



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

The Digital Literacy Universe

MONITA BELL

I was sitting in my child's second-grade classroom during Open House, listening to her teacher go over the various websites, and apps, and other tools they'd be using in class, and that we parents and guardians could use to support and keep up with our kid's work at home. It was around this time that the teacher mentioned that she encourages the students to log out of various websites and apps each day in class to "protect their information."

It struck a chord, to say the least. I mean, sure, my kid has a tablet, and I let her play with my phone. She knows the PINs for each, but we'd never really discussed usernames, passwords, or online privacy or safety. I knew then that I needed to rethink how my child, a digital native, engages with the digital world.

She just turned seven, and I'm already behind. But, so is education around digital literacy, in general. I'm Monita Bell, and this is The Mind Online. This podcast comes to you from Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

According to a 2018 Pew Research Center Survey, about 95 percent of teens say they have a smartphone or have access to one, and about 45 percent say they're online "almost constantly." Snapchat, Instagram and YouTube are central to young people's daily lives, but when it comes to education around how those technologies work and how to use them, we're still trying to figure it out. It's more than fake news—a *lot* more.

We live in a world of algorithms and mechanisms that track every move we make online. How are we preparing our young people to navigate this world? Not only in terms of how they're using social media or other digital tools, but also how they can take control of what they put out into the world, and how to respond when they encounter hate online. How are we empowering them to use the Internet and other digital tools to make change?

We're going to dig into those questions here, and each episode of The Mind Online will explore an aspect of the digital literacy world, what educators and students alike need to know, and how educators can guide students to be safe, informed digital citizens. In this episode, I speak with Matthew Johnson and Shana White. Both experts with varying connections to the world of digital literacy, and deep insights into what educators need to think about when it comes to effective teaching about life online. Let's get into it!

First up, my conversation with Matthew Johnson of Canada's MediaSmarts. Among other things, we chat about how students can identify hate masquerading as legitimate ideals online.

So, Matthew, thank you so much for talking with me today. I think our audience, our community of

educators, will really appreciate hearing what you have to say. So, first of all, can you introduce yourself and tell us about what you do?

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Sure. My name's Matthew Johnson, and I'm the director of education for MediaSmarts, which is Canada's center for digital and media literacy. For more than 20 years now, we've been doing research in media literacy, and developing media literacy resources for parents, teachers, young people and the general public in Canada.

MONITA BELL

So, I think many of us, including me, grew up with this concept of media literacy. When I was in school it was how to critically evaluate sources and check whether a URL ended with an *.edu* or an *.org*—you know, things that that.

Students today face a different landscape than previous generations, like mine. What can you tell us about—what, in your mind, makes digital media different from traditional media?

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Well, what's really changed is the low barrier to publication and distribution of information. So, it used to be that it took a certain amount of money to be able to produce any kind of media, even print media, and it took even more to distribute it. Really, that was the biggest expense. It was relatively easy to, for instance, make a 'zine, back in the 1980s, when I was young, but obviously distribution was fairly limited. Probably to people you knew, or people at local clubs.

The Internet has changed both of those, so it's very easy now for almost anybody to create a website that looks as professional as any legitimate website. In many cases *more* professional because a lot of times, legitimate organizations—scientific organizations, medical organizations, government NGOs—they may not direct their money towards making a nice-looking website. Then someone else who has the intention of misrepresenting themselves—they're going to put more money into that.

So, often, the fake websites look better than the real ones, and of course, distribution on the Internet is almost entirely frictionless. It's really up to users to spread it around. So, without those barriers, it means that anyone can spread their message. It means that the things that we describe now as being most viral, things that really provoke your emotions, things that provoke feelings of tribalism, in a way. Things that really go to the heart of your identity, or that scare you, or upset you. Things you really want to be true. These are the things that spread most easily. Often, much more easily than the truth, than correction to these stories.

So, we are in a situation where it's not enough to be able to just judge a particular source, because they have gotten so good, in many cases, at making their websites look respectable and legitimate. It really is a matter of being able to identify what's behind a source and recognize the chain that brought a particular piece of content to you, and follow that to its original source. Rather than trying to, necessarily, fact-check every step of the way.

MONITA BELL

So, one thing I really heard you emphasizing there was this idea that, often, the sources of problematic content look really slick and professional, and that's part of the reason people can so easily be fooled by

them. So, what are the implications of that you're seeing with young people today? What's happening with students today, as a result of not being able to tell the difference? We've heard a lot about this in the news; *fake news* is a term that is definitely related to this. Just in your line of work, how are you seeing this play out with young people?

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Well, one of the things we already know from data that we've gathered is that young people are a lot less likely to make an effort to fact-check information that comes to them by way of social media. We actually found a really encouraging number of students that we surveyed were fact-checking things that they were doing for school, which shows that they are learning, in schools, how to do fact-checking. When they know they're going to be called on it, when their teacher has told them they have to prove the validity of any source that they're using, they'll go ahead and do it, and they have some idea how to do it. We also know that they will take an effort to fact-check things when they're doing research on someone else's behalf. So, when they're trying to get some health information for a friend who asked them to help them find it or finding a recommendation of a product for a relative, or something like that. They do take the steps there, but they don't take the steps when things come to them through social media. We know, of course, that is how so much news comes to them.

So, what we are learning is that we need to emphasize more than just how you evaluate a specific source, how to get the context that you need to be able to evaluate a source. That the weakness, of course, of young people, has always been that they don't really know that much about the world. Often, they don't know how to recognize what are some of the signs that someone holds a particular political position, or is a member of a particular group. Some of the things we sometimes call "dog whistles" or even particular phrases that are associated with different political theories, different political identities, different subgroups.

