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# Democracy & Education

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## Red States, Blue States, and Media Literacy Political Context and Media Literacy

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### Abstract

This paper examines the ways that political contexts affect the perceptions and practices of social studies preservice teachers (SSPSTs) being prepared in a conservative “Red State” compared to those being prepared in a liberal “Blue State.” The researchers analyzed how controversial the SSPSTs in each context considered the practice of teaching media literacy by exploring their beliefs about media literacy using a survey, analyzing practices related to media literacy through a targeted lesson plan assignment, and facilitating focus groups to member check emerging themes. Survey data indicated that both groups believed teaching media literacy skills was essential, but the assignment revealed that Red State SSPSTs were far more likely than Blue State SSPSTs to create lesson plans at the lowest level of media literacy integration. In the focus-group interviews, this discrepancy was explained as Red state SSPSTs considered media literacy to be controversial at rates beyond their Blue State peers. The study’s implications suggest that methods instructors who prepare SSPSTs need to be aware that community context influences the way SSPSTs integrate anything that can be deemed political into the classroom, including media literacy skills, and provide targeted content examples to help SSPSTs gain confidence for teaching these skills.

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### Introduction

**T**HE POLITICAL DIVIDE between liberal and conservative America appears to be growing, especially since the election of Donald Trump in 2016. According to the Pew Research Center (2017), the partisan divide in terms of fundamental political values between Republicans (conservatives) and Democrats (liberals) grew during the presidency of Barack Obama and substantially widened during President Trump’s first year in office. This division is

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symbolized in the *Red States* and *Blue States* labels, which originated from the contested 2000 election to describe states that consistently vote Republican (red) or Democratic (blue) in national elections (Zeller, 2004). At this point, the terms *Red States* and *Blue States* are firmly entrenched in common political discussion, with Southern and Midwestern states comprising most of the Red States and Northeastern and West Coast states comprising most of the Blue States (Gelman, 2010).

Masyada and Washington (2016) pointed out the importance of explicitly teaching students multiple perspectives of issues, even as state standards narrowly focus on facts instead of the skills and dispositions that would help students learn to navigate the political realities of today's world. The skills and dispositions needed for navigating contentious political disagreements include deliberation and discussion (McAvoy & Hess, 2013), particularly in times of political polarization, which is all today's middle and high school students have ever known (McAvoy, 2016). Yet research indicates that conservatives increasingly distrust teachers at all levels, particularly fearing political indoctrination by teachers espousing liberal views during class discussion (Brown, 2018; Lautzenheiser, Kelly, & Miller, 2011; *Phi Delta Kappan*, 2018). This environment can lead to teachers omitting key citizenship skills for fear of public backlash from their communities (Journell, 2017; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

In this study, we researched how social studies pre-service teachers (SSPSTs) viewed the necessity for teaching media literacy and how they approached that task with a directed lesson plan assignment. Focus groups composed of the SSPSTs were then used to clarify our evolving, iterative analysis of the data set. We, the researchers of this project, lived and worked within teacher-education programs located in very different contexts during the study. One of us worked in a very traditional, Southern, conservative Red State, and one worked in a progressive, West Coast Blue State. This study was positioned to analyze the extent that context mattered in considering how the SSPSTs in our different states viewed and planned to teach media literacy.

The overall research question for this study is: How does political context affect the way SSPSTs consider and approach the teaching of media literacy? To manage this larger research question and align it to our data sets, we divided it into the following sub-questions:

1. How do SSPSTs in teacher-education programs in a Red State and a Blue State compare in terms of their responses to survey questions about their ability and willingness to teach media literacy skills?
2. How do SSPSTs in teacher-education programs in a Red State and a Blue State compare in terms of their approach to the teaching of media literacy based on their lesson plans?
3. How do SSPSTs in teacher-education programs in a Red State and a Blue State compare in terms of their beliefs about media literacy as a controversial teaching strategy?

The findings section includes a presentation and analysis of each data point, and the study concludes with a discussion of the

implications for SSPSTs' perceptions about teaching media literacy in two states with different political contexts.

## What Is Media Literacy, and Why Might It Be Sensitive to Political Context?

This study follows the National Association for Media Literacy Education's (NAMLE) (2007), definition of media literacy that explains it as "the ability to ACCESS, ANALYZE, EVALUATE, CREATE, and ACT using all forms of communication" (para. 1).

While not every aspect of media literacy relates to *news media* literacy, there is a clear connection to political context. Hobbs and Jensen (2009) have argued that teachers must not only help students analyze news, advertising, and propaganda available on social media—they must teach students to become active authors of social media messages and utilize it as a forum for self-expression and advocacy. This call is similar to the way Alvermann and Hagood (2000) claimed that teachers must support their students to "acquire the analytic tools necessary for 'critically reading' all kinds of media texts" with an eye toward the politics of gender, race, class, and sexuality (p. 203). We see NAMLE's definition of critical media literacy as being useful in unpacking not only media messages that target consumerism, spread popular culture, and disseminate information, but also for analyzing the truthiness of political messages in an era of "fake" news (Cherner & Curry, 2019).

The political dimensions of media literacy are often present in classroom resources offered for media literacy. Teacher guides address biases inherent in commercials and political messages from Republican and Democratic campaigns (Baker, 2016), and they attempt to teach critical thinking skills whenever approaching content gleaned from the media (Scheibe & Rogow, 2011). Websites such as the News Literacy Project (<https://newslit.org/>) and News Guard (<https://www.newsguardtech.com/>) explicitly teach messages about interpreting the news that appears in social media feeds while maintaining a nonpartisan position on issues. The Stanford History Education Group has created assessments of civic online reasoning teachers can use to measure students' ability to judge the credibility of online sources (<https://sheg.stanford.edu/civic-online-reasoning>). Other sources focus on integrating media with content, such as Facing History and Ourselves (<https://www.facinghistory.org/>), which is a resource focused on developing materials for teachers to integrate history lessons with current topics, especially on topics of ethical decision-making. Each of these resources is designed to provide teachers with materials to help students be more aware of the provenance and bias of the messages they receive, given the democratization of the news industry in the digital age (Moffa, Brejwo, & Waterson, 2016). The National Council for the Social Studies supports this stance with its position statement about Media Literacy: "Media literacy models a constructivist approach to document-based analysis that asks the students to apply key content to a focused and complex analysis of messages, meaning, authorship, audience, representations and reality" (Sperry & Baker, 2016, p. 183).

The purpose of media literacy is not political indoctrination but an analysis of the provenance and purpose of media messages, including political ones (Hobbs, 1996). This raises the question of why the political context of a community has the potential to alter

the way media literacy is envisioned and enacted. Media literacy lessons may involve current topics with potentially “open” controversies (Journall, 2017), and teaching controversial issues in a measured and respectful way contains many challenges for classroom teachers, perhaps especially in places where groups opposing social change tend to be more populous (Mayo, 2016). When teaching a topic such as immigration, for example, teachers should “include both historical and contemporary perspectives of immigration as well as civic perspectives” (Hilburn & Jaffee, 2016, p. 51). However, one study found that even when handed extensive evidence packets featuring multiple perspectives of immigration, students largely discounted the evidence in favor of personal experience or previous beliefs (Crocco, Halvorsen, Jacobsen, & Segall, 2017). The authors cited social identity theory to explain how evidence could not stand up to the weight of prior experiences and beliefs when it came to the topic of immigration. “Sociocultural identity, personal experience, and ideological leanings seemed to drive the dynamics in ways that reflected what political sciences call ‘motivated reasoning,’” (Crocco, Segall, Halvorsen, & Jacobsen, 2018, p. 6).

