SAGAMORE INSTITUTE

What do you mean by that? Polarization and lack of trust in news media make media literacy essential

It's an ironic paradox: Americans consume more news and information on more platforms than at any point in history. Yet, the public's already low trust in the sources of information they use is continuing to decline.

At the same time, strong polarization over political, economic and cultural issues has created silos in which many Americans listen to and interact predominantly with people who share their viewpoint. In combination, the lack of trust, polarization and siloed relationships has led to the erosion of a shared civic vocabulary.

The term "media literacy" is a prime example of this phenomenon. One view of media literacy initiatives is that they are a well-intentioned, important effort to equip citizens with the skills needed to discern whether the information they consume is trustworthy. It's the point of view adopted by many academic institutions, mainstream media organizations and others that help promote media literacy.

Yet, others equate media literacy programs, especially those funded by governments, as a backdoor means of censorship. In an April 2024 essay, the editorial director of Telecoms.com wrote this about the British government's new media literacy initiative: "Amid all the talk of improving it, we couldn't find any descriptions of what constitutes good media literacy. If all they mean is things like encouraging a plurality of sources and identifying bias and agendas in what you see online, then that would be hard to argue with. But more likely Ofcom (a British government agency that regulates communications services) sees itself as the arbiter of good and bad content – i.e. chief digital censor."

The lack of trust in news media and other sources of information has enormous implications for our democracy. The Framers of the Constitution understood the critical role of the free press in a free society, writing legal protections into the First Amendment that have served the nation well since its founding.

However, if citizens no longer trust their sources of news and information – and if a significant percentage of citizens feel alienated from mainstream news sources – then how will Americans maintain a shared dialogue and a shared purpose in the future?

Before examining examples of the many ongoing attempts to address that question, let's first look at the depth of the challenge. In October 2024, Gallup reported that Americans' trust in mass media had reached a record low, with only 31% saying they have a "great deal" or "fair amount" of confidence in the media to report the news "fully, accurately and fairly."

“For the third consecutive year, more U.S. adults have no trust at all in the media (36%) than trust it a great deal or fair amount. Another 33% of Americans express ‘not very much’ confidence,” Gallup reported.

The dissolution of trust is not confined to the news media. In 2023, Gallup found that Americans’ faith in 16 major social institutions – including the Supreme Court, Congress, the medical profession, banks and organized religion -- had not improved after falling significantly the previous year. In fact, fewer than half of Americans expressed confidence in 14 of the 16 institutions, with only small businesses and the military scoring above 50%.

"The historically depressed nature of today's ratings is evident in the average confidence scores of nine institutions that Gallup has routinely tracked since 1979. That average fell to a new low of 26% this year. While down just one point from 2022, it is 10 points lower than in 2020," Gallup reported. "Confidence has generally trended downward since registering 48% in 1979 and holding near 45% in the 1980s. It averaged closer to 40% in the 1990s

and early 2000s before dropping to the low 30% range in the 2010s. Last year was the first time it fell below 30%."

In light of Americans' lack of trust in major institutions and evidence of deepening polarization, an army of nonprofit organizations, many from the grassroots, has formed in recent years to launch the "bridging movement."

The Listen First Coalition, a collective of 500 organizations that work to reduce toxic polarization, defines "bridging" as the effort to reduce distrust and animosity by bringing people of different political backgrounds, life experiences and social and economic classes together to listen to and to learn from one another in a safe environment.

Those efforts include the annual National Week of Conversation, which brings together people of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints to engage in civil conversations about difficult issues. "Bridging across differences is not about changing our opinions on issues, but rather changing our perspective of those who hold opinions different than our own," organizers of the National Week of Conversation say. "Disagreement is healthy for our democracy, but we need to find ways to #DisagreeBetter."

Such initiatives are closely aligned with media literacy efforts because there is an understandable tendency for people to reject even accurate information from sources they do not trust. It is, after all, one of the lessons to be gleaned from the ancient fable of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf."

