Creating and Maintaining Balance in News Consumption[1]

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Have you ever come to an election and wished you knew more about the issues on the ballot? Have you ever wanted to know more about what is happening in your city, state, or the world? What about understanding your options, risks, and benefits regarding a medical issue? Becoming informed about an issue does not happen overnight. Rather, as with the unattributed adage, the best time to have planted a tree was ten years ago, but the next best time is today. A tree doesn't grow to its full potential for years, and you, too, can grow your knowledge a little bit at a time. This publication, for all readers but also for educators who want to build a curriculum to help learners, shares strategies for identifying sources, building habits, and becoming more confident in your knowledge on various current topics.

Why be informed?

Having the most up-to-date information available helps to refine your knowledge and think critically about what the best choice for your family, community, and/or self could be when you are faced with a decision. Information (i.e., facts about the world) and knowledge (i.e., what individuals understand about those facts) are constantly changing. In the case of scientific information, scientists conduct research to answer emerging questions about how the world works, such as understanding the effects of fossil fuel use on climate, or specifically on how climate change affects Florida and its residents (Papacek et al., 2020).

Political information tracks governments making changes to their communities, including how to fund services such as schools and fire departments.

Adults in the U.S. are interested in news; in late 2021, 75% of survey respondents said they were very or somewhat interested in news about science, including health and medicine, while 85% were interested in news about their local community (Saks & Tyson, 2022). In addition, U.S. adults agree that voters should be knowledgeable about issues and follow what goes on in government and politics (Oliphant, 2018).

It is important to be aware of differences in interest levels in particular topics as well as disparities in access to news on said topics. Only about 40% of people of color, namely Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans, thought the U.S. news frequently enough covered the topics which are most important to them, such as healthcare, crime, and the economy, versus 54% of White Americans (Tomasik & Forman-Katz, n.d.). Across the U.S., access to news, particularly local news, continues to change dramatically (Abernathy, 2020; Abernathy & Stonbely, 2023). U.S. adults have a range of interests and concerns, but trying to increase news consumption on all topics at once may be unsustainable.

Identify your topic interest and your goals

There is large agreement that knowledge is important in a democratic system and in making personal life and community decisions, and knowledge begins with gathering information. Now let's turn to how to accomplish information gathering. First, recognize that you cannot immediately learn about everything. Select a few areas or even a single topic area to start with. What is it that you want to know more about and why? Do you want to be an informed voter in an upcoming election or address a health issue? Use this goal to drive the sources and frequency with which you consume news.

Identify sources and formats

How do you like to get information? Far from the historical limitations of word of mouth and traditional printed news, today the *news ecosystem* encompasses a variety of organizations, technological formats, and content which interact in the process of news production (Wiard, 2019). Sources of information are those organizations and individuals who produce content. Sources can be legacy news outlets, such as The Associated Press, Fox, and *The New York Times.* Sources include emerging media companies, such as organizations which may produce both audio- and video-based content, perhaps in combination with legacy media outlets; an example here is iHeartMedia (formerly Clear Channel Communications), which owns radio stations but also produces a number of podcasts distributed online. Finally, several smaller production outfits, ranging from individuals with a single show to groups who support a number of shows, exist that can offer different perspectives, levels of factuality, and bias (see the section on media literacy below).

Sources today offer a variety of formats, so you are not limited to reading a physical newspaper or watching a live television broadcast. You can read traditional news articles online. Maybe you would rather listen to a daily or weekly podcast, attend government or community meetings, or watch videos shared on social media or livestreamed. These can be valuable ways to gather information if the sources are reputable.

Start small and grow over time

Once you have identified your topic, sources, and formats, determine a frequency and an amount of time you can devote to news and work to make news check-ins part of your routine. Think about what will make it most likely for you to take in some news. If you can get a daily 10-minute news podcast, set up an app for an automatic download or bookmark the website. If you would rather watch a longer video once a week, schedule that time for lunch or another window in your week. Start with one source, and once that becomes habit, consider adding other sources to round out your consumption, as described in the sections below, and break your "filter bubble" (Bozdag & van den Hoven, 2015), wherein you have a narrow rather than diverse set of perspectives on news in the sources you consult.

