

“And all of that lives on my son’s tablet”

Social media, America’s youth, and misinformation

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When Whitney Houston died on February 11, 2012, the news of her death was tweeted and retweeted more than 1,000 times per second in the hour after the first tweet was posted, according to Topsy Labs.

Meaning that within the hour, this news was posted on roughly 4 million Twitter users’ feeds.

21st century news can be spread at a faster rate than at any other point in history with the use of social media. While most news posted on social media looks legitimate and sophisticated, much of it is owned by a group of people with a manipulative agenda.

The danger is that most Americans don’t consider this; they believe news that is what they want to hear and what they want to read.

Since the beginning of modern communication, civilians have been quick to trust information that has been brought to the public. When the Gutenberg press was invented in 1450, people believed what was on paper simply because it was put on paper. This over-trusting of the press led to Jews being burned at the stake in Trent, Italy, because it was falsely printed that these Jews were drinking children’s blood as a religious ritual, according to Dr. Robbyn Taylor, journalism professor at Troy University.

We believed it when it was printed.

We believed it when it was on the radio.

We believed it when it was on TV.

And now with social media, we believe the pictures and videos that are on our feeds.

“And all of that lives on my son’s tablet,” Taylor said.

Taylor specializes in mobile journalism and multimedia journalism, and with a degree in broadcast journalism, experience in photojournalism, a job in reporting, time as a newspaper writer, and a PhD in communication, Taylor’s career has encompassed every aspect of the field.

Media bias isn't a new problem, according to Taylor. It has existed since the beginning of communication because people work for news for different reasons. Some are journalists simply because they want to be popular, leading to the rise of sensational journalism.

Today, about one in five Americans say that they get their news from social media, according to Taylor. Because social media users follow accounts of people who they are generally like-minded with, most Americans get news that they want to hear from sources that lean toward the same side of the political spectrum that they do.

"America's view is that if they agree with a headline, it's got to be true," Taylor said.

This way of thinking is defined as media illiteracy, and it is plaguing America with people not knowing that they are infected.

Dr. AJ Bauer, a professor of journalism at the University of Alabama who studies the political communication, said that critical media literacy is centered around training children and adults alike to consume media widely and to understand which sources have specific ideology biases.

"It means knowing why certain media outlets appeal to me and why some of them don't," Bauer said.

As a boy, Bauer and his family ate dinner over conversation of the taboo topic of politics. He discovered that he disagreed with his family on many issues, leading to familial arguing.

"We would fight about it, and that was fine," Bauer said.

The opposing political climate that Bauer has researched stems from Americans becoming increasingly averse to political conflict. If society would lean into political conflict and engage with it, a more self-reflexive culture would be born that recognizes different interpretations as healthy.

Critical media literacy means that we don't determine which sources are accurate and which are inaccurate according to Dr. AJ Bauer, professor of journalism at the University of Alabama. It means training kids and adults alike to consume media widely and to understand which sources have specific ideology biases and knowing why certain media outlets appeal to me and why some of them don't.

One citizen who does this faithfully is Jackie Goldberg, who, like a one-a-day multivitamin, takes five newspapers a day: The Wall Street Journal, Haaretz from Israel, In These Times, Los Angeles Times, and the New York Times.

Jackie Goldberg attended the University of California at Berkeley in the 1960s and was a student leader for the Free Speech Movement in 1964. In 1983, Goldberg was first elected to the LA school board of education. Re-elected in 2019, she began to advocate for media literacy classes to be introduced to students in the public school system.

Because children are bombarded with media that they don't ask to receive at young age, Goldberg believes students should not be able to get through a public-school education without being equipped with the tools to ask who is trying to give you information and to ask if it could be misinformation.

It goes back to discerning the difference between an email that you asked for versus an email that you didn't ask for, according to Goldberg.

"An elementary school kid can think about that," Goldberg said.

There is no sequence of this media literacy instruction beginning in 1st grade and building on that knowledge each year, though an occasional social studies or English class will mention misinformation.

Goldberg talked to her great nieces and nephews, ages nine and 11, and they both told their great-aunt that they receive an endless amount of information sent every day.

"My granddaughter looks at TikTok all the time and she loves it. But does it influence her? Does she know that it's influencing her? Probably not." Goldberg said.

The vote for the implementation of media literacy classes unanimously passed among the LA school board, and the program will begin as soon as the school system can recover from COVID-19.

A fourth-grade teacher turned journalist, Share has seen how sponge-like the minds of elementary school aged children are. Share also has seen how media culture goes about creating images, telling stories, and communicating with the world.

“When I was in the classroom, I saw there was a lot that kids just don’t think critically about; they see a picture and think it’s the truth,” Share said.

Share saw a dangerous assumption that his students were making between sight and fact. So, he and his students went on a field trip. Giving his students disposable cameras and film to photograph what they saw, they would take their film photographs back to class, share them on the projector, and talk about what they saw.

As Share’s students learned to deconstruct messages by seeing how media portray their information in at a misleading angle, making us think certain ideas, the students were more likely able to reject overly biased messages.

This simple exercise led Share to see the benefit that small media literacy lessons could provide to the youth of this age. Learning that there is a field of study in media literacy, Share went back to school to get his masters and PhD in media education.

Communicators have found that repeating messages over and over, whether it be in Hollywood on the movie screen or on Facebook ads, they have the power to make people believe ideas through repetition. If consumers of media question sources more often, there would be less problems in society, according to Share. If we question how messages are being communicated about gender, race, and class, we would be able to see through most misinformation.

But this bias in the media shouldn’t be seen as bad in of itself; it should drive media consumers to feast on a variety of news options and to never settle for only one source.

“You can’t have neutral information if it was created by a human,” said Share.

Dr. Sara Demoigny is an elementary education professor at Auburn University who sees the need for teaching media literacy skills to youth as young as in preschool. Seeing the bias in the media as ‘innocent’ as a Disney movie, it is necessary to actively provide elementary school students with skills to ask questions.

In the classrooms, it’s not only the children who need media literacy skills, but also the teachers who choose what media is being fed to their students. From infographics to videos to commercials, a

student's teacher acts as a mediator between the world of increasing bias and misinformation and the child's malleable mind.

"It's common for teachers to use the same sources repeatedly," Demoiney said, emphasizing the need for instructors to feed their students information from a variety of outlets.

Political hope lies in the hands of our young people; a solution to the epidemic of misinformation and media illiteracy begins in the classroom.

"The most important strategy we use is getting students to create media," Share said.

When students take photographs themselves, create the podcasts themselves, and put together movies themselves, they see media through a lens that encourages them to ask what could be left out from a piece of media and how it could be intended to make its audience think a certain way, according to Share.

Bauer encourages families to watch different news sources, discuss political events, and be comfortable with disagreement. If Americans can come to terms with differences in opinions, the political climate can be mediated, and society can become used to swallowing their daily multivitamin of a variety of news sources.

"In our own lives, we can be less nervous to talk with people about politics because that creates a healthier political climate," Bauer said.

And, instead of mindlessly clicking on and sharing every piece of news we see on social media, readers should read the 'about' section of their source to find out where their news is coming from.

"We can't be the victim anymore. We know that there is fake news where it serves someone's political agenda. We have to think 'who posted this' and 'what is their end game'? We have to become active and conscious consumers of news." Taylor said.

We will create a generation of better news consumer if we have open and honest conversations with our children, according to Taylor. Her son wanted to know why people were protesting downtown after the George Floyd killing, and she has taken the approach of telling the truth in a child-appropriate way.

No matter their age, the truth is always the answer.