

Article authors wrestle with how to teach news literacy and how much “context” should wrap around the skills of sourcing and identifying bias so commonly (and vitally) taught. One study, by Megan Fromm and Caleb O’Brien, began as a precursor to the summit.

Research in this journal depicts young people’s views about journalists and their habits in consuming news.

And more than one piece addresses head on the relationship between news literacy and media literacy, a discussion that generated more than one moment of tension in that hotel meeting room in Chicago.

I wish more students had experienced the Pulitzer event that captivated my son. Not intended as a news literacy event, yet it was - a celebration of journalism and why it matters. We didn’t hear about bias or sourcing, tools for teaching news literacy. It was aspirational. It showed the impact journalism has when done bravely and done right. And isn’t that the lesson? Isn’t that why news matters?

At the event, in an airy 1926 Christian Science church converted to a performing arts hall, an actor performed Atticus Finch’s closing argument from “To Kill a Mockingbird,” a Pulitzer winner for fiction. We heard a troubadour sing, “The times, they are a-changin’,” representing Bob Dylan’s honorary Pulitzer (technically a citation). The evening ended with the Power of Song Community Choir, Congressman John Lewis of Georgia and Poynter Vice President Roy Peter Clark holding hands on stage singing, “We shall overcome,” as the audience sang along.

My son told me on the car ride home he considered joining the group on stage for that finale. Had he, then this erstwhile news literacy event would have converted understanding and appreciation into action. May the work of these researchers and advocates find comparable success.

# How do they keep all this stuff straight?

## Mark Baldwin, Executive Editor, Rockford Register Star and the Journal-Standard

**How do they keep all this stuff straight? That’s my first thought whenever Beloit College releases its annual Mindset List. The list, published each year at the start of the academic year, is a compilation of the cultural touchstones that inform the world view of entering college freshman.**

The Mindset List for members of the Class of 2019, who started college last fall, included these gems:

- They have never licked a postage stamp;
- They have grown up treating Wi-Fi as an entitlement;
- Charlton Heston is recognized for waving a rifle over his head as much as for waving his staff over the Red Sea;
- Color photos have always adorned the front page of The New York Times.

The full list comprises 50 items.

When I started college, in 1975, the list wasn’t nearly so long. The cultural dialogue was dominated by the lingering effects of Watergate and the fall of Saigon. Love was keeping the Captain and Tennille together. Walter Payton was a Chicago Bears rookie. A mechanical shark called Bruce had propelled “Jaws” to the top of the box office.

The Mindset List underscores what most of us understand intuitively — namely, that thanks to digital technology, there’s more information available in more forms than at any time in history. And therein lies a problem.

Not every drop from the digital fire hose is as important as every other. Worse yet, not everything is true. We’ve all seen urban legends whip around the world in seconds.

And that’s why news literacy matters, or ought to matter, to news organizations and the communities they serve.

To be sure, there’s a bit of healthy self-interest involved. A news literate community provides a built-in competitive advantage for our rapidly evolving, multiplatform industry, which faces challenges from competitors whose standards of verification and fair play are nowhere near ours but that attract large audiences nevertheless.

If we can work with local educators to provide students the tools they need to become effective consumers of information, we will plant the seeds for a new, younger audience of news consumers. And so, in Rockford, we’ve assembled a coalition of the willing, drawn from local public and parochial high schools, to work toward embedding news literacy training in their courses.

It simply makes good business sense.

But at least two other values are in play as well that relate directly to the traditional newspaper mission of First Amendment journalism and thought leadership: good citizenship and dialogue.

The skills taught by the news literacy movement are essential to citizenship in a democracy. They boil down to questions we all ought to ask about the information we receive:

- Who created the information?
- Who researched it?
- Is the information designed solely to inform? Persuade? Entertain? Smear?
- What's my own bias? People are wired to seek out information that confirms what they already think.
- What standards are present in terms of sourcing and fairness?
- What's missing? Am I getting a comprehensive report?
- And finally, am I willing to believe the evidence — and to change my mind based on fresh evidence?

These questions aren't a partisan fetish. They ought to be embedded in the DNA of everyone who takes citizenship seriously. After all, it's these questions that enable citizens to exercise their rights under the First Amendment — it's not a stretch to say that the First Amendment assumes a news literate public — and, more generally, as voters.

Talk to public officials as often as my fellow editors and I do, and a common refrain emerges: Too many members of the public form their views of public business, at the local, state and federal levels, based on half-truths and misinformation gleaned from Facebook, Twitter and barstool conversations.

In that environment, productive debate on important public issues becomes nearly impossible — as does the ability to govern. And that leads to a further dividend provided by an investment in news literacy.

The tools of news literacy lay the groundwork for productive civic dialogue, too.

That's been our experience in Rockford, a city of around 150,000 residents 60 miles northwest of Chicago. The community was hard hit by the recession of the 2000s, which worsened the social challenges caused by the decline of old-line manufacturers over the previous 40 years.

We've got high crime and a poverty rate around 25 percent. Throw a stone, and you'll hit a foreclosed home. You get the idea.

Throughout 2015, debate raged over plans to construct an affordable-housing complex in a middle-class residential neighbourhood, part of a broader strategy designed to reduce the concentration of poverty on the city's heavily African-American west side. Many of those expected to move to the new complex live right now in a dilapidated 1960s-era public housing complex operated by the Rockford Housing Authority.

Because the issue of public or affordable housing sat at the nexus of race, class, income inequality and residents' distrust of government, the debate was beyond ugly. In public meetings, angry residents shouted down pleas for civility and understanding. And on social media, the discussion was hateful, and sometime overtly racist.

The low point came at a public meeting in June held in an overcrowded, un-air-conditioned school gym. Backers of the housing development were shouted down. A resident grabbed a mic from Rockford's mayor. The evening was a disaster. The Register Star covered the event, of course, and responded to the chaos with an editorial and column from the executive editor in which we challenged the community to find constructive means of debating the issue.

Coincidentally, early in the year, the Rockford Register Star had been selected by the American Society of News Editors to participate in ASNE's National Community and News Literacy Roundtables Project. It works in communities around the country to identify a challenging local topic and help a diverse array of community leaders, activists, students and residents parse the topic using the tools of news literacy. The end goal is to expand the

community's capacity to think critically about the issue and thereby foster civil discourse.

In Rockford, affordable housing certainly qualified as a challenging topic, so we organized a two-day forum and roundtable to discuss the issue. The first day's session was devoted to interviews by Register Star staff members of key stakeholders who could lay out the facts of the situation.

The following day, the principles of news literacy figured prominently as eight community members representing diverse points of view on housing participated in a structured dialogue designed to uncover shared values, identify sources of factual information versus its less-credible cousins, and teach the community how to have a deep, civilized discussion of the issue. Our goal wasn't to come up with solutions but simply to help people with opposite views engage in a healthy fashion.

By all accounts, the event worked to change the tone and trajectory of the housing discussion. As Ron Clewer, CEO of the Rockford Housing Authority put it:

"The unique approach was not a platform for storytelling or debate, but rather intentional dialogue where participants spoke to and with each other, in a facilitated environment. The end result, while disagreement still existed, fostered understanding."

Particularly poignant feedback came in a letter to the editor, published early in 2016, expressing the wish that the entire housing discussion had begun with our roundtable.

"I think that if we had started with a roundtable, we may have had a different situation now," wrote reader Mike Sartino of Rockford.

Over the next year, the Register Star will double down on its commitment to promoting news literacy, working with partner educators and organizing additional dialogues. In Rockford, news literacy is here to stay.