If you're not able to recognize those, then your antennae don't tingle when you encounter something that's problematic. That's one of the reasons why we really advocate for a holistic media and digital literacy that has not just authentication skills, but also really important aspects about the specific elements of hate material online. So that, even if you don't necessarily recognize where something is coming from, once you recognize the elements of the ideology of hate that's being promoted—even if it doesn't necessarily seem like hate, explicitly, because a lot of times hate groups will provide the watered-down stuff to have a wider appeal—or, if you recognize some of the images, some of the language that they use, then you know already to be on your guard.

MONITA BELL

I'm really glad that you mentioned hate, specifically, and the various ways that can present itself in ways that aren't immediately apparent. It sounds like what you're saying, with this holistic approach, is in some ways an approach of empowerment. So, I would love for you to talk more about what are some examples of how this holistic approach could play out in a classroom. If a teacher is interested in, say, getting their students to think more about the news they're encountering on social media, and the need to take that seriously, in terms of validity in what they're encountering, what are some specific things they can be doing in the classroom to take a more holistic approach to digital literacy?

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Well, we actually have a suite of lessons, starting from kindergarten going to the end of high school,

that cover a really wide range of aspects of digital literacy. Everything from authentication—what we call “finding and verifying”—to consumer awareness. So, understanding your rights as a consumer, and understanding how the profit motive dictates so much of the architecture of the Internet. And community engagement would be another example, where you learn about your rights and your ability to make a difference and exercise your rights online.

Those are just three aspects, but among these lessons are quite a few that are devoted specifically to authentication and a number that are devoted to online hate, as well—and a few that kind of overlap over the two of them. So, certainly, we have lessons. One of our most popular lessons is a high school lesson called “Authentication Beyond the Classroom,” and it uses viral photos and videos to help you realize that you can’t really necessarily evaluate something by just looking at it. The point being that you’re shown a number of viral photos, and number of viral videos. You might guess correctly or wrongly on which ones were true and false, but the point is that you can’t really tell by just looking at them. That there are things in this world that are so strange, they seem hard to believe but are true, and then, of course, there are things that look true but are false. Then, there’s another category, which is probably larger than either of those, and those are things that are true but misleading.

Where there’s a nugget of truth in there, but the way it’s being presented is misleading in some way. Really, the only way you can tell which of these it is by doing deeper and broader research. So, not just necessarily looking at the thing itself. Not trying to make yourself a forensics expert in looking at where the shadows are cast, and things like that, but doing a little bit of research. Going to Google, going to Wikipedia, going to sources that you trust. Identifying what you know about the author, trying to track it back to its original source because, often, the source that we get something from may not be the original source.

So, you may see a video that was brought to you by a channel that you might not trust, like RT, the Russian propaganda outlet, but if the original video came from Reuters, then you have a pretty fair idea that you can trust it. This, of course, requires that students know the difference between RT and Reuters, and that goes back to what I was saying earlier about the importance of teaching context. That we do have to teach kids how to evaluate a source once you get to that ultimate source. Really, it only takes a few moments to find out what those two things are, and why you would trust one or the other.

Another example would be some of our lessons on hate material online. So, we have one called “Hate 2.0,” which is about recognizing and learning the ways that hate groups disguise their message, through things like cloaked websites. How they communicate through social media, in many cases. So when you encounter it, you can recognize it. We have other lessons, as well, that teach you what you can do about it. Again, going back to that idea that you mentioned, of empowerment. The idea that it’s not just about recognizing when something is true or false, but taking action. Sometimes taking direct action to confront or report something when you recognize it is hate speech, but also recognizing the idea that, because the Internet is a network, we’re no longer just consumers of information. We’re broadcasters, as well, and we have the power to stop misinformation in its tracks by not sharing it and, in some cases, by participating in debunking it, as well.

MONITA BELL

So you were just speaking quite a bit about hate, which I touched on before. In your work, are you seeing that hateful information that’s being spread—is that something we should be increasingly concerned

about? Is hate in a really substantial way finding its way into our classrooms—or into students' consumption—in an alarming way? Right now?

MATTHEW JOHNSON

There's definitely evidence that, in particular, the open expression of hate speech has increased over the last couple of years. That can have a really important impact, because we know that it's the loudest 10 percent in any community that sets the tone, that sets the values of that community. So, when open hate speech, or open use of racist or anti-Semitic or misogynist language goes unchallenged, then even among young people who may not be vulnerable to radicalization, they're less likely to speak out against it.

Certainly, that's one of the really interesting findings we had in our last round of our Young Canadians in a Wired World research. Where we survey, roughly, 5,000 students across Canada, from grades four through eleven. We found that students of all ages generally agreed at about the same rates that hate speech online was wrong. The older students were actually less likely than the younger ones to feel they had a right to speak out against it.

MONITA BELL

Oh, that's interesting. What was that about?

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Well, that's what we're investigating right now. We're actually in the earlier stages of another research project. We're actually going to be doing the sampling, I think, in the next couple of weeks, where we're exploring that idea quite a lot more carefully, taking a look at what it is that influences the decision by people—young people in particular—about whether or not to speak out against what we're describing as casual prejudice. What you might think of as the thin edge of the wedge, but we do know that it's important. Where things that are not necessarily directly provoking, or not necessarily directly aimed at an identifiable target, but still things like use of stereotypes, use of racist or sexist language, that communicate the idea that these things are acceptable community values. So, we're hoping to come out from—

MONITA BELL

Maybe microaggressions as well?

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Yeah, exactly.

MONITA BELL

We can kind of throw that in there.

