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## Counterbalancing Teen Reliance on Social Media News: The Importance of Using Street Law Methodology to Teach About Current Events

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**COUNTERBALANCING TEEN RELIANCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS:  
THE IMPORTANCE OF USING STREET LAW METHODOLOGY  
TO TEACH ABOUT CURRENT EVENTS**

*Globally, civic engagement of young people lags behind the general population. There is some evidence that young people are becoming more interested and engaged in world events. The pandemic and social justice movements addressing the environment, racial injustice, woman's issues, and LGBTQ rights have especially mobilized young people.*

*Social media has been key to the success of many grassroots movements (#MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and Greta Thunberg). Increasingly young people are also using social media as a source of news. Teachers and professionals who work with young people have noticed a dramatic surge in awareness and interest in current events. They are hopeful this will translate into greater civic engagement and higher youth voter turnout.*

*Students may be accessing news more frequently, but they are increasingly obtaining news via social media. In addition, young people are often obtaining news from celebrities and social media influencers. Use of these unchecked sources for news raises serious questions about the reliability of the information. Social media algorithms, which deliver content based on previous usage, can also lead to increased polarization. These issues underscore the importance of addressing current events in the classroom using balanced, reliable information. Street Law lessons are designed to encourage students to critically examine legal issues from multiple perspectives. Using the Street Law teaching methodology to examine current events in the classroom may be the antidote to teen use of social media as a source of news.*

Key words: youth, civic activity, social media, misinformation, Street Law, legal education.

**Еммі Уоллес. Збалансування довіри підлітків до новин у соціальних медіа: важливість застосування методології Street Law у навчанні про поточні події**

*У всьому світі залучення молоді до громадянської активності значно відстає від населення у цілому. Проте останнім часом з'явилися певні докази того, що молодь стає все більш зацікавленою та залученою до світових подій. Рухи під час пандемії, вимоги соціальної справедливості, об'єднання навколо проблем навколишнього середовища, расової несправедливості, жіночих проблем та прав ЛГБТ особливо мобілізували молодь.*

*Соціальні медіа стали ключем до успіху багатьох низових рухів (#MeToo, #Black Lives Matter і #Greta Thunberg). Усе більше молодих людей використовують соціальні медіа також як джерело новин. Учителі та фахівці, які працюють із молоддю, помітили різкий сплеск поінформованості та зацікавленості поточними подіями. Вони сподіваються, що це призведе до більшої громадської залученості та активності до виборчих процесів.*

*Останнім часом студенти цікавляться новинами значно більше, але при цьому вони все частіше отримують новини через соціальні медіа. Окрім того, молоді люди часто отримують новини від знаменитостей та впливових осіб (агентів впливу) у соціальних мережах. Використання цих неперевіраних джерел для отримання новин викликає серйозні питання щодо достовірності інформації. Алгоритми соціальних медіа, які передають контент на основі попереднього використання, також можуть призвести до поширення фейків та посилення поляризації. Ці питання підкреслюють важливість розгляду поточних подій у школі/університеті з використанням збалансованої, достовірної інформації. Уроки Street Law (практичного права) покликані заохотити студентів критично розглядати правові питання з різних поглядів. Використання методології викладання Street Law для вивчення поточних подій у школі/університеті може стати протиотрутою для використання підлітками соціальних медіа як джерела новин.*

Ключові слова: молодь, громадянська активність, соціальні медіа, дезінформація, методика Street Law, правознавство.

### Introduction

Political scientists, teachers, and community leaders struggle to ascertain why levels of civic engagement for young people generally lag behind other age groups [1]. There are many ways for people to participate civically but one of the most measurable is voting. Fewer than forty percent of the eligible young people, aged eighteen to

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twenty-nine voted in the 2016 United States presidential election [2] considerably lower than overall voter turnout. Low levels of electoral participation are a critical issue in the United States and similar trends in voting can be found internationally [3]. In a study of twenty-four countries [4], the percentage of young people who voted in each country was lower than overall voter turnout.