*Motivated reasoning* is the phenomenon whereby decision-making processes are “motivated” by outside influences (including social group identifications and political affiliations) rather than by rational thought. This type of reasoning leads people to not “trust the evidence” if it contradicts their previous beliefs (Kraft, Lodge, & Taber, 2015). Along with being especially critical of evidence that does not support preexisting beliefs, this type of reasoning leads to confirmation bias, wherein people are noncritical and accepting of any evidence that supports their beliefs (Chaiken, Giner-Sorolla, & Chen, 1996). Clark and Avery (2016) also pointed out other psychological phenomenon that limit people’s ability to reason with evidence on controversial issues, especially in our ultra-polarized political environment. For example, polarization itself is not necessarily problematic, but *affective* polarization negatively impacts discussions of controversial topics in classrooms. Affective polarization is “the degree to which individuals evaluate their own party positively and the opposition negatively” (Clark & Avery, 2016, p. 111). All of this leads to a climate where arguments over what should be rational, evidence-based differences of opinion instead feel like conflicts involving crucial aspects of our identity (Mason, 2018), making them potential minefields for teachers.

This study takes place in two relatively homogenous communities within politically opposite states. Not only are the teachers in these states dealing with students’ individual psychological processes that often limit the effectiveness of controversial topic discussions, they are compounded by the impact of working within relatively homogenous political climates. Journell (2017) conducted research on students and teachers exploring controversial issues at three politically disparate school environments in the same county. He found that they followed the basic ideas of the “spiral of silence” theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), which states that individuals who are part of an ideological “outgroup” will often prefer silence, or even expressing the prevailing opinion of the “ingroup,” rather than risk social ostracization or hostility.

SSPSTs live in a polarized political climate and understand that it is a challenge to overcome bias. Even seasoned in-service teachers have indicated that they typically avoid discussions of controversial issues because of fears of parent backlash (McAvoy & Hess, 2003). A study conducted by the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (AEI) indicated that teachers’ fears of including any content that even “seems” political due to a fear of backlash may be well-founded. According to their research, the public is wary of teachers “[using] their classes as a ‘soap box’ for their personal point of view” (Lautzenheiser et al., 2011, p. 4). The study asked both teachers and non-teachers to agree or disagree with a statement on a variety of topics, including a particularly relevant point regarding media literacy: Students must learn to critically evaluate information for credibility and bias—it’s a crucial citizenship skill. According to this study, nearly all teachers agreed, compared to only three-quarters of citizens, and even fewer responders who identified as Republican.

The nonpartisan Pew Research Center published a study that found similar ideological differences regarding beliefs about higher education (Brown, 2018). In the survey, 73% of Republicans said they believed higher education was heading in the wrong direction, and of those, 79% cited “professors bringing their political and social views into the classroom” (Brown, 2018, para. 2) as their main reason. Meanwhile, 52% of Democrats believed higher education was heading in the wrong direction, and only 17% claimed that was due to professors bringing their own political and social views into the classroom. The 2018 *Phi Delta Kappan* (PDK) poll of the Public’s Attitudes toward Public Schools also found a political difference in liberal and conservative views of education, in this case through a question about whether the respondents had “trust and confidence” in teachers. Seventy-five percent of liberal respondents who answered this question agreed, but only about 50% of conservatives did (*Phi Delta Kappan*, 2018, p. K8).

These surveys indicate that just as Americans are becoming more divided along ideological lines on a wide array of issues (Pew Research Center, 2016), there is also a gap between Republicans and Democrats in terms of trust in educators at all levels, especially when educators bring “political and social issues” into the classroom. This study, in turn, looked for evidence to determine the impact political context had on SSPSTs.

### **Theoretical Framework: Levels of Integration of Media Literacy Content**

This study’s research questions focus on SSPSTs and their beliefs about and approaches to teaching media literacy. To guide our comparison of the lesson plans created by the SSPSTs, we adopted a theoretical framework that emphasized the level of Integration of Media Literacy content based on Banks’ Approaches for the Integration of Multicultural Content (Banks, 2016, pp. 164–165). However, in this study, we augmented Banks’s multicultural focus with an emphasis on media literacy that we next explain.

In his framework, Banks used Contributions, Additive, Transformation, and Social Action as his four approaches to

describe the depth at which multicultural topics are taught. Banks described the Contributions approach as being references to a culture that result in overall generalizations or stereotypes. This approach may include references to one type of food or pastime attributed to a culture, such as Black Americans eating fried foods or being athletes. The Additive approach goes further in that it provides a fuller description of a culture; however, stereotypes and generalizations are still prevalent. For example, only studying the history of slavery in America without providing further information of its long-term impacts is an Additive approach. When moving to the Transformation approach, it more fully addresses and contextualizes the culture being studied with the purpose of deep understanding. Returning to the slavery example, teachers can develop lessons that address the institutional structures that disadvantage people of color in general and Black Americans in particular. Banks's final level is Social Action, which requires individuals to make an effort to redress the social inequities that exist in society, such as marching for civil rights.

In this study, we see Banks's approaches as aligning to the purpose and instruction of media literacy (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Hobbs, 1996; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009), particularly as it relates to teachers' perception of the controversy inherent in teaching these topics. However, as Banks (2010) explained:

*The problems developed because the material was used with students who had neither the content background nor the attitudinal sophistication to respond to them appropriately. Adding ethnic content to the curriculum in a sporadic and segmented way can result in pedagogical problems, trouble for the teacher, student confusion, and community controversy. (p. 242)*

Media literacy, with its similar potential to incur "pedagogical problems, trouble for the teacher, student confusion, and community controversy" (Banks, p. 242), might be most effective at higher levels of integration, where the students learn the content and skills required to be thoughtful and critical consumers and producers of media.

**Table 1**

**Levels of Integration of Media Literacy Content, Adapted from Banks's Approaches for the Integration of Multicultural Content**

Approach	Description	Examples
Contributions	A principle of media literacy is applied to a lesson plan that could exist without it, but the principle is enhanced by the contribution of a media literacy lens.	Yellow journalism lesson, where students are asked to look at five examples of yellow journalism and say whether they were authentic and unbiased enough that they would "share" these items on social media.
Additive	A principle of media literacy is used to add content and concepts to a lesson, which deepens understanding of both the media literacy principle and the content of the lesson.	A lecture on political parties, interest groups, and the impact of the media on politics introduces the topic. Then students go to sites such as Hoaxy or Red Feed, Blue Feed to choose a topic to compare by political party.
Transformation	The basic goals and structure of the lesson are changed to reflect the principle of media literacy selected, enabling students to view events and issues from multiple perspectives based on their analysis of the media selected.	Students are asked to find media depictions of Muslims before and after 9/11 to determine how media can influence a nation's view about groups of people.
Social Action	Students identify important social problems and issues, and they use media literacy principles as a method for social action. Lessons focus on helping students gather data, clarify their positions on issues, and use social and other media to take reflective actions on the issue.	Students are divided into groups and given a contemporary issue facing women today—access to education, employment opportunities, maternal and personal health rights, gender-based violence, child marriage, gender equality—as well as a non-U.S. country to focus their research on. Following research, students develop an awareness campaign that could be implemented through a social media platform.

