With talk of “fake news” most everywhere and lots of great media literacy resources for students of all ages, practitioners may be asking: How young can kids be to start learning about news media?

The good news is that it is never too early to start teaching students how to evaluate, analyze, and create media. However, there are some specific considerations for younger learners, especially given the complex and often frightening current events that children may be exposed to.

The first obstacle facing those who work with children between the ages of eight and 12 is bringing news into the classroom at all. Teachers know that students think and talk about current events. During the 2016 election, the New York Times reported that some teachers and parents were horrified by the thought of their students reenacting events or language from candidates they encountered on TV or online (http://ow.ly/9CG9i30bwX3c).

There are real concerns about the basic content of the news and its impact on students’ well-being. Groups such as Common Sense Media (http://ow.ly/rxp030bwXfl) have suggested ways to frame conversations about difficult topics for young children.

However, despite the risks, there are plenty of benefits to “bringing the world to school,” as Renee Hobbs and I wrote in our book Discovering Media Literacy, and as I noted in an open-access article for the Journal of Media Literacy Education (http://ow.ly/6tM30bwXm1). For several years, we have worked with elementary-age students at a public charter school in Philadelphia, and we are always surprised to learn just what students are capable of thinking about, talking about, and doing when it comes to current events.

I hope some of these tools and frameworks will help librarians, educators, and others working with younger children, as they confront fears of bringing the world to school—and engage in digital and media literacy practices to evaluate, analyze, and make media related to current events and pop culture.
Don’t confuse media literacy practices with using tech

Before discussing the “do’s” of talking about news and current events in elementary school, it is important to clarify one big “don’t.” Good media literacy practices that engage with media and popular culture—including news and current events—don’t require teachers to use any particular media or technology.

This may seem counterintuitive. But especially for young children, it can be overwhelming to experience the “information overload” of doing online research, watching charged imagery in television news, or diving in to “fake news” stories without even knowing much about the “real news.”

Most of these techniques don’t require any specific technology use—and in some ways discourage it. Conversations about news media are often better without controversial visuals, for instance. Figuring out what students already know in the room, in the form of a question bank or “tweet wall” where students write out their own short responses to a topic, can help to bring news into the classroom without necessarily bringing media into the classroom. (Students do not need to actually use Twitter, which may not be appropriate for younger kids—they can use rectangular construction paper to create short responses or questions that are 140 characters or less.)

Students learn at a very young age that media, especially online and social media, can offer up answers very quickly. Media literacy, by contrast, is about the process of asking good questions and being skeptical of easy answers. This sometimes means avoiding easy sources, easy technologies, and other distractions from figuring out what kids need to know and how to scaffold the conversation with them.

Prepare your learning environment for current events

When distressing events happen in the world, our first impulse is often to engage our students immediately in conversations about them. I have seen wonderful discussions, even with young children, about topics as varied as climate change, homelessness, and transgender rights.

What made those conversations work was a sense of trust and understanding between educators and students. But not every topic or event is right for every classroom. Students can lead discussions and may even lead curriculum development based on their own interests—but only if the classroom is in the habit.

Having a constructive dialogue about current events requires students and educators to honor different perspectives in the class and to recognize how differently people view the world. This is one of the core principles of media literacy. Students also need practice to develop careful listening skills so that they are able to follow up each other’s comments with a “yes, and…” attitude. When kids follow what others have said with “yes, and…” all are encouraged to build on previous comments.

Start with background knowledge

Once you feel that the classroom environment is a safe place to explore the often unpredictable and sometimes scary world of current events, it is time to figure out what students already know.

Kids come to school with a wealth of knowledge from their homes, their neighborhoods, and the pop culture that they view, use, and absorb in their everyday lives. Tackling current events in the classroom requires a sensitive understanding of their background knowledge, including not only what they know, but also what they are comfortable sharing; what media rules are in effect in their households; and what kinds of information make up their media diets. In some classrooms I have worked in, very young children regularly refer to adult media, including local news, horror movies, and reality TV. In others, there are taboos among some highly media-restrictive parents who don’t want their kids talking about shows like SpongeBob Squarepants.

You might have students free-associate about what they already know, using a concept map, a K-W-L chart, which tracks what a student knows (K), wants to know (W), and has learned (L) about a topic (http://ow.ly/FGlu30bzVCy), or a mind map (http://ow.ly/wmjc30bzV5h) to engage students in what they know about a topic in the news. For instance, rather than going straight to students’ impressions about Donald Trump, see what they know about who the president is and what the president does in the world. Rhys Daunic, founder of the New York–based Media Spot, has done great work incorporating mind maps into media literacy programs for children as young as elementary school (http://ow.ly/ZTEx30bwxQ).