There is some evidence that young people in the United States are becoming more engaged. Voter turnout in the youngest age group increased by eleven percentage points for the 2020 presidential election [2]. Inspired perhaps by bitter political polarization in the United States and abroad or large-scale protests against racial discrimination, police brutality, and sexual violence and harassment, young people appear to be more interested and engaged than they were a few years ago. Social media may be contributing to this increase in the curiosity and awareness about current events. Being knowledgeable about world events has become “cool.”

This generation has grown up with a relationship to social media unlike any previous age group. They are often more social media savvy than their parents but are accustomed to seeking answers and information online often without critical thought about the source. Crucial global issues facing the world energize young people but many are obtaining information about those important topics from unchecked authority.

This paradox underscores the importance of teaching current events in the classroom. Specifically Street Law lessons are perfectly designed to counterbalance the problems that arise when young people use social media as their main source of information about world events. This paper includes: an examination of how young people use social media to access information about current events; a discussion of how Street Law teaching methodology is specially situated to address the concerns raised by use of social media as a source of news; examples of teaching techniques designed to address current issues through in-depth examination of topics from multiple perspectives; and final conclusions and recommendations<sup>2</sup>.

#### **Youth Use of Social Media as a Preferred Source of News**

The majority of young people indicate that following current events is important to them [5]. The heightened interest in social justice movements and politics is noticeable to teachers and other adults working with young people. A teacher in Brooklyn, New York noted that, “talk of gay rights and President Trump’s executive order on immigration has replaced chatter about ‘the Kardashians or Beyonce, or somebody’s new sneakers.’” Another teacher commented that, “[i]t’s a conversation in the lunchroom, when normally politics really isn’t the thing to talk about” [6]. Civic engagement is often a habitual behavior so young people being invested in their communities is a great indicator that they will continue to do so as adults.

However, as young people become more interested in world events, they are increasingly turning to social media as their source of information [5]. Young people no longer have to wait for evening news programs or for a daily newspaper. They can access news immediately on their phones and they are increasingly using that readily available source as their main authority on world events [7]. As one student noted, “CNN and Fox and big-name news media, those are all geared towards people who have honestly grown up with a longer attention span” [8]. Young people are accustomed to receiving information in sound bites and many lack the endurance to investigate a topic thoroughly.

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism examined how people in six countries sought news about the pandemic. The study identified that young people reported using online media almost exclusively and often used social media as their main source of news on coronavirus. Almost fifty percent of young people in Argentina who participated in the study identified using Instagram as a source of news about COVID-19 in the week before responding to the survey [9]. Young people around the world are using this easily accessible medium to obtain crucial information about the issues that directly affect them.

Young people using social media as a primary source of news is not unique to the pandemic. Common Sense Media studies teen use of social media for news. The 2019 study identified that over fifty percent of young people, aged thirteen to seventeen, reported accessing news a few times per week via social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter and half of teens reported obtaining news from YouTube. Teens accessed news via social media at least ten percent more than peers who sought news from online or print news organizations, or television [5]. The 2020 study showed almost eighty percent of young people reported getting news and headlines from social media. Teachers are excited by increased teen interest in and access to information about current events. One professional noted, “[w]hat’s on their radar in terms of world events and domestic issues has grown exponentially” [5].

Some teens are not passively reading or watching news via social media, they are creating content. For young people, short TikTok videos, which are less than a minute in length, have become a popular means of discussing current events. One young TikTok influencer noted, “being able to make shorter videos and educational clips, it’s easier to connect with a younger generation who’s just swiping through their phones 24/7” [8]. All this awareness and discussion of current events seems like a key to increased civic engagement but the methods teens are using to access information raise serious concerns about rigor, accuracy and polarization.

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Because anyone can create content and post to social media, there are few safeguards to ensure the accuracy of the information young people are accessing. News posted by celebrities and influencers can reach millions of followers but this information is not subject to traditional fact checking methods used by most traditional news organizations. Because social media is predominantly a visual space, people often share memes that are intended to garner “likes” rather than inform followers [7]. There is little oversight of news posted to social media and therefore fake news [10] stories abound. James Stayer of Common Sense Media stated, “[t]here are few standards for what constitutes news and how accurately it’s portrayed on the platforms the teens use” [5]. Students are bringing false news stories into school and teachers of all subjects are forced to address these issues in class [6].