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Yeah, that sort of thing. So, we're hoping to come out from that with some clear ideas about how we can empower young people to speak out because certainly we have resources already that are about empowering young people more broadly to shape community values online. When dealing with things like cyberbullying, for instance, because that is an essential part of digital citizenship. It's not just following the rules—it's not always following the rules. It's about recognizing that you have rights as a citizen online—and offline as well, of course—and that you have the power to influence the values of your online community.

So, we do have some resources around that already, and we do have some resources around confronting more obvious examples and more stark examples of hate speech online. But we're really hoping to learn from this research what are some of the barriers to speaking out against casual prejudice? What are some of the things that can empower young people to make their voices heard, when they encounter it?

MONITA BELL

Yeah, I really appreciate ...I think what you're describing is something we have found in our work, as well, which is this increasing mainstreaming of hateful ideas, and how to spot that. And that the envelope of what is acceptable is being pushed—and getting young people to recognize that. You also spoke to the fact that you have kindergarten lessons. I think that also touches on this idea that some people think, “Oh, maybe this is something we don't have to worry about until middle school, or maybe late elementary.” But you're clearly saying we need to be talking about this in school with much younger students—with our *youngest* students.

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Absolutely.

MONITA BELL

Can you talk more about that?

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Yeah! With our material for the youngest kids, of course we know that young kids need media and digital literacy education because we know they're consuming media. We know they're using digital devices. We know that they're using digital devices, younger and younger, every year. You don't have to walk very far, you don't have to go to too many restaurants or sit on too many buses before you'll see a toddler with an iPad or an old iPhone that has been passed down to them.

So, we know that there is a need for this. With the youngest kids, of course, it is a challenge keeping it really concrete. Keeping it at a level that's appropriate for them in terms of their cognitive development, their emotional development. So, what we do early on is really try to make a small number of ideas very clear. So, one of the things we teach in those early lessons is the idea that it's easy to find things that you weren't looking for online.

We know from a number of sources, including our own research, that young people are more likely to encounter hate material online accidentally, rather than looking for it. So, it's important to teach them from very early on that this can happen, that you can find things you weren't looking for. Of course, part of that is the idea that going online is not like going to a bookstore. That, really, anybody could have published something on there. So you have to be skeptical in a way that's appropriate of that age.

We also, of course, talk about ethics and empathy. A lot of our lessons, carrying through the whole framework, are about promoting empathy in an online context and helping kids avoid what we call the “empathy traps of online communication.” That is, the aspects of online communication—the fact that we don't hear tone of voice or see body language or facial expression—that may prevent us from feeling empathy in situations where we normally would.

So, at the kindergarten level, we're really looking at helping kids realize that when they're interacting with people online, they're interacting with real people. That we have to treat in the same way we would treat someone who is right there next to us. Also, the idea that there are rules to online life that make sense for everyone to follow in the same way that there are rules in the schoolyard. That if everyone's playing the same game, everyone's going to have a lot more fun. If someone's playing the game but doesn't want to follow the rules, then it's going to be less fun for everybody. As they go on, we build on that. We are able to be more sophisticated; we're able to be a little more abstract and bring in more real-world context. But certainly, when we first start talking about things like hate speech, we do it in a way that's going to be more accessible.

So, we use—at that age, when we're talking the grade four-to-eight level, we use—a lot of analogies and allegories. So a lot of talk, for instance, about aliens or wolves and pigs so that they can understand the ideas. The ideas of these kinds of content out there, and recognize aspects of the ideology of hate without necessarily having to be exposed to actual examples that might be painful for them at that age. Then, when we move into middle school and high school, we start using some genuine examples, because, again, it is really important that kids understand the context. That they learn that this isn't happening in a vacuum; it's happening in the context of the reality of racism, sexism and so on. So, without genuine examples, it's very hard for them to understand that context and understand why it is a serious issue.

MONITA BELL

How have you found the younger ones, in particular, responding to that material? When you're getting into some of the hateful ideas? Even with the wolves and the pigs, how are they engaging with it?

MATTHEW JOHNSON

I think that young people really do have an instinctive dislike, for instance, of the idea of stereotyping. I think, because they perhaps often experience it themselves as young people. So, when we talk about stereotyping, whether we're talking about it from a media point-of-view, when we're looking at representation in media. Whether we talk about prejudice towards a group, and viewing that group as a whole, rather than as individuals.

I think that, in many cases, that is reaching a feeling that young people already have. Again, that is what our research has found, is that the younger kids have an instinctive feeling that they should speak out. Our job, really, is helping them to keep feeling that way as they get older. As peer pressure becomes more powerful, as the pressure to not make waves online becomes more powerful and, of course, as they start moving into the adult world. Where they may feel less that they have a right to speak out, where they may not feel like false citizens.

As opposed to the younger kids, who are participating mostly in platforms that are made for them.

MONITA BELL

Absolutely, I have a second-grader, so I hear lots at school—

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Me too—just started two days ago.

MONITA BELL

Oh, really? Okay, so we have kids the same age.

MATTHEW JOHNSON

A week ago, sorry.

MONITA BELL

Yeah, and I will hear stories about, “So-and-so said this, and I told them stop that. That’s not nice.”

Or, you hear kids, young kids especially, talking about what’s fair and what’s not fair. When someone is kind and not kind. So, what you’re saying makes perfect sense to me. This is the time to be transferring those conversations to what’s happening digitally, for sure.

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Yeah, and, again, that is why it’s so important to have this coherent framework approach through all of the grades. Because you can wind up—when you have a patchwork approach, you can wind up in a situation where they feel very empowered in grade four or grade eight. But by the time they’re in grade eleven, if you haven’t given them, in a way, a booster shot—if you haven’t given them lessons or resources that fit the context they’re in—and our research does show there’s a huge difference in how kids use digital devices between grades eight and ten—then all of those lessons you taught them earlier, they won’t really feel like they’re relevant anymore. They won’t know how to apply them. So, it really is important that we cover the same material repeatedly over their grades, over their school careers.

