

An informed, engaged electorate is critical to maintaining a healthy democracy. Media consumers of today, regardless of age, are faced with the challenge of separating falsehoods, opinions and even propaganda from facts, which can feel like trying to find a needle in a haystack. Media literacy describes the critical thinking skills that empower media consumers to access information from a variety of different sources and assess its veracity and trustworthiness. Without these skills, people can become cynical and isolated as a result of confusion and distrust.

The best way to increase media literacy among Americans is with education programs targeted at different age groups. The United States should follow the example of Finland, which teaches school children how to detect disinformation. One method used in Finnish schools involves asking students to create “fake news,” an exercise that reveals how easy it can be to spread falsehoods and manipulate pliant consumers of information. Including media literacy in the school curriculum as early as preschool, as is done in Finland, conveys to children that it is their civic duty to be an informed consumer of information and an open-minded but critical thinker.

Media literacy education customized for teenagers empowers them as citizens who will become informed voters. It is salient that teens can discern the difference between what they see on Instagram and TikTok versus what they see in newspapers and news broadcasts, which are held to journalistic and ethical standards. Studies of American teens show troubling deficits in their ability to evaluate the trustworthiness of online information. The work of organizations like the MediaWise Teen Fact-Checking Network (TFCN) can combat this. The TFCN provides lesson plans for teaching teenagers to ask: Who created this media? Who is the intended audience? What is the purpose of sharing this information? How does this information impact my life or other people's lives? Joining organizations like TFCN may appeal to the common teen

instinct to question those who claim authority. The TFCN YouTube series “Is This Legit?” fosters healthy competition among teenagers to uncover misinformation and flag it for their peers.

Many of today’s adults and all senior citizens grew up in a time where news was more curated and less fragmented, causing them to have less confidence navigating the current media landscape. Trusted, non-partisan institutions like public libraries and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) provide opportunities to educate them about media literacy. Public libraries can offer workshops for patrons, promoted by well-known local broadcast or print journalists, using curricula like MediaWise for Seniors, which partners with AARP to offer online digital literacy training. The course is composed of exercises, videos and quizzes that teach skills like “lateral reading,” or searching for what other outlets say about a topic to cross check the credibility of one source. The course moves at a relaxed pace and has noted journalists as instructors. A study by the Stanford Social Media Lab has shown that this training significantly increases the ability of senior citizens to detect disinformation.