

# Can Media Literacy Education Help Build Trust in The Media?

Grace Lotz

---

## Introduction

The study of distrust in mass media and journalists is hardly new. Much research exists on the topic of public trust in the media, and Gallup has tracked Americans' views on the subject every year since 1997. In September 2020, Gallup found that a record number of Americans (33% of survey respondents) claim to have no trust at all in mass media, including newspapers, TV, and radio (Brenan). According to that same poll, 60% of Americans overall claim varying degrees of distrust for mass media. The numbers show even deeper distrust among Republicans, with 90% of survey respondents who identify as Republican claiming to have “not very much” or no trust at all in mass media. Meanwhile, 73% of Democrats are highly trustful of the media, showing a large gap between the two parties—proof of the hyper-polarization that continues to divide America along party lines (Gallup). Megan Brennan of Gallup writes, “Americans' confidence in the media to report the news fairly, accurately, and fully has been persistently low for over a decade and shows no signs of improving.” When fully realized, this distrust manifests in many ways that my journalism colleagues and I have witnessed first-hand: In comments on social media claiming a story is “fake news”; in emails from readers who claim an organization's non-partisan coverage to be either “too liberal” and “too conservative”; and even in threats against the safety of journalists, simply for choosing to work as journalists. However, in contrast to Brennan's assertion that Americans' confidence in the media “shows no signs of improving”, there is reason

to believe, based on what discoveries have been made through research and lived experience, that there is potential to improve public trust in media through media literacy education.

The study of media literacy education is hardly new, either, with more than fifty years of history in the United States (Schilder and Redmond 95). And researchers have found there is an immense need for greater media literacy education in our schools, particularly in the digital age. One study found that “across [online civic reasoning] tasks and grade levels, students struggled to effectively evaluate online claims, sources, and evidence” (McGrew et al. 165). Americans’ widespread distrust in mass media, and a general inability to critically evaluate online information, coincides with a rapid increase of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories online, thanks in large part to social media.

Social media platforms are designed to share information based on the amount of engagement a social media post receives, regardless of its accuracy. Engagement with unreliable news sites on social media grew larger in 2020, to 18%, compared to about 8% in 2019 (McDonald). The owners of social media and search engine platforms, such as Facebook and Google, face increasing pressure to moderate and remove such damaging content from their platforms, but there is no financial incentive for them to do so. Platforms like these profit greatly from the spread of misinformation through advertising dollars (Graham-Harrison, et al.). Despite these platforms’ unwillingness to moderate and remove disinformation, a recent Pew Research poll found a whopping 86% of Americans get their news online, with 53% using social media to do so (Shearer). Paired with a lack of media literacy education in most K-12 schools, and an inability to

determine accuracy in online media sources, this disconnect is troubling, especially for journalists.

Amid our rapidly changing news environment in the digital age, in which a person can find the news they need online (and often without paying for it), newspapers in particular have been slow to adapt to a changing landscape. Their business model depends on subscribers and ad revenue, and newspaper subscriptions have dropped substantially since 2004 (Abernathy 14). According to a report by Penelope Muse Abernathy, “over the past 15 years, total weekday circulation—which includes both dailies and weeklies—declined 40%, from 122 million to 73 million, for a loss of 49 million” (14). This, in turn, has resulted in less advertising profit for newspapers. Over the past decade, declining readership and ad revenue has led to one in five newspapers shutting down across the United States (Abernathy 9). The closure of news organizations has obvious consequences for journalists, by creating a dearth of job opportunities and lower wages for the jobs that remain. Across the U.S., newsroom employment has dropped nearly 45% since 2004 (Abernathy 28). But closures also impact the communities that are left behind in what have come to be known as “news deserts.” Research shows that when a newspaper closes, “municipal borrowing costs increase by 5 to 11 basis points, costing the municipality an additional \$650,000 per issue” (Pengjie, et al.). When newspapers close, the communities they leave behind pay the cost. A lack of trust in the media has financial costs for journalists and the communities they serve.

In the absence of government intervention in the regulation of search engines and social media platforms, and in light of the media industry’s slow response to a

rapidly changing news environment, the onus is on journalists and educators to foster a greater sense of trust in young learners.

