

Media Literacy Week

Patrick Lee Plaisance

Flu season is upon us. Have you inoculated yourself against fake news?

No, that's not a misprint. Just as most of us regularly get a flu shot to help protect ourselves from the influenza virus, we can also take steps to prevent being fooled by "stories" that push misinformation – not by getting a shot, but by having what I call a healthy news diet. People who regularly read good journalism are simply less gullible when it comes to fake news. And there's no better time to think about our news diets than this week, which is national Media Literacy Week.

The fact that you're taking the time to read this column suggests that you likely have a decent news diet. Good for you! But we're surrounded by people who aren't making the same effort and so are less able to see the difference between good journalism and news-like clickbait. And a core segment of those spread bad stuff even further by sharing it on social media networks.

Part of the problem is lack of motivation and misplaced expectations on the part of many Americans. Most Americans will say they want "just the facts" from their news. But that's not entirely true. They want information that affirms their own beliefs. Media scholars have documented this in many ways: People consider accounts "truthful" if they validate their own opinions and group identity. That's why, as one scholar pointed out, "the need for beliefs 'on the edge' of rationality or in the face of ambiguous evidence provides a constant incentive to consume misinformation that supports those beliefs." It's also why most Americans tend to rely

on their social media feeds for news – even though doing so results in a sadly meager and narrowly selective news diet, and even though we know that people who rely heavily on their social media feeds are more susceptible to tabloid news and misinformation.

Also, the expectation that information on the web is – or should be – free remains rampant. But good journalism is expensive, and the news industry is in bad shape. Entire newsrooms have closed, and newspaper buildings are being sold off at a steady pace. And yet more than 70 percent of Americans think local news media organizations “do well financially,” according to a 2019 report by the Pew Research Center. The same report found that only 14 percent of Americans paid for local news in the past year. And that percentage was only 7 percent for people ages 18 to 29. It’s much easier just to presume that with so many online sources, news will just “find me” eventually, and our social media feeds are so convenient. But that’s a problem, researchers have found. Think there’s plenty of good “free” news out there? We get what we pay for. Always remember that when we get something for “free” online – a Facebook account, say, or a Google tool – that only means that *we* (our data, our attention), have become the product being sold. Combine our tendency to only consider validating information with our unwillingness to pay for good journalism, and you can go a long way in explaining the polarized mess we’re in today.

Another feature affecting all this is the ongoing disconnect between what journalists are trying to do and what the public thinks they are doing – and not all of this is the public’s fault. Journalists are not very good at explaining themselves. They’re trying harder lately – witness the little “How we report on politics” and other little “explainer” boxes now embedded in stories by *The New York Times* and other outlets. But news outlets need to have many more frequent and ongoing conversations with audiences that offer up why they do the things they do. Many

Americans chafe at journalistic efforts to not simply report *what* happened, but explain *why* it happened and by offering context and perspective intended to help audiences make sense of it. Americans also are suspicious of any subjective language in news accounts, presuming that such language betrays bias. Yet for journalists, subjective language – as opposed to opinion – is the heart of good storytelling. Also, journalists seek to engage audiences and cultivate trust with individual stories. But many Americans are looking to trust the brand of a news outlet. A recent report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University nicely explored this disconnect. The Institute has an ongoing “Trust in News Project” that explores this chronic “trust gap” among audiences. Of the findings in its September 2022 report, institute director Rasmus Nielsen tweeted, “[The] UGLY news is that, when we talk to journalists trying to address low trust and overcome negative perceptions, the things they focus on (e.g. transparency, audience engagement) are very different from what audiences focus on (relevance, familiarity, reputation for integrity).”

But there is some good news out there for those of us concerned about our country’s low level of news literacy. The hoard of ignorant fake news purveyors out there flooding our feeds with trash? Turns out it’s actually just a sad, lonely little clutch of rubes. Researchers found that only 10 percent of Facebook users shared any fake news during the 2016 presidential campaign. And during that campaign, 0.1 percent of Twitter users were responsible for 80 percent of the fake news shared on the site. Despite all the attention, researchers documented that fake news represented only 0.15 percent of Americans’ daily media diet.

The Trust in News Project report mentioned earlier also found some reason for optimism. Media consumers in this country, Great Britain, India and other countries, are doing a good job distinguishing “news in general” that they see on the web from platforms and “other stuff.” And

they trust that news much more than they do social media platforms. Such distinctions may seem like small wins, but it's better than nothing.

A good news diet is not about a single meal or a single story. It takes effort and time to cultivate good habits. Becoming savvy media consumers is no different.

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