SAGAMORE INSTITUTE

Check it out: How adults can acquire the media literacy skills they need to identify misinformation

Much of the momentum surrounding media literacy training centers on K-12 education, but the need to help adults acquire the skills to identify misinformation and disinformation is equally as important. In this case study, we will look at two major national initiatives that provide adults with tools to increase their media literacy skills.

Why are organizations increasingly investing resources in media literacy initiatives for adults? In a 2022 survey, conducted by the Reboot Foundation on behalf of Media Literacy Now, only 38% of American adults said they had received media literacy education in high school. More than 60% said they did not have "an opportunity in class to reflect on media messages, such as advertising or on TV programs, and how they might affect people's thoughts, beliefs, feelings, or actions."

At the same time, the increased use of artificial intelligence has led, according to the Washington Post, to an "explosion of web content mimicking factual articles that instead disseminates false information about elections, wars and natural disasters."

In 2023, NewsGuard, which tracks misinformation around the world, reported a 1,000% increase in websites featuring false articles generated by AI. By September 2024, NewsGuard had identified more than 1,000 sites, many of them disguised as legitimate news sites, pushing articles filled with disinformation.

Communities across the United States also have experienced a sharp decline in both the number of local news outlets and of local journalists, who for decades covered everything from school board and city council meetings to local elections and police departments. The dearth of professionally vetted information has led to an increased reliance on "citizen journalism," which, although often motivated by good intentions, lacks training and experience as well as a consistent set of ethical and professional standards to promote fairness and accuracy.

Researchers from the Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism reported the following findings about the condition of local journalism in 2023:

- "There are 204 counties with no local news outlet. Of the 3,143 counties in the U.S., more than half, or 1,766, have either no local news source or only one remaining outlet, typically a weekly newspaper.
- The loss of local newspapers ticked higher in 2023 to an average of 2.5 per week, up from two per week last year. There were more than 130 confirmed newspaper closings or mergers this past year.

- Since 2005, the U.S. has lost nearly 2,900 newspapers. The nation is on pace to lose one-third of all its newspapers by the end of next year. There are about 6,000 newspapers remaining, the vast majority of which are weeklies.
- The country has lost almost two-thirds of its newspaper journalists, or 43,000, during that same time. Most of those journalists were employed by large metro and regional newspapers.
- There are about 550 digital-only local news sites, many of which launched in the past decade, but they are mostly clustered in metro areas. In the past five years, the number of local digital startups has roughly equaled the number that shuttered.
- Based on the demographics and economics of current news desert counties, Medill's modeling estimates that 228 counties are at an elevated risk of becoming news deserts in the next five years. Most of those "Watch List" counties are located in high-poverty areas in the South and Midwest, and many serve communities with significant African American, Hispanic and Native American populations."

Given this reality, the ability to separate factual information from false is both more essential and more difficult than ever. And as artificial intelligence becomes more sophisticated and more ubiquitous the need for media literacy training will grow ever more urgent.

To address this challenge, organizations such as AllSides and the Poynter Institute, through its MediaWise initiative, offer online tools to help adults learn how to identify misinformation and disinformation.

The AllSides model for promoting media literacy

AllSides, founded in 2012 as a public benefit corporation, states that its mission is to "free people from filter bubbles so they can better understand the world — and each other."

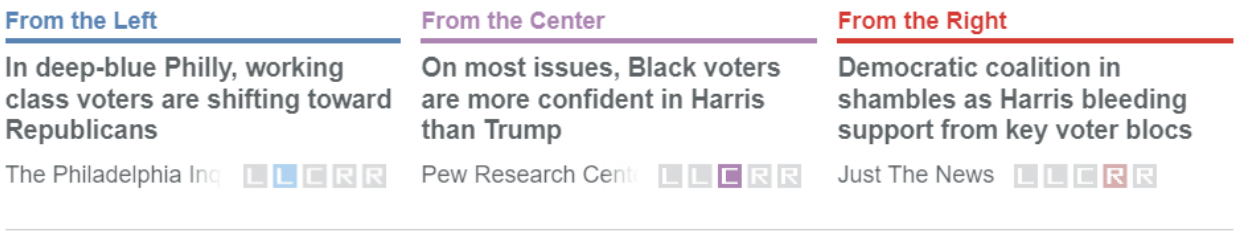
A filter bubble is defined as "an environment and especially an online environment in which people are exposed only to opinions and information that conform to their existing beliefs." Filter bubbles reinforce confirmation biases, defined as people's tendency to "process information by looking for, or interpreting, information that is consistent with their existing beliefs."

Social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram and news aggregators such as Apple News use algorithms that can inadvertently reinforce filter bubbles and confirmation biases. For example, if a user clicks on an article about Indiana Fever player Caitlin Clark in their Apple News feed, they are likely to be offered additional articles about Clark in the future. The consequences of this kind of self-selection are largely benign when they involve entertainment, sports, lifestyle trends or hobbies. Yet, self-selection via algorithms can create problems for individuals and for our democratic society when complex political, social, environmental and health issues are involved.

AllSides says that it fights filter bubbles, and the polarization that often occurs as a consequence of confirmation bias, by helping citizens to "gain a broader view. We believe diversity in thought and relationships heals divides. Less polarization allows us to appreciate others and engage in productive problem solving — and ultimately, heal our democracy."

A key feature of AllSides is its "media bias ratings" of more than 1,400 news outlets and journalists. The goal is to help news consumers identify the different ideological perspectives that shape editorial decisions and content.

Before the 2024 election, for example, AllSides featured three articles about the presidential race that it labeled as coming from "the left, the center, and the right":



Such a presentation is standard practice for AllSides, which in this way serves as both an aggregator of news and information and as a media watchdog. Yet, the model raises important questions: Who decides how a news source is rated? Do the editors and leadership of AllSides have their own biases?