### **Current State of Media Literacy Education**

Today children are introduced to an increasing number of media messages daily. Media Literacy Now, an organization that advocates for greater media literacy in public schools, estimates the average kindergartner sees about 70 media messages a day. A child's use of media increases to nearly nine hours per day once they become teenagers—and that's not including time spent at school or for homework (Rideout 15). This increase in childhood media consumption, paired with a lack of media literacy education in public schools, sets up future generations for failure. Implementing media literacy curriculum across the country is pertinent to our future.

While our world adapts to new forms of technology and media, our definitions of media literacy have evolved with those changes as well. As defined by Media Literacy Now, media literacy is “a set of skills that help people analyze the content of media messages that they receive and send.” It goes on to classify media literacy as “*the* literacy of the 21st century... an essential element in education, on par with reading and writing.” Another organization, the Center for Media Literacy, defines media literacy as “a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages... [and] builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy.” Common Sense Media defines it as “the ability to identify different types of media and understand the messages they're sending.” By these definitions, a greater understanding of the media would allow students across

grade levels to think critically about what sources they can trust, instead of not knowing who or what they can trust online. But developing media literacy by these definitions requires legislative action across the nation.

Currently there is no national media literacy education requirement in American public schools. State legislators are responsible for setting education priorities and directing education departments on what to prioritize when it comes to curriculum (Media Literacy Now). According to a recent state-by-state report on media literacy education legislation, there are 14 states with legislation containing some level of media literacy education, with Florida and Ohio leading the way (“U.S. Media Literacy Policy Report 2020,” 6). In 2008, Florida added a media literacy requirement to public K-12 school education, which places the curriculum within language arts instruction (“U.S. Media Literacy Policy Report 2020,” 10). This same study found that Ohio added a media literacy component to a 2009 bill, requiring the State Board of Education to ensure that academic standards “include the development of skill sets that promote information, media, and technological literacy” (11). And, in 2019, Texas adopted a bill directing its state Board of Education to incorporate digital citizenship education into its curriculum. Digital citizenship is defined in the legislation as “the standards of appropriate, responsible, and healthy online behavior, including the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act on all forms of digital communication” (12). A little closer to home, House Bill 74 in the Missouri Legislature would establish a joint committee on media literacy, but no movement has been made since the bill was introduced and read for a second time on Jan. 7, 2021. While this state-by-state movement towards broader media literacy education is encouraging to media literacy

advocates, too many states have yet to even begin the process of implementing media literacy education into our public-school curriculum.

### **Community Engagement's Role in Building Trust in the Media**

It is worth exploring and examining the impact of community journalism in increasing media literacy among its participants, and the critical role many journalists play in teaching media literacy in local classrooms and helping to build public trust in journalism. Introducing journalists into local classrooms puts a face to the broad term “the media” at a time when shrinking newsrooms means fewer reporters in the field, thus fewer interactions with the public, and fewer chances a young learner has to learn about the role of a journalist. Some communities have taken on this challenge by creating community initiatives such as Journalists in Classrooms, which invites reporters to teach media literacy in classrooms in an effort to “[Make] Real News Visible to the Next Generation.” There is reason to believe this community engagement aspect of media literacy, in particular, could be an important introduction to journalism and mass media for students who may know no reporters in real life, and could have great implications for the future of media literacy education.

Formal research into community engagement’s role in building trust in the media, as well as research into the differences between liberal and conservative views of the media, is ongoing and will likely continue. The results of these studies could add to the growing belief among media professionals that community engagement and media literacy are key to rebuilding trust with audiences. Hopefully these studies also offer insight into what media companies are missing in their quest for growing audience numbers and regaining audience trust.

For the past two years, Matthew Long-Middleton of KCUR in Kansas City has worked in collaboration with Story Corps and Missouri Humanities to create audio and digital content based on conversations between two people with differing political views. Story Corps began as a weekly segment on NPR's *Morning Edition*. Each segment features a personal conversation between two people—think mother and daughter—and in 2019, Story Corps started its *One Small Step* initiative in partnership with KCUR. Instead of facilitating conversation between two close partners, *One Small Step* focused on conversations between two strangers who disagree on politics or have opposing ideologies. Following his work on *One Small Step*, Long-Middleton continued his work with Missouri Humanities by facilitating over a dozen conversations between 2-4 participants with discordant political views (Long-Middleton). Prior to these sessions, each participant completes an ideological survey to measure whether their beliefs skew more conservative or liberal. This allows discussion facilitators to match participants with discordant ideological views and facilitate conversations where each participant asks the other participant questions—almost like an interview—about how life experiences have shaped their outlook on politics, life, and the media (Long-Middleton).