While some young people are accessing the social media accounts of news organizations, many are getting news from celebrities and influencers regardless of their credentials. Almost forty percent of teens often get news from personalities, influencers, and celebrities on social media and YouTube and almost a third identify those individuals as their preferred news source. Celebrities and influencers are not bound by the ethical norms of traditional news providers and are not obligated to provide a balanced examination of the news they discuss. Only fifteen percent of young people stated that they trust the information from celebrities, personalities, and influencers “a lot” but it is hard to believe that information these individuals share is not permeating the beliefs of many young people [11].

In addition, although young people are accessing news more frequently they generally are not reviewing stories in detail or critically examining the limited information they are reading. Two thirds of young people admit to reading headlines when accessing news on social media compared to one third who read articles [11]. This superficial understanding of current events does not allow young people the opportunity to investigate properly important issues.

Finally, because social media algorithms deliver content based on previous usage, young people might see content only from political groups, media, or influencers with similar beliefs [7]. This means many young people will see only one side of a controversial topic. Of young people who responded that they obtain news from YouTube, half stated that they most often watch news stories because they were recommended by the platform [5]. When discussing accessing news via social media, one student stated, “not only is information easy to find, it finds you” [6]. This myopic view can lead to increased polarization as young people are bombarded with repetitive one-sided messages on an issue.

The Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University School of Journalism identified four literacy challenges posed by online media: the volume of information makes it difficult to differentiate reliable versus fabricated information; misinformation can be easily shared and widely spread; media consumers want information quickly which increases the chances that information may be incorrect; and social media feeds often reinforce pre-existing beliefs. These problems can be magnified for young people who may not have the experience or skills to navigate online media.

Teen reliance on social media as a preferred news source underscores the importance of balanced, thorough, and critical investigation of current events in the classroom.

#### Examination of Current Events Using Street Law

The Street Law legal education teaching methodology was designed to increase civic engagement, critical thinking skills, and develop legal knowledge in non-lawyers. Street Law clinics and programs vary dramatically throughout the United States and abroad but all programs incorporate three fundamental components: interactive skills-based lessons; community involvement; and practical legal content [12]. Since the founding of Street Law at the Georgetown University Law Center almost fifty years ago, current events have been popular topics for the law student instructors. The program received its name after the first group of high school students said they would be learning the law that they need to know “on the street.” Current events have continued to be a fundamental component of Street Law. Student classroom engagement levels fell dramatically during remote instruction required throughout the pandemic [13]. Addressing current events was a critical way to spark student interest and encourage students to participate [14]. Street Law programs are uniquely situated to address the problems that arise from youth reliance on social media as a news source. Street Law methodology is designed to have students critically examine issues using balanced information from multiple perspectives.

Street Law lessons are crafted to develop high-order thinking in non-lawyers. This goal requires students to thoroughly engage with each topic being discussed. Lessons are designed to introduce students to new topics but require the students to take the material learned and apply it in novel and creative ways. This allows students to delve into complicated topics and critically examine issues in order to reach their own conclusions. In essence, “the Street Law methodology prioritizes student inquiry and student discovery as fundamental building blocks for every lesson” [15]. This focused inquiry is the antidote to the superficial understanding of current events that comes from reading only headlines or social media posts. It also addresses the problem of an excessive volume of information identified by the Center for News Literacy.

A fundamental tenet of Street Law is that students should examine issues from all angles. Professor Roe, explains, “law must be taught not in absolute terms but in a context of values and diversity. As in a diverse, pluralistic, democratic society, it should be open to multiple points of view” [16]. Street Law lessons are designed to encourage the consideration of multiple student perspectives. This important practice helps address the problem identified by

the Center for News Literacy; that social media can reinforce our preexisting beliefs instead of providing a balanced picture of current issues. The Center for News Literacy emphasizes the importance of developing the critical thinking skills necessary to achieve media literacy, specifically the ability to identify different types of bias. Street Law lessons enable students to practice these skills.