But taking into account how they’re developing in their cognitive and emotional and moral development, but also the different ways in which they’re using different platforms. Of course, that’s why it’s so valuable to be able to do repeated research, so we do have a clear idea of how they’re using their digital devices and what they’re doing with them.

MONITA BELL

You know, I think you’re really speaking to something I wanted to ask you about so I’ll get into it now, which is this idea of what educators are missing when it comes to digital literacy and education around digital media.

So, I think we talked a lot about the hate aspect, that people haven’t been thinking about as much, but that is definitely coming to bare. Not only in the United States, but in Canada, as you were saying, and in other parts of the world. We see these ideas growing, I would say, at least in vocal nature. That it’s out in the open, as you were saying earlier. So, I would say then in terms of what’s missing, the hate angle has probably been missing. I think you’re also talking about this comprehensive approach for all grades, K-12, that we haven’t been thinking about digital and media literacy in that way, with this holistic view from K-12.

Would you say that there’s anything else missing when it comes to education around digital literacy that people need to be thinking about?

MATTHEW JOHNSON

I'm not sure it's so much missing as that what we really need to do at this point is fully fuse media literacy and digital literacy. Because, in many ways, we can no longer treat them as separate things because they're so many concepts from one field that have become essential to understanding the other field.

So, as an example, we've already talked about how a lot of the authentication techniques that we've taught kids over the years that come from media literacy don't take into consideration how easy it is to create and spread content. They don't take into consideration the network nature of modern communications. So, you can wind up encouraging kids to spend a lot of time evaluating where they saw something, where in fact where they saw it may not be relevant—it may be the original source that they really need to fact-check.

A good example there, as well, is how our views of Wikipedia have changed over the years. Because, I think many of us, coming from the media literacy field, obviously, we were very skeptical of Wikipedia at first, and rightly so. Because, early on, it was not hugely reliable. Even today, many of the articles on Wikipedia are not reliable.

But what we know from digital literacy is that what is so useful about Wikipedia, and what is almost unique about Wikipedia, is its transparency. Which is to say, you actually have a way of judging how accurate a Wikipedia article is. You can tell who's got an axe to grind. You can tell if there's a dispute happening because you can actually look at the edits. You can look at what people are saying.

So, if someone is putting something in for partisan purposes or just as a prank, you can see that, and you can see other people responding to it, in many cases. So, we were one of the first organizations in the media literacy field that came out with tools for using Wikipedia as a referenced source in the classroom so that you can distinguish between an accurate, or a reliable or an unreliable lesson.

Then, looking at the other direction, in ways that we need to bring media literacy into digital literacy. A lot of those basic concepts of media literacy, the key concepts, the things like the idea that most media have commercial implications. That is to say that media are created to make money, in most cases.

We know this is hugely relevant to digital literacy, because many of the platforms, especially that young people use, the young people themselves don't understand how these platforms make money. So, we know from our own research with teenagers about platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, they almost never understand how it is that these platforms are making money from them. What that means is, it makes it very difficult to understand what your rights are, relative to this platform. When we look at platforms like video sites, search engines, social networks, when we see them unintentionally facilitating the spread of hateful content, you really do have to understand the economic motivations behind that. Why it is that from a commercial point of view, that spreading hate can seem like a good business decision.

Of course, that connects to the consumer awareness as well that we also have to make kids realize—and everyone realize—that when these platforms have taken action against hate, it's almost always been as a result of consumer pressure. Either direct consumer pressure or consumer pressure on their advertisers, who then place pressure on them. We've seen that in a number of cases, but again, if you don't understand how the platform makes money, if you don't understand that Facebook or YouTube or Google make

money from advertising to you, then you don't know you have this powerful lever on them.

You have a powerful way of getting them to change by going to those advertisers and saying, "I want you to know that your ads are appearing next to hate content on this platform."

MONITA BELL

What a great, timely example—especially with the U.S. Congressional Hearings with Facebook and Twitter, and what's allowed on those platforms. For sure, we need to be thinking about that.

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Yeah.

MONITA BELL

Okay, so you were just mentioning some of the tools that folks can use. Obviously, MediaSmarts is one of them. You've got a number of resources there. Are there any other resources you would recommend to folks who want to get this right and want to make sure they're doing a good job of fusing media literacy and digital literacy? Thinking of them as one and the same, and giving students what they really need to be good digital citizens.

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Well, one of the people that I'm following closely who I think is really at the forefront of fusing these different ideas is Mike Caulfield from The Digital Polarization Initiative. He has a blog as well, which is Four Moves and a Habit, which is his heuristic for how to authenticate.

He's really, I think, doing some of the most important thinking, and also synthesizing, from a lot of other places, the most important thinking that's going on right now about how to deal with this, and how to most effectively spend our energy. Because we do have to recognize that—that most people, they don't have a lot of time, and they don't have a lot of energy for things like fact-checking. One of the ways we can deal with that is to make fact-checking feel like part of our civic duty. To valorize fact-checking, and also penalize spreading bad information. But, from an educational point of view, it's also trying to find the most efficient ways of getting people to do these things. Of course, one of the ways that connects specifically to hate is that we have to teach people that you have to be extra-skeptical with the things that most neatly fit your view of the ways things are or the things you really want to believe.

So, if you see something and you think it's really juicy and you want to share it, that's exactly the time when you need to take a few minutes. Sometimes even 30 seconds is enough to Google that thing, and add the word hoax, or do a site search on Snopes—

MONITA BELL

Snopes, yep.

