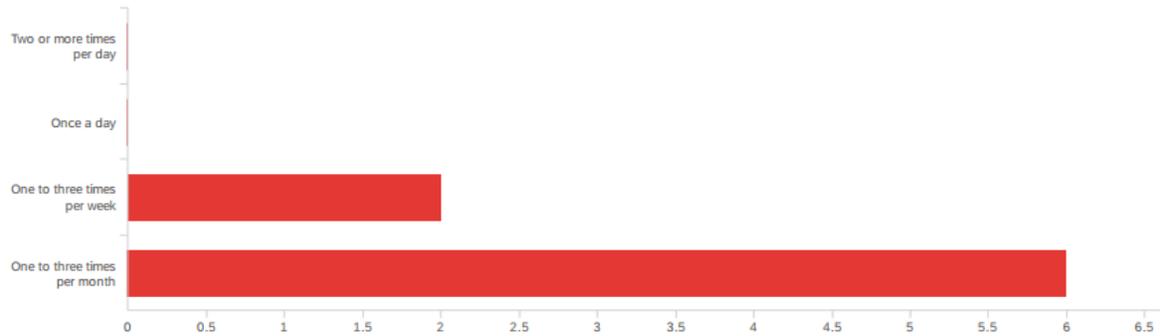
Figure 3.

Default Report

MA Thesis Survey Questions
March 9, 2021 7:19 AM MST

Q1 - How often do you read news articles?

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	How often do you read news articles?	3.00	4.00	3.75	0.43	0.19	8

#	Field	Choice Count	
1	Two or more times per day	0.00%	0
2	Once a day	0.00%	0
3	One to three times per week	25.00%	2
4	One to three times per month	75.00%	6
			8

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

Figure 4.

Q2 - What news source(s) do you obtain your articles from? (Choose as many as applicable)
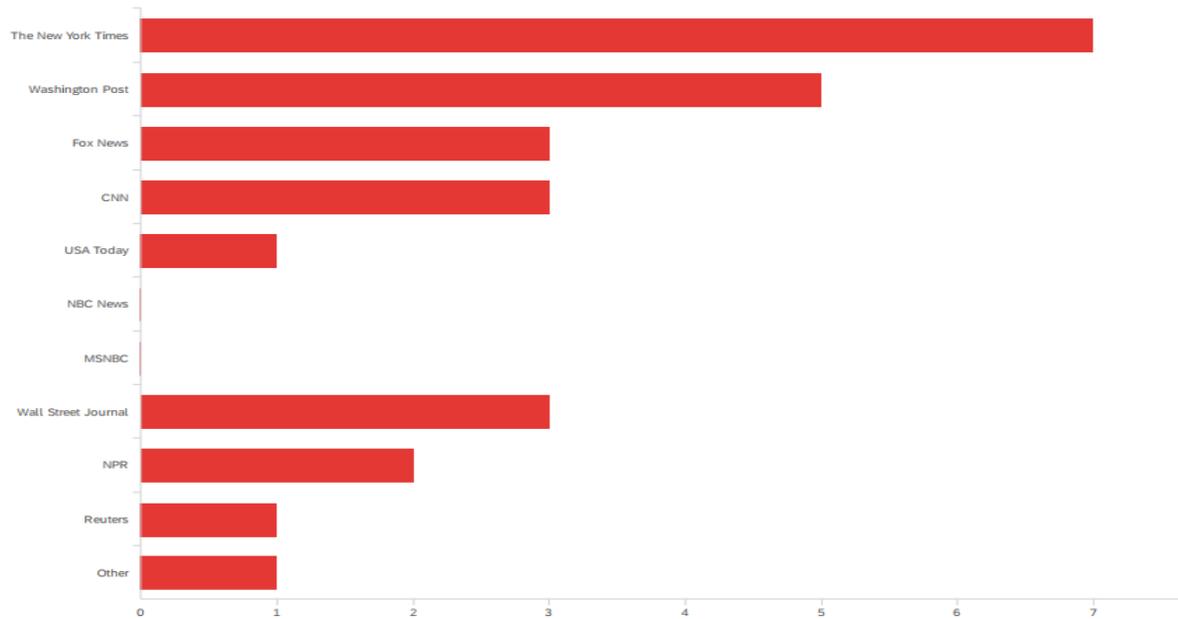
#	Field		Choice Count
1	The New York Times	26.92%	7
2	Washington Post	19.23%	5
3	Fox News	11.54%	3
4	CNN	11.54%	3
5	USA Today	3.85%	1
6	NBC News	0.00%	0
7	MSNBC	0.00%	0
8	Wall Street Journal	11.54%	3
9	NPR	7.69%	2

