

## INFORMATION LITERACY VS. THE DEMAGOGUE: ARE WE PREPARING STUDENTS FOR INFORMED CITIZENSHIP?

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*I have here in my hand a letter from Senator Joseph McCarthy, dictated to me through a Parker Brothers Ouija Board in the very late hours of St. Patrick's Day, 2013.*

*Senator McCarthy died in 1957. From 1950 to 1954, Senator McCarthy amassed a great deal of power and media attention by making allegations of widespread Communist infiltration into the federal government. He never substantiated any of the charges he made, though his accusations ruined the careers of many citizens working in politics, journalism, and entertainment, and his smear campaigns greatly contributed to the atmosphere of suspicion and partisanship that was prevalent in the early Cold-War period.*

*Here is what the senator has to say:*

Dear librarians and information literacy educators:

I understand that you concern yourselves with the development of your students as “informed citizens,” and that you believe that the information literate student should be able to “recognize prejudice, deception, or manipulation” (ACRL, 2000). If that’s really what you’re after, you need to start doing things differently. If you want to help your students recognize political humbug when they see it, you need to study the techniques of the artists who excelled in that medium. I was one of the best.

Consider my 1950 Lincoln Day address, the very first time I claimed that I had the names of 205 Communist sympathizers who were working for the State Department. Why would I pull a stunt like that, especially without any firm evidence? Heck, I didn’t even have any names! (Johnson, 2005). But it worked like a charm – here’s why:

1. I mentioned *Communists*. It was early in the Cold War. Most people didn’t know what Communists

were, but they were certain that Communists were treacherous and detestable. State Department employee Alger Hiss had been recently exposed for sharing government secrets with the Soviet Union. Who’s to say the infiltration didn’t go even further?

2. I gave a statistic: 205. In speeches the following week, I changed the numbers a bit, first to 207, then to 57 (Bayley, 1981). The quantity didn’t really matter. But the fact that I gave a specific number made it look like I knew what I was talking about.
3. I was challenging the establishment: As a senator from Outagamie County, Wisconsin, exposing treason in the federal government allowed me to take on the role of the outsider from Middle America challenging the Washington elites. Everyone hates Washington elites, and my status as the underdog appealed to people.

My message was crafted to push people’s buttons, to play upon their fears and their sense of indignation. But the message wasn’t all – I also paid attention to the medium I was using. I had a strategy for working the wire services of the Associated Press and United Press International. Here’s how it worked: remember my Lincoln Day speech stating that 205 Communists are employed by the State Department? Do I drop that bombshell in New York or DC? No way! In places like that, there are too many other stories competing for headlines, not to mention too many Pulitzer Prize-winning troublemakers who might ask difficult questions (Johnson, 2005). No, the place to expose Communists in government was Wheeling, West Virginia. I was sure to be front-page news there. More importantly, Wheeling provided a point of entry into the AP wire network. According to a newspaper study conducted by Edwin R Bayley (1981), 28 newspapers across the nation covered my Wheeling speech. Two days later, I followed up that performance with press conferences in Denver and Reno. Thirty-four papers ran stories about Denver;

forty-nine papers covered Reno. That's how we went "viral" back in the 1950s, and I was just getting started. According to the same study by Bayley, by 1954, it was common for me to be mentioned fifteen or more times a day – in a *single* edition of a *single* paper. I was *everywhere*!

Imagine what I could do today with Twitter and YouTube. According to a recent Pew study, 39% of American adults use social media to engage in political activities (Rainie, Smith, Brady, & Verba, 2012). I could "broadcast myself" directly to the people instead of working through the filter of the press. Some of the liberals in the media might challenge me on what I was saying, but it wouldn't make any difference. The conspiracy express would already have left the station, and the voices of the critics would just help carry my message further.

You don't think the people would believe me instead of my critics? I'll let you in on a little secret – people believe what they want to believe, and they love nothing better than the righteous indignation that is the stock-in-trade of partisan politics. Your political scientists are looking into this – they call it "motivated reasoning." According to one recent study, the more sophisticated a liberal argument is, the harder a conservative mind will work to disconfirm it, and vice versa. In the words of the researchers, people "hold the arguments they don't like to a higher standard" (Taber, Cann, & Kucsova, 2009). Another study suggests that this holds true even when (a) a political figure makes a misleading claim in a news article and (b) the reporter or editor presents evidence that disconfirms the claim in question (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Instead of buying into the corrective claim that's actually based on evidence, the true believers dig in their heels to stand by their ideology of choice.

It's no wonder my job was so easy. And no wonder why your job is so hard. If your information literacy really is about promoting informed citizenship, it needs to address more than just search and the characteristics of various formats of information. *It needs to encourage questions about the judgments and choices people make when they create, disseminate, and buy into political information.*

To quote one of my least favorite journalists, "Good night, and good luck." If you are going to try to keep up with the demagogues, you're going to need it.

Sincerely,

Joseph R. McCarthy

United States Senate – Wisconsin

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