Following are three examinations of initiatives to rebuild a shared vocabulary, reduce polarization and ultimately rebuild trust in sources of news and information.

Do you understand what I'm saying? The Red Blue Translator

In 2016, AllSides collaborated with Living Room Conversations, a nonprofit bridging organization, to build and launch an online dictionary of about 400 terms that people of divergent ideological backgrounds tend to understand and use differently. The terms include such words and phrases as: "Freedom of Speech, Fake News, Woke, Israel-Palestine, Gun Control, Racism, Abortion, Privilege, Microaggression."

The dictionary, called the Red Blue Translator, is intended as a resource used to reduce "confusion by revealing how people across the political spectrum think and feel differently about the same term or phrase."

Here is how the Red Blue Translator addressed the phrase "American Exceptionalism," which as the dictionary notes has become the subject of sometimes heated debate in recent years:

"Whether or not the United States is unusual or extraordinary (in a positive way) in world history is a point of substantial disagreement. Many religious conservatives, on one hand, accept this notion as a reflection of divine providence over the nation -- and a sign of God's favor. Many secular conservative intellectuals also point to features of U.S. governance and

history as evidence that the U.S. model of free market constitutional democracy combined with cultural pluralism is a superior model worth promoting globally.

Many progressives, both religious and secular, on the other hand, see the ideology of American Exceptionalism as an excuse for the United States to have run roughshod over Native Americans under the banner of 'Manifest Destiny,' to violate international law in pursuit of 'national interests' (understood here as the interests of the military-industrial complex), and to act as a bully in the world."

The dictionary entry then asks a set of questions designed to prompt reflection and discussion:

- "Do you believe America is a unique or exceptional county? If so, how and why? If not, how and why?
- What, if any, are the ways you see America as special or unique or exceptional in comparison to other countries?
- If you believe America is exceptional or special, does that ever feel arrogant to think your country is so superior? If not, why not?"

The goal is not to provide definitive answers but to assist leaders, who communicate with diverse audiences in a variety of settings, in navigating the complexities of language. Words and phrases can elicit differing, even strong emotional, responses based on a person's ideological, ethnic and racial, religious and generational background.

Used carelessly, language can further divisions in our democracy and reinforce distrust of core institutions. Tools such as the Red Blue Translator can help leaders ensure that they are communicating exactly what they want to communicate and lower the barriers that increasingly divide Americans.

Can we still talk? Learning to break out of information silos

In a polarized society where difficult conversations can spark unwanted conflict, people often avoid engaging in discussions about controversial topics with people who don't share their views and values. The increase in conservative and progressive media, which target audiences who share particular points of view, reinforce this trend toward conversation and information silos.

In recent years, conservative business and political leaders have purchased and transformed social media platforms such as Twitter (now X) and Rumble. On the progressive side, digital news sites such as The Huffington Post and The Daily Beast have leaned heavily into attractive a liberal audience to the exclusion of moderate and conservative users.

The result is an expanding bifurcation of news outlets based on ideology. This in turn reinforces polarization, erosion of a shared vocabulary on controversial topics, and the public's tendency to avoid engaging with people who do not share their viewpoint.

To address this drift away from healthy civic engagement, organizations such as Living Room Conversations promote opportunities for Americans to bridge political and ideological divides through guided discussions on sensitive topics.

Living Room Conversations, a nonprofit launched in 2010, defines its mission as connecting "people within communities and across differences through dialogue to build trust and understanding. We believe belonging starts with conversation and are committed to designing the resources and opportunities that allow everyone to feel seen and heard while celebrating the differences that make us unique."

The organization takes a grassroots approach to transforming how people relate to one another by providing conversation guides on a variety of topics designed to bring small groups of people together to engage in meaningful discussions. Topics in September ranged from politics to artificial intelligence, including: "Trust in Elections (Local); Anxiety and Elections; Belonging; Trust In Elections (National); Conversations in Troubled Times; Cancel Culture: Free Speech and Accountability; Talking to Strangers; Communicating with Care; Does My Vote Really Matter?; Adicción a los opioides: Spanish Guide; Empathy; Politics: Can We Talk?; Reclaiming Our Democracy; Artificial Intelligence; More Curious, Less Furious."