MATTHEW JOHNSON

—and find out whether it is legit. I can tell you, there has probably been a half dozen times in the last week when I've seen something on Twitter, and I've thought, "Oh, that's great." But, I've stopped myself, and about half of those times, it has turned out to be something that wasn't accurate.

MONITA BELL

Mm-hmm (affirmative), excellent example. Any further tools or resources?

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Yeah, there's a whole field, media literacy. Everyone is probably aware of NAMLE, the National Association of Media Literacy Educators—I always get that mixed up. And they have links to media literacy work that's being done across the United States.

Of course, Canada and the United States this year are celebrating—at the beginning of November—Media Literacy Week. Our theme this year is about recognizing—at least, in Canada, it's about recognizing and authenticating good information online. So, in fact, at the Media Literacy Week website—and I know for here in Canada, it's MediaLiteracyWeek.ca, there are going to be links to events and resources from a lot of different sources.

Certainly, we do share links from the other Media Literacy Weeks around the world, including the United States. For teachers, that can be a really terrific way to get the conversation going, because it helps kids feel that they're part of a bigger movement. That this is things that are happening around the country and around the world they're a part of.

MONITA BELL

I think that is a fantastic way to wrap up. Matthew Johnson of MediaSmarts, thank you so much. I think folks will find this a very useful conversation.

MATTHEW JOHNSON

Thank you.

MONITA BELL

That was Matthew Johnson, Director of Education from MediaSmarts. Did you know that Teaching Tolerance has other podcasts? We've got Teaching Hard History, which builds on our framework, Teaching Hard History: American Slavery. Listen as our host, history professor Hasan Kwame Jeffries, brings us to lessons we should have learned in school through the voices of leading scholars and educators. It's good advice for teachers and good information for everybody. We've also got Queer America, hosted by professors Leila Rupp and John D'Emilio. Joined by scholars and educators, they take us on a journey that spans from Harlem to the frontier West revealing stories of LGBTQ life that belong in our consciousness and in our classrooms. Find both podcasts at Tolerance.org/Podcasts, and use them to help you build a more robust and inclusive curriculum.

Next, I talk with Shana White, a fellow with the Constellations Center for Equity in Computing at Georgia Tech. She makes one thing very clear in our conversation. Nurturing good digital citizenship in our students, in part, correlates directly with the culture and educator establishes in the classroom and that educator's modeling of citizenship IRL: in real life.

Thank you so, so much for agreeing to do this. I'm so excited to talk with you about this particular subject, given all of your wonderful expertise.

SHANA WHITE

Also—I'm glad that you asked me.

MONITA BELL

Can you just start by introducing yourself and telling us a little bit about what you do?

SHANA WHITE

All right. My name is Shana White, and I recently accepted a position with the Constellations Center for Equity in Computing. It's through Georgia Tech, and basically we're trying to level the playing field, as far as computer science instruction in K-12 classes. So, basically, there are three fellows. We go into local high schools and teach AP computer science principles to students with the hopes to get them excited about computer science, and also get them to pass the AP course. And also pursue, hopefully, computer science, post-secondary, as well as possibly for a career.

MONITA BELL

Okay, great. So, this podcast is about digital literacy, specifically. So, what does that term mean to you as an educator, specifically with what you're doing now, regarding computer science?

SHANA WHITE

The big thing for digital literacy is understanding media, being able to decipher, and pull information. But, to also understand how to create that information, and how to create platforms and other tools to be able to break down that information. So, that it is consumable for little kids, all the way up to kids that are seniors in high school.

So, basically, it's just being able to decipher and pull apart information that's in the media. Social media, just like television, the Internet, and being able to decipher it. Being able to encrypt and decode it, and also be able to create it yourself.

MONITA BELL

So, I like that you touched on various types of media that folks are engaging with today. Can you talk about some of the major misconceptions regarding teaching about media and digital literacy, and how do you think teachers can overcome those misconceptions in their own practice?

SHANA WHITE

One big thing is with digital literacy, it's understanding how—kind of how Common Sense Media calls it “the nuts and bolts of creation,” but also understanding—a lot of times, teachers come in with the misconception, because the generation that's coming up right now is very digitally driven. That they understand how to possibly keyboard, to locate reputable information, because they have access to a device 24/7, and that's not necessarily true.

So, teachers need to better understand that they're actually needed to teach these types of skills. Where kids can actually decipher fake news, as our current president always screams from the top of his lungs. But, also be able to create, to not infringe on copyright laws. When you look at somebody else's work to not rip that work off.

But, to also understand that there is so much stuff out there, and just be able to sift through it with a critical eye and a critical lens is essential and is something that teachers should be really excited about being able to do.

MONITA BELL

I like what you were touching on there about this idea that because young people have so much access to information that they readily know how to decipher the validity of what they're finding. I know, sometimes my son will ask me—he's in college now, but he'll ask me—what somethings means, or what something is. I'll say, "Ask Siri. Why are you asking me? You have an iPhone."

SHANA WHITE

Right.

MONITA BELL

But, that very idea of just setting them loose on what's out there doesn't mean that they're reading to parse that information. So, that's a really good point. You were also speaking a lot about young people as creators today. So, I just want to touch on that. Especially today, what do we need to be thinking about in terms of young people as creators, that's different than what we're used to in more traditional or older media?

SHANA WHITE

I think, one of the big conceptions is, a lot of times, teachers will say, "Oh, we need to give students a voice."

When, the big thing is actually, "No, we don't need to give them something they have. We need to get out of their way and provide opportunities for them to share that voice."

So, giving them the means to be able to do that, and it doesn't necessarily have to be technology, but technology is a great medium to reach a broader audience. So, I think giving kids the sense of agency, where you're like, "Hey, here's some platforms that can really help you elevate your voice."