Long-Middleton suggests that these listening sessions and open, yet targeted, conversations bring participants into the process of creating journalism, by posing questions and listening to answers, and he believes, based on survey results, that this helps to build their trust in the process of journalism. Having conversations about political beliefs, in which participants are expected to listen and engage thoughtfully—without trying to persuade others to adopt their beliefs—shows how a journalist listens to two sides of an issue and fairly presents both to an audience. This also shows

participants how difficult a journalist's job can be when dealing with sources that disagree. Long-Middleton's findings suggest that incorporating community engagement into media literacy education, either by introducing a journalist to students or having students play the role of a reporter by interviewing others, could help build trust in the media.

Community engagement events such as these can also bring readers closer to the journalists who report in their communities and could impact a reader's trust in local news sources. According to a study on trust in everyday life, a person's propensity to trust is influenced, in part, by the proximity and familiarity between the trustor and the trustee (Weiss et al. 15). This study suggests that being closer to a person increases one's likelihood of trusting that person. Placing journalists in communities where journalists rarely are (or where they only go when something "bad" happens) could help to build trust between journalists and the communities on which they report.

But what about the large disconnect between the mass media and people who identify as conservative? Researchers at the University of Texas, in collaboration with Trusting News and KCUR in Kansas City, are currently investigating this disconnect through the Conservative Voices Research Project. The aim of this research is to "better understand the dramatic erosion of trust in media among conservatives" (KCUR). Their findings will likely offer insight into how political ideologies and values influence people's trust in the media, and how media companies and educators can further work together to improve civic trust in the media.



## **Strategies For Media Literacy Education Curriculum**

Media literacy education should be tailored for children at every age group, with each year's curriculum building upon the last to help students develop greater critical thinking skills. The development of this curriculum is already in the works by the Center for Media Literacy, which offers free educator resources and multiple lesson plans for teachers of all grade levels. Its CML MediaLit Kit™ is an “evidence-based, peer-reviewed” framework for teachers to use in the classroom and includes the “Five Key Questions That Can Change the World” (“Educator Resources”), which helps students learn how to think critically about media messages. Some of those questions include: *Who created this message? What creative techniques are used to attract my attention? Why is this message being sent?* These questions are key to media literacy and developing critical thinking skills, and many worksheets are made available online to teachers who want to add media literacy components to their current lesson plans (“Educator Resources”).

But media literacy education shouldn't stop when students graduate high school. Media literacy should also be incorporated into English classes at the college level as students are developing their research skills. A workshop developed by a librarian and a media studies professor from the University of Maine seeks to help students “think critically about the news that they consume and share” (Bonnet 104). In a seven-step process that lasts about 75 minutes, this workshop helps students learn how to spot misinformation and accurately assess the credibility of a source. The workshop instructs students to study headlines, examine the well-known media bias chart, determine ways to check a source's reliability, and even learn how our personal biases “influence our perceptions of credibility” (Bonnet 105). It begins by asking participants to write down

their own definition of “fake news,” and to list where they get their news. Next, workshop facilitators use academic research to “define and contextualize” fake news, then move on to discussing how and why trust in the media has changed recently. Students then break into small groups to complete activities that are designed to show how difficult it is to sort fact from fiction based on headlines. Students are asked to develop a list of criteria by which to judge a source’s credibility—that they will put into use with the final exercise—by determining out of three examples which news stories are true and which one is false. A mix of lecture and active learning, this workshop could easily be broken into multiple sections taught across several days and would be appropriate for teaching students at the high school level.

Bringing a local journalist into the classroom to assist in this workshop could also help students feel they can trust their local journalists, while helping them think critically about the media they use every day. And, as technology changes, so will our needs for media literacy. Once implemented, policy makers and educators should revisit and review media literacy curriculum yearly to determine whether additions or other changes need to be made due to new technology, current events, or cultural changes in our media habits.

### **The Path Ahead**

The path towards greater shared media literacy—and improved civic trust in the media—is undoubtedly a long one. Journalists, educators, and policy makers at the local and national level must work together to develop media literacy education standards and incorporate media literacy into the curriculum for all K-12 public school students. Committing to incorporate media literacy education into all students’ curriculum by

considering it “a 21st century approach to education,” as the Center for Media Literacy suggests, would help future generations better understand how to interact with the many forms of media, and provide them with the critical thinking skills they need to determine what media sources are trustworthy and which ones they should avoid. Preparing future learners by implementing media literacy early on prepares them for more than just smart media consumption. These critical thinking skills are vital to a person’s participation in our democracy and are critical to one’s growth as a citizen.

