



SEARCHLIGHTS AND SUNGLASSES

LEARNING LAYER

Building bridges in social networks

Political bloggers tend to cluster because we share information within our own social groups. Yet researchers have shown that some organizations and individuals can connect the groups. [Some are developing new tools](#) to help put more surprise and serendipity in our lives. As a communicator, do you divide or unite?

Student activities on three levels:

Flashlight: In [*The Tipping Point*, writer Malcolm Gladwell offers a simple test](#) to see if you are a “connector.” First, take the test. Now, think about the groups of friends or cliques in your school. Are there individuals who bridge multiple social networks? What qualities do they share? How would they have done on the test? Come to class prepared to discuss.

Spotlight: In the bestseller [*Connected*](#), scholars Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler explain “how your friends’ friends’ friends affect everything you feel, think and do.” Have students watch either the [TED talk](#) or this [full-hour lecture on how social networks function](#). The class should discuss the videos in the context of their own social networks. Do students believe the things they do – eating, consuming media, voting – are affected by their networks?

Searchlight: Researchers from the University of Georgia found that [political talk on Twitter is highly partisan](#). Students should seek out research that focuses on Twitter conversations that bridge the partisan groups. What do the bridging conversations have in common? If the class finds a good number of studies, recommend the best to the [Journalist’s Resource at the Shorenstein Center](#).

Extra credit: In this book, the author argues that journalists need to be experts in how “digital sunglasses” work. The [MIT Center for Civic Media](#) develops digital age filters like [Truth Goggles](#) and [Lazy Truth](#). Services such as [Twitter Audit](#) say they can tell you “how many of your followers are real.” Try it. Tweet your [opinions](#) of these projects.