

# Beth Shalom Media Literacy Sermon

The following is a transcript of the sermon I delivered on Saturday January 8, 2022 at Beth Shalom Synagogue, Columbia South Carolina.

Rabbi thank you

My name is Frank Baker. I am an education consultant. For more than 20 years I have traveled out state and elsewhere teaching “media literacy”—a skill it appears MANY are lacking.

The Talmud says that **ONE of the groups of people that do** not merit to greet the Divine presence is liars.

The proof is out there: social media is being used to spread lies,

misinformation, fake news, conspiracy theory and much more.

If you’re not on social media, you won’t be exposed to it.

Yet, millions ARE on it and they see it and some will share it.

Think about this for a moment:

(Marshall McLuhan) The fish swimming in the ocean is completely oblivious to its

environment—the water. That’s an apt metaphor for us and the

media. We swim in an ocean of media, yet few of us, or our

students are given the education opportunities to study it,

especially in K-12—an area I am intimately familiar with.

There is an epidemic in this country and it's called

Media **Illiteracy**—the inability of many people to THINK CRITICALLY

to adequately comprehend what they read, hear or see.

I asked to speak here this morning because I am worried—worried

about the future of education but more so...the future of Democracy—

especially when there are so many

forces—domestic and foreign—designed to create chaos and discord.

Quote from oped USA Today (December) Our nation is failing to foster critical thinking, media literacy and an ability to understand other perspectives. Just as young people should be taught coding, they must be taught the decoding of news and information as a prerequisite of informed citizenship.

The US Surgeon General recently declared that CORONAVIRUS

MISINFORMATION is a “major public health hazard.”

Make no mistake about it—someone RIGHT NOW is manipulating a

headline, a social media post, a photograph or a video—and they will

make sure it is seen and heard around the corner & around the world.

Thomas Jefferson famously said—and I paraphrase here—the health of

a democracy depends on an informed electorate. What happens

when

the electorate is ill-informed—is media illiterate—if they don't have the

necessary and sufficient critical thinking skills to question fake news,

conspiracy theory and the like?

I have helped teachers understand HOW to engage their students in

both critical thinking and critical viewing skills—but the major problem

is: media literacy is NOT taught in our colleges of education. So

educators enter the classroom unaware of its importance. Adding insult

to injury: media literacy does not exist in the state's mandated teaching

standards. Imagine that?

Do you believe everything you see read and hear? I don't- I question

the media (and hope you do too) and I verify something that I think

needs clarifying.

Now you may ask, what is media literacy? You've heard or read that

phrase in the news a lot in the past four years.

Media literacy is SIMPLY applying critical thinking to media messages.

But that's a problem for a lot of young people today—who tend to

believe what they read without question. Many NOW get their news

and information from SOCIAL media. If you're not ON social media,

you may not understand it. Today's young people MAY BE media savvy, but they are NOT all media literate.

Allow me to ELABORATE: Evidence exists that many students nationwide are lacking in their thinking about what they consume online.

The Stanford History Education group issued an alarming report after studying the habits of 8000 middle, high school and college

students. Among the findings:

- **82%** of middle-schoolers couldn't distinguish between an ad labeled

“sponsored content” and a real news story on a website

- **More than two out of three** middle-schoolers couldn't see any valid

reason to mistrust a post written by a bank executive arguing that

young adults need more financial-planning help

- **nearly four in 10 high-school students** believed, based on the

headline, that a photo of deformed daisies on a photo-sharing site

provided strong evidence of toxic conditions near the Fukushima

Daiichi nuclear plant in Japan, even though no source or location was

given for the photo.

The researchers described (today's) student's abilit(ies) to access

information sources as "dismaying," "bleak," AND "[a] threat to our

democracy."

In November of 2018, a follow-up survey of four thousand high school

students by Stanford found that more than **96 percent** failed to

consider that ties to the fossil fuel industry might affect the credibility

of a website about climate change.

Now let me tell you what's happening in South Carolina. For the past

years I've worked with Rep Seth Rose to get our legislature to pass a

"media literacy" bill...a simple measure that would have required the

State dept of education to create an advisory task force to look into

media literacy and how it's represented in our schools.

To my utter surprise the state dept of education OPPOSED the measure

and made sure it was defeated in committee. Now why you might ask

did they oppose it? I will tell you. State education representatives

CLAIM that we already teach students media literacy. That's a claim we

have refuted. The state dept of education provided us evidence that

students in SC are taking a course on media literacy—unfortunately

only 2 thousand students actually took that class.

In addition, the State dept of education has clear and convincing

evidence that most middle and high school students failed that part of

the test when it comes to identifying bias and the credibility of

information.

Let me be clear—public school students in SC are not getting the

necessary instruction on how to analyze media messages—and their

teachers are not prepared to teach it. THAT IS TROUBLING.

The phrase TECHNIQUE OF PERSUASION (aka Propaganda techniques)

no longer exists in our state teaching standards.

It has been replaced by ARGUMENT. For example, ADVERTISING, a powerful and influential force in young people's lives...barely gets

attention by teachers and students. Do you think they should be aware

of the techniques advertisers use to get us to buy things; or vote for a

Politician? I certainly do. If people, including students, don't recognize

when marketing and advertising tries to persuade: they might be

sucked into believing a politician's message; buying a brand of peanut

butter; or a snazzy car, or something worse like falling for fake news.

### MEDIA LITERACY: The Most Critically Important Skill

So Frank you've shared with us the problem. What is the solution?

The best answer is to ALWAYS QUESTION & VERIFY what you consume.

Appropriate Media literacy questions like these are recommended:

WHO IS THE AUTHOR; WHAT IS THEIR AGENDA

WHAT TECHNIQUES ARE THEY USING TO MAKE ME BELIEVE SOMETHING

WHO OR WHAT MIGHT BE OMITTED AND WHY

WHO PAID FOR THE MESSAGE

WHO BENEFITS FROM THIS MESSAGE

WHY IS THIS MESSAGE BEING SENT

One solution already promoted by the Stanford group is to encourage

LATERAL READING when online. That means: instead of reading a webpage from TOP TO BOTTOM; you simply open a second

Tab in which YOU RESEARCH THE SOURCE of the original page.

Another solution: Fact checking. Too many of us tend to believe

something without taking the time to verify it. Today more than a

dozen different fact checking organizations do the work for us.

Another solution: our local media, radio, TV, newspapers need to

help consumers but not only reporting the news, but ALSO reporting

when it is wrong or misleading. I want to recognize Channel 19 WLTX

which has a regular news segment entitled VERIFY...

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, I want to urge everyone of you

listening and watching to ask your elected representatives, school

board members, child's teacher or principal:

what are you doing to ensure this generation receives important

media literacy skills? Every teacher in every subject in every school



should have the opportunity to be trained on how to incorporate media

literacy into instruction. Folks, it's not rocket science.

I wish to leave you with this quote:

from a new book entitled CALLING BS The Art of Skepticism in Data Driven World.

“Democracy has always relied on a critical thinking electorate, but never has this been more important than in the current age of fake news and international interference in the electoral process via propaganda disseminated over social media.”

I don't know about you, but I want to do everything in my power to ensure that our students have the necessary skills to think critically about the media.

Thank you very much.