Find out what students don’t know

Once you have assessed students’ background information, it’s often a good idea to open the floor for questions so that students can figure out what they don’t know. You may be surprised by the questions they ask—and may discover opportunities for building background knowledge further.

For example, students in kindergarten may be able to tell you an endless amount of information about a fictional show or cartoon without being fully aware that the characters are not real. I have seen kids create impressive public service announcements on environmental issues such as recycling without really knowing what recycling is. When I taught fifth graders about the debate surrounding Puerto Rico’s status as a U.S. territory, we had gotten deep into the research process before one student noted that we had not identified where Puerto Rico was on a map.

Sometimes, in the rush to teach students how to access credible information, we assume that they have enough meaningful information to get started. That’s not always the case.

Think of sources as a “who,” not a “what” or “where”

Many news literacy techniques involve inspection of a publication and its reputability, for instance, to determine credibility or authority.

But news, like all media, is at its core a set of relationships between creators and users. Sometimes by thinking of “the news” as a source of information, we forget that real people made decisions about how to frame, create, and distribute it.
What does a “credible source” look like to a five-year-old? In one professional development workshop I led, a teacher asked what kinds of news sources she could use to help her kindergarten students learn about water safety. She was concerned that all of the videos and news items she found portrayed drowning risks in a scary or sensationalistic way.

I asked her which people she would want her students to speak with in person in order to learn more about this issue. She was skeptical about the likelihood of talking to a news reporter or local journalist. But it had not yet occurred to her to simply have her students ask a lifeguard, who could provide some primary resources.

In thinking of an issue in the news only as news, we limit resources that help to teach children that all of the information we receive is created, in specific ways, based on a wide variety of sources.Digging in to an issue to think about who is creating knowledge and where that knowledge really comes from—starting with “who do I know who might know this?”—may involve community members, family members, or local organizations.

Tactics for spotting fake news or assessing journalistic credibility often treat newspapers, websites, and other sources of information as “places” to find information, rather than focusing on the specific people who create that information.

Don’t just get it from Google

As early as second and third grade, students know how to “get things from Google”—that is, ask a search engine a question and accept its result. Some educators would like to maintain that Google is always unreliable, but it is often very good at providing accurate information in limited domains, such as converting units of measurement, providing a basic translation, or understanding a science concept from Wikipedia.

However, current events are not easy to “get” from Google and require much more careful searching. Teaching students what Google is (a search engine, not a reliable source of information in itself) and how to use it (using keywords, operators, and techniques such as quotation marks) can begin as soon as they start using Google—often in early elementary school.

Another benefit of limiting search engines’ role in researching current events is that in many cases, there is inaccurate or developmentally inappropriate information accompanying a simple Google search. Many librarians and educators may want to curate resources based on Google searches or webquests that they create prior to starting class. Common Sense Media has a comprehensive list of kid-friendly news sources (http://ow.ly/BHFB30bzUPH), but librarians should also feel free to use their own judgment based on their knowledge of their students. If conducting a Google search with keywords, librarians may want to test out different keyword phrases in advance.

Use media production activities so kids see themselves as media creators as well as consumers

Finally, students benefit from becoming creators themselves, not only to learn about professional roles in journalism, but to go through the process of learning, synthesizing, and sharing information from a variety of sources—the heart of what news really is.

One impressive example of this is a project undertaken by a third grade enrichment teacher who used a comic creation project to explore homelessness in Philadelphia. Students used a variety of sources, from interviewing community activists to watching popular films about homelessness to limited online research to drawing their own comics. One group of students explored how stereotypical images of homelessness in Disney’s *Aladdin* film differed from more realistic portrayals in the Will Smith film *Pursuit of Happyness*. Another focused on a story of friendship between a student and a homeless child she meets (discovermedialiteracy.com).

Kids who take on independent research like this often find that their knowledge of an issue exceeds surface-level information they might get from news outlets. When our students listened to news stories about homelessness after completing their projects, they took on a new and important role: fact-checkers. When the news used a stereotypical image or did not tell the whole story, our kids were able to push back—taking their first steps as informed users of news media.

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Third graders explored homelessness in these comics based on interviews, films, and other sources.