Or, "You maybe have a knack for this and that, and these are some things and some tools, technology-wise that can help you elevate that and to fine-tune those skills."

But, at the same time, to also understand that they are still kids. With that agency comes a bit of responsibility in teaching them how to utilize these tools in a responsible fashion. So, they are not perpetuating myths and misinformation, and that they can possibly lead their generation to this new frontier of having a robust set of information that they have to choose from. But being able to be critical as far as assessing that information at the same time.

MONITA BELL

I think that's a great segue into the next thing I wanted to ask you. As you're talking about this new frontier of information, and there's so much out there, and make sure we're helping young people tap into their power to use it responsibly.

So, I just want to ask you, in the work that you've been doing what have you noticed as the dangers that young people face in this online universe that we live in? How can educators navigate those dangers?

SHANA WHITE

The one big thing I would definitely emphasize is that you cannot trust anybody on the Internet. That sounds really sad to say, but to me, it's similar in person. Like, I tell my children, you can't just trust people on the street. The Internet is just a really, really large highway. So, you can't necessarily trust people have the best intentions on the Internet, and if you go in with that mindset, you're going to be a little more protective.

I always tell my—especially when I coach, my—student athletes to be mindful of what you post because it can be found. No matter if you delete, remove, whatever method you want to use to get rid of something, it still always can be found. So, to be mindful of that when you're posting stuff, especially on social media. People believe social media is a platform to really show their individualism and show their autonomy, but a lot of times they have to understand that there's still some mindfulness involved with that. So, I would say those are the two biggest things with Internet usage, is to not necessarily trust anybody on the Internet, and to also just be mindful of what you post, because eventually these things can be found.

MONITA BELL

You mentioned social media, specifically. In some ways, educators are using social media as a tool. I think some folks are also kind of hesitant to do that. So, can you talk a little bit about educators' roles in either discussing social media or using social media with students, as a classroom tool? Just the things to think about along those lines.

SHANA WHITE

I think social media's an awesome tool to leverage for students. Like I said, to build that broad audience, and access people they might not necessarily be able to access in their local community. So, I think the wealth of knowledge that's available through social media is great, but I think a lot of times, with social media, we, again, have to be mindful as educators to not use a comparison lens.

Where we compare somebody's classroom has done all this stuff because the accessibility I have through social media to see. That I don't use that as a way of a shaming tool, as far as, I might not be doing enough for my students. But, I think leveraging social media to reach out to experts in certain fields, to expose students to things they might not necessarily get to see or hear about in their local community. I think it's a great tool in that means, but again, teachers, we have to also be mindful to use our agency for good and not evil. To leverage social media as a positive thing for our students in the classroom. To build them up, but to also help them amplify their voice.

Or, to clear their curiosity. If they're curious about the why's of certain things. To reach out to people who are experts in certain fields, in certain areas—that you can best crave their curiosity and satisfy it with information that's relevant to them and important to them as well.

MONITA BELL

You were speaking a second ago about accessibility. I think we definitely are in a climate where teachers are made to feel, "Oh, if I'm not using these digital tools" or "I'm not doing this from a technological standpoint. I'm behind in some way." But, we know there are fundamental inequalities in access to information and certain technological tools across our society, and definitely in schools. So, I would love for you to share some ideas in terms of how should we be thinking about digital literacy as an equity issue

and what that means for educators?

SHANA WHITE

Well, I think, going back on the previous question about social media, we have to understand, equity-wise, there are certain schools in certain districts that block a lot of things and applications for students and teachers to use. Something like YouTube, which has a wealth of information—and there is some stuff on YouTube that is definitely not something that I would expose students to. But how we block certain things as far as access points for students to gain information and knowledge is something that I feel we need to look that. I think with digital literacy, as far as the “nuts and bolts” as I said Common Sense Media coined it as, is teaching kids how to use these digital tools. Can schools buy some of these programs? These robust things people are creating with in the fields that maybe they’re interested in working in. A lot of times they can’t.

So, what are some substitutions that are still financially feasible that still will give exposure to kids to things that maybe they’re interested in. As far as maybe creation with Adobe, or whatever the case may be. I can’t necessarily afford Adobe, but maybe I can afford this other creation tool, and I’m mindful of this tool being a gate-opener for the kid. I think that’s the other thing we have to realize with the equity issue is that a lot of times we don’t have enough access to tools that are even gate-openers for kids. That is a part of the hierarchy [of] education as it is. And understanding, as teachers, we have to find ways to dismantle those barriers from our classroom however we can because the big thing, ultimately, everybody should be in this for, is to better kids, and to provide opportunities for kids.

So, in some ways, digital literacy is important in that aspect, of being able to dismantle some of those barriers that exist in our schools. But, sometimes, we can’t necessarily dismantle them on our own. It takes a collection of educators in our building, administrators in our building, understanding and really knowing that these tools are necessary for our kids to have access to just the basic versions of them. So, that they can see, “Hey, this is something that I’d really like to pursue further, but I’ve at least had my eyes opened to it.” I think, as educators, we have to see that as a huge bit of power that we have. To open kids’ eyes and open doors for kids that aren’t necessarily open all the time.

MONITA BELL

I really like that you mentioned the perspective of administrators, or that this is something that really concerns them too, not just individual classroom teachers. So, for administrators in particular, for those who might have some worries about their teachers bringing certain technologies into the classroom or might be otherwise hesitant, what advice would you give them?

SHANA WHITE

Well, the first is to become knowledgeable on the tool that the teachers are requesting. There has to be a reason they’re requesting it, and especially if you’re hearing it from more than one teacher. A lot of times, administrators—because they have to wear multiple hats as well, they—can’t necessarily invest the time to actually do the research and find out the information necessary to make an educated decision. It’s kind of like, I’m presented with an idea, and my first inclination is always to say no. That’s usually how administrators operate. So, a lot of times teachers take their own autonomy and they say, “You know, I’m just going to do it and ask forgiveness later.”