Develop media literacy

Media literacy can be defined as "the ability to analyze [and] access … media in a variety of forms and contexts and a desire to act upon such abilities in a manner that benefits a healthy and democratic citizenship" (Strasburger et al., 2009, p. 523). That is, it is not enough to take in information; one must know how to evaluate the legitimacy and accuracy and how to use the information for it to become actionable knowledge. Programs on television and radio, similar to newspaper sections, may have different purposes and therefore, different amounts of bias and opinion versus straight reporting. Vetting your sources for credibility is a first step in understanding whether the content you consume is likely to be accurate. The News Literacy Project (2022) suggests five steps to vet sources:

1. Determine whether others have rated the organization as credible. See more below on fact checking and rating websites.

2. Look at standards for publication, which should be easily accessible and clear.

3. Check for transparency including ownership and who produces content.

4. Understand how the organization handles errors.

5. Examine several of the pieces of content for yourself for inclusion of facts vs. opinions when appropriate and professionalism including lack of errors.

The News Literacy Project infographic on vetting also discusses elements that can degrade trust.

It is important to understand that stations and news outlets also make decisions on what to cover as well as how to cover it. Two-thirds of U.S. adults have experienced coverage differences even within a single news source, at least about recent elections (Shearer, 2020); within a

single media outlet, news content or programs designed to report information versus editorial programs which offer opinions may be rated differently in their political learnings. A notable example is *The Wall Street Journal;* the outlet's online political news is rated as centrist in U.S. political leanings by the rating site AllSides.com (see more about this rating group in the following section), while its online political opinion pages are rated as right-leaning. In addition, related media properties may also rate differently; the rating site Ad Fontes Media (see more about this rating group in the following section) rates CNBC more centrist than NBC News overall. These programs and sources can also change over time with changes in leadership, as when CNN's then-new CEO Chris Licht was revamping the network (Helmore, 2022), so regularly revisiting your sources may also help keep your news diet balanced.

Consider following sources that are reputable with high factuality ratings but perhaps different editorial content than you typically choose. The following sites cover both national news and major regional outlets and topics from politics to healthcare. Some ways to assess factuality and editorial leaning are through:

- Media Bias/Fact Check, a website founded in 2015 by an individual but now run by a "collective of volunteers and paid contractors" (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2023, para. 2) whose credibility comes through extensive use over the years rather than the credentials of their founder (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2023). The site offers ratings of news outlets as a whole on both editorial leaning (right, center, left) and factuality (Whitney, 2022). You can also find daily fact checks of claims made in news, a weekly media literacy quiz on current events, and a browser extension. You can read about their methodology for rating outlets as well.

- NewsGuard, a browser extension free for users at schools and libraries, or available to individuals for a monthly fee in some browsers (Whitney, 2022). The extension displays NewsGuard's rating of websites on nine criteria including publication of false content, correction policies, and maintaining responsible distinctions between news and opinion (NewsGuard, n.d.). Ratings come from journalists. The extension also notes satirical websites such as TheOnion.Com, and NewsGuard publishes a free monthly newsletter called the Misinformation Monitor. The site is funded partially by Microsoft.

- AllSides.com, a website founded in 2012, which presents side-by-side headlines from the center, left, and right on U.S. political topics. AllSides.com offers a Red Blue Translator to show differences among political affiliations on especially contentious topics. An app is available along with third-party browser extensions. AllSides.com has a hybrid funding model of both media business and nonprofit, donor-based funding (AllSides, 2018).

- Ad Fontes Media.com, a "public benefit corporation" (Ad Fontes Media, n.d., p. footer) founded in 2018 that provides an interactive chart to check fact-based reporting and bias of sources. Users can submit articles to be fact-checked as well. The information is available as a smartphone app.

- Ground News, which offers reports on the number of sources reporting (left, center, and right), the overall factuality of stories, and the ownership of sources, such as from private equity, media conglomerate, or "independent" media, as explained in their methodology. The site's Blindspot report can offer you a personalized newsletter of stories you may have missed if you primarily consume news from particular outlets. Ground News reports bias and factuality based on a combination of information from Media Bias/Fact Check, Ad Fontes, and AllSides. com.

