



**ASPEN TECH  
POLICY HUB**

**POLICY BRIEF**

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# Empowering Students to Combat Radical Content on Social Media

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rapid rise in radical content on social media platforms, including fabricated information – otherwise known as mis- or disinformation – poses a threat to the well-being and intellectual development of college students. To address this challenge, colleges such as the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) should adopt a short workshop to give students access to immediate and accessible information on the essential skills required to navigate the social media landscape safely and critically. This strategic intervention would not only educate students on identifying such content but also empower them to respond to it effectively.

## BACKGROUND

As heavy users of social media, college students often find themselves in the crosshairs of radicalization campaigns and other harmful content. Researchers at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in London studied 1,030 TikTok videos from 2020 and discovered that almost a third of them contained hate content, including white supremacy and anti-Black racism. The study also revealed a significant number of videos with derogatory content targeting Asians, LGBTQ individuals, migrants, refugees, women, Muslims, and Jewish people. This is particularly concerning given TikTok's widespread popularity among younger audiences. Additionally, TikTok has been identified as a platform where misinformation, particularly regarding mental health, is frequently disseminated by influencers.<sup>1</sup> This divisive content can spread extremist ideologies, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. Misinformation and conspiracy theories aren't the only concerns; problematic posts on these platforms can also promote other harmful behaviors, particularly substance abuse.



Moreover, studies have shown that young adults' exposure to harmful social media content correlates with [increased risk behaviors](#), such as glorifying violence, promoting extreme beliefs, and causing students to neglect their studies. Given these implications, interventions to mitigate the impact of harmful social media content can be vital in a university setting — in terms of both promoting campus safety and supporting students during a critical time in their development as adults and as community members. A key priority for colleges and universities is ensuring the safety and well-being of their students, and those efforts must extend beyond the physical campus.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The Rochester Institute of Technology and similar universities that currently lack institutionalized training for students on social media literacy should adopt such measures, which would teach students the skills to identify and respond to radical content on social media. This training could occur through 1 of 2 methods: a short, introductory skill building workshop or a longer duration short course on social media literacy. The goal of both strategies would be to equip students with the right tools and skills to mitigate the dangers of radical mis- and disinformation spread through social media platforms such as TikTok. These 2 strategies could work in tandem, with a university deploying the skill building workshop as a pilot program to test and develop the content for a longer course.

#### Single Session Skill Building Workshop

As part of their orientation or health and wellness programs, universities could adopt a brief skill building workshop to provide students with strategies to identify questionable content online. Example skills to develop in this workshop include distinguishing reliable sources from untrustworthy ones and recognizing markers of misleading or sensationalized information. The workshop should provide opportunities for students to practice their analytical skills in a controlled environment by incorporating real life examples of model responses to problematic content, as well as allow students to engage in group discussions and role-playing to foster a collective sense of responsibility and agency.

There are multiple avenues that universities could take to increase the workshop's reach. One option would be to partner with student groups, such as affinity groups or groups of student leaders. Such partnerships would provide administrators with the opportunity to tailor the workshop's content to the interests and concerns of these smaller audiences.

Another alternative would be to integrate the workshop into existing student wellness programs, such as Mental Health First Aid training programs.<sup>2</sup> Here, a combined program could include discussions of the signs and symptoms of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and trauma, that can be triggered by exposure to radical content. More importantly, these programs could also provide students with resources for seeking support and professional help to protect themselves from the harmful effects of social media.



### Short Course on Social Media Literacy

A more in-depth alternative to building social media literacy would be to adopt a short, potentially 1-credit course that expands on the issues raised in the single session workshop. Building on the insights gained from the workshop, this course would allow universities to shape a longer term and systematic approach to social media literacy by integrating a comprehensive course on that topic into the broader curriculum of a program, school, or institution.

This short course would offer an extended and comprehensive exploration of the challenges tied to radical content on social media through class discussions, peer interactions, and group projects. The course would also help train a new generation to research mis- and disinformation while developing campus leaders who could assist peers in navigating online challenges.

In terms of content, the short course would focus on studying historical cases of misinformation, understanding the psychology behind radical content, and exploring the intricacies of cybersecurity. In tandem with these lessons, the course would discuss the implications of spreading misinformation and the approach to acting upon it to help students build a strong ethical foundation supporting responsible online behavior. Finally, the proposed course would incorporate project-based learning with real world examples, giving students the opportunity to create their own content campaigns that promote positive messages or debunk online myths.

While the Rochester Institute of Technology currently lacks institutionalized training on social media literacy, it is worth noting that many universities, including the University of Rochester, have already made this a compulsory component of their curricula. For institutions such as RIT that want to explore steps in that direction, this short course could initially be introduced as a 1-credit elective course, with the goal of transitioning this offering into a mandatory course in time.

*For more information about this proposal, please see [the associated draft workshop outline for universities](#).*

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Ash-Har Quraishi, Amy Corral, and Ryan Beard, "Social Media and Mental Health: The Pitfalls of Self-Diagnosis." *CBS News*, February 22nd, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/social-media-mental-health-self-diagnosis/> (accessed November 28th, 2023); see also Jessica Guynn, "TikTok videos are fueling hate speech, white supremacy, and extremism." *USA Today*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2021/08/24/tiktok-videos-hate-white-supremacy-racism-terrorism/8249286002/> (accessed November 28th, 2023).
- 2 "Counseling and Psychological Services: Mental Health First Aid," Rochester Institute of Technology, accessed November 13, 2023, "<https://www.rit.edu/counseling/mental-health-first-aid>"



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