Civil, respectful conversations on controversial topics happen in Street Law classrooms. These types of discussions might be difficult for most adults in the increasingly polarized political environment. Young people are often more willing to engage with those who hold divergent views [8]. If young people can learn to engage in civil discourse and thoughtfully consider all sides, hopefully they will carry those essential skills into adulthood.

Finally, because lesson materials are created by teachers, lawyers, professors, or law students, program participants use materials from reliable news sources. Students read, interpret and evaluate those resources and develop a more complete picture of the current issues in their communities. These materials allow students to think critically about information they may have seen on social media and decide for themselves whether those sources are credible. The Center for News Literacy also identified the ability to evaluate and deconstruct news reports across news media platforms as a critical thinking skill required for media literacy. Street Law pedagogy expects students to examine issues, question the motivation of actors, and make their own decisions about issues in their communities.

### **Sample Teaching Strategies for Addressing Current Events**

Virtually any interactive, student-centered Street Law lesson addressing practical legal topics would be effective in discussing current events. Some specific examples of teaching techniques crafted to encourage student engagement with topical issues are included below.

#### **Mock Legislative Hearing**

A mock legislative hearing is a unique way for students to consider the impact of a current issue on multiple community stakeholders. The facilitator constructs a new law under consideration by a legislative body. The legislative group can be any governmental body that creates laws and could include a town council, a group of state or federal elected representatives, or even an international body. The students are broken into five or six small groups. One group acts as the legislative body (council members, senators, members of parliament). Facilitators work with the student lawmakers to help them brainstorm questions to ask each group during the hearing. The lawmakers should be thinking about what they really want to know from each group. The remaining groups are each assigned a constituency. These groups are dependent on the topic of the law being discussed but can include parents, young people, business owners, or law enforcement. Each group works together to draft a statement that examines the issue from the perspective of that group. Law students or facilitators work with those groups to help them consider how the law impacts them. Each stakeholder group presents their statement at the hearing. After each statement is read, the legislative members ask questions. The questions are designed to force each group to consider all aspects of the law and its possible effect on the community. At the end of the hearing the legislative group votes to either pass the law as written, discard the law entirely, or revise it.

This interactive teaching strategy enables students to consider a current issue from many viewpoints. It also forces students to think about the effect of an issue on different groups of people. Finally students are able to consider competing policy arguments for the problem. This strategy could be used for any current issue, including COVID-19 quarantine restrictions, juvenile justice issues, immigration, or LGBTQ rights. During a training program in Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan, participants simulated a mock legislative hearing considering specific COVID-19 restrictions. The following constituencies testified at the hearing: an organization of medical professionals; a restaurant association; a citizen's group; and a group of food markets.

#### **Debate & Legislative Drafting**

Combining a debate and a legislative drafting exercise encourages students to think critically about an issue and then brainstorm possible solutions. Facilitators choose a current issue, ideally one with two clearly defined sides. They prepare thorough materials for each side of the controversy. Students are divided into two sides. The students do not get to choose their side. Students work in groups to review the materials for their side and identify the strongest arguments in the materials provided. They are also encouraged to contribute their own arguments to strengthen their position. The students are then broken up into small groups to have simultaneous mini-debates throughout the classroom. Either one or two students from each side debates one or two students from the other side. At the conclusion of arguments, the students discuss their mini-debates. Students are encouraged to identify strong arguments made by their "opponents." This not only tests their listening skills but also their ability to hear and consider competing points of view. Students are then placed in new small groups. Regardless of their previously assigned side, students work together in new groups to write a law addressing the controversial issue. Finally the groups report out their new law and explain the group's rationale.

Although some students may initially complain about being assigned a side to argue, it provides them the freedom to examine a different perspective. Considering the full picture strengthens their understanding of the issue as a whole. Being able to articulate the contrary standpoint is fundamental to constructing a persuasive argument on any issue. This balanced examination counteracts the one-sided content that can pervade social media. This teaching strategy can work for a variety of topics including voting rights, legalization of marijuana, and gun

laws. New York Law School law student instructors used this strategy to teach about identification requirements for in-person voting during the 2020–2021 school year.