Integration of these ideas begins at the level of Contributions, where a principle of media literacy is applied to a lesson plan that could exist without it, but it is enhanced by the contribution of a media literacy lens. For example, a student submitted a lesson on yellow journalism that concludes with students giving five examples of yellow journalism from the 19th century and then deciding whether the stories are authentic and unbiased enough that they would share them on social media. In this case, the social media element is not essential to the lesson, but it enhances students' understanding of the content. At the Additive level, a media literacy principle is used to add content and concepts to a lesson, deepening understanding of both the media literacy principle and the content of the lesson. Returning to the yellow

journalism lesson, it needs to include an activity requiring students to go to websites such as Red Feed, Blue Feed (<http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/>) to see modern examples of sensationalist journalism and then discuss in small groups how they are similar or different to the yellow journalism of the 19th century. In this lesson, content is added so it contributes to a deeper understanding of the content (yellow journalism) and media literacy (modern news literacy) in the current context.

In both the higher levels, the lesson's purpose shifts from being about teaching the content selected to being about teaching media literacy using a content standard. This is essentially a swapping of roles from what is found at the Contributions level, where media literacy is considered an "enhancement" to a content lesson.

At the Transformation level, the lesson's essential purpose is to teach the media literacy principle with the content element being secondary to it. Continuing with the yellow journalism example, a lesson at this level might involve students working in several small groups that were given a distinct political affiliation and regionality. Students would be asked to research how people with their given political affiliation and regionality would likely respond to a current news item. The group would then be charged with finding a "sensationalist" news story about that current news item, written explicitly to appeal to the political and regional sentiments of the group they are researching. Groups would indicate the tactics and language used by the journalists to appeal to their group, and they would listen to the findings of each group. Finally, the teacher would show examples of yellow journalism from the 19th century and lead a discussion wherein students find connections with modern-day media tactics. In this example, there is a clear connection to the content, but media literacy is the primary purpose of the lesson.

Finally, the last level is Social Action, and it requires students to identify important social problems and issues and use media literacy principles as a method for social action. Lessons focus on helping students gather data, clarify their positions on issues, and use social and other media to take reflective actions on the issue. At this level, students are using their media literacy skills to act on an issue they have researched. Concluding the yellow journalism lesson example, students would identify a story in a local newspaper or news station and write a critique that points out how the media's treatment ignored or downplayed another perspective on the issue to sensationalize the story. This critique could then be emailed or even tweeted with the paper or station's hashtag.

### Methodology and Participants

This case study focuses on understanding and comparing the beliefs of SSPTs completing a teacher-education program in a conservative state to those in a liberal state. Yin (2017) explained that studies where the researchers are seeking to trace "operational processes over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence" (p. 10) are appropriate for case studies. In this study, we see the "operational processes" Yin referred to as the SSPTs' beliefs about teaching media literacy due to the beliefs informing how the SSPTs will "operate" in the classroom. Furthermore, this research was delimited to two specific sets of participants and collected data from them using three methods to strengthen our study's design (Baxter & Jack, 2008) to bound our case study and which will next be described.

### Context

This study took place in two locations. The Blue State's location was in Moyer Pacific University's (MPU) (pseudonym) College of Education, which is an urban university situated in the United States' Pacific Northwest (PNW) region. MPU has a mission to serve its local community, and it claims to provide teacher-education programs rooted in social justice, equity, and inclusivity. MPU considers itself an "access" university that serves all students, and its teacher-education programs are nationally accredited and have a reputation for being focused on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusivity.

The Red State's location was in Southern Coastal University's (SCU) (pseudonym) College of Education, which is in a coastal region of a Southeastern state. According to its mission statement, SCU embraces a teacher-scholar model with an emphasis on high-quality teaching and engaged learning. SCU's mission statement is based on developing a "global perspective" in its students.

### Participants

This study was situated specifically in two classes. At MPU, this study was implemented in an instructional technology class that included eight SSPSTs. At SCU, this study was implemented in a social studies methods course that included 13 SSPSTs. All of the study's participants held a bachelor's degree in a social studies field and were spending an average of 14 hours a week in a school-based placement. By completing their respective programs, the SSPSTs would earn a master's degree and initial teaching credentials at the secondary level.

To compare the context of the MPU and SCU, we report county and state demographics from 2018 along with results of the 2016 presidential election. These comparisons are intended to paint a fuller picture of the participants' overall context.

**Table 2**  
**Demographics for SCU and MPU Counties Compared to the State Context**

	SCU County	Red State	MPU County	Blue State
Race: percent White alone	82.6%	68.5%	76.5%	87.1%
Race: percent Black	13.3%	27.3%	6.0%	2.2%
Race: percent Hispanic or Latino	6.0%	5.7%	11.6%	13.1%
Race: American Indian and Native Alaskan	0.6%	0.5%	1.4%	1.8%
Race: Asian	1.3%	1.7%	7.9%	4.7%
Language other than English spoken at home	7.5%	6.9%	20.0%	15.2%
Education: High school degree or higher	89.3%	86.5%	91.0%	90.2%
Education: Bachelor's degree or higher	23.0%	27.0%	43.8%	32.2%
Median household income	\$46,475	\$48,781	\$60,3694	\$60,309
Poverty rate	17%	15.4%	14.4%	13.2%

*Note:* All percentages came from U.S. Census data and will not be cited to protect the identity of the states.

Compared using their county information, SCU is situated within a largely White population, whereas MPU is in a more diverse context. However, when comparing the states' populations, the Blue State is composed of a much larger White population than the Red State's population. There is a nuance, however, that Black individuals comprise a significantly larger percentage of the population in SCU County and the Red State as compared to the other minority populations. In MPU County and the Blue

State, the Hispanic population is the second largest, followed by the Asian population. This population trend is also reflected by the fact that there are more than twice the population who speak a language other than English in MPU County and the Blue State as compared to SCU County and the Red State. In addition, MPU County and the Blue State also are more highly educated and have a higher median household income and a lower rate of people living in poverty than both SCU County and the Red State.

**Table 3**  
**2016 Presidential Election Results: SCU and MPU Counties Compared to the State Context**

	SCU County	Red State	MPU County	Blue State
D. Trump	67.3%	54.9%	17.0%	41.1%
H. Clinton	29.5%	40.8%	73.3%	51.7%
Other	3.2%	4.3%	9.7%	7.3%

Election results in the county where SCU is located indicate that a higher percentage of the population voted for the Republican candidate than was average for the state. Donald Trump earned more than 66% of the vote in this county, compared to less than 55% for the state overall. In MPU's county, a higher percentage of the population voted for the Democratic candidate than was average for the state. Hillary Clinton earned almost 75% of the vote in this county, compared to just over 50% of the vote statewide. In both cases, the participant counties are not only representative of the political context in the state—they are intensive pockets of political polarization based on voting records.

#### **Participant Demographics: SCU and MPU**

The following table is intended to highlight the in-state status, gender, race, and undergraduate major of each participant.