To their credit, AllSides executives not only acknowledge such questions but attempt to answer them with transparency on their site. On the Editorial Philosophy page of its website, AllSides' editors write: "While we strive to remain balanced, we do add some editorial bias of our own. We believe everyone is biased, including us, and it is important to be transparent about bias."

The site provides an extensive explanation of its standards for content creation and news curation. Those standards include giving voice to perspectives that are often ignored; giving attention to news with contrasting coverage; presenting news on common themes that bridge political and philosophical divides; highlighting stories on political polarization and media bias; and promoting free speech and civil discourse.

AllSides also identifies where its executives and staff members fall on the ideological spectrum. Co-founder and CEO John Gable, for example, is identified as coming from a center right perspective. Co-founder and Chief Technology Officer Scott McDonald is identified as a centrist, and co-founder and Board of Directors member Joan Blades is identified as being on the far left.

This level of accountability and transparency is uncommon and could serve as a model for news organizations and others that disseminate news and information to the public.

Personal biases are a universal fact, even among professionals who strive for objectivity and fairness. Those biases can shape decision-making, especially when those in leadership roles are confronted with information and opinions that do not fit within the prevailing, dominant set of ideas and expectations. Acknowledging ideological leaning and potential biases can help the public to evaluate sources of news and information for themselves, which is primary goal of media literacy training.

The MediaWise model of media literacy

In 2018, the Poynter Institute, a well-regarded nonprofit based in Florida that trains and supports journalists, launched the MediaWise initiative, a digital media literacy program that teaches adults and students how to "responsibly engage with online content in the age of information overload."

MediaWise offers a range of online training and other resources to help different age groups strengthen media literacy skills. MediaWise for Seniors, for example, helps people over the age of 65 learn how to spot false news stories, hoaxes, scams and conspiracy theories on social media and other platforms.

Working with the American Library Association, MediaWise has developed a digital toolkit to teach media literacy at libraries. Training material also is available for high school and university students, and media literacy training is available in Spanish and even through a text-message based course called Find Facts Fast.

In 2019, MediaWise launched its Ambassadors program, which features prominent journalists and influencers in the United States, Brazil, France and other countries who help to promote awareness of media literacy efforts.

Alex Mahadevan, director of MediaWise, is a former journalist who says he first noticed a sharp increase in the dissemination of misinformation while working as an editor at local news sites in 2015.

"I was seeing how consumers were starting to seek out fake news and then share misinformation whether it was through Facebook comments or comments on our website," Mahadevan told Silicon Republic in March 2024. "And so, I watched this new shift in the information ecosystem to this fake news world from the local level. So, I was watching these national narratives kind of trickle down to the local level and it was just really bizarre."

He says the problem has become worse in the past decade. "It's gotten easier to make and distribute misinformation," he said. "With generative AI or any other tools, I can edit a video clip on my phone in five minutes and share it on Twitter. So, it's gotten a lot easier to create fake news."

And he notes that intense polarization feeds the problem: "That kind of exacerbates confirmation bias. So, people are kind of existing in these separate spaces online. And if you

exist in these separate spaces online, you're more likely to seek out sources that confirm your beliefs."

Efforts to equip adults with the skills needed to identify misinformation are vitally important for the sake of individuals and our democracy. Yet, as we will discuss in the final section of this case study, such initiatives face significant challenges to their effectiveness.

Challenges and conclusions

As MediaWise's Alex Mahadevan noted, recognition of the rise in misinformation gained momentum almost a decade ago, with growth and promotion of media literacy initiatives following in the years since then.

Yet, much of the emphasis has been on media literacy education in K-12 schools and on the university level, a fact that unfortunately leaves out millions of working-age (and voting-age) Americans. So, initiatives such as AllSides and MediaWise that attempt to equip adults in an era of rampant misinformation are welcome.

The need in our democracy to help adults identify misinformation and disinformation will continue to grow in importance as digital media tools evolve and as artificial intelligence becomes a primary driver of content creation.

But how effective is such training in reaching a significant percentage of the adult population?

One factor limiting the reach of these efforts and others is the opt-in nature of the programs. To benefit from the training, an individual must know it is available, set aside time to study the materials provided online and be motivated to complete the curriculum. In an increasingly dense news and information landscape, and with the hectic personal lives of many Americans, the reached audience compared to the potential audience for media literacy training is undoubtedly small.

Two potential approaches could significantly expand the reach of programs such as AllSides and MediaWise. The first involves businesses, academic institutions and nonprofit organizations choosing to make media literacy training available to their employees as a means of strengthening our communities' civic health.

After all, in a democracy, it's essential that we have a well-informed and engaged citizenry. The prevalence of misinformation and the rise of disinformation campaigns weakens our democracy, our communities and even our economy. An organization's decision to engage in media literacy training for its workers is therefore a long-term investment in both the strength of that organization and the communities it serves.

The second potential initiative involves a sustained public information campaign that would emphasize the need for media literacy, raise awareness about the dangers of disinformation and promote the availability of resources to help individuals learn to navigate sources of news and information.

The campaign could be modeled after nonpartisan initiatives that encourage people to vote or to get flu shots. Raising awareness about the need for media literacy is a critical first step to ultimately helping more people gain the skills needed to sift through news and information for accuracy.

It's tempting to downplay the need for such initiatives. After all, time and money are limited, and the competition for resources is intense. Yet, the foundation of democracy rests on the public's ability to receive trusted and accurate information. The Founders who wrote and ratified the U.S. Constitution understood that fact – to the point that they included freedom of speech and freedom of the press in the First Amendment.

But freedom is meaningless without truth. In an age when forces both foreign and domestic use information to manipulate and deceive citizens, it's imperative that we understand and protect that principle.

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