

Notes

Forum on News / Information Literacy

May 3, 2021

A group of educators, broadcasters, journalists, and researchers were asked to join via ZOOM in an exploratory forum on the challenges to teaching and communicating in a polarized world, where consumers of information / news are bombarded by a barrage of “facts” that all claim to be the truth. The Forum was initiated after an initial discussion among adult education faculty at UW Madison (Knox and Gibson) and UW-Milwaukee (Conceição)

Representatives from the following organizations were asked to join the Forum:

News Organizations:

- The Capital Times
- Wisconsin Public Broadcasting

Educational Organizations:

- UW – Madison, Continuing Studies
- UW – Madison, Cooperative Extension
- UW – Madison, School of Education
- UW – Madison, School of Human Ecology
- UW – Milwaukee, School of Education
- Wisconsin Humanities Council
- Madison Area Technical College

Researchers / Educators:

- UW – Madison, Political Science
- UW – Madison, Journalism and Mass Communication

The invited participants included:

Katherine J. Cramer: Professor and Natalie C. Holton Chair of Letters & Science | American Politics. Department of Political Science, UW-Madison. Author of *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago University Press, 2016)

Larry D. Hansen: Program Director/Journalism and Co-Chair/Communications and Performing Arts at Madison Area Technical College. Prior to teaching, Hansen was a journalist for daily newspapers and magazines for about 15 years.

Kristin Runge: Community Development Specialist, Center for Community and Economic Development, Division of Extension, UW-Madison. Her work focuses on individual media use and personal predispositions as filters for attitudes related to controversial issues in emerging technology and economic development.

Jean Feraca: Veteran broadcaster and host of “Here on Earth: Radio Without Borders” on the Ideas Network of Wisconsin Public Radio. She has worked in public radio for over 30 years and has been a freelance reporter for NPR’s *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*. She is also poet with many published works. She was inducted into the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences Arts & Letters in 2012.

Emily Auerbach: Professor of English and Odyssey Project Co-Director / Founder and co-host of Wisconsin Public Radio’s *University of the Air*. The UW Odyssey Project

offers University of Wisconsin-Madison humanities classes for adult students facing economic barriers to college. Now in its 18th year, the UW Odyssey Project has helped change the lives of over 500 low-income adults and their families.

Dhavan V Shah: Maier-Bascom Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication and Political Science and Director of the Mass Communication Research Center, UW-Madison. His research focuses on communication influence on social judgments, civic and political engagement, and health support and behavior.

Meg Turville-Heitz: Beyond the Headlines Coordinator and Grant Program Director, Wisconsin Humanities Council. Beyond the Headlines was launched in 2018 in response to concerns about the public's declining trust in the news media, and the potential effects a loss of trust could have on civic participation and democracy.

Paul Fanlund: Editor and Publisher of *The Capital Times*. A longtime Madisonian, he was a State Journal reporter and editor before becoming a vice president of Madison Newspapers. He joined the *Capital Times* in 2006.

Simone C.O. Conceição: Professor, Department of Administrative Leadership, School of Education, UW-Milwaukee. Her research focuses on distance education, use of technology with adult learners, instructional design, and principles and foundations of adult learning.

Alan Knox: Professor Emeritus, School of Education, UW – Madison. For seven decades he has been helping adults learn, coordinating educational opportunities for adults, and being responsive to diverse learners.

Terry Gibson: Professor Emeritus, School of Human Ecology, UW – Madison. His scholarship focused on distance education and the application of technology to education.

The forum was also joined by a colleague of Jean Feraca's:

Susanne Sklar: Lecturer in English and Theology, University of Oxford, UK

The ultimate objective of the Forum was to inform the practice and thereby enhance the acceptance of initiatives by educators, broadcasters, and researchers.

The Forum was convened via ZOOM on May 3, 2021, at Noon and concluded at 1:30 PM.

When the participants were asked to identify themselves with brief descriptors, they responded with:

Humanist concerned with the truth

Educator and social gadfly for social justice

Educator of adults

Social scientist

Journalist

Former journalist and educator

Social scientist and educator

Social science researcher, economic development specialist, and adult educator

Educator of adults and scholar practitioner

Educator

Scholar and educator who teaches people of all ages

Educator and scholar practitioner

Participants were also asked to share a brief illustration or story about the impact of misleading information and alternative facts. Examples included.

Opposition to vaccines and voting

Alternative “facts” based on a very small study and published on an internet blog.

The assumption that all media is biased, liberal, and anti-Republican.

Levels of vitriol that would have been unrecognized years ago

Intentional efforts to distract and distort

A single source for news, the Fox effect

Inability to separate “news” from “opinion”

Confirmation bias - the search for information that confirms our biases.

People create their own “bubble” of social media and interpersonal contacts.

It may be difficult to break into or out of the “bubble”.

Contributing factors leading to some of the identified issues included:

Is there a trusted national news source that can be universally believed?

Is expertise dead? Can expertise be trusted?

What does it take to be an expert? What makes you an expert that can speak on my behalf?

The search for quick answers rather than well documented answers from original sources has become the norm. Does Google have all the answers?

There is a healthy distrust of authority that may go too far, so that vital information is not believed.

The value of higher education and research is also questioned. Science should be exempt from bias and prejudice. Many people don't understand scientific methods and the conscious efforts that need to be undertaken to remove bias and to be able to report results with confidence.

People may not realize the research that has helped their families, communities, agri-business, or manufacturing plants succeed.

Concerns about objectivity come from multiple directions.

What strategies can be used to begin to deal with the problems identified?

1. National and state issues become salient when they are connected to local concerns.
2. Find ways to connect with local opinion leaders and other trusted local sources that will impact decision making.
3. People want more local news. Remember the “town dump guy” in the rural community.
4. Once you get people together around local problems, they may be willing to talk and engage in real dialogue.
5. Find ways to connect with individuals on an interpersonal level. Once people connect, they may be willing to engage in discussions and problem solving on local issues and concerns. Make certain to involve multiple perspectives. A small businessperson and an economist can be paired to share insights in a rational manner that furthers understanding to solve problems rather than provide solutions that are in search of a problem.
6. Be creative in your use of labels. Be conscious of trigger words like “climate change” that will keep some people from becoming engaged.
7. Look at anything we are doing and figure out what are the walls we are erecting, is it transportation, childcare etc. What is it that is keeping our group from being representative of a wider audience?
8. Local libraries are trusted sources of information that can help people and communities seek the “truth”.

The exploration on increasing news and information literacy has only begun. The attached list of resources, provided by the participants, may serve as a starting point for further discovery as we as educators, journalists, broadcasters, and researchers seek ways to increase news / information literacy.

As the originators of the Forum, we encourage you to use the notes from the Forum and the list of resources in any way that you feel is appropriate

Session Coordinators:

Terry L. Gibson
Emeritus Professor
UW- Madison, School of Human Ecology

Alan Knox
Emeritus Professor
UW-Madison, School of Education

Simone C.O. Conceição
Professor
UW-Milwaukee, School of Education