**Table 4**  
**Participant Demographics, Including In-State Status, Gender, Race, and Bachelor's Degree Field**

SCU Participant	In- or Out-of-State (Before and After Teaching)	Gender	Race	Bachelor's Degree
1	In-state	Male	White	History
2	In-state	Male	White	History
3	In-state	Male	White	History
4	In-state	Male	White	History
5	Out-of-state	Male	White	History
6	In-state	Female	White	Communications
7	In-state	Male	White	History
8	In-state	Male	White	Psychology
9	In-state	Male	White	Psychology
10	In-state	Female	White	History

SCU Participant	In- or Out-of-State (Before and After Teaching)	Gender	Race	Bachelor's Degree
11	In-state	Male	White	Communications
12	In-state	Male	White	History
13	In-state	Female	White	Interdisciplinary Studies: History

MPU Participants	In- or Out-of-State (Before and After Teaching)	Gender	Race	Bachelor's Degree
1	In-state	Female	White	History
2	In-state	Male	White	History
3	In-state	Male	White	History
4	In-state	Male	White	Politics
5	In-state	Female	White	History
6	In-state	Female	White	Interdisciplinary
7	In-state	Female	White	History
8	In-state	Female	Black	History

Population demographics for SCU indicate that all but one of the participants was an in-state student both before entry into the program and after graduation. Three of the 13 participants were female, and 10 were male. All of the 13 participants were White. Most of the participants had received their bachelor's degree in history, although two of the participants had received a degree in communications, and two others had a background in psychology. For MPU, all the participants were in-state both before and after completing the program. Of the participants, 62.5% were female, and all identified as being White. Seventy-five percent of the participants had earned a bachelor's degree in history, and the participants who came from another discipline completed enough appropriate coursework in the field to be qualified for the program.

Participants were not asked about their political ideology, sexuality, or other identifying information. This decision to not ask for that information was to increase the participants' comfort level with the study and for them not to potentially feel "outed" by the study. All but one of the participants were in-state students both before and after the study, which indicates that participants were immersed in the larger political context of the institution's county and state.

#### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study collected and analyzed three data sets. The first set was a survey gauging the SSPSTs' comfort level for engaging with media literacy, as both consumers and teachers. The second set was a lesson plan assignment that asked the SSPSTs to teach one of the National Association for Media Literacy Education's (NAMLE) (2007) core principles of media literacy along with a state social studies standard. Commentary was also included, so the SSPSTs had an opportunity to explain their logic. The third set consisted of transcripts from two focus-group interviews conducted with a sampling of SSPSTs from each institution.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The multi-item survey replicated the one used by Simons, Meeus, and T'Sas (2017). Though other researchers have also developed instruments to gauge the abilities of students and teachers related to media literacy (Arke & Primack, 2009; Hargittai, 2009; Hobbs & Frost, 2003), Simons et al. (2017) validated their survey with both teachers and student teachers. Their survey included 12 media literacy skills, and it asked the SSPSTs to rank of the importance of teaching each skill, using a four-point scale. The analysis of this data consisted of disaggregating the survey results by institution and ranking the media literacy skills by average level of agreement for each group. The top three skills, middle three skills, and bottom three skills were determined for SSPSTs at each institution, and they were compared to each other for analysis.

The participants' lessons that aligned to one of NAMLE's core principles and a social studies content standard and commentaries were all uploaded to a Google Form. Both researchers coded each lesson plan to establish reliability. To code, an open technique (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was used to analyze the lesson plans and commentaries. Initial coding consisted of tagging single words and short phrases used by the participants in the documents that provided meaning related to media literacy (McCann & Clark, 2004), and then tagging sociologically constructed codes assigned to the words and phrases the researchers identified in the documents (Bailey & Davis, 2010). Part of the coding procedure was to use the emerging codes to organize the lesson plans using the levels of integration of media literacy content (Table 1), adapted from Banks's approaches for the integration of Multicultural content and described in the theoretical framework section. The researchers used the relevant tags for each lesson plan to best align the plan with one of the four levels of integration. They then discussed these initial tags by examining the language used by the participants in the lesson plans against on their interpretation. This conversation led to them developing emerging themes identified in the data that informed the interview protocol prepared for the focus groups.

Finally, a focus-group interview was conducted with SSPSTs at each institution, and an interview protocol based on the themes from the lesson plans and commentaries was developed. One researcher facilitated a focus group with four participants in the Red State, and the other researcher did so with three participants in the Blue State. Both interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes. The interview protocol (Appendix A) began with a section where

students stated if and why they viewed an element of media literacy as controversial. Their responses were tallied, and the rest of their responses were open-coded (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) by tagging single words and short phrases used by the participant (McCann & Clark, 2004). The two focus-group interviews were coded separately before themes were compared and contrasted.

## Limitations

This is a case study (Yin, 2017) bound to a specific group of participants. Like all case studies, generalizability to other populations can be challenging. The purpose of the study is not to make the claim that all SSPSTs in similar contexts will believe or act in the same way as this study's participants but rather to document and interpret these findings with the hope that they may shed light on the overall challenge for how to best prepare new teachers to teach media literacy skills in various teaching contexts.

As noted, participants took part in a focus-group interview, which also has limitations as a research method. For example, in focus-group interviews, there is the potential for speakers to be influenced by the first participant to answer a question.

In addition, the participants of this study are enrolled in different courses, which may have an impact on how they chose to address the media literacy lesson plan assignment. At CSU, this lesson plan was part of a social studies methods course; at MPU, the assignment was part of a technology course. The overall course content may have some bearing on how the participants chose to develop their lesson plans, even though the assignment was identical.

Also, this study's sample size can be considered a limitation (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Ideally, this study would have included SSPSTs from multiple teacher-education programs, but that was not possible. The researchers therefore used the populations available to them in their own institutions as a convenience sample (Creswell, 2005).

## Findings

### Survey Findings: Ability and Willingness to Teach Media Literacy

The survey asked the SSPSTs for their level of agreement based on a four-point scale regarding the importance of teaching 12 media literacy skills. The media literacy elements were ranked by an average level of agreement for each group. Table 5 provides the rankings of each media literacy element for both Blue State and Red State SSPSTs.

**Table 5**  
**Survey Results Ranked in Terms of Highest-, Middle-, and Lowest-Ranked Items, on a Scale of 1–4, Compared by Institution**

	MPU* "Blue State"		SCU* "Red State"
<i>Highest-Ranked</i>			
	AVERAGE:		AVERAGE:
I believe the interpretation of the effects of media on behavior is an important skill to teach students.	4.00	I believe the creation of media content is an important skill to teach students.	3.82
I believe the evaluation of media content using various criteria is an important skill to teach students.	3.83	I believe the awareness of antisocial media behavior is an important skill to teach students.	3.82

(continued)

**Table 5****Survey Results Ranked in Terms of Highest-, Middle-, and Lowest-Ranked Items, on a Scale of 1–4, Compared by Institution (continued)**

	MPU* “Blue State”	SCU* “Red State”
<b>Highest-Ranked</b>		
	AVERAGE:	AVERAGE:
I believe the evaluation of news articles based on an understanding of media production is an important skill to teach students.	3.83	I believe the use of literacy strategies to interpret media messages is an important skill to teach students. 3.82
<b>Middle-Ranked</b>		
I believe the awareness of antisocial media behavior is an important skill to teach students.	3.67	I believe the evaluation of news articles based on an understanding of media production is an important skill to teach students 3.64
I believe the use of literacy strategies to interpret media messages is an important skill to teach students.	3.67	I believe the evaluation of media content using various criteria is an important skill to teach students. 3.64
I believe the ability to participate in the public debate through media is an important skill to teach students.	3.50	I believe the interpretation of the effects of media on behavior is an important skill to teach students. 3.64
<b>Lowest-Ranked</b>		
I believe the creation of media content is an important skill to teach students.	3.16	I believe the interpretation of targeted media content (personalized through cookies and algorithms) is an important skill to teach students 3.27
I believe the interpretation of targeted media content (personalized through cookies and algorithms) is an important skill to teach students.	3.16	I believe the ability to consciously choose between different media devices is an important skill to teach students. 3.27
I believe the ability to consciously choose between different media devices is an important skill to teach students.	3.00	I believe the ability to use media devices is an important skill to teach students. 3.27

\* n=8 for MPU; n=13 for SCU

Comparing the Red State and Blue State SSPSTs, there are more similarities than differences. Both groups rank all aspects of media literacy fairly highly, with no questions averaging below a 3.00/4.00 for either group. The bottom rankings for the Red State SSPSTs all cluster around items that could be considered “technical knowledge,” items like using media devices, selecting appropriate media devices, and understanding how cookies and algorithms work. The Blue State SSPSTs agreed on two of the three of these, and they also ranked two of these “technical knowledge” items in their bottom three.

