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OPINION // OPEN FORUM

We need news literacy education in our schools - now!

Darragh Worland
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Being news-literate means recognizing the critical role of the First Amendment and a free press in a democracy, and interacting with news and other information in ways that promote engaged participation in civic life. Getty Images / iStockphoto

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Dear reader: By now you likely know that the shocking Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol was largely the result of millions of Americans believing in an alternative reality (that the 2020 presidential election had been stolen, even though [it wasn't](#)). The attack was a terrifying example of the destructive, harmful impact of disinformation.

The reality that an alternative information ecosystem can come dangerously to life provides even more urgency to the need for news literacy education as a national priority, taught in schools across the spectrum, from Maine to Miami to Seattle. Failing to provide our children with the knowledge and skills needed to recognize credible and accurate information is more than a disservice — it's disempowering, putting them at a significant civic disadvantage as they face a more complex information environment than ever before.

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News literacy is the ability to determine what is credible and what is not. It is the ability to identify different types of information (for example, news versus opinion) and use the standards of authoritative, fact-based journalism to decide what to trust, share and act on.

Being news-literate means recognizing the critical role of the First Amendment and a free press in a democracy, and interacting with news and other information in ways that promote engaged participation in civic life.

It's no exaggeration to say that being news-literate can be a [matter of life or death](#).

If a student doesn't understand the difference between a news story and an opinion column or how to spot dangerously misleading disinformation, the consequences can be dire. Those who believe falsehoods about COVID-19 have flouted public health guidelines, endangering family members and friends. Some have been sickened by [ingesting bleach](#), touted falsely as a COVID-19 treatment; others have died as a result of taking false cures ([one example](#)).

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The impact extends beyond just individuals and families. In December, the mayor of Dodge City, Kan., [resigned](#) because of death threats after voting for a mask mandate. Across the United Kingdom, people have [set fires to cell phone towers](#) because of a false conspiracy linking technology to COVID-19. The list goes on.

Conspiracy theories, falsehoods and hoaxes regularly spread unchecked on social media platforms, contributing to a crisis in journalism, as Americans reject a shared set of facts and seek information from a circular and self-sustaining echo chamber of partisan media sites.

The number of quality, standards-based news organizations — especially at the local level — is [shrinking](#). As news consumers let newspaper subscriptions lapse, gravitating instead to free online sources (many of which are not standards-based), advertisers follow. One in five newspapers across the country has closed, leaving communities across the country with little to no coverage and stripping them of their local watchdogs. By some estimates, 1,300 communities across the country lack any local news outlet, leaving them with no independent oversight of local government and business.

Why should we care? [Research shows](#) that the loss of local news outlets results in greater polarization in voting, as residents retreat to those echo chambers online where their biases are encouraged and left unchallenged.

Add to that a lack of appreciation for the role of a free press in a democracy and growing public disdain for journalists, and you have a recipe for what we saw on display at the Capitol.

If we don't teach the next generation of Americans what sets [quality journalism](#) apart, give them an appreciation for the central [watchdog role journalists play](#) in holding the powerful to account, or help them understand why democracy can't function without a working independent news media, then we have no hope of turning this dangerous situation around.

Over the past month, I've seen social media posts calling for a mandatory return to civics education and I couldn't agree more. I would add this: Let's also mandate news literacy education while we're at it, because a functioning democracy can't exist without it.

We owe it to the next generation to support news literacy education in our schools across the country. Talk to your kids about the news they are absorbing on a daily basis. Ask them probing questions that will encourage them to think critically about what they are consuming. Persuade their teachers and schools to adopt news literacy education as a mandatory part of the curriculum and demand that we bring civics education back to the classroom. You can even log onto our Checkology® virtual classroom free of charge and take one of our lessons with your children. Who knows? You might learn something along the way yourself.

Join me in helping to create a more news-literate next generation. Our democracy depends on it.

Darragh Worland is vice president of creative services for the News Literacy Project, the host of its podcast, "Is that a fact?" and a former journalist. She lives in New York City with her family. To join the news literacy movement, visit NewsLiteracyWeek.org during National News Literacy Week, Jan. 25-29, presented by the News Literacy Project and The E.W. Scripps Company.

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