To check individual stories or claims that you see, consider these resources in addition to the bias and factuality reporting of the sites overall:

- FactCheck.org, from the University of Pennsylvania Annenberg Public Policy Center, "monitor[s] the factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players" (FactCheck.org, n.d., para. 1) in media, including advertisements. A subset of claims on science is found on SciCheck. Users can submit questions as well via the website.

- PolitiFact.com was founded in 2007 by journalists at the *Tampa Bay Times,* and is now owned by the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Florida. It checks politicians' and candidates' press releases, as well as a variety of social media posts and media personalities who cover politics. Searchable by person as well as by issue, the site also has several state editions, including for the most populated U.S. states of California, Florida, Texas, and New York.

- Snopes.com was founded in 1994 to investigate "urban legends, hoaxes, and folklore" (Snopes.com, n.d., para. 2). Today, Snopes also covers U.S. politics and news as well as sports and pop culture. Snopes has a more extensive rating of information truthfulness, including Research in Progress, Unproven, Outdated, Miscaptioned, and Unfounded.

- TrustServista browser extension uses artificial intelligence and analytics, rather than humans, to provide feedback on context (i.e., facts, sentiment, and source trustworthiness) (Whitney, 2022).

Consider the people behind the story

The role of the content producer comes more starkly into focus when stories cover people from marginalized communities, such as individuals with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, individuals with diverse gender identities, or people with disabilities. Some evidence suggests people from marginalized communities feel journalists do not adequately cover issues that are relevant to those communities (Pew Research Center, 2023). Criticisms include overly negative coverage, lack of variety of experiences depicted, and frequent failure to tell the full story. Considering the background of the staff, from writers and editors to producers and photographers or camerapeople, can help you understand whether coverage may be representative of the community or off base.

Share the habit and the news with friends

Talking about habits you are trying to form or maintain, such as consuming news media, not only encourages you to continue, but it can help deepen your own knowledge while simultaneously sharing information with others. Discussion can also alert you to new sources, blind spots, other perspectives, and new areas of interest. Remember to hold both yourself and your friends accountable to providing facts that can be backed up with evidence; do not allow people to share information from misleading sources or early on in a rapidly evolving situation without calling attention to potential problems and misinformation.

Balance mental health needs and media use

Overall, mental health professionals acknowledge the news can be anxiety-inducing, especially when we can update ourselves nonstop (Dodgen-Magee, 2021). Creating a scheduled time to check in on news can help keep us from becoming overwhelmed. Consider turning off notifications in news apps, setting timers for reading news (especially on social media), and instituting tech-free times, such as going outside for a walk or doing a puzzle or arts and crafts project (Huff, 2022). If necessary, take a longer break (such as days or even weeks) if that fits with your goals of building your knowledge over time. Especially after natural disasters,

care with media consumption may be needed (Frohlich et al., 2021). Combine news consumption with concrete actions to help alleviate stress of lack of control over outside forces which you cannot entirely or substantively influence (Huff, 2022).

Regularly reassess

As your life changes and your information store grows and evolves, your need and available time and energy for following news, especially particular topics, may change. On a regular basis, review whether the sources you consume still serve your goals. If needed, seek out new sources and stop following some which no longer serve you. Set limits and take breaks as needed, pausing your regular news check-ins, such as when going on vacation or when you might be in an already heightened emotional state (Dodgen-Magee, 2021). As you build your knowledge, you will begin to see that you can more easily catch up after breaks and learn from other sources as many stories cross boundaries from personal, to community, to political levels.

Conclusion

Building your knowledge on issues important to you and your communities, whether those are geographic or cultural, can take time. However, with small, regular steps, you can increase your understanding of issues and be better prepared to engage at many different levels of society to improve your well-being.

Resources

TheConversation.com: Nonprofit news organization featuring web articles, videos, and podcasts written by academic experts for public audiences.

Institute for Nonprofit News directory: Independent news organizations that are nonpartisan and dedicated to public service. Searchable by keyword to find publications for specialized audiences. Includes Spanish-language organizations.

Poynter Institute's MediaWise Programs, including versions in Spanish, for teens, and for seniors.

Snopes.com's guides to combating online misinformation

News Literacy Project tools for building news literacy

Rate Your Local News tool from USNewsDeserts.Com, now The State of Local News Project

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