The survey results indicate that the SSPSTs in Red States and Blue States agreed on the relative importance of teaching media literacy to students, with relatively high marks on each of the elements. Perhaps most surprising is that both groups ranked the most overtly political item of “I believe the ability to participate in the public debate through

media is an important skill to teach students” relatively highly, with an average of 3.5/4.0 for both groups. In other words, this political element ranked above the technical items—ability to use media devices in a technical sense and the ability to consciously choose between different media devices—for the SSPSTs in both groups. Overall, survey results indicated that both groups of SSPSTs valued the idea of teaching media literacy to students. The next step was to examine how SSPSTs thought about these ideas as they integrated media literacy content into their lesson plans.

**Lesson Plan Findings: Approach to Teaching Media Literacy**

Table 6 reports the lesson plan findings for both the Red State SSPSTs and the Blue State SSPSTs. The lesson plans were coded by the level of Integration of Media Literacy content.

**Table 6****Lesson Plan Levels of Integration of Media Content, Compared by Institution**

Approach	MPU* SSPSTs (“Blue State”)	SCU* SSPSTs (“Red State”)	Total
	<i>Example:</i>	<i>n = % of total “blue” Example:</i>	<i>n = % of total “red”</i>
Contributions <i>A principle of media literacy is applied to a lesson plan that could exist without it but is enhanced by the contribution of a media literacy lens.</i>	Lesson on the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Students examine primary sources and use a media element (dotstorming) to create and share an argument based on their reading.	1 12.5% WWII propaganda lesson. Students analyze propaganda from WWII and discuss how media impacts people’s actions.	5 38.5% 6

*(continued)*

**Table 6****Lesson Plan Levels of Integration of Media Content, Compared by Institution (continued)**

Approach	MPU* SSPSTs (“Blue State”)		SCU* SSPSTs (“Red State”)		Total
	<i>Example:</i>	<i>n= % of total “blue”</i>	<i>Example:</i>	<i>n= % of total “red”</i>	
Additive <i>A principle of media literacy is used to add content and concepts to a lesson, deepening understanding of both the media literacy principle and the content of the lesson.</i>	Lesson on WWI propaganda. In addition to analyzing messages from WWI propaganda, the students are asked to create modern propaganda reflecting the principles they discussed.	3 37.5%	Japanese Internment lesson. Begins with a lecture, and then students go to Hoaxy to compare current news stories’ depictions of Muslims today to newspaper depictions of the Japanese during WWII.	2 15.4%	5
Contributions + Additive		4 50%		7 53.8%	
Transformation <i>The basic goals and structure of the lesson are changed to reflect the principle of media literacy selected, enabling students to view events and issues from multiple perspectives based on their analysis of the media selected.</i>	Students use three different blue shades and three different red shades to mark the bias in a series of four news articles from allsides.com. Students work in small groups and rotate the articles to each other to see how different people interpret the bias in the media differently.	3 37.5%	Students are given three contemporary topics and guided through apps such as Red Feed, Blue Feed to find news articles that show either the conservative or liberal perspective on the issue, noting the titles, tone, and word selection of each perspective. Students compare and contrast one article from each perspective on the three contemporary topics.	5 38.5%	8
Social Action <i>Students identify important social problems and issues and use media literacy principles as a method for social action. Lessons focus on helping students gather data, clarify their positions on issues, and use social and other media to take reflective actions on the issue.</i>	Students conduct research on women’s reproductive rights issues and look for biased and inflammatory speech in the articles they find. Students develop a three-minute speech on their topic and record it.	1 12.5%	Students are divided into groups and given a contemporary issue facing women today (access to education, employment opportunities, maternal and personal health rights, gender-based violence, child marriage, gender equality). Student groups select a non-U.S. country to focus their research on. Students should not only conduct research but develop an awareness campaign that could be implemented through a social media platform.	1 7.7%	2
Transformation + Social Action		4 50%		6 46.2%	

\* n=8 for MPU; n=13 for SCU

As with the survey responses, one of the findings from the lesson plan analysis is that the two groups are more similar in their approaches to incorporating media literacy than they are different. Exactly half, 50%, of the Blue State SSPSTs and 53.8% of the Red State SSPSTs developed lessons wherein the media literacy content was in the lower two levels of media literacy integration, the Contributions/Additive range. For about half of SSPSTs in both contexts, media literacy was at best an Additive element to the submitted lesson plan. As an example, in a lesson on WWI propaganda, students spend most of the lesson analyzing propaganda messages from WWI, and then at the end of the lesson, they created modern propaganda reflecting the principles they discussed. This lesson ranked low because it did not position students to use media literacy as a tool for improving society or push back on the media messages they receive.

It follows that about half of the SSPSTs created lessons at the Transformation or Social Action levels (50% at MPU compared to

46.2% at SCU), with only a minor increase for the institution in the liberal context. Nearly all the “higher-level” lesson plans for both groups were at the Transformation level. Only one lesson plan for each group was coded at the highest level of media literacy integration, which equates to 12.5% at MPU and 7.7% at SCU. In both groups, the Social Action lesson plan involved researching women’s rights and creating media designed to address a women’s rights issue.

However, the differences between the two institutions at the lowest two levels of integration is more significant. Only one Blue State lesson plan (12.5%) was coded at the lowest level of integration, while five (38.5%) of the Red State lesson plans were coded at this level. There are multiple hypotheses to explain this difference, especially given the relatively small numbers of the sample sizes. This trend is worth noting because the findings in the surveys highlighted before (Brown, 2018; Lautzenheiser et al., 2011; *Phi Delta Kappan*, 2018) indicate differences in public trust toward teachers, especially when teaching may be viewed as political.

For a deeper understanding of the choices of both groups, focus groups were conducted that first asked participants to rank the different elements of media literacy as controversial or not before discussing their rankings.