Additionally, inviting local reporters into the classroom to assist with media literacy workshops would help students become more familiar with local journalism and develop trust and familiarity with local reporters early on in a child’s life. This development benefits the journalist as much as it benefits the student. Media literacy education is a bipartisan issue that demands our attention, and the sooner we implement media literacy standards into K-12 public schools, the better off we all are.

---

*Grace Lotz is a student at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and digital producer at KCUR 89.3 in Kansas City.*

## Works Cited

- Abernathy, Penelope Muse. "The Expanding News Desert." *Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*, 2018, pp.8–9.
- Bonnet, Jennifer L., et al. "Fake news, misinformation, and political bias: Teaching news literacy in the 21st century." *Communication Teacher*, vol. 34, no. 2, June 2020, pp. 103-108. [doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2019.1625938](https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2019.1625938).
- Brenan, Megan. "Americans Remain Distrustful of Mass Media." *Gallup*, 14 Jan. 2021, [news.gallup.com/poll/321116/americans-remain-distrustful-mass-media.aspx](https://news.gallup.com/poll/321116/americans-remain-distrustful-mass-media.aspx).
- "Conservative Voices Research Project." *KCUR 89.3*, 5 Mar. 2021, [www.kcur.org/politics-elections-and-government/conservative-voices-research-project](http://www.kcur.org/politics-elections-and-government/conservative-voices-research-project).
- "Educator Resources." *Center For Media Literacy*, 2020. [www.medialit.org/educator-resources](http://www.medialit.org/educator-resources). Accessed on 27 Apr. 2021.
- Gao, Pengjie, et al. "Financing Dies in Darkness? The Impact of Newspaper Closures on Public Finance." *Journal of Financial Economics*, vol. 135, no. 2, 12 Feb. 2019, pp. 445–467. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3175555.
- Graham-Harrison, Emma, et al. "Facebook 'Still Making Money from Anti-Vax Sites.'" *The Guardian*, 30 Jan. 2021. [www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/jan/30/facebook-letting-fake-news-spreaders-profit-investigators-claim](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/jan/30/facebook-letting-fake-news-spreaders-profit-investigators-claim). Accessed 9 Mar. 2021.
- Long-Middleton, Matthew. Personal interview. 18 Mar. 2021.
- McDonald, Kendrick. "Special Report: 2020 Engagement Analysis." *NewsGuard*, 20 Dec. 2020. [www.newsguardtech.com/special-report-2020-engagement-analysis](https://www.newsguardtech.com/special-report-2020-engagement-analysis).

McGrew, Sarah, et al. "Can Students Evaluate Online Sources? Learning From Assessments of Civic Online Reasoning." *Theory & Research in Social Education*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2018, pp. 165-93.

"Media Literacy: A Definition and More." *Center for Media Literacy*, 2020.

[www.medialit.org/media-literacy-definition-and-more](http://www.medialit.org/media-literacy-definition-and-more).

Rideout, Vicky. *The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens*. Edited by Seeta Pai, 2015.

[www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/censusexecutivesummary.pdf](http://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/censusexecutivesummary.pdf). Accessed 26 April 2021.

Schilder, Evelien, et al. "Measuring Media Literacy Inquiry in Higher Education: Innovation in Assessment." *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, vol. 11, no. 2, Aug. 2019, pp. 95-121. <https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2019-11-2-6>.

Shearer, Elisa. "More Than Eight-in-ten Americans Get News from Digital Devices." *Pew Research Center*, 12 Jan. 2021. <https://pewrsr.ch/2MZqns7>. Accessed 6 Mar. 2021.

"U.S. Media Literacy Policy Report 2020." *Center for Media Literacy*, 2020.

[medialiteracynow.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/U.S.-Media-Literacy-Policy-Report-2020.pdf](http://medialiteracynow.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/U.S.-Media-Literacy-Policy-Report-2020.pdf).

Weiss, Alexa, et al. "Trust in Everyday Life." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2020. [doi.apa.org/doi/10.1037/pspi0000334](https://doi.org/doi/10.1037/pspi0000334).