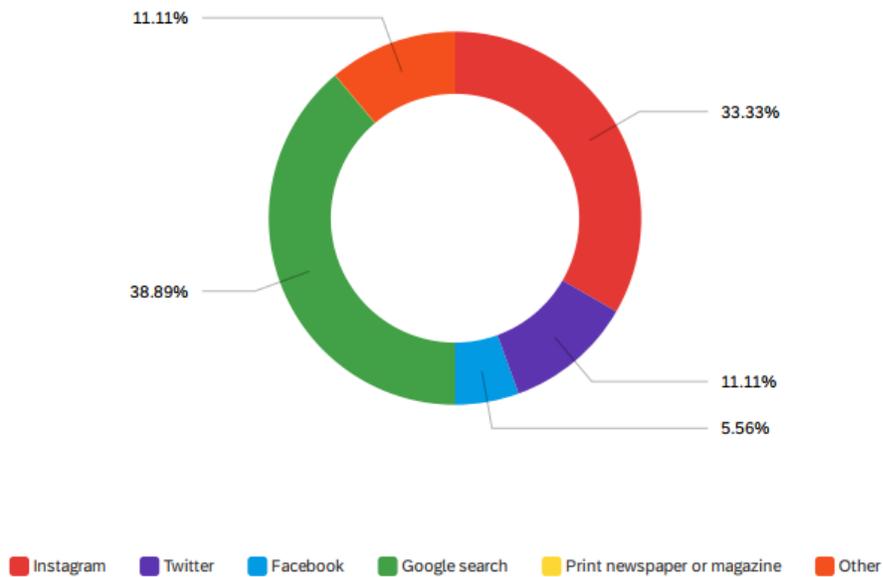| #	Field		Choice Count
10	Reuters	3.85%	1
11	Other	3.85%	1
			26

Showing rows 1 - 12 of 12

Q2_11_TEXT - Other

Other

ESPN, Bleacher Report, Barstool Sports

Figure 5.

Q3 - What platform(s) do you use to obtain your articles? (Choose as many as applicable)

11.11%
33.33%
38.89%
11.11%
5.56%

Instagram Twitter Facebook Google search Print newspaper or magazine Other

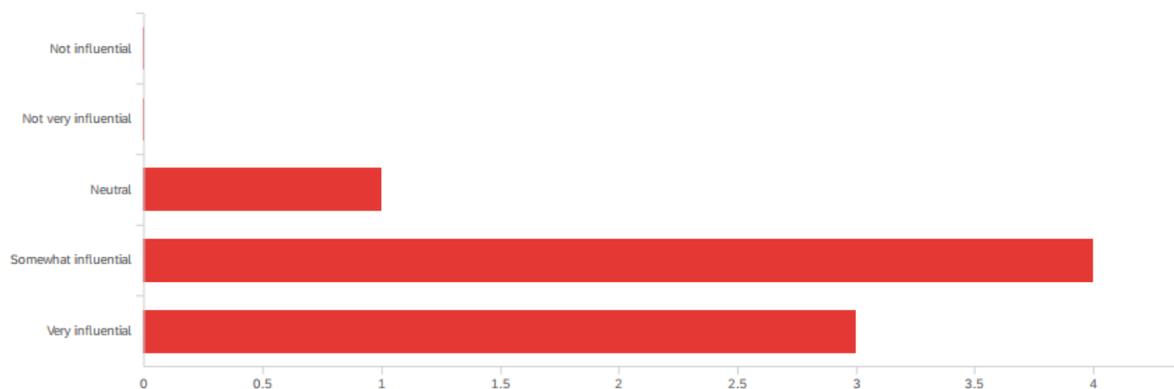| #	Field		Choice Count
1	Instagram	33.33%	6
2	Twitter	11.11%	2
3	Facebook	5.56%	1
4	Google search	38.89%	7
5	Print newspaper or magazine	0.00%	0
6	Other	11.11%	2
			18

Showing rows 1 - 7 of 7

Q3_6_TEXT - Other

Other
Television
Reddit

Figure 6.

Q4 - On a scale of 1-5 how influential was your research paper in altering how you analyze source credibility?

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	On a scale of 1-5 how influential was your research paper in altering how you analyze source credibility?	3.00	5.00	4.25	0.66	0.44	8

#	Field		Choice Count
1	Not influential	0.00%	0
2	Not very influential	0.00%	0
3	Neutral	12.50%	1
4	Somewhat influential	50.00%	4
5	Very influential	37.50%	3
			8

Showing rows 1 - 6 of 6

End of Report

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SETON HALL █░█ UNIVERSITY™
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December 14th, 2020

Sanna Fogt
Seton Hall University

Re: 2021-169

Dear Sanna,

At its December meeting, the Research Ethics Committee of the Seton Hall University Institutional
Review Board reviewed and approved your research proposal entitled, "*A Rhetorical Genre Approach to
Source Credibility*". This memo serves as official notice of the aforementioned study's approval.
Enclosed for your records are the stamped original Consent Form and recruitment flyer. You can make
copies of these forms for your use.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of
this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol, informed consent form or study team
must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

You will receive a communication from the Institutional Review Board at least 1 month prior to your
expiration date requesting that you submit an Annual Progress Report to keep the study active, or a Final
Review of Human Subjects Research form to close the study. In all future correspondence with the
Institutional Review Board, please reference the ID# listed above.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Mara Podvey

Mara C. Podvey, PhD, OTR
Associate Professor
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board

Phyllis Hansell

Phyllis Hansell, EdD, RN, DNAP, FAAN
Professor
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board

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