### ***Focus-Group Interview: Beliefs of Media Literacy as a Controversial Teaching Strategy***

Beginning with the media literacy skills, participants indicated the following skills were controversial to implement as a teacher:

**Table 7**  
***Element of Media Literacy Considered “controversial,” Compared by Institution***

Element of Media Literacy	Red State		Blue State	
	<i>Controversial</i>	<i>Not Controversial</i>	<i>Controversial</i>	<i>Not Controversial</i>
Teaching students how to find the bias and political perspective of current news stories	2	1	0	3
Teaching students to determine whether a current news story is fabricated	0	3	1	2
Teaching students to conduct research online, using only reliable sources	0	3	0	3
Teaching students to research a topic and communicate their findings via media	2	1	0	3
Teaching students how to share their views on political topics and argue respectfully on social media	3	0	1	2
Teaching students to develop a social media campaign to raise awareness for a social issue	2	1	2	1
Totals	9	9	4	14

Overall, Red State SSPSTs at SCU indicated that items were controversial nine times and were not controversial nine times. Blue State SSPSTs at MPU indicated that items were controversial four times and were not controversial 14 times. This discrepancy was sometimes quite stark. When asked which of the skills they were least likely to apply to their own teaching, the Red State responses were unanimous and immediate: “teach students to share their views on political topics and argue respectfully on social media.” Looking at the media literacy integration chart in Table 1, this skill is part of the highest level of integration, Social Action. The interviews suggest that SSPSTs at SCU did not write lesson plans at the Social Action level due to its perceived controversy. By contrast, when asked the same question about which skill they were least likely to use, Blue State respondents were flummoxed. They silently considered the question for a full 45 seconds before someone ventured, “I kind of feel like they’re all tied in. I don’t think one sticks out as something I wouldn’t want to do.” As recorded in Table 2, the MPU students were just as unlikely as the SCU students to create a lesson plan at the Social Action level, but in the interview, these students did not indicate a clear indication that this was because of the inherent controversy of the teaching method. Rather, it was their perception of the complexities related to the interconnectedness of the media literacy skills themselves.

#### ***The Potential for Controversy: “Teaching Students to Research a Topic and Communicate Findings via Media”***

When asked whether the skill “teaching students to research a topic and communicate their findings via media was controversial,” a skill that fits within the transformative level of integration, SSPSTs in the Blue State expressed confusion.

STUDENT 2 (MPU): No, how could it be? Unless they do the thing on their blog where they get advertising and get paid every time someone comes to their blog. I mean, that’s kind of unethical in school? I don’t know. Why would it be?

STUDENT 3 (MPU): I’m going to say no, too. I mean, I could see where someone may not be that type of learner, but I don’t think that would generate controversy.

The Blue State SSPSTs could not fathom where the controversy might be, so they began inventing possible issues, such as ethical issues involving advertising and issues meeting the needs of all students. When asked the same question, Red State SSPSTs immediately saw the potential for this media literacy skill to be controversial.

STUDENT 1 (SCU): If you use a blog, it might be controversial, because that person might be heavily biased, because to me a blog is like a rant.

STUDENT 2 (SCU): The medium that you present it in can make it controversial. So a blog is more like your opinion kind of place, and there you can distort the facts.

In other words, the elements of media literacy were more clearly controversial to Red State SSPSTs for one simple reason: Media literacy was often equated with expressing one’s political opinions, which was viewed as inherently controversial. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating teacher concerns about controversy in the classroom (Hess, 2009; McAvoy & Hess, 2012).

### *The Potential for Controversy: “Building an Opinion”*

The only skills not deemed by any Red State SSPSTs to be controversial were conducting research and determining whether a news story is fabricated, which they expressly stated to not be controversial because students were not “building an opinion.” For example, a Red State SSPST offered the following to explain why a particular element was not controversial:

STUDENT 3 (SCU) (ON WHETHER IT IS CONTROVERSIAL TO DETERMINE WHETHER A NEWS STORY IS FABRICATED): I don’t think it’s controversial because all you’re teaching them is whether it’s fact-based or not, not their opinion on it.

While the skill of “building an opinion” was often cited by Red State SSPSTs as a reason a skill was controversial, this was not the case for the Blue State SSPSTs. The MPU SSPSTs consistently pointed to skills involved in developing and sharing political opinions as necessary and relevant, and the topics as the only potentially controversial element. For example, when asked if teaching students how to share their views on political topics and argue respectfully on social media was controversial, the first Blue State respondent answered:

STUDENT 1 (MPU): It can be, but you’re not telling them what to think, just how to articulate what you think.

Contrast to this the Red State response to this same question:

STUDENT 3 (SCU): I just think it’s controversial because parents might think it’s not the teacher’s place to be teaching the students how to share their political opinions.

This different view about whether developing and sharing opinions is controversial is reflected in the lesson plan integration of these disparate groups. The SCU SSPSTs indicated that any expression of political opinion in the classroom was inherently controversial, regardless of whether the opinions were examined in the context of the lesson. Contributions is the lowest level of our media literacy integration chart, and it is the only level that allows participants to avoid any political content. As a result, this fear of allowing students to express political opinions may help to explain why almost 40% of the CSU SSPSTs created lesson plans at the Contributions level.

### *The Potential for Controversy: Red State SSPST Expectations and Experiences*

Why did Red State SSPSTs see teaching students to develop and share opinions to be inherently controversial, when Blue State SSPSTs did not? It was not that the students themselves were perceived to be unable to handle these discussions, nor was it that the SSPSTs considered themselves to be unable to teach students to explore controversial topics. In fact, two of the Red State SSPSTs related specific instances when they led a conversation about a

controversial topic successfully in their student teaching experiences. One used abortion law as a topic in a government class, and the other had a Socratic seminar on race relations in world geography. Instead, each of the Red State SSPSTs cited the same reasons for their hesitation about teaching students to build opinions and share them: parents.

STUDENT 3 (SCU): I don’t think it’s the students at all. I think it’s the parents we’re talking about right now. So, um, the students will be pretty much fine either way no matter where you’re at, but the parents here are going to be more reluctant for you to be teaching their kids how to raise awareness for LGBTQ groups or whatever. A parent down here would be like, “Why is my kid being exposed to that in your classroom? I didn’t sign up for this,” you know.

STUDENT 2 (SCU): They think you’re trying to change them. If you’re trying to teach them to be nonbiased, they think, the parent would think that you’re trying to change their children’s opinions on what it is; instead of having an open mind, they see that you’re trying to lead them to . . .

STUDENT 1 (SCU): Exactly.

What is particularly interesting about this exchange is that none of these SSPSTs themselves had any run-ins with parents. Instead, two of the four SSPSTs indicated that they had integrated controversial topics into their student teaching despite their concerns, and neither of them described any backlash from parents. Yet, even without firsthand evidence to the contrary, they were insistent that parents would not like their children being asked to develop opinions on controversial topics. Later in the interview, the SSPSTs began referencing the source of these beliefs. Their cooperating teachers had all given them warnings about the dangers of parental disapproval. An example exchange clarifies the training the SSPSTs in the Red State received in relation to controversy in the classroom.

STUDENT 4 (SCU): You’ve gotta look at the battles you can win. Like, my teacher has had to [say], “Okay, you’ve got to slow down here.” I had this thing about transgender dances getting cancelled and father-daughter dances getting cancelled, and he’s like, “You’ve gotta look at the battles you can win here. There is no way you’re going to win if that gets brought up to administration.” I was like, “All right.”

STUDENT 1 (SCU): See, I got told don’t teach the flappers in the 1920s because you’ve got to talk about the morality and the sexuality of the 1920s, and he’s like, “I wouldn’t do that. Let me do that.” I was like, “Go ahead!”

STUDENT 2 (SCU): See, my teacher, I think, is on that level because I think my teacher is afraid to touch on a lot of these subjects because he doesn’t want the backlash. Like when I was talking about race, and we started to talk about certain things, he was holding his head, and he was turning red, and he was visibly, like, almost angry or

nervous about what was going to happen, like the backlash that might come out of this discussion. And I told him, “I take full responsibility, if anything was to come out of it . . .”

All four of the Red State participants related specific instances when their cooperating teachers had warned them about using controversial topics in their teaching. Given how tenuously controversial some of these topics were, such as the above example of flappers of the 1920s, the SSPSTs all came away with the same message: Controversy is everywhere, and they were advised to avoid it.