But, I think the onus is on administrators, to take that extra initial step, to find out why the teacher needs this tool, and sit down and talk to the teacher. Find out how, maybe, if this tool is not financially feasible for your school or your district, find out if there is a comparable tool that we can use, that can still meet the needs that the teacher wants met for its students.

So, I would say, the onus is on the administrator to definitely do their research, or their homework, on their own. But, also just to actually sit down and listen to the teacher. A lot of times teachers don't feel like they're listened to anyways, and when they get no's from administrators, they're not willing to take those risks for kids and go out on a limb. I think, as an administrator, the responsibility is on administrators to step into those gaps and say, "You know what, you're responsible enough and I respect you as a professional enough, that you're saying that you need this. Tell me more, and tell me why, so that I can do my legwork to make this possible for you and also for our kids."

MONITA BELL

Yeah, thank you for that. That's excellent advice. So, we've been talking some about what all is out there and available to young people. Not only the various tools, but the various kinds of information and various ways to access that information. I think we are seeing an increasing connection between knowing how information flows today and good civic behavior. So, what, in your mind, is that connection between digital literacy and good democratic practice and engagement?

SHANA WHITE

I think teaching students how to be good citizens doesn't necessarily require Internet usage, and I know there's a lot of movements, as far as kindness in the classroom and empathy. But, a lot of our spaces are not inclusive; you can't be kind and empathic to someone you haven't really included. So, I think part of the big responsibility on teachers is to take a step back and say, "What have I done to create a classroom space, or what can I do better to create a classroom space that is inclusive of all voices, and respectful of all voices at all times?" A lot of times, that requires the teacher to de-center themselves, which, as a teacher, that is hard to do. We have egos, as teachers. A lot of times people don't think that we do, because we care about kids, but teachers do have egos. De-centering ourselves in that conversation is a huge thing.

I think to also make a more democratic feel to a classroom, and even to digital literacy and media literacy, is understanding and respecting kids' voices, and respecting them and granting them agency with their voices. A lot of times our first response is to lash back when a child maybe expresses an opinion that we don't agree with, and usually those opinions are not necessarily related to society or whatever. It's how the classroom is being run. So, a lot of times, as teachers, we have to de-center ourselves and understand if we're making an inclusive classroom. That we are respecting students' voices, and we're also honoring their agency in using their voices.

A lot of times those two things don't always go hand in hand, and I think once we do that a little bit more in our classrooms, we will create better citizens and people leaving our classrooms, and things like empathy and kindness will flow, because we have created that inclusivity. By leveling respect in the classroom, and de-centering ourselves as the authority figure in the classroom, and really respecting and understanding student agency—and student agency in its various forms—and not policing that as much as a big deal.

MONITA BELL

Okay, so I really love what you're saying here. I just want to make sure I'm really translating this properly. So, what you're saying is, if we're thinking about how good citizenship, say, is transferring from real life to what's happening online, that part of that has to start with, not only how educators are modeling that in the classroom, but that very culture that they set in the classroom.

SHANA WHITE

Absolutely, absolutely. A lot of times educators will say, "Well, we can't handle what happens at home." That's true. Once the student leaves our classroom, we don't necessarily have any control, but we do have control for a large amount of hours out of a student's day. How we build that culture within our classrooms and our schools is key because, not only are you having the opportunity to develop kids that are going to be great citizens and be inclusive of other people once they leave your building or your classroom, but they can model that behavior in their community.

You have a lot of times where people say, "Oh, well so-and-so's family believes this," or, "*Those kids.*" We use those qualifiers all the time. You'll hear educators use that. In understanding that we can still ... In using those qualifiers, we have basically become the worst version of our own selves. We have to understand if we're trying to build that culture and create good citizens—who will ultimately be good digital citizens—we have to model that culture in our own classroom. I think we can combat a lot of the stuff that happens online if we create good citizens in our classroom.

Like I said, it goes back to the respect piece. It goes back to this de-centering of authority by teachers. Goes back to the excess of policing we do of certain kids' voices, and certain kids expressing their voices in our classrooms and our schools. I think, once we do that, and we realize and take it from that lens, you're going to develop kids that sit there and say, "Wow, I was in this classroom and I felt respected. I felt my voice was honored. I felt that I was included. I want to make sure that I replicate that feeling for other people, and I will replicate that feeling while I'm online."

I think understanding that our behavior that we have in person, it's literally the same online. A lot of times people say they take different personas online, on social media *this*, on social media *that*. There's tremendous insight to who you are online, as who you are in real life. I think, as educators, we have a really good chance to mold kids to be good citizens and good people in real life, so they will ultimately, literally, adopt that same behavior when they're online.

MONITA BELL

You know, what you just said is really resonating for me right now. Because, I don't know if you've heard this news—that I just read this morning—that a teacher in Louisiana is in hot water for a comment she made on Facebook regarding the Colin Kaepernick situation, and that black people, "act like animals."

So, I think that is just such a rich example of what you were just saying, about if this is a teacher who is holding these beliefs and putting that online. I'm wondering, now, what is her classroom culture? How is she engaging with students, and what are the messages she is communicating in person? Then, we see what she has now revealed about her beliefs online.

So, just that connection: There's not that veneer of the screen, as people like to think. It really just shows

what's happening in real life and in face-to-face interactions. Have you heard that story?

SHANA WHITE

I didn't hear that story, but we had a recent story in Georgia with a superintendent of a school district that was caught on tape using the n-word, and his district serves a lot of black students. Like you said, social media, to me, is an insight into who people really are. I can't imagine being a student in that district, in Georgia, or a student in that classroom in Louisiana.