The conversation guides also are tailored for use in a variety of setting such as libraries, workplaces, schools and houses of worship. The initial goal is to help participants practice listening and engaging with people who hold different viewpoints and diverse life experiences in a respectful, civil setting.

The larger goal is that, in time, Americans learn to reengage with one another with respect and thereby reduce polarization and the attraction of information and relational silos.

And that eventually reduces the financial incentives that news media and social media platforms have for stoking polarization and reinforcing silos.

Will we listen? The stakes are high

Living Room Conversations is not alone in working to rebuild civil society one discussion at a time. The Listen First Coalition, which represents 500 member organizations, describes itself as "the backbone organization for collective impact to save our country from breaking apart."

That may sound dramatic, but researchers and domestic and foreign policy experts have increasingly raised concerns about the dangerous path American society appears to be on. In 2023, the National Governors Association hosted an event called "Disagree Better," which featured former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Utah Gov. Spencer Cox, the organization's chair. "We have always had polarized politics in this country. The question is, what's different?" Gates said. "I think the key is the fact that the polarization has led to paralysis."

The event's keynote speaker was Rachel Kleinfeld, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the founding CEO of the Truman National Security Project. Her work is particularly focused on strengthening democracies.

Kleinfeld raised deep concerns about the current state of American democracy: "Our democratic system is so old that a lot of things that we assume are laws are, in fact, just habits and norms. Norms can be stronger than laws. But when they break, it's much harder to reestablish them … And a disintegration of norms is what America has been facing for the last 15 years."

Kleinfield is far from alone is raising such concerns. She noted that Freedom House has reported that the United States "is on one of the fastest downward trajectories of any country in the world over the last few years."

And the American public also is expressing grave concern about the future of our democracy, with the news media and social media at the center of those fears. In March 2024, the Georgetown University Institute of Politics and Public Service released a poll indicating that when asked about people, organizations or groups that present a threat to democracy, 47% of respondents cited major news organizations (47% serious, 24% extremely serious) and social media (43% serious, 23% extremely serious).

The threat can be put in the form of an equation: Distrust of civic institutions + polarization + disinformation/information = weakening of democracy.

Much of the discussion about how we as a nation can change that trajectory focuses on what political and media leaders and others in influential positions need to do to improve the tone of our civic dialogue. Yet, members of the Listen First Coalition take the opposite approach by focusing on change coming from the grassroots of civil society.

Coalition members seek to bring "Americans together across differences to listen, understand each other, and discover common interests. We seek to increase social cohesion — the strength of relationships and the sense of solidarity among members of the American community."

Those vital goals are dependent on Americans consuming and sharing news and information that is accurate and fair. In that regard, media literacy is an essential component of our democracy's health and is deserving of an elevated role in civic education and outreach.

Challenges and conclusions

As noted in a preceding case study, a major factor that limits the reach of the bridge building movement is the opt-in nature of these efforts. Participants are self-selective, meaning only those who already have an interest in breaking out of political, social and information silos are likely to sign up for events.

The lack of awareness that such initiatives exist also is a limiting factor that curtails both the reach and effectiveness of the bridge-building movement.

As with adult media literacy education, two strategies could expand the reach and effectiveness of these programs. One centers on businesses, academic institutions and nonprofit organizations choosing to make bridge-building initiatives such as Living Room Conversations available to their employees as a means of strengthening our communities' civic health.

The second strategy involves a public information campaign that helps to raise awareness of both the need to engage civilly with people who share different viewpoints and values and of the availability of Listen First Coalition members.

It may seem simplistic to promote purposeful listening and civility as an antidote to toxic polarization and disinformation campaigns, but our current path of siloed communications, inflamed rhetoric and targeting the "other" is not sustainable in a large and increasingly diverse democracy.

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