It is also worth noting that the SSPSTs used controversial topics and strategies anyway, despite the advice of their cooperating teachers. When asked if teaching media literacy was “something that must be taught, or only something that can be taught if it fits into the content,” every participant in the Red State agreed that it must be taught.

STUDENT 2 (SCU): I think it’s the future, right? So, like, I think we need to teach to the future. Instead of teaching to the standard, teach to the future. I just think that it’s a skill that everyone is going to need to have, one way or another.

The SSPSTs at SCU were being explicitly trained by the school-based personnel in their student teaching not to use controversial topics in their teaching. This message was strong and consistent, and despite some of the participants claiming that they used controversial topics anyway, the lesson plan and interview findings indicate the message was successfully received by the SSPSTs. They were unlikely to use media literacy methods at the highest levels of integration not because they thought they were unimportant or because they feared student reactions but because they were being told to fear parents who would disapprove of these lessons by their cooperating teachers.

### *The Potential for Controversy: Blue State SSPST Expectations and Experiences*

Compared to the interview with the SCU SSPSTs, the MPU SSPSTs were far less likely to mention either parents or cooperating teachers in their discussions about teaching media literacy. There is only one exchange in the Blue State interview that explicitly references parents:

STUDENT 2 (MPU): Working with young people, I’m not so concerned that they’re going to take offense with me because it doesn’t really come down to holding your position as a teacher. It doesn’t come down to what the students think of you; it’s the parents a lot of the time. It’s not up to the parents, but if they cause enough trouble, that could change things.

The SSPST used the phrase “it’s not up to the parents.” Meanwhile, the Red State SSPSTs were getting the opposite

message from their cooperating teachers. In addition, Blue State SSPSTs did not actually reference their cooperating teachers’ opinions about teaching controversial topics during the interview. While cooperating teachers’ fears of parent backlash loom large in the minds of the Red State SSPSTs, these concerns do not seem to be very real in the minds of the Blue State SSPSTs. When asked which media literacy skill they were most likely to teach, the first Blue State respondent answered, “Social media campaign, because I think that would be kind of fun to do,” while this was mentioned several times in the Red State interview as being a skill they would likely avoid because of the controversy. The researcher asked this participant for a potential topic that would be too far to go, that would be pushing the limits of too controversial. Maybe abortion? The participant responded:

STUDENT 2 (MPU): I don’t think [abortion is too far out there], even though abortion probably is one of the most controversial topics. I don’t think that should be off-limits to high-schoolers because it’s something some of them will have to go through. They should be aware of it. . . . So they could choose to go either for it or against it, but it would have to be like an actual effective argument, not just bashing.

This idea, that controversy was to be embraced instead of feared, was common among the SSPSTs in the Blue State. This was true at all levels of media literacy integration. For example, the researcher asked about the potential controversy of developing a social media campaign for a social issue topic, an activity that fits within our media literacy framework’s highest level of Social Action. The participant responded:

STUDENT 3 (MPU): I feel like it should be controversial. I feel like if this is a social issue you’re going to dive into, obviously it’s a problem, it’s something noticeable to the students, and there’s obviously something keeping this from being an easy fix. And so I feel like if you’re going to attack a subject, you know, tackle a subject to try to find a way to make it better for those involved, there probably is an implied controversy.

This same sentiment was repeated later in the Blue State interview by another participant, in response to a question about whether it makes sense to modify the topic or skill based on whether you are teaching in a liberal or conservative area.

STUDENT 2 (MPU): I’m from a more conservative area, so I feel like I can communicate with the students in the area as well. That’s what I grew up with. Yeah, I’m just wanting to emphasize all the skills, and sometimes you have to be uncomfortable to teach something.

RESEARCHER: What I’m hearing you say is that you would be happy to teach the skill, but you might change the topic depending. Is that correct?

STUDENT 2 (MPU): I'm not sure, because I want them to be exposed to things that might make them uncomfortable.

Ultimately, what stands out from the two focus-group interviews is not the actual practice of media literacy, which both groups agreed was important. It was not future practices related to media literacy either, as both groups solidly agreed that these lessons were going to be increasingly important in the future, and they needed to be a focus of social studies teachers. Instead, it was the obvious differences in perception between the two groups in terms of the safety of teaching both the political topics inherent in media literacy and the skills involved in developing and sharing political opinions. SSPSTs in the Red State felt vulnerable approaching the topics and skills of media literacy in their classrooms, and this vulnerability was not expressed by their Blue State peers to anywhere near the same extent. And yet, the SSPSTs in the Red State planned to teach these skills anyway.

## Discussion

Participant SSPSTs in both the Red State and the Blue State saw the need for skills and preparation required to teach media literacy. All the respondents clearly expressed the belief that these were important skills in today's world and expected that they would teach their students media literacy skills. However, the SSPSTs in this study who were being trained in a Red State encountered conflicting messages about the teaching of media literacy. On the one hand, they were trained in their methods courses that media literacy was an essential 21st-century skill. On the other hand, they were placed in classrooms where their cooperating teachers communicated a notion of parental supremacy, and where angering even one parent by using controversial topics could result in job loss. This message did not seem to be as prevalent for the SSPSTs being prepared in the Blue State. While they often had vague notions that a skill or topic "could be" controversial, they clearly had not received the same explicit messages from their cooperating teachers that these topics needed to be avoided. Ultimately, the major differences between the Blue State and Red State SSPSTs came down to Red State SSPSTs working in an environment where they feared controversy. The Blue State SSPSTs did not express those same fears and instead expressed the belief that they would choose controversial topics despite knowing parents might disapprove.

However, this study also highlights the resilience and creativity of SSPSTs training to be teachers in the Red State. Lesson plans indicate that media literacy skills were woven into "factual content" lessons that participants felt would pass muster in classrooms. The concentration of lesson plans at the "Contributions" level of integration, compared to the survey responses and focus-group interviews, seem to indicate an understanding of the political realities of teaching in their state. Focus-group interviews contain multiple examples of these teachers sharing the specific state standards that would encompass media literacy as they worked together to add them to their content lessons while protecting themselves from parents and administrators. These SSPSTs were taking in the messages while recognizing

and working within the practical limits for their future teaching selves.

## Implications

These findings have implications for the teaching of media literacy in polarized political contexts. The remainder of the paper will focus on three strategies suggested by this research that could be employed to help SSPSTs in politically polarized climates teach needed media literacy skills.

1. Respect the strategy of solidly grounding media literacy lessons in content standards.
2. Teach SSPSTs how to "boost" media literacy skills in these content-based lessons.
3. Narrow the bridge between university- and field-based messages about teaching media literacy and other potentially controversial content.

First, one of the strategies adopted by the SSPSTs in the Red State context was to firmly ground the media literacy concept in a content standard. While this meant that these SSPSTs often developed lessons at the lowest level of media literacy integration, this strategy allowed SSPSTs to rationalize covering a potentially controversial topic if they were questioned by parents or administrators, as their interview indicated they often feared. The Red State SSPSTs in this study demonstrated a desire to teach media literacy, and the most common method for including media literacy in their lesson plans was a "backdoor" approach through content standards. The theoretical framework for this study assumes that higher levels of media literacy integration are preferable because they allow for deeper exploration and even the creation of media message by students. However, the experiences of the Red State SSPSTs in this study encourage reexamination of the perspective that higher integration levels are necessarily better in all contexts. Anderson and Stillman (2013) pointed out the need for PSTs to navigate contexts and communities and develop adaptations and adjustments beneficial to teaching in particular contexts. This study suggests that new teachers in politically polarized climates might benefit from more intentional exercises in grounding media literacy into a variety of social studies standards. Many of the SSPSTs used the same couple of historical standards for their lesson plans, specifically yellow journalism and propaganda during World War II. This research suggests it might be useful to provide them with resources to expand their views on including media literacy into content standards.