#### Moot Court

Simulating an appellate court case is an excellent way for students to analyze a controversial topic. A moot court lesson can examine an issue before any appellate court, including the United States Supreme Court or the European Court of Human Rights. Facilitators prepare materials detailing the facts of the case, relevant laws, and any previous decisions the court might consider. Depending on the level of the students, facilitators might also prepare some arguments for each side. Students are broken into three groups, the judges, the petitioners (applicants), and the respondents. The judges brainstorm questions to ask during the proceeding. Facilitators work with judges to ensure they understand the substantive law. They also assist the judges in crafting strategies for inquiring about prior cases during arguments. The other groups work independently to prepare oral arguments to present before the panel of judges. Facilitators work with the two sides to prepare them for the types of questions the judges might ask. Students focus on supporting their claims with evidence from the case summary.

This lesson can be done as one large court or several smaller mini-courts happening simultaneously. As one large court, each side presents their oral arguments as the judges ask questions. At the conclusion of the proceeding, the judges consider the arguments that were made and discuss the issues in order to reach a decision. If multiple simultaneous mini-courts are considering the case, one member of each group (judge, petitioner, respondent) forms individual triads in the classroom. Again, each side presents oral arguments and the judge asks questions. At the conclusion, each judge presents their individual decision and the class discusses the differences between the judges' decisions.

Again, students are generally not permitted to choose their side so it enables them to consider both sides of the case. Moot court also requires students to support their arguments with substantive law, thereby demonstrating the importance of substantiating their position with evidence. Facilitators can prepare these materials using the documents each side files with the court, and reliable news articles discussing the case. Street Law, Inc. has a vast library of case summaries on their website which can be used to simulate arguments before the United States Supreme Court<sup>3</sup>. New York Law School law student instructors concluded the fall 2020 semester using this teaching strategy. The law students spent the semester teaching about the First Amendment freedom of speech so the high school students mooted a case involving a California law banning the sale of certain violent video games to minors.

#### Deliberation

A deliberation is a teaching strategy used by Street Law, Inc. that is designed to allow students to cooperatively discuss contested political issues and reach a consensus [17]. Students work in small groups to carefully consider both sides of an issue and to identify common ground. Materials are posted on a variety of topics including hate speech, medical aid in dying, and compulsory voting.

A study of the method found that it, “helped students develop a deeper understanding of the issues, engage in critical thinking, make decisions based on evidence and logic, respect others’ points of view, and identify multiple perspectives.” This teaching strategy would enable students to closely examine an issue from a variety of angles and identify commonalities.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The events of the past few years have underscored for many people the importance of being informed about the issues of the day and for some being actively involved in searching for solutions. The incredible reach of social media has enabled small grassroots efforts to quickly expand into national and international movements. Discussion of current issues on social media has also sparked increased interest and curiosity among young people. However, their reliance on this unchecked and often lopsided portrayal of current issues can lead to superficial or even false understanding. This is the time to capitalize on youth interest and use student-centered teaching techniques, which will allow them to develop the skills they need to fully participate in their communities.

Street Law methodology, created before the proliferation of the internet, may be the perfect antidote to youth reliance on social media for news. These programs focus not just on what the law is in any state or country, but what the law should be. They teach students to consider all sides and think critically about the impact of laws on different people and groups.

All Street Law programs focus on practical law and therefore necessarily incorporate current events. Wherever possible, topical issues should be incorporated into existing programs. In other non-Street Law history, politics, or civics courses, Street Law teaching techniques should be implemented to discuss current issues as a means of addressing any confusion that the use of social media may have caused. In our experience students want to discuss these issues and they want to be knowledgeable. Some are overwhelmed by the volume of information available and need to practice the skills needed to make sense of what they are seeing and reading. Young people want to be included in the discussion of solutions for the biggest problems the world is facing. Street Law can help equip them with the skills to participate.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://store.streetlaw.org/scotus-teaching-materials/>

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