Even as a parent—because I have two kids myself—I would be terrified to know my child is in a classroom with somebody who believes that. I think, like I said, it goes back to social media, and your online persona is really a glimpse of who you are in real life. You can't have an inclusive classroom with a teacher who has beliefs that, literally, are the opposite of inclusion.

Like I said, I didn't hear that Louisiana story, but it breaks my heart because I don't know how long she's been in the classroom. You don't know how many lives and trajectory of lives she's changed because of that belief. Because I'm willing to guess she's over-policed black kids in her classroom. There might have been more discipline-related things for black students in her classroom. If she was comfortable enough to express on social media that black people behave like animals, that conditioning in her mind literally would have impacted the trajectory of so many students that she would have seen in her career.

That hurts my heart, because those kids are scarred for life, and their trajectory has been ultimately changed and shaped by this one person. It goes back to—my husband is a big superhero fan, and the big Spider-Man thing: “With great power comes great responsibility.” As educators, we have to harness that and understand the power that we have, and the fact that we can change the trajectory of children's lives, for the *best* or for the *worst*, and understand that power that we do have.

MONITA BELL

Thank you. I think that's a great way to wrap up, just with the responsibility that educators have when it comes to their influencing, like you said—the trajectory of children's lives. So, this is more than teaching about how to use and seek information online. We really are influencing the citizens that young people will become, by the kinds of citizens we are, largely.

SHANA WHITE

Exactly, exactly. Our example. A lot of times you'll hear people say kids won't necessarily listen to the words—all the words—that come out of your mouth, but they will watch how you behave.”

Even those words—if they come out on social media—I'm willing to bet kids, they saw that writing on the wall a long time ago, with the incident from the teacher in Louisiana and the superintendent here in Georgia. So, understand students are watching, they're paying attention, and they're going to know when your words and your actions don't match up either.

I think that's what teachers need to understand; we need to be mindful. There's so much stuff on our plate, I totally get that. But, to me, this should be the core of our mission while we're in schools, is being good citizens ourselves, and creating environments that are inclusive of all kids and all voices, and

respectful of all kids and all voices, and then modeling that ourselves.

That might take work on some people's parts, as far as education into our own biases and misconceptions, and implicit biases as well. But, ultimately, if we want to change the trajectory of our country, and to produce great citizens, and also great digital citizens, it starts in our classrooms every single day.

MONITA BELL

I'm not even going to add to that. That is the perfect way to wrap that up. Thank you, Shana, for that.

So, my final question for you then. Considering everything we've talked about, can you tell us about some resources that you would recommend to teachers, when it comes to teaching about digital literacy, but also digital citizenship and citizen in general? I know you already mentioned Common Sense Media.

SHANA WHITE

I would say Common Sense Media is a great go-to, just for digital citizenship and digital literacy. They have tons of resources. They actually, even, vet applications that teachers can use in their classrooms. So, to me, that's also a great resource to leverage, especially if you're asking to use some sort of digital tool with your administrator.

You can show them how Common Sense Media has ranked it, other teachers have ranked it. So, if gives you a little bit more leverage, as far as possibly getting those digital tools to your students. I'm always a big fan of Teaching Tolerance, as far as the inclusive lens and creating those classrooms that are inclusive and respectful of all voices. All meaning *all*—not all the ones that we like, but all meaning all. So, I love the resources there. But there's—like I said, you easily can do a general Google search for digital literacy resources. But I would say Common Sense Media is probably the best one, and the one I would say is a big go-to. But, a lot of times, you can learn a lot of things just from talking to other colleagues. A lot of the stuff that I've learned, just in the world of ed-tech, computer science and even with digital literacy, is talking to other teachers. What works in your classroom? What didn't work? Using and leveraging other colleagues and their expertise as well is a great way to make your classroom more inclusive and more likely to create great citizens.

MONITA BELL

Thank you, thank you so much. That is Shana White, and Shana, just one more time. Will you tell us what you're doing at Georgia Tech?

SHANA WHITE

I'm a Constellations fellow with the Constellations Center for Equity in Computing. Basically, we are trying to make computing more equitable for students in Atlanta schools. So, we are going into teach AP computer science to these students, to help them not only pass the AP tests, but to also provide opportunities and open doors in computer science and computing, for students that might not necessarily have these opportunities available to them.

MONITA BELL

Awesome. Thank you so much, Shana. I really appreciate it.

SHANA WHITE

Thank you.

MONITA BELL

All right, bye-bye.

SHANA WHITE

Bye-bye.

MONITA BELL

You just heard from Shana White, a fellow from Georgia Tech's Constellations Center for Equity in Computing. Thanks for tuning into The Mind Online, a podcast of Teaching Tolerance, which is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. I'm your host, Monita Bell, Senior Editor for Teaching Tolerance.

This podcast was inspired by Teaching Tolerance's digital literacy framework, which offers seven key areas in which students need support developing digital and civic literacy skills, and features lessons for kindergarten through 12th-grade classrooms. Each lesson is designed in a way that can be used by educators with little-to-no technology in their classrooms.

The digital literacy framework, and all its related resources, including a series of student-friendly videos and a professional development webinar, can be found online at tolerance.org/digit. That's tolerance.org/D-I-G-L-I-T.

This episode of The Mind Online was produced by Jasmin López, with help from Esther Manilla Sawyer, JP Davidson and Seth Samuels. Production was supervised by Kate Shuster. Special thanks to my guests, Matthew Johnson and Shana White, and to Teaching Tolerance Senior Writer Cory Collins. Like what you heard? Then share this podcast with your friends and colleagues, and remember to rate and review us on iTunes or wherever you listen.