In addition to the resources that exist for helping students analyze and evaluate contemporary political news messages, new teachers in politically polarized areas can be introduced to resources such as Facing History and Ourselves (<https://www.facinghistory.org/>) to find media literacy lessons directly aligned to social studies content. They could be provided with example lesson ideas from practitioner journals that open their eyes to other historical topics with media literacy connections. For example, students could use media messages from the 2016 election as a discussion point when covering previous elections

that have similar themes, such as William Jennings Bryan's 1908 presidential campaign (Sperry, 2016). Teachers covering immigration in the early 20th century could incorporate media messages and "fake news" in the debates about immigration today (McCorkle, Cole, & Spearman, 2018). The civil rights movement standards often cover media messages as well, allowing space for students to add a comparison with media literacy and race continuing into the modern media landscape (Turk & Berman, 2018). Manfra and Holmes (2018) pointed out that one best practice is to help students develop "habits of mind" beneficial for teaching media literacy, such as consistently looking up key information about sources they use to make sure they are accurate, no matter what content they are researching. This kind of firm grounding in content knowledge and skills may make the prospect of teaching media literacy in polarized climates more palatable for new teachers.

Second, SSPSTs can be trained in methods to "boost" the media literacy integration when they feel confident in doing so. Although they expressed fears of community disapproval, the Red State SSPSTs also expressed in their interviews a willingness and desire to implement media literacy lessons anyway, and new teachers may benefit from additional training in media literacy integration. Using a variation of Banks's (2016) levels of integration and applying it to media literacy, half of the lessons for each group included relatively shallow levels of integration, but they could have reached a transformative level with minor tweaks. For example, one Red State student developed a yellow journalism lesson that ended with an assessment where students looked at five historical examples of journalism and decided whether they were authentic and unbiased enough to "share" on social media. This is a great connection to a historical topic, but to be considered "transformative," the emphasis would be reversed. Most of the lesson would involve helping students understand the development of media messages and doing exercises to determine authenticity and bias of messages shared through social media, with yellow journalism serving as a historical context demonstrating the timelessness of this issue. Banks (2010) suggested that, counter-intuitively, teaching multicultural content at higher levels of integration creates *less controversy* instead of more because students have sufficient depth of knowledge to ground the lessons. The same may be true for Integration of Media Literacy lessons. Moving from the lower levels of integration to the higher levels through the incorporation of explicitly taught content and skills could allow for richer contextual understanding and less of the confusion and abruptness that creates controversy.

Third, it is important to consider the experience of cooperating teachers and the impact they have on student teacher beliefs about media literacy. Cooperating teachers want their student teachers to be successful in classrooms, and often serve as the intermediary between the university's preparation and local contexts (Hoffman et al., 2015). However, the idea that cooperating teachers and university personnel do not necessarily agree on teaching practices, expectations, norms, or theories is not new. Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985) called this phenomenon the two-worlds pitfall. As mentioned previously, Anderson and Stillman (2013) suggested

that part of the solution to this is to recognize the legitimacy of adaptations and adjustments made by PSTs in response to local contexts. PSTs do not necessarily replicate practices they observe in either of their two worlds; they recontextualize them to suit the context as they see fit (Horn, Nolen, Ward, & Campbell, 2008). Part of the solution may be to support PSTs as they search for the connections between university training and field placement and adapt them in their own teaching (Braaten, 2018).

One suggestion is to develop a bridge between university training and contextual experts. Courses teaching media literacy strategies could invite area teachers that incorporate media literacy lessons regularly into their classrooms to a panel discussion to share the strategies they use to successfully navigate potential tensions. Research indicates that student teachers often follow the practices of cooperating teachers, indicating that seeing positive models for practices like media literacy would benefit new teachers (Rozelle & Wilson, 2012). Additionally, when new teachers are trained in context-specific practices, they are more likely to feel positively about their teaching context (Tamir, 2010), which may be helpful for reducing feelings of fear in polarized political contexts. Thus, inviting successful local teachers to discuss their practices has the potential to encourage SSPSTs who want to teach media literacy and other controversial topics but believe their teaching context may be too restrictive. Such a contextualized approach to the teaching of media literacy that takes into account the realities of community expectations would open up spaces for SSPSTs to safely experiment with strategies for incorporating media literacy into their classrooms in ways similar to other successful teachers in their area.

Future research could include the extent to which strategies such as those suggested here impacted how often and in what ways new teachers implement media literacy lessons. Researchers could continue to examine teaching practices across disparate political contexts when it comes to a variety of controversial teaching practices and topics and offer politically salient solutions that consider community values. Above all, researchers should continue researching best practices for preparing new teachers to teach in politically homogenous communities.

### **Conclusion: Why Does This Matter?**

Continuing trends toward political polarization (Jones, 2019) are particularly worrisome given the proliferation of fake news (Bomey, 2018) and the even more concerning tendency to call any news one disagrees with "fake news" regardless of its basis in fact (Oremus, 2016). A recent Pew Research Center study looked at how well respondents were able to distinguish fact from opinion (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Sumida, 2018). Only about a quarter of the adults in their study were able to correctly identify all five factual statements as "factual," and only 35% were able to correctly identify all opinion statements as "opinions." Students in today's world need media literacy lessons more than ever, but the polarization also leads to an environment of fear of discussing anything that may be deemed political in classrooms.

Along with the suggestions listed above for addressing this issue, it is compelling to conclude this study with a note of

optimism. All but one of the SSPSTs were local to the state in which they were training to become teachers and in which they intended to become practicing teachers. Yet, this disparate group of people, who according to the theories of increased political polarization should have had very different beliefs about most issues, largely agreed on the importance of teaching media literacy. They demonstrated similar capacity to plan media literacy lessons. And the biggest difference between these groups in their interview was the perceived perceptions of community members in their different contexts. While there may be a fear in politically polarized environments that teaching media literacy is too “political,” the remarkably similar perspectives of the SSPSTs indicate the opposite. This suggests that with context-specific training and acceptance of context-based strategies that incorporate media literacy, this important topic has the potential to be incorporated meaningfully in curricula in all states: Red, Blue, and everywhere in between.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

- One by one, I’m going to list some elements of media literacy. As I say each one, tell me if you think it is controversial or not and why.
  - Teaching students how to find the bias and political perspective of current news stories. Is this controversial?
  - Teaching students how to determine whether a current news story is fabricated. Is this controversial?
  - Teaching students how to conduct research online using reliable sources. Is this controversial?
  - Requiring students to research a topic and communicate their findings via media, such as a web page or blog post. Is this controversial?
  - Teaching students how to share their views on political topics and argue respectfully on social media. Is this controversial?
  - Asking students to develop a social media campaign to raise awareness for a social issue. Is this controversial?
- Which of the above activities do you think you would be most likely to implement as a teacher? Why?
- Which of the above activities do you think you would be least likely to implement as a teacher? Why?
- Does your answer about which activities you are most and least likely to implement depend on whether you teach in a more liberal or more conservative community? Explain your answer.
- In general, do you see media literacy as being a skill that MUST be taught or as something that COULD be taught if it